

A history of cremation in the West: What, when and where

■ Evidence of cremation practices can be traced to prehistoric and preliterate times. Historians generally accept that burning of dead bodies began during the early Stone Age, around 3000 B.C., in the general vicinity of Eastern Europe and the Near East.

During the late Stone Age, cremation began to spread across northern Europe. Decorative pottery urns found in western Russia attest to cremation's presence. From the beginning to the middle of the Bronze Age (2500 B.C.- 800 B.C.), cremation migrated to the British Isles, Hungary, Northern Italy, Spain, Portugal, Western Asia Minor, Northern Europe and Ireland.

■ 1000 B.C., in the Mycenaean Age, the Greeks started using cremation as an integral part of their elaborate burial customs. The respected ancient historian Pliny writes about the cremation practice and by the time of the poet and historian Homer (800 B.C.), cremation had become the dominant method used by the Greeks for the disposal of the dead. Cremation was encouraged for reasons of health and expedient burial of slain warriors in this battle-scarred country.

■ The early Romans appeared to have copied the Greeks by adopting cremation around 600 B.C., and it became so prevalent that official decrees were issued in the mid-5th century against cremating bodies within the city walls of Rome. The writer Virgil (70 B.C.-19 B.C.) wrote about Roman cremation practices and endorsed the "extramural" (outside the city walls) approach to cremation. During the golden age of Rome (27 B.C.-395 A.D.), cremation was widely practiced, and the creation of elaborate cremation urns was a prized skill for artisans. Also during this period, columbariums were developed.

■ 177 A.D. – As described by the historian Eusebius (263 A.D.-339 A.D.), the Romans persecuted Christians in Lyon, after which they cremated all of the martyrs' bodies as a way of mocking the Christian theology and belief in a literal bodily resurrection.

■ 217 A.D. – The Emperor Severus (145 A.D.-211 A.D.) died and was cremated in York in the British Isles. Seven years later, his ashes were returned to Rome.

■ 381 A.D. – The Emperor Theodosius (347 A.D.-395 A.D.) forbade burials and cremations inside the walls of Rome.

■ While the practice of cremation was common among Romans, cremation had become rare and disliked by Jews and early Christians, who considered it pagan. Judaism clearly preferred sepulcher entombment.

During the year 400 A.D., the Christianization of the Roman Empire by Constantine completely eliminated cremation. The focus shifted from the human body being an item of little importance to the religious conviction that the human body was sacred. For the next 1,500 years, earth burial remained the accepted method of disposition throughout Europe, though cremation still took place.

789 A.D. Charlemagne (742-814) proclaimed that any cremation is punishable by death for those who participate.

1300 – Pope Boniface (1235-1303) issued the statement that any Catholic who cremates or participates in cremation will be excommunicated.

1409 – The first oven which can generate high heat was invented.

1428 – Biblical translator John Wycliffe was exhumed and cremated 44 years after his death as punishment by the Roman Catholic church for heresy.

1658 – Sir Thomas Browne wrote a book concerning funeral and cremation practices called "Hydriotaphia or Urn Burial."

1710 – The wife of the treasurer of Ireland publically expressed her wish to be cremated.

1826 – The gas oven was invented.

1869–1872 three Italian scientists work independently to invent an oven which can generate enough heat to easily cremate a dead human body. One of the Italian scientists and inventors, Professor Brunetti, perfected a model and displayed it at the 1873 Vienna Exposition.

1874 – Sir Henry Thompson (1820-1904), physician to Britain's Queen Victoria, attended the Vienna Exposition and was intrigued by the cremation oven. Sir Henry eventually started the Cremation Society of England. Concern about dangerous cemetery conditions in England and possible health effects prompted Sir Henry to begin the cremation society. The first crematory in England opened at Woking in 1878.

1876 – Dr. Francis Julius Lemoyne

built the first crematory chamber in Washington, Pennsylvania, for his own personal cremation.

1878 – The first crematory in Germany was built and opened in Gotha.

