

A Metamorphosis by Fire: The Direct and Metaphorical Relation between Cremation and Urns in the West

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Introduction

Death is the end of life, in which the physiological being of a human goes through metamorphosis. At the crucial moment, the human body ceases to exist as a living person and becomes a "body". This state of nonexistence requires that a person's acquaintances, family members and friends, go through a process of "parting" and dispose of the dead body.

From the dawn of mankind, people have been using various methods to dispose of dead bodies, and throughout history new methods came into use. Burial in the ground is one of the most common ways of disposing of a corpse. This method was adopted by all monotheistic religions, with their different schools and sects. This religious ceremony is an adaptation of one of eight burial methods that were common among the inhabitants of the Levant during the late Bronze Age and the Iron Age (Bloch-Smith, 2002). While burial in pits and in cist graves was widespread in the country's plains, burial in caves and bench tombs was prevalent in its mountainous and plateau areas. Additional methods of body disposal are known – casting into the sea or an abyss, preservation in shrouds, embalming or freezing, in anticipation of the Great Resurrection. Other options were consumption by cannibals or wild animals. In modern times, some people donate their bodies after death to medical research or other scientific purpose (Prothero, 2001). Others opt for cremation, which is one of the most widely known and accepted methods of disposal of dead bodies today. The cremation ceremony includes two main stages: the deceased undergoes first a physical and mental transformation, and then memorialization in various ways. Archaeologists have found in many cultures, from prehistoric times to our age, evidence of body cremation for religious, political, social, economic as well as sanitary reasons.

Cremation was common throughout the ancient world, in both the East and the West. In the East, especially in ancient India, a long tradition of body cremation was prevalent among the Hindus. Among the ancient Chinese, Egyptians and Levant populations, cremation was also commonly practiced. In the Western parts of the world, the Etruscan and ancient Greeks cremated their dead and kept their ashes in special vases and urns. Many findings from the archaic period serve as evidence of this phenomenon, which was prevalent among the high classes and nobility. In the classical period, too, the Greeks preferred cremation to burial, since they regarded fire as possessing mythical powers.¹ In Homer's *Iliad*, the cremation of Patroclus's body by his friend Achilles is described:

Then she left while the winds rose with a roar, driving the clouds in rout before them. Soon they were out at sea, stirring the swelling waves with their stormy blast. Reaching the fertile land of Troy, they attacked the pyre, raising a great column of roaring fire. Together, their blast beat on

¹ See Prothero, 2001, especially the review in the introduction to "Ancient Cremation", which describes the custom of cremation in ancient societies.

the flames, howling all night long; and all night long swift Achilles drew wine from a golden bowl in a two-handed cup, and poured it on the ground, wetting the earth and calling to the spirit of poor Patroclus. And pacing heavily round the fire, and while his friend's bones burned, Achilles groaned without any cease, as a father groans for a newly-wedded son whose death leaves his wretched parents in despair.²

The Romans, too, preferred to cremate their dead instead of burying them, and kept their ashes in decorated ceramic vases, stored in a columbarium (Davies, 2007).

In Western culture, the cremation ritual vanished with the birth of Christianity and its consolidation in the fourth century AD, as it was prohibited by Christian priests. The Christians continued the Jewish tradition and mostly buried their dead (Prothero, 2001).

During the 19th century, the Church began to lose its monopoly on burial rites (Jupp, 2006). Parallel with the secularization process gaining ground in the West, questions emerged as to the burial ceremonies and the role of the Church in memorialization. The intellectuals opposed the bishops' involvement and the requirement to pay burial taxes in the church graveyards, and they sought a civic and spiritual alternative, rooted in classical and humanistic ideals. One of them was Sir Henry Thompson (figure 1),³ who published a paper in 1874 titled "The Treatment of the Body after Death", in which he explains why body cremation is preferable to burial, and discusses its necessity and merits. Subsequently, the Cremation Society of Great Britain was founded, and it immediately caused a public controversy around the ethical aspect of the ceremony. The Anglican priests regarded this phenomenon as an assault on religious values and social norms, and called it "barbaric and unnatural". Others opposed the cremation process, stressing the damage to the environment and public health, and rejected it for hygienic reasons. The Cremation Society, however, began drawing more adherents once the first modern crematorium was built, the "Woking Crematorium", was built in London in 1878. The unique structure could house the entire procedure of body cremation – from the funeral ceremony and the farewell, to the cremation itself and the preservation of the ashes and the memorialization (Laqueur, 2008). Such structures were erected throughout western Europe in that period, and the U.S. saw similar social movements that defied the traditional burial ceremony and proposed a modern, humanist alternative (Prothero, 2001).

