

Pyramids and Standing Stones: Monuments for the Dead

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Abstract:

Monuments dedicated to the dead hold power over the living long after they are built. Architecture can transform how people experience a landscape or city for hundreds or thousands of years. The construction of elaborate edifices meant to memorialize the dead brought many people together, represent large expenditures of labor and resources, and manifest the power of individuals or groups to shape ideals, convey conceptions of the cosmos, legitimize the leadership of particular lineages, or dominate their domain long after death. Archaeologists use the features of mortuary monuments to discern differences and understand the role of the dead among the living.

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6D Pyramids and Standing Stones: Monuments for the Dead

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Monuments dedicated to the dead hold power over the living long after they are built. Architecture can transform how people experience a landscape or city for hundreds or thousands of years. The construction of elaborate edifices meant to memorialize the dead brought many people together, represent large expenditures of labor and resources, and manifest the power of individuals or groups to shape ideals, convey conceptions of the cosmos, legitimize the leadership of particular lineages, or dominate their domain long after death. Archaeologists use the features of mortuary monuments to discern differences and understand the role of the dead among the living.

Spectacular tombs, such as the Taj Mahal in India or the pyramids at Giza in Egypt are world famous (Figures 6.9–6.10). They are synonymous with the identity of nations where they were built. Despite the millennia that passed between them, both mortuary monuments signaled their builders' wealth and power, were conceptualized as afterlife abodes, and included quarters for living attendants. The eventual "residents" of these grand palatial graves each espoused royal ideology. Shah Jahan covered his cenotaph with flowers because he viewed himself as "the spring of the flower garden of justice and generosity" (Koch 2005, 147), whereas Khufu elevated his burial chamber, a complex feat of engineering, to position himself closer to the sun god and assert identification with the deity (Billing 2011; Verner, Posener-Kriéger, and Vymazalová 2006, 180).

Towering mortuary monuments were also built in the Americas. Like those in Egypt, many Maya constructions paired temples with tombs, and kings were adored as semi-divine beings upon their death. One example is Temple 1 at Tikal in Guatemala (Figure 6.11). The nine-level pyramid, which represents Maya beliefs about the universe, started by Jasaw Chan K'awiil, ruler from 682 to 734 CE, once featured his portrait above the entrance to the temple at its top. The project was completed by his son, Yik'in Chan K'awiil, 734–746 CE (Martin and Grube 2000). Elements of Temple 1 represent the three plains of the Maya cosmos: the underworld, the Earth, and the celestial (see Feinman in this volume, on Mesoamerican Cosmologies). Jasaw's remains were found under the pyramid, dwelling in the underworld, but his image in life faced the plaza from lofty celestial heights, much like the gods. His essence as ancestor was carved on the lintels inside the shrine, which may have represented the dark interior of a cave (Orton 2015). Only a select few could enter and experience its interior. The floating kingly father depicted on the lintel may replicate images from previous centuries of rulers with a powerful ancestor hovering above their head (e.g., Stela 31, Tikal).

It is quite possible that Yik'in purposely staged himself under the carved lintel to communicate with Jasaw, who legitimized his rule at Tikal. The portrait atop Temple 1 left little doubt to whom the pyramid was dedicated; such features emphasize the power of individuals and their lineages. Similar to the Taj Mahal and Khufu's pyramid, Tikal's Temple 1 required a great investment of labor and many resources, and put power on public display. The dead were not forgotten, but rather dominated the visual landscape long after their passing.