The Welch eccentric Dr. William Price attempted to cremate his dead child, was arrested and challenged the law against cremation in England. The courts sided with Dr. Price, making it legal for people in England to cremate their dead.

1884 – The first free-standing public crematory in the United States was built in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Cultural support for cremation in America in the early years came mostly from liberal Protestant clergy who wanted to reform burial practices and from medical professionals concerned with health conditions around old cemeteries, particularly in metropolitan areas.

1886 – Pope Leo XIII issued Canon Law 1203 which forbade cremation to Roman Catholics and also prohibited Roman Catholics from joining cremation societies, whose purpose the church feared was to deny the bodily resurrection.

1899 – The Modern Cremationist Magazine began publication.

1900 – Crematories sprang up throughout the United States and Great Britain. In 1900 there were already 20 crematories operating in the U.S., and by the time that Dr. Hugo Erichsen founded the Cremation Association of America in 1913, there were 52 crematories in North America.

1920 – The first Cremation Act was passed in the British Parliament.

1908 – The Catholic Encyclopedia referred to the practice of cremation as a "sinister movement."

1913 – The Cremation Society of America was founded.

1937 – The International Cremation Federation was founded.

1963 – Vatican II removed the strict prohibition against cremation for Roman Catholics.

1969 – The Mungo Lady, the world's oldest known cremation was discovered in Australia.

1975 – The Cremation Society of America changed its name to the Cremation Association of North American (CANAA).

2012: The cremation rate continues to rise.



CREMATION HISTORY

When exploring the history of death in general, three clear and distinct facts emerge. First is the undisputed, unarguable and inevitable fact that the death rate globally is a perfect, round, even 100 percent. This fact concerns many people, but today, it is also conveniently ignored by just as many, if not more.

Second is the almost unarguable fact that concerning the disposition of dead, two methods have been available to people to dispose of their dead, earth burial and cremation.

Third is the almost always unspoken fact that throughout history, human beings have found disposing of their dead both challenging and unpleasant.

To be sure, there are wide variations in and approaches to earth burial and cremation. For example, there is a farmer in the Midwest who, for a small fee, will take a sampling of the cremated remains, fill a shotgun shell with a small portion and blast them into the air.

Then there are the unique Towers of Silence, where the dead body is left exposed to the environment, where birds are allowed to devour the corpse. The birds in turn do the natural thing and deposit recycled remnants throughout the countryside, a type of post-mortem fertilizer cycle, if you will.

However, even with the myriad variations that people throughout history have created to dispose of their dead (and there have been many), still, in the end it comes down to two simple choices, burn or bury.

Another consistent theme in the history of dealing with the dead is the abundantly clear fact that living people find dead people problematic, and with good reason. To not properly care for our dead is, in most places on earth, unkind, unlawful and unsanitary. People have a consistent history of viewing corpses as problematic.

The question which has confronted every generation since the beginning of time concerning dead people comes down to this: "What should we do with them?" The answers that people throughout history have come up with are fascinating, to say the very least, and if we were to explore all the possible answers, our work would never come to an end. But the purpose of this essay is very specific: to explore the history of cremation.

Why study history?

Many people like and some even love history, but possibly only a few loyal purists

CREMATION HISTORY

In the Aeneid, Virgil lambasts the tasteless, crude etiquette of cremation conducted without religious funeral rituals and ceremonial fanfare, done merely for profit and expediency (a kind of contemporary immediate disposition). On the other hand, Virgil praises a conflagration in which the correct kinds of dried leaves, twigs and dead cypresses are set ablaze to the prayerful cries of the mourners circling the cremation funeral pyre.

actually enjoy learning the myriad dates which seem to be connected with every historical account, and which so many people are compelled to memorize in school. Often that proves to be a tortuous experience, with the result that many people end up hating history.

Certainly dates are important, but as we will soon see, cremation actually started before we had dates, so instead of a text outlined using dates, this chapter is instead written as an historical narrative with a few references to dates tossed in for good measure.