[Figure 1: A portrait of Sir Henry Thompson (1820-1904). Courtesy of The British Museum, museum collection number 2006, U.2914]

In addition to social and religious processes that took place in the 19th century and promoted the return and acceptance of cremation in Western society in general and in Britain in particular, various geopolitical changes and historical events also influenced the ritual of cremation in modern times. Britain, which controlled the Indian sub-continent in the colonialist era, was influenced by many of its indigenous subjects, their cultures and their customs. It is therefore likely that the Hindu rites, including

² Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Kline, A. S. (2009), Book 23

(www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Illhome.htm, accessed September 27th 2017).

³ Sir Henry Thompson (1820-1904), was a surgeon, Queen Victoria's personal physician, one of the founders of the Cremation Society of Great Britain and its first president.

body cremation, directly affected the development of the Cremation Society and the rise of this phenomenon in general (Jupp, 2006).⁴

The First World War and the “Tomb of the Unknown Soldier” greatly affected the formation of memory and the conception of death among Europeans. After the war, memorials and temples were erected for memorializing the soldiers whose bodies were never found (Kazmier, 2009). The modern cremation movement regarded this trend as a means to spread the idea that no grave is necessary to memorialize the deceased, and that there are more modern and more aesthetic alternatives to the memorialization of the dead.

"The council (is) constantly receiving testimony that the war has done a great deal to direct attention to the great advantages of cremation as compared with burial. First, there are those who have actual battlefield experience, and have seen for themselves what earth burial in large numbers means and the amount of land that that has been used for the purpose. They entertain no doubt as to the method which is to be preferred".⁵

After the First World War, the cremation of bodies began to be more widespread among the different classes in European society. The proponents of the modern cremation movement realized that the memorialization of the deceased is the highest goal and is instrumental in drawing the crowds to choose the alternative way. The crematoria that were designed like chapels and temples attempted to compete with cemeteries and church burial grounds through their elegant memorial ceremonies and luxurious tombstones. Many exquisite memorial gardens were built next to the crematoria structures, gleaned positive responses and increasing the appeal of the cremation ceremony, as people began to realize graves are not necessary for memorialization (Kazmier, 2009). From that stage, the modern cremation movement focused on aesthetic considerations rather than economic or hygienic ones. Alongside the creation of the gardens, the practice of preserving the ashes and storing them in urns continued to be developed and updated (Laqueur, 2008). At that point, Thompson published a unique catalog of urn designs, inspired by ancient Greek and Roman urns. Moreover, large investments were made in constructing Columbaria – structures that stored the ash urns, whose symbolic value was far beyond their practical value. In addition to that, increasingly more people preferred that their ashes be scattered instead of stored in an urn. Thus, many people who chose cremation asked beforehand that their ashes be scattered in nature or on the ocean, and regarded it as the humane way of returning to nature and a more aesthetic solution to the verse "for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return" (*Genesis* 3:19). Some of the crematoria even repurposed parts of the memorial gardens to areas designated to scattering ashes.

On the eve of the Second World War, the proportion of body cremation in Europe was 10% of all the deceased, on average. In Switzerland, those who chose cremation were the biggest group, followed by those in Germany and Britain. In the U.S., too, the numbers of those who chose cremation were rising (Kazmier, 2009).⁶ The Second World War and the extensive use of cremation by the Nazis as part of their plan to exterminate the European Jews and other minorities caused a great decline in the popular use of

⁴ This conclusion is based on an assumption made in the cited paper.

⁵ Sir Charles Cameron, the second president of the Cremation Society, quoted in Kazmier, 2009, 566.