Impressive monuments built to commune with the dead can be more egalitarian in purpose when ancestors are broadly shared, or several are considered of equivalent status between lineages in a broader region. One of the earliest sites with monumental structures, Göbekli Tepe, dates to the tenth millennium BCE (Figure 6.12). It features megalithic T-shaped pillars in circular formations connected by benches and walls. Pillars depict different animals in relief, and a few are engraved with hands and clothing to represent humans. Among the 12 excavated stone circles, each is unique in its depictions. This may represent social divisions; however, the size of the stones, up to 12 feet in height, probably required coordinated efforts from several groups to put in place. Evidence indicates such gatherings involved feasting and possible beer drinking. There are no intact burials, but numerous skeletal fragments and pieces of modified skulls connect it with cultic activities celebrating the dead at smaller megalithic sites and cemeteries in Upper Mesopotamia, as well as farther afield in Israel, Jordan, and Syria (Gresky, Haelm, and Clare 2017). Like people, the enclosures were ritually buried upon abandonment. The broken heads of human statues, which lack distinctive features, were interred near the central pillars (Notroff, Dietrich, and Schmidt 2015). Decommissioning the site would have been of symbolic importance, which likely shifted the power it held over people elsewhere.

Göbekli Tepe may remind us of Stonehenge (Figure 6.13), a monument built, remodeled, and used between 3000 and 1500 BCE in Britain (Bayliss, Ramsey, and McCormac 1997). The eponymous standing stones were surrounded by a ridge and ditch etched into the chalklands and formed a circular ceremonial space of approximately 87 meters in diameter (Parker Pearson et al. 2020). Ritual constructions of this sort were created throughout the area; there was not a single, dominant place to celebrate the dead; however, Stonehenge had the greatest number of cremation burials placed between 3000 and 2400 BCE. Their presence is not obvious today but would have been

Figure 6.11. Temple I at Tikal, started by Jasaw Chan K'awiil and completed by his son Yik'in Chan K'awiil between 734 and 746 CE, reflects the power of Maya rulers.

an essential part of the sacred site. Many fragmentary remains were interred in the Aubrey Holes, which are interpreted as sockets that held the earliest standing stones erected at the site. Cremation burials were added during later ceremonies adjacent to the unfinished bluestones or elsewhere within the complex. The monument continued to be modified, the sarsen stones were added, and the blue stones were rearranged throughout the Early Bronze Age. The dead with few exceptions were interred elsewhere. A select set were buried with great labor and wealth in upland barrows on the surrounding ridges, which had a commanding view of the avenue that led pilgrims from the river Avon to Stonehenge (Allen 1997; Lawson 1997; Needham, Lawson, and Woodward. 2010). Henge monuments continued to be centers of community labor and celebration, even as the newly dead were entombed in other locales. Enduring sacred sites like Stonehenge may have been the domain of fictive forebearers described in legends and song. If this were the case, those bold enough to claim kinship with these entities could exert influence over seasonal celebrants who came from near and far in midwinter to observe the return of the sun with the barrows of leading lineages prominent on the horizon.

Monuments dedicated to remembering the dead are as diverse as the societies who built them. The tombs of Shah Jahan, Khufu, and Jasaw exemplify the ways in which the powerful expend great resources to maintain their position and that of their descendants. If the goal was to achieve immortal renown, they met it. Stonehenge and Göbekli Tepe were built by groups that chose to remember the dead for different reasons. At their inception such monuments may have mediated equality, but such omnipotent symbols in the landscape and the perceived importance of maintaining connections with the illustrious dead (real or fictional) can ultimately be a source of influence or a means to assert power through control of these places. Monumental tombs, whatever their form, make the dead impossible to forget; their role among the living may change over time, but their influence may be inescapable.

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The dead, and the monuments to them, have great symbolic power in almost every society on Earth. They continue to be touchstones for human social organization, be it political, religious, or economic power being sought by a social group. They are not always used in the way they or their descendants may have intended in life, but they hold great sway in the ways in which the world is constituted even today.

Death Is Not the End

For humans, physical immortality remains elusive (Zenou 2022), and so if our polities and groups are to

remain sustainable, our social networks and institutions must continue to patch and bridge the voids left by death. Throughout human history, people have employed beliefs, memories, monuments, shrines, rituals, and other means in a sense to put the dead to work, using them to help address the problems that their absences and other factors create for the living and to foster the aims of those who endure. At this time of pandemic, loss, inequity, and war, the importance of remembrance cannot be overstated.

"Grief is the repeated experience of learning to live after loss" (Lee 2022). Collective sustenance and well-being