This chapter is a story about cremation, and most people love being told stories about any subject. If it is anything, the story of cremation is a story about how people have approached the issue of using fire to dispose of dead bodies. People addicted to dates can refer to the historical chronology on page 48.

The more people know about their history, the more chances they have of being wiser and more judicious as they go about their daily lives. Winston Churchill was once quoted as saying: “Study history, study history, study history.”

Let me first remind you to keep in mind the truth of the old adage that history repeats itself. As we will see, there is really nothing new under the sun concerning cremation, though the members of each and every generation believe their history is unique and their problems are unlike any the world has ever seen before.

Monumental, history-changing events in reality are very rare. In talking about the history of cremation, the most important event was development of a way to generate tremendous amounts of heat in a way that produced a high temperature quickly. This was no easy task, as we shall soon see, but claiming that anything to do with cremation qualified as a monumental historical event is an overstatement.

Also, remember that every generation, most particularly one ignorant or uninterested in their history, is likely compelled to repeat the mistakes of the past. As the great Harvard

philosopher George Santayana hauntingly reminds us: “Those who forget their past are condemned to repeat it.”

Significant events

There are no records of a time in history when cremation has not been present, and because of this no one really knows where and when the practice began. In other words, cremation history has no definite beginning. If a student of this history looks for primary sources, verifiable documents or even cave drawings concerning the genesis of cremation, that student is doomed to failure. Cremation is so ancient that much of what has been promoted as historical fact is in truth based on anecdotes, oral tradition and well-intended speculation.

While historical verification of the beginnings of cremation is somewhat sketchy, what we do have is the story of “The Mungo Lady.”

In the late 1960s, Professor Jim Bowler, a geomorphologist with the University of Melbourne (Australia), discovered the fossilized remains of a woman in the Willandra Lakes Region of Lake Mungo, in New South Wales, Australia. Immediately the corpse was dubbed The Mungo Lady. When her remains were carbon dated, she was found to have lived approximately 20,000 to 26,000 years ago, making her one of the oldest anatomically modern humans ever discovered.

It was certain that after The Mungo Lady died, her remains were cremated. From burn mark patterns on the bones, it was determined that the Mungo Lady’s remains had undergone an unusual ritual for the time. The body was burned, then the bones were partly crushed and then the cremated remains were burned for a second time. The first cremation probably was botched and did not complete the burning process, and that was the reason for the second. However, a second theory speculates that possibly her descendents performed this unusual ritual to ensure that she did not return to haunt them.

The discovery of The Mungo Lady was

important because it represents the world’s oldest known cremation.

Archeologists and anthropologists say that cremation probably started during the Stone Age in the Near East and some places on the European continent.

Throughout history (until contemporary times), earth burial by far exceeded cremation as the preferred, and most times the most accessible and practical, method of taking care of the age-old problem of disposing of our dead.

One of the practical impediments to the use of cremation was the consistent inability of these ancient peoples (and this problem continued for a long time) to generate enough heat to actually burn a dead body thoroughly, and thoroughly is the key word.

One can only speculate just how many “botched” cremations were performed which resulted in a partially burned cadaver. It is safe to conclude that a partially cremated dead body would have been just as repugnant and distasteful to our Bronze Age ancestors as it is today when the crematory retort malfunctions and the flame goes out half-way through the process.

There was also another practical reason cremation was problematic for these ancient people: Wood had other much more vital purposes for these people than creation of a funeral pyre. To survive they needed wood to burn for cooking food, and for heat. Wood equaled literal survival.

From a military necessity in Greece to status symbol in Rome

The beginnings of the acceptance of cremation, regardless of available fuel and convenience, appear to be rooted in the thinking and philosophies of the Greeks. The Greeks embraced cremation not because of some odd ritual requirement which used fire, but on the revolutionarily new idea (for the time) of public health concerns. None other than Plato himself proclaimed that no earth burials (including burial of cremated remains) should be made in agricultural fields or by places

► to page 52

►from page 50

which were highly populated. It would be a great overstatement to say that the Greeks embraced cremation on the level we see currently in some places, but it is clear they accepted cremation in a way not seen before.