⁶ In 1931, 1.1% of the dead in Britain, 5195 bodies, were cremated; in Germany, 8%, 725,000 bodies. In 1934, in Switzerland 11.5% of the dead were cremated, 5666 bodies.

cremation. The horrors of war and the Holocaust affected the cremation movement, leaving the cremation ceremony shrouded in trauma and dread (*ibid.*).

An earnest effort by the modern cremation movement in Northwest Europe brought about an improvement and rehabilitation of the cremation ceremony image in European society. These changes in the public perception of cremation stemmed from both aesthetic considerations and, as after the First World War, sentiments related to the commemoration of the dead of WWII. In 1970, 50% of the deceased had chosen cremation before their deaths (*ibid.*). Since then, a steady increase in this proportion has been the case. Cremation has become a clear trend, owing among other things to the modern and contemporary image acquired by the cremation ceremony. Whereas body cremation in Britain accounts for 70% of all funerals, in the U.S. the rate is significantly lower, 25%, and it is concentrated on the west coast. In comparison, the cremation rate in Japan is 98% (Prothero, 2001).

The Direct and Metaphorical Relation Between Cremation and Urns in the West

According to a survey conducted in the U.S. in 1996, it seems that 50% of the people who chose to be cremated after their death also chose to preserve their ashes in urns (Prothero, 2001). The rest asked that their ashes be scattered or undergo other processes (*ibid.*). Choosing urns or other vessels to store the body's ashes can be seen as echoing a custom dating from other periods in the history or prehistory of humanity. Archaeology has a sub-discipline that deals with body cremation, and it is aptly named the "Archaeology of Cremation". Studies carried out in the last several decades have found many evidences of cremation, a practice that was common already in prehistory. Remains of ash urns and columbaria were discovered in excavations both in Europe and in America. The archaeological findings enable the reconstruction and description of death rituals, and can help the comparison between funeral ceremonies, cremation and memorialization as well as other customs of the societies that inhabited those areas (Schurr, 2014).

In this paper, I would like to trace the practice in the West. This custom is discussed here in a Western orientation, and the analysis follows an extensive survey of the concept of death in Western cultures, which I have conducted. I have found that body cremation and ash storage in urns do not belong only to Asian cultures, but also to Western ones. It was interesting to find that the revival of this practice and its development in modernity rest on ancient traditions of the cultures that inhabited our lands, centuries and even millennia ago.

Ethnographic studies and the examination of archaeological findings have facilitated the understanding of the origins of body cremation and ash storage, and raised critical questions about religious, social, political, economic and geographic ideas. An interesting example and case study is the analyses of ash urns that were found in several locations in central Alabama (Regnier, 2006). Analysis of the urns' shapes and decorations led to the conjecture that their primary use was in the domestic environment, as general storage or food vessels, and that they were formed to provide a solution to the everyday needs of aboriginals and decorated with motifs from the local culture. In fact, the discovery of these urns brought the researchers to the understanding that those aboriginal inhabitants were different from their ancestors, who lived in tribes in earlier times.

During the times of ancient Greece and Rome, the ash urn had an important function in cremation; therefore great efforts were made in designing, manufacturing and decorating it. From a very early stage, crafts people and potters created various vessel configurations for this purpose. The vases were made from a wide variety of materials, such as chiseled stone, decorated clay, fine colored marble and shiny metals; and in antiquity, the exclusiveness and significance of the ash urn were determined by the material from which it was made. In ancient Greece, urns were mostly made of terra-cotta, but some urns were discovered that were made of bronze and other metals. According to the *Iliad*, Achilles kept his friend's ashes in a gold urn, which he protected with layers of animal fat. The Etruscans kept the ashes of their dead in stone or clay urns designed in human form or as buildings. The Romans used to cremate the city's wealthy inhabitants and daubed the urns with oils and perfumes (Schechter, 2009). In their monuments, the upper classes were boasting exquisite urns, rare and expensive, while the lower classes had to be content with simple clay or stone urns and sometimes with lesser options. It seems, therefore, that the urn had symbolic characteristics that represented the deceased, his/her personality, wealth, and social status when he/she was memorialized.

