

# Material Culture of Death, Grief and Memory: A Case Study

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*There is a Reaper, whose name is Death,  
And, with his sickle keen,  
He reaps the bearded grain at a breath,  
And the flowers that grow between....  
- Longfellow, W.H. 1839*

## Introduction

All living beings inherit the faith of death with their birth. But, only few animals have the sensitivity about this compulsive ending of life and it is developed among humans in a more complex way. Jan Assmann stated "death is the origin and center of culture" and living with the dead and with death is one of the most normal manifestations of human culture (Assmann 2005: 1). Culture is a human product. Archaeology, as a humanist science, studying this essence, humans expressions and perception of themselves in society, that is death (Fahlander & Oestigaard 2008: 1). After death, carcasses are discarded to a space and with time it provides a physical record to archaeologists to reveal that essence about former inhabitants.

Philosophical solutions to the ultimate end of life were only invented by humans. Many philosophers thought about an afterlife. According to the Buddhist philosophy, all the animals, plants and even gods are bound to the cycle of death and birth in motion world (*Sansāra*) and death can only be stopped by stopping the birth. Except the Buddhism, some other philosophies teach about Eternalism or eternal *ātman* and Thanatism or no *ātman*. Monotheistic religions believe that the deceased are getting union with the creator god or becoming lost souls if sinful. All these represent four possible answers to the philosophical question about death.

- Annihilation - It is simply the end.
- Immortality: An imperishable soul lives on without the body.
- Resurrection: After an intermediate period, the dead person rises to live again, in a re-created body.
- Reincarnation: Something of the essence of the dead person is reborn into another form of life (Gowan 2003: 127).

All these explain about mental or soul related processes of death. Huntington and Metcalf expressed that the cultural relation to death is not random but 'meaningful and expressive' (Huntington and Metcalf in Chapman & Randsborg 1981: 2). Though the philosophies and concepts are full of meaning, they

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