The Greeks also used cremation as a practical method of bringing back the bodies of warriors who had died gloriously in battle in some far off land. The Greeks also were the first to decide that in the instance of cremation you could also have earth burial—simply bury the cremated remains. Yes, the ancient Greeks invented the cremation urn burial. Here then is a good example of the truth that there is nothing new under the sun, for contemporary cremation practices use this method of inurnment routinely.

Frequent and protracted battles throughout the ancient classical world made cremation first commonplace and then the preferred means of disposal of the heroic warrior dead. Though ground burials were held for most people, cremation became so closely associated with valor, manly virtue, patriotism and military glory that in time the Greeks came to regard it as the only fitting end to an epic life.

Status symbols are not new. In ancient Greece, the greater the hero's glory, the bigger the cremation conflagration needed to be. The Iliad tells how elaborate and elegant cremation became for Greek heroes. For instance, Zeus compels the victorious Achilles to turn over the corpse of Hector so that the slain hero's father, King Priam of Troy, can cremate his son in royal style. Achilles earlier had ordered a huge, 100-square-foot funeral pyre built to gloriously burn to ashes the body of his slain friend Patroclus. After an arrow pierced Achilles' all-too-vulnerable heel, the leader of the Trojan War was himself afforded the most spectacular incineration yet. It was a classic case of good, old-fashioned one-upmanship.

As the Greeks went, so did the Romans, though the inventive and economically savvy Romans turned cremation into profit, or at least tried to. In the Aeneid, Virgil lambasts the tasteless, crude etiquette of cremation conducted without religious funeral rituals and ceremonial fanfare, done merely for profit and expediency (a kind of contemporary immediate disposition). On the other hand, Virgil praises a conflagration

in which the correct kinds of dried leaves, twigs and dead cypresses are set ablaze to the prayerful cries of the mourners circling the cremation funeral pyre.

The Romans were quite skilled at putting on elaborate ceremonies, pageants and rituals. Today's New Orleans Mardi Gras celebrations harken back to the Roman funeral processions of old. The Romans even had their own version of ancient funeral directors, called *libitinaris*, who were in business to organize all type of death activities, including cremations.

The poor in both Rome and Greece might well have been cremated, but they received communal cremations. The elaborateness of Roman cremations made them life's last status symbol for those who could afford to pay. The indigent went up in small flickering flames, usually as a group, while the wealthy departed this world in towering infernos. However, such cremation opulence was not to last.

It will be helpful here to interject the reminder that cremation, while it is evident throughout history, is not the oldest form of disposing of a dead body—earth burial holds that record—and cremation always has involved the tensions created by the merger of sacred rituals combined with secular customs.

History is never black and white; it is a series of transitional grays. At this juncture we need to make the first such transition by talking about religion as a powerful influence in the history of cremation.

The influence of religion

About 100 years after the death of Jesus, the fires of cremation slowed down considerably and in some places, stopped. The cutoff is historically abrupt and only suggestively understood, but two powerful factors probably contributed to this snuffing out of the cremation fires.

The first is a practical explanation. As world exploration increased, more ships were needed, and in order to build ships, and large ships to boot, you needed wood, tons of wood.

During the first millennium after the death of Jesus, the Roman Empire experienced a severe shortage of wood because so many trees had been felled for centuries to fuel their magnificent cremation pyres. The Roman government placed severe restrictions on the use of timber, and this eventually turned into a ban on the use of wood for cremation, and

cremation the Roman way was not an activity to be pulled off clandestinely.

Another powerful influence was the growth of a new religion. The spread of Christianity played a tremendous role in the decline of cremation.

To explore this, it helps to begin with the origins of Christianity in Judaism. One feature of both is that they are religions focused on books. Before the Jewish writings, most religious activities were a series of random rituals, many times brutal ones involving sacrifices to myriad gods. For the most part, the rituals and beliefs attached to these "mystery religions" (and there were thousands of them) were not written down. The emergence of Judaism changed all that.