Apart from the symbolic traits of the urn, it also has salient metaphorical characteristics related to the cremation urn and ceremony, with its different stages (Cerezo-Román & Williams, 2014).⁷ Metaphorical characteristics were studied in archaeological researches of cremation and as part of an ongoing survey of the revival of the cremation ceremony in the West in modern times. In the present work, I shall relate to two key metaphorical characteristics: fire and home. These two motifs are present throughout the long history of cremation, and they integrate the urn into it to form a harmonic, complete ritual that stands the test of time.

Fire

Controlling fire and using it are one of the biggest achievements of the human species. Flames provide heat and emit light. For this reason, fire is one of the elements of the cosmos according to Aristotle, and it is the supreme element.

Fire is a life-giving element. At the dawn of humanity, humans could not have survived and subsisted in cold places without fire. The heat provided by a fire warmed the body and the place of habitation, and it enabled cooking and the heating of water. Fire also illuminates the lives of humans and their world. Throughout history, fire has been an inseparable part of religious ritual (burning of sacrificial animals), and represented the inextricable bond between man and God (as symbolized by Prometheus in Greek mythology). However, as much as it gives life, fire also consumes. Incontrollable outbursts of fire have led to catastrophes and loss of life; and a deliberate use of fire has been made in wars, conquests and annihilation.

It is thus not surprising that fire is integral to the cremation ceremony, as the active ingredient responsible for the consumption of the human body, with its organs and bones, and its transformation to ash. Moreover, the daily use of fire, for livelihood, work and religious ritual led humans to include fire

⁷ Based on an idea featured in their paper that offers an archaeological perspective on cremation, apart from symbolic motifs that arise from the archaeological findings. The author hypothesizes metaphorical contexts, including ancient crafts.

in the last stage of their life – their death. The body cremation ceremony required some technical knowledge. Understanding the proper way to cremate a body was acquired in other areas that bear on human life (*ibid.*). This understanding derives from religious rituals, including animal sacrifice. The enchanting appearance of fire excited the senses of the participants in the sacrificial ceremony; they witnessed the transformation of the sacrificed animal, the intense heat, the force and might of the flames. Moreover, cooking food on fire focused the attention on the transformation of the cooked food, and a good, strong fire was perceived as positive and life-giving. Ancient societies whose members settled in cold regions saw fire as the source of life and light (similarly to inhabitants of warmer regions who regarded the sun as the source of life, e.g. the ancient Egyptians). Hence, the former borrowed the benign nature of fire and assimilated it in their death rituals. Those who practiced cremation believed that the warm, illuminating fire is beneficial to the soul of the deceased than the cold and dark earth.

Stephen Prothero, in his *Purified by Fire*, describes a different approach to fire:

"Accompanying this shift were a series of subtle but significant transformations in the theology of everyday life – from viewing fire as punishing to viewing fire as purifying, from seeing the person as an amalgamation of body and soul to seeing the person as soul-only, and from viewing hell as a real and present danger to viewing hell as an antiquated relic of nastier times. And as theology changed, ritualization also gradually but inexorably migrated from routinization to improvisation, from formality to informality, from ostentation to simplicity".⁸

Prothero proposes here a novel theological approach to "fire". Usually, in the monotheistic and other religions fire was associated with the concept of "hell", with its sinister implications. According to Prothero, the conception of fire is changing in our time. From "hell fire" that is regarded as a punishment for past sins, it becomes "purging fire". The cremation ceremony, according to him, stresses the separation between body and soul, and in fact leaves the deceased with only a soul.

My study of this subject led me to find a metaphorical link between ancient crafts related to fire, human capabilities during one's lifetime, and their application to the cremation ceremony. An obvious material analogy exists between smithery and the "craft" of cremation. The control of fire and the transformation it effects lead to new results in both cases. In pottery, the physical and metaphorical connections are even clearer. The manufacture of vessels and vases is a long, complex process involving many stages. First, the earth, the clay, which is worked on and ploughed by humans in their lifetime, undergoes processing, forming, and molding, in order to achieve the desired ware. Dry vessels and vases undergo firing in a kiln, a metamorphic stage that is irreversible. Fire determines their fate; it immortalizes the process they underwent, and leaves a permanent mark on the urns. These, like the human body and soul, go through a very similar journey that has equal metaphorical characteristics. Fire consumes the body of the deceased, causing it to metamorphose irreversibly.

