

Iron Age Research Student Symposium 2019

29 May – 1 June

University of Cardiff

Session 5: Mortuary Practice: I See Dead People

Chair: Dr. Richard Madgwick, University of Cardiff

13:20 – 13:40: Emma Tollefsen, University of Manchester

Messing with Bodies: Exploring Curation and Funerary Treatments in Iron Age Britain

Abstract:

Anthropology teaches us that the world can be seen through a multitude of lenses and that there is no one way of making sense of life and death – consequently there are many different ways of treating the body of the dead.

In the last decade a focus on taphonomy and decompositional histories of burials has gained considerable traction within archaeological research and in 2014 scholarship demonstrated that there is a causal relationship between bone diagenesis and funerary treatment. It has become apparent that this relationship is multifactorial and complex in nature; as such, I argue that we should take a multiple method approach to the burial record when the archaeological context suggests that the body and grave have been treated in a ‘special’ or ‘unusual’ manner.

Employing a suite of scientific techniques this paper aims to explore ideas of curation through investigating aspects of the post-mortem trajectory and depositional history of a number of burials dating from the British Iron Age (c. 800 BC – 100 AD). This research will shed light on subtle clues regarding the funerary treatment of burials where the body of the dead is arranged in such a way that active anthropogenic manipulation is implied; such as bodies found in an exceptionally tightly contracted position whilst maintaining its anatomical articulation.

Lastly, this paper will present thoughts on the social motivations for why prehistoric people chose to preserve/mummify/curate the body after the death of an individual.