

# Virtual Special Issue: Death, Burial and the Afterlife

## Introduction

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Burial rites and funeral practices shape the way we remember the dead, while beliefs about the afterlife reflect hopes and anxieties about our own fate and our continued relationship with the departed. At the beginning of the twentieth century French folklorist and ethnographer, Arnold Van Gennep, articulated the notion of death as one of the *rites de passage* common to all societies. Since then folklorists have been collecting, and analysing the complex and culturally diverse spectrum of traditional behaviours associated with funerals, burials and the fate of those who have died. Prior to this, scholarly interest in beliefs and practices associated with death regarded these customs as cultural oddities, superstitious survivals of a less rational age or the exotic practices of foreign colonies. The rise of such disciplines as folklore and anthropology in the latter part of the nineteenth century, of which Van Gennep's work is one example, paved the way for a different approach to the examination of these customs. The wide range of customs and practices described in these articles taken from the Journal of the Folklore Society parallel, and at times even challenge, ideas and changing attitudes to the dead and their continued relationship with the living.

Two of the articles selected for this virtual edition published by Taylor and Frances Group for the Folklore Society consider burials and funeral customs. Robert Halliday's study of records from East Anglia relating to certain roadside burials examines the popular belief that suicides were buried in marginal areas outside consecrated ground. The article considers both the changing legal attitude to the burial of suicides and the way in which the East Anglican sites, which are still part of a contemporary local landscape, have been endowed with tragic rather than censorious histories. While this article focuses on contemporary practices, Patricia Lysaght looks at Irish wake and funeral customs from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. This

extensive survey demonstrates the centrality of the wake as a mortuary custom in Ireland, the ways in which it was structured and the function of hospitality.

Three articles deal with the restless dead, specifically vampires and revenants. David Keyworth reflects the contemporary interest in vampire traditions by examining the features which make this supernatural being unique. His article re-examines, and in some ways revises, our perception of the complex records of vampire beliefs and vampire descriptions collected and published in the eighteenth century. Jacqueline Simpson examines the manner in which a series of medieval English apparitions blend folkloric and theological elements, often in surprising ways. Katrein Van Effelterre's study complements Simpson's approach. It contrasts Flemish legends about modern revenants with traditions relating to the lost souls of earlier tales as an indication of changing attitudes in contemporary life to death and the role of authorities such as the church.

The final article in this edition highlights the complexity of competing worldviews in relation to practices associated with death. Elizabeth Warner's study of beliefs associated with death and the supernatural, in particular the unclean dead, in a rural area of Russia reflects a worldview that reveals a degree of continuity with past cosmologies, but one that is moderated by the tension between peasant and modern worldviews. This is less a picture of continuity and innovation, which is so often expected as cultures are transformed by contact with modern social institutions and technology, than a dynamic and somewhat uneasy juxtaposition of clashing worldviews.

The sugar skulls sold for Mexico's Day of the Dead; the personal mementoes left at the grave of a loved one; Oscar Wilde's flamboyant, and probably apocryphal, pronouncement that dying was the very last thing he would do, all these evoke varying responses of celebration, grief and humour which accompany the passing of life and the continued remembrance of the dead. The articles in this virtual edition of *Folklore* and in the suggested further reading from the *Folklore* archive cover selected aspects of a broad subject. Many articles have been published since the journal first appeared in the nineteenth century, and the final *rite of passage* continues to absorb the interest of scholars and researchers.