These metaphorical associations lead us to the memorialization stage, with complete harmony. The clay or metal urns are, so I suggest, a dual product of the joint metamorphic stage. The urns are the primary and exclusive means of memorialization after the cremation, and they present a picture that reflects - metaphorically, aesthetically and lucidly - the process undergone by the body and the soul in the cremation ceremony.

⁸ Prothero, 2001, 12.

Following the cremation, oftentimes large remains that preclude storage in urns were often left behind, especially in antiquity, when it was sometimes impossible to reach high enough temperature (Schurr, 2014). Crushing the remains must be undertaken following the cremation, when the remains are ground to fine powder. This can be metaphorically related to agricultural processes, for example grinding wheat grain into flour. Here, too, one can draw a parallel between everyday practices of human life and the final journey and the transformation by fire.

Home

In Western society, it is widely accepted that the primary objects of human life are family and home. The home is people's haven, an anchor in life's journey. Home fulfills emotional and social functions, and in it humans play out their lives with their families.

Home is the place of birth, the place in which a human being grows from childhood to youth, the place where time is spent with the family and children are raised. In most cases, home is where a human being ends his or her life, in bed surrounded by friends and loved ones. Thus, death is the final stage of human life, in which the human "must" leave home and family. It is a traumatic situation that burdens the lives of the remaining family members. Mourning practices in various societies and religions were formed to alleviate the sorrow and pain of the dead person's relatives. The home thus becomes a central motif in a person's death and subsequent memorialization.

Ultimately, the dead body remains, ready for cremation or burial. Following the above-mentioned ideas, burial in the ground provides a solution to the body's storage, and constitutes a cold, alienated "home" for the "warm" body of the recently deceased. Cremating the body and storing the ashes in an urn is an alternative to the "homeliness" that ground burial provides (Mitford, 1963). The metamorphosis of the body leaves ash that can be kept forever. Throughout history, urns have been buried in the ground, kept in columbaria or taken by the family members. The search for a "home" for the urn is natural, and it guarantees that the memory of the deceased be preserved for many years. Moreover, the urn's storage in a columbarium provides the family members with a place in which they can connect with the memory of the deceased and be consoled in anniversaries (Laqueur, 2008). Preserving the ashes in urns (that are themselves a small, private "home" for the remains of the dead), and depositing them in official columbaria give rise to metaphorical associations of establishing a new home for a person following his death.

A metaphorical line connects the concept of home in human life, with its functions and meanings, to the ash urns and the memorialization of the dead. Archaeological findings from historic and prehistoric times inspire this metaphorical assumption, and underscore possible associations related to it. Already in the prehistoric period, ash urns and columbaria were used, mimicking the structure of the private, familiar and beloved home. An excellent example of the metaphorical link between ash urns and the concept of "home" is the discovery of clay urns that are miniature models of homes (figure 2). The "ash homes" were found in archaeological excavations in northern Europe, and they are dated to prehistoric times (Bradley, 2002). The choice of the "home" shape, researchers explain, is deeply rooted in the intention of the societies that settled in that region to substantiate and emphasize the relation between death and finality, on the one hand, and the continuity of life after death, on the other hand.

[Figure 2: Drawings of ash urns in the form of a residential home or granary, found in northern Europe. Courtesy of *Antiquity: A Review of World Archaeology*, vol. 76, p. 372-377 (2002). Cambridge University Press]

In the Etruscan society, too, “home” assumed a crucial role in life and death. The Etruscans were an “urban” society, and building in cities was part of their culture and heritage. It may be assumed that the importance of the home in Etruscan life also permeated the forming of memory and the memorialization of the dead. In archaeological excavations in the Apennine peninsula, hut-shaped ash urns were discovered, made of black clay, and these were dated to the 9th century BC (Shimshi, 1985).

