



**Ian Kuijt, Colin P. Quinn, and Gabriel Cooney:  
Transformation by Fire: The Archaeology of  
Cremation in Cultural Context. The University  
of Arizona Press, Tucson, 2014. 322 pp. ISBN  
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of the effect the various kinds of human interaction may have had on the social practices of lithic procurement and technology. Around 40 pages are dedicated to questions regarding the cultural history of the Arctic, and most of these are given to the argument of how the regional variations in technology, and thereby production concepts and lithic raw material use, indicate the groups' chronology and direction of movement into and in Greenland. Hence, the cultural history of Greenland is discussed, albeit the subject is given less attention than Sørensen's extensive study deserves. He does not stray off track to explore social aspects of interaction which may have affected the people using the technology he presents. Then again, this may be due to the fact that this is a published dissertation and one often finds that, in dissertations and theses, the time dedicated to actually discussing the results are sacrificed to the presentation of the details of the material, methods and methodology.

Even if I have pointed to aspects I would have liked Sørensen to have addressed more explicitly, I will end on a positive note. There is no doubt that Sørensen has undertaken a large empirically study in a manner not previously done with this material, and that he has made a great contribution to studies of Palaeo-Eskimo lithic technology in Greenland. The amazing archaeological material of Greenland has the potential to serve as source material for many archaeological projects in the years to come, and this book will probably be important for anyone who studies the lithic-technology-using part of the prehistory of Greenland.

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This anthology is a welcome contribution to the studies of cremation in comparative contexts. Based on a large session held at the Society for American Archaeology's annual conference in 2011 and a later workshop seminar, the publication's greatest strength is its explicit aim of comparing archaeological cremation practices in the Old and in the New World. This is a novel contribution which not only focuses on the actual material cultures, but also highlights and discusses the different research traditions in Europe and America when it comes to the study of death and mortuary remains. As such, there are two parallel themes throughout the volume, capturing the sub-title of the book – 'Cremation in Cultural Context'. On one hand, the main emphasis is on actual cremation practices as manifested in the archaeological record (the past cultural contexts), but, on the other and to a lesser degree, the book is also about how different research traditions have approached death and how the past is used today (for contemporary cultural contexts, see Chapter 2).

Although the specific chapters and analyses focus mainly on contexts in America and Europe, the introduction also sets out to identify a global approach (pp. 6–10), pointing out some

very old contexts (Australia 30,000 BC, California post-10,000 BC, China post-8000 BC) and even an African context in Cameroon (1000 BC). This shows the rich possibilities of cremation studies in specific and comparative contexts.

Studying cremation is, however, a challenge, not only because the material remains are often few and fragmented, but also because cremation, perhaps more than many other funerary practices, is a transformative process: although the very cremation (or burning of the dead body or parts of it) was important, in most cases it is more difficult to contextualize the actual burning in the broader sphere of death and the use of cremated remains in other contexts. The volume starts with a simple premise: 'cremation is the combination of fire and the body' (p. 5), but, as is also pointed out, 'cremation is a process, rather than a distinct and discrete event' (p. 13). By combining and comparing contexts of Native American societies and European prehistory, the volume eloquently shows the wide variety of cremation practices and contexts. Moreover, as the references in the respective chapters partly indicate, there are also different research traditions and archaeology as a discipline benefits from this type of knowledge exchange, and not only with regard to cremation, so more volumes like this are encouraged, among and between American and European colleagues, but also other scholars and continents.

Given the diversity in contexts and approaches, rather than focusing too specifically on individual chapters, I would like to elaborate on some of the theoretical quests in cremation studies raised in this volume. In Chapter 1 the question of a common terminology is discussed, and the conclusion is somehow that multiple terminologies are perhaps preferable, primarily because of the variability of cremation practices, as Cerezo-Román and Williams write in the last chapter (p. 240): "'Cremation' is a complex set of funerary procedures in which the burning of the body is but one element.' In their conclusion, they propose six avenues for future research in the archaeology of cremation: integrating science and theory in cremation research, cremation in theory and history, cremation as *rites de passage*, cremation as technology, cremation variability, and the archaeology of modern cremation. While I fully concur with these themes, they also reflect the main weakness of the volume, since perhaps one of the most important frames of understanding is hardly discussed or addressed, namely religion.

