

Lecture Review: Love and Death in the Stone Age

Write a 2-page review of what Prof. Stiner imagines early humans might have thought about the afterlife and the evidence she uses to draw her conclusions.

Mary Stiner, a professor of Anthropology at the University of Arizona, Tucson, examines the origins and reasons for the persistence of mortuary practices of today by analyzing the origin of funerary traditions among prehistoric human societies through her lecture titled 'Love and Death in the Stone Age'. To understand the purpose of funerary traditions we must analyze who these traditions serve and what their purpose is for these people. Although centered around the deceased funerals, are a way for the living to commemorate the dead and maintain a bond with them across the physiological divide. Besides humans, animals, such as chimpanzees, dolphins, and elephants, also have diverse methods of mourning the dead and assisting the dying.

Burials and burial practices have evolved along with humans. Mary Stiner's first few examples examine burial practices, as early as 30 thousand ago, where the dead are buried near places of activity. One purpose of this practice is to keep the dead among the living by burying them within a life space. These burials are some of the earliest examples showing that the relatives of the dead still care for them and try to involve the dead in activities of the living according to their ability. Initial burial sites in life spaces were located in residential camps, approximately 30 thousand to 27 thousand years ago, that early hunter-gatherer societies would routinely visit while migrating (burial sites in Sungir, Russia, and the Krems-Wachtberg site in Austria). Even as humans settled and became agricultural, this practice of burying the dead in spaces that the living would frequent continued. One example is the burial of an adult under the floor of an early Neolithic house in Asikli Hoyuk, Turkey from approximately 10,300 years ago. Besides caring for the dead, these burial practices also show early humans acknowledging the different states of being for the dead and the living.

The Pit of Bones in Sima de los Huesos, Spain is another interesting site to study for potential prehistoric burials. Dated to approximately 350 thousand years ago, the Pit of Bones has remains of over 28 hominins of the same species, rocks, and bones of animals such as early horses and sabertooth cats. Some of the hominin bones even have gnaw marks on them. There are two theories on why the bones of the early hominins and animals end up in the pit with rocks from the nearby area. The first theory argues that the pit, a geological fissure, is a

natural trap site for collecting biological and physical material from the surrounding areas through natural processes such as wind, water, and landslides/erosions. Why were there so many bones in the surrounding site? That question might continue to remain a mystery. An alternative argument is that bones were put there by other living hominins at the time through the tossing of the dead into the hole. A section of the mountain, as seen in the image below supports both of the above arguments.



Another interesting observation is that only one artifact, an axe, was found in the Pit of Bones.

Looking further back, we can assume hominins from over a million years ago also had mortuary customs based on the remains in the Rising Star Cave in South Africa. How hominin remains ended up in the cave is a question for debate because the cave has several narrow passages and a 12-meter vertical shaft preceding the chamber in which the hominins were found. Interestingly, nearly complete hominin remains have been found in this cave with no remains of animals or other material/things. Similar to the Pit of Bones, there are two theories on why the hominin remains ended up in the Rising Star Cave. Theory one states that a freak accident or a threat in the outside world drove the early hominins to the deepest part of the cave. These hominins were then unable to escape, which explains why their remains were found in a primarily inaccessible space. An alternative theory is that the hominin remains were placed intentionally by other hominins to protect the bodies from external predators/scavengers or even other hominins.

The Shanidar and Dedeiyeh caves show evidence of the sick and elderly, and children being buried respectively. All the remains in these caves belong to Neanderthals and show that funerary traditions date back to the earliest forms of humanity. These findings suggest that mortuary practices originated from Neanderthals before homo-sapiens adopted them. We can

also conclude that Neanderthals and early homo sapiens had a rudimentary conception of the afterlife, as implied by the burial of the deceased in life spaces.

In conclusion, burials of the dead in the life spaces of early humans symbolize the continued inclusion of the dead in the daily activities of the living. Currently, the dead can continue living in two ways, passing on their genes to their offspring or persisting in the minds of the living. Professor Stiner ends her lecture with a quote by Steve Kuhn. Steve Kuhn says, "We all live forever through the differences we make in the lives of other people." This quote is about the dead persisting in the minds of the living while highlighting why funerary traditions continue to be an integral part of human evolution.