Historically, little importance was placed on the worth of just one human life; life was cheap. But in Jewish texts, each human being was seen as a creation of God, as having value. Hence there emerged from Jewish teachings for the first time in world history a reverence for the sacredness of every human life. You did not have to have financial wealth or royalty to qualify as important in the eyes of God. Jewish reverence for human life translated quickly into teachings concerning reverence for the dead.

Death was a highly significant event for a Jewish family. A close relative would close the eyes of the deceased. The dead body was then bathed, fully dressed and humbly carried on a wooden bier to the burial site. Cremation was unheard of, and the reason the Jews discarded cremation is interesting, because without question they would have been exposed to the practice in their already long and eventful history.

The early Jewish experience was one of community, humility and sharing as key to survival. Because each individual person had special significance, the Jewish community approached each death with quiet reverence, with solemn rituals, with prayers, with the reading of verses from their sacred texts and also with humility.

It appears that the Jews were disassociating themselves from what they considered the paganism, the status symbols, the flash and the pageantry of the Greek and Roman way of death. The result was that they turned their backs on cremation. Cremation was seen as both a total destruction of God's creation and also proud, arrogant and totally lacking in humility.

In addition, fire was often linked to punishment in Jewish thinking, a view later

Furnaces that could melt iron had been invented, but they were useless in cremation, because those “blast” furnaces would completely vaporize a human body, which is not what was wanted.

adopted by Christians.

Early Christianity did not explicitly forbid cremation (as the church later would), but it sternly frowned on burning the body of a Christian for two reasons. No. 1, the pagans routinely cremated their dead to mock the Christian belief in a bodily resurrection, and No. 2 and more compelling, Jesus had not been cremated.

During the early days of Christianity, Romans incinerated the bodies of martyrs and then scattered the remains. The result of this Roman insult was the development of the underground catacombs where the Christians' sacred dead would be protected, and the growing prohibition of cremation as a choice for Christians.

It was true that permission could be given to use cremation under “extraordinary” circumstances such as the plague years during the Middle Ages, but as a general rule the early Christians, and later the organized Catholic Church, outlawed cremation as a cruel attack by pagans against the fervent Christian hope of a reunited body and soul at the final resurrection.

The first government-proclaimed prohibition against cremation for Christians came when Constantine the Great, the first world leader of importance to embrace Christianity, prohibited cremation everywhere within his realm. Some of the world's religions, including Hinduism, practice cremation as an essential part of their death rituals, but to this day, Christianity has never truly been at peace with cremation.

This anti-cremation feeling became so pronounced in the Roman Catholic Church that in May 1886, Pope Leo XIII promulgated Canon Law #1203, which read: “The bodies of the faithful must be buried; cremation is forbidden.” Also, Roman Catholics were forbidden from joining societies formed to spread the practice of cremation, because according to the Vatican in 1886, such a membership implied a denial of the resurrection of the body.

During the Vatican II council, a discussion was started of how cremation could fit into the Roman Catholic funeral rite, allowing the human body to be treated with the dignity that it deserves. It had become apparent that in some cases cremation was local custom, and in other cases it was necessary for economic or health reasons. On May 8, 1963,

Pope Paul VI removed Canon Law #1203, and since then the cremation rate has risen steadily.

Christianity has a strong history of resisting cremation, though nothing lasts forever. In parts of Europe, cremation was strictly forbidden by law, even punishable by death if combined with pagan rites. Church authorities sometimes used cremation to punish heretics, including burning the person alive at the stake. Over time, the church succeeded in associating cremation with fiery eternal punishment. Overall, the Christian opposition to cremation lasted for 1,500 years.

The spread of books and literacy spawned free thinkers who challenged the prohibition of cremation. Some of Protestant denominations came to accept cremation, the theological rationale being that if God can resurrect an entire dead body, then God can just as easily resurrect a bowl of ashes and create a new body.

By 1658, Sir Thomas Browne authored a book on burial customs, including an honest and balanced narrative on cremation, of which he approved.