While rituals and ritual practices are discussed, the potential to use cremation as an entry to understanding cosmology and religion is given little relevance. That the realm of death, cremation included, is within the sphere of cosmology and religion is without doubt, although I have to acknowledge that the editors and authors are following the premises of the sub-title by analysing cremation in cultural context. The question is whether this is the preferable way of proceeding, and even if it is possible to understand cremation properly without seeing it also in terms of cosmology and religion.

The main title of the volume, *Transformation by fire*, and the definition referred to above - 'cremation is the combination of fire and the body' - may illuminate some points. The role of fire as such in transformations, the different qualities of fire and not the least different temperatures of fire (contrary to what Schurr seems to suggest in Chapter 12) have been of vital importance in past and present contexts, but the volume hardly addresses such topics as the title suggests. Just as an example of qualities of fire, Bachelard wrote from a psychoanalytic and cross-cultural perspective:

Fire is thus a privileged phenomenon which can explain anything....Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentle and torture...It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation. (Bachelard 1968, p. 7)

While these perceptions may not be relevant in all archaeological contexts, the importance of what fire is and the religious defined agencies and qualities of fire shape premises for how we perceive cremation. From a technical, modern and non-religious (and perhaps cultural) perspective, as is stated in the introduction, '[b]urning of the body is a destructive act' (p. 15), and it seems that this perception is shared to various degrees among several of the authors. This is, however, a very culturally specific understanding of burning and cremation. Decaying corpses are in most cultures and cosmologies seen as polluting and impure, and the cremation fire may also be seen as life-giving and purifying - all perceptions within religious worldviews. In fact, each and every aspect of a cremation among, for instance, modern Hindus - from how the corpse is washed and dressed, to the pyre built and the fire used, to the immersion of the ashes and so on - is religiously defined and has

cosmological consequences, and without these perceptions the cremations would not have taken place as they do (Oestigaard 2005). Analysing prehistoric cremations from perspectives emphasizing the role of different forms of sacrificial fires opens up other understandings of death and cremation, including that the fire might be a god or divinity consuming and annihilating death (Kaliff 2011). Understanding the depth of cremation without incorporating religion or cosmology and the qualities of different fires may be difficult.

Contemporary cremations may be a source for approaches opening up new interpretative possibilities, as indicated in the volume. Still, after having studied and participated in contemporary Hindu cremations for years, I have come to the conclusion, perhaps slightly paradoxical, that the Hindu cremation is but one special type of cremation practice not usually found in archaeological contexts (at least many Northern European), although the cosmologies may still be a rich source for analogies. The extreme variation of past cremation practices, and the innumerable contexts in which burnt bones are found – in fields, ceramics, furnaces and so on – basically outside what we normally would label ‘graves’, opens unique ways to understanding religion and cosmology. Although fire is the common denominator, in practice as I have argued earlier, ‘cremation is not one, but many funeral practices’ (Oestigaard 2013, p. 497), and all these practices mediated by fire have to be seen in relation to other mortuary practices taking place at the same time, like inhumation, as Williams argues (p. 102). From this perspective, one reason for choosing cremation in some periods might be to produce ‘bones’, as suggested by Larsson and Nilsson Stutz (p. 50). However, the rationale for all these practices and interrelationships cannot, I will argue, be solely found in or reduced to social or cultural variables.

To conclude, although I have argued that perhaps the approach adopted in this volume is too narrow, it is important to stress that one does not exclude the other and the cultural context of death and cremation is also the lived and daily world and hence important. Moreover, as the editors state in the introduction, ‘our hope is that the dialogues started here will allow for an increasingly detailed and nuanced perspective on cremation as a social context’ (p. 21), or, as Cerezo-Román and Williams end the volume, ‘the study of fire and the body in the human past and present promises to be a growing and exciting field of archaeological and interdisciplinary investigation’ (p. 255). Regardless of approaches, this volume has set an excellent standard with regard to how this knowledge production and exchange can take place: broad comparison from scholars identifying important research gaps, since ‘surprisingly little research has explored the archaeological context of cremation in the Old and New Worlds’ (p. vii).

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