Another example of found urns that highlight the metaphorical relation between urn design and the concept of home is the tomb of the “Rich Athenian Lady” from the geometric period (Liston & Papadopoulos, 2004). The lavish tomb, unearthed in the Agora excavations below the Athenian Acropolis, offers a different perspective on the urn phenomenon and its place in ancient Greece. One of the findings in the lady's tomb was a clay amphora, with typical geometric decorations. Inside the amphora lay the remains of the lady's body, and according to lab tests and archaeological analyses, it seems that she passed away during pregnancy. In addition to her remains, the remains of several domestic animals were found to be buried with her. This finding probably points at the metaphorical relation between her lifetime home and her "new home" after her death. The burial of domestic animals alongside their owners is a testament of the wish to preserve, for the deceased, a metaphorical home space after death. Moreover, storing the rich lady's remains in a lavish amphora, which was originally used to contain drinking water, wine or other liquids also refers to the concept "home" after death. Reassigning the food-storage vase and removing it from the household context to be used as an ash urn is a clear symbolic transformation of household life to death and life after death.

There are also more modern attempts to create a homelike experience after death, but in different – sometimes humorous – ways. As part of the project "Ashes to Art", the artist Darin Montgomery designed an urn in the shape of a home vacuum cleaner (figures 3 and 4). The "Urn-a-matic" is undoubtedly a modern associative response to concepts such as "home", "ash" and "dust".

[Figure 3: The "Urn-a-matic", a prototype ash urn by designer Darin Montgomery, inspired by a household vacuum cleaner. Courtesy of Darin Montgomery]

[Figure 4: The "Urn-a-matic", a prototype ash urn designed in the shape of a candy vending machine. Courtesy of Darin Montgomery]

Conclusion

The return of body cremation in modern times has prompted culture scholars from different backgrounds to study the history of the ancient ceremony that seem to have been revived in the West in second half of the 19th century. From the cremation of Albert Einstein's body in 1955 down to the present, it seems that cremation has been gaining ground in the West, and in recent years it has even become a veritable "trend" especially in Western Europe and in the United States. Body cremation has become popular and even commercialized. Thus the spiritual and free ritual, which breaks away from traditional practices, has become an integral part of Western culture.

"If the past is in any sense prologue, however, America's new ways of cremation will be rich in spiritual significance and ritual action. In the future, as in the past, cremation will probably continue to be buffeted about by business concerns, but it is almost certain to continue to be a religious demonstration. As such, it will contribute not only to the history of American ritual life but also to American religious diversity".⁹

The cremation urns have also become an inseparable part of the growing commercialization of body cremation. In the 1960s and 1970s, when cremation was becoming increasingly more popular, a relatively small variety of urns were on offer, and they were made of wood, ceramic, marble or metal, and mostly of square shape. Today, one can find in the home of a recently deceased person an elegant catalog that offers an extensive list of ash urns, with designs and styles for the taste of almost every family (or even the deceased himself), and these urns are proudly displayed in the family home for many years. Today it is possible to order urns custom-made to the family's specification – in a design that perhaps symbolized the deceased person's life, status or occupation. The variety of urns is huge and the possibilities more numerous than ever before: from expensive, "one-of-a-kind" urns, to elegant, kitsch, ceramic, aluminum, glazed porcelain to even golden ones (Schechter, 2009).

The innovative designs of cremation urns today preserve the concepts discussed in this paper. The metaphorical relation between the urn and the concept of home is present in many modern designs, though by means of clearer and more up-to-date design choices – for example, a special lighting added to the urn, which illuminates it in a flame-like light. Alternatively, the concept of home is expressed in the design choices (both in terms of style, e.g. minimalist vs. ornamental, and in terms of color palette) for the urn and its suitability for display at the family home.

The practice of body cremation and the use of cremation urns have been constantly developing since prehistoric times, through antiquity, the modern cremation movement in the 19th century, and down to our times. This custom is subject to social, cultural and economic changes. As an American businessman, who took an interest in the business of cremation in the early 20th century, summed it up:

"The undertakers to a man
should favor the cremation plan,
Because the more they have to burn,
'it's evident, the more they'll urn".¹⁰

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⁹ Prothero, 2001, 212.

¹⁰ Prothero, 2001, 193.

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