The Department of Anthropology

Presents:

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4:00 P.M.
23 Phillips Hall

A Taphonomy of Ritual Practice
Archaeothanatology and its potential to shed light on mortuary ritual in the archaeological record

In recent years archaeology has embraced the developments in ritual theory which have nuanced and problematized our approach to the study of ritual in the past. Similarly, archaeology has incorporated theories about the body. However, while reflection and theorization of the concepts of ritual and the body have grown steadily, the challenge for archaeology remains that of making the connection between these theories and the archaeological record. How do we really connect material culture and material traces to these sophisticated theoretical concepts? This paper explores the possibilities of synchronizing archaeological methods and theories in our search for understanding ritual in the past. This is not only a question of finding a useful theoretical toolbox, but also of trying to find methods that can be articulated with those new questions that embrace both the theoretical concept and the archaeological situation. One possible solution is offered by the French approach Archaeothanatology (previously called Anthropologie ‘de terrain’), an approach that combines detailed observations in the field with knowledge in biology about how the human body decomposes after death. Through the application of this approach, it is possible to identify and sort out the result of natural processes of decomposition, in order to highlight the result of human actions in the past (through a careful reconstruction of the nature of the burial, the immediate burial context, initial position of the body, interactions with the body at different times during the process, etc.). To illustrate the potential of the methodology, I will present results from my own work on northern European Mesolithic burials, and also highlight examples from other similar studies.

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