In 1710, none other than the wife of the treasurer of Ireland boldly and with great conviction and bravado (for a woman of the time) made known her wishes to be cremated, based on the horrible condition of most of the churchyards she had examined. Her wish provoked an outcry, particularly from the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland.

In 1822, the famous English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley was drowned in the Mediterranean and, according to the Tuscan health laws of the time, was cremated. His devoted fans started requesting cremation for themselves.

It is time to examine another transition in the history of cremation, in industry.

Generating enough heat

Cremation has one unique requirement: heat and a lot of it. As we have already established, obtaining heat used to be a monumental task, and there were no guarantees of having enough to get the job done.

A brief history of ovens and furnaces will be helpful here, because ovens revolutionized cremation. Ancient people first cooked on open fires. By the Middle Ages, tall brick and mortar hearths, often with chimneys,

were being built. The first written record of an oven refers to one built in Alsace, France. It was made entirely of brick and tile, including the flue.

Around 1728, cast iron ovens were being made in quantity, but few if any people associated ovens with cremations. By the late 1860s, however, a number of independent inventors, particularly in Italy, were experimenting with developing a heat source capable of incinerating a dead body, but they were still stymied by the age-old challenge of generating enough sustained heat to complete the job.

Furnaces that could melt iron had been invented, but they were useless in cremation, because those “blast” furnaces would completely vaporize a human body, which is not what was wanted.

Things began to look up for cremation technology when the British inventor James Sharp patented a gas oven in 1826, but the initial operation was unsuccessful. By the 1870s, the gas oven had been perfected, and gas lights, gas ovens and gas heating sources were being used in millions of homes.

Around this time, there was growing support for cremation in Germany and in England. In England none other than the personal surgeon to Queen Victoria, Sir Henry Thompson, inspired the cremation movement in his country. Sir Henry was concerned with the deplorable conditions of the English churchyards, and saw it as a genuine threat to public health.

Sir Henry attended the Vienna Exposition and saw Professor Brunetti's invention; he returned to England with a cremation mission in mind. He wrote an article favoring cremation, and a debate both written and spoken quickly began between Sir Henry and the Church of England (of course firmly against cremation), as well as many members of the public, who held strong opinions for and against cremation.

In 1874, Sir Henry formed the Cremation Society of England with a membership comprised mostly of free thinkers, Unitarians, liberals, socialists and people (the newspapers reported) without any professed religious convictions.

By 1878, the Cremation Society of England erected its first crematory in Woking and used a furnace which clearly generated enough heat for the required

CREMATION HISTORY

time to thoroughly cremate a dead human body. However the growth of the Cremation Society of England was slow.

Now enter the eccentric yet highly creative and infamous Dr. William Price of Wales. Dr. Price received much fame and attention for his deep involvement with a revival of the Druid religion in his native country. Dr. Price today is recognized as one of the most unusual people to live in Victorian Britain.

Dr. Price had many eccentricities. He would not wear socks because he thought them unhygienic. He wore a large fur hat and dressed in bright green coats covered with bright red buttons. He thought he had been specifically chosen by a Druid god to deliver the Welsh people from bondage from Great Britain. Dr. Price said he did not believe in marriage, proclaiming it to be an enslavement of women, but nonetheless, he married twice.

However, it was Dr. Price's stance on cremation that both got him into trouble and also made him a cremation hero in Great Britain, changing the course of cremation in that country forever. Here is the story.

In 1883, Dr. Price had a son whom he

named "Jesu Grist" (Welsh for Jesus Christ). The infant died five months later, and Dr. Price, believing that burying a corpse polluted the earth, decided to cremate his son's body.

When Dr. Price himself started the cremation pyre, many townspeople noticed the fire, and when they found out that Dr. Price was trying to cremate his own son, the crowd flew into a rage and had him arrested before the child's body had been burned.

Dr. Price was charged, as the arresting officers were convinced that cremation was a crime. At his trial, Dr. Price defended himself and declared that while the law did not state that cremation was legal, it also did not state that it was illegal. The judge agreed, and Dr. Price was freed. He finally was able to give his son a cremation which included Druidic prayers.

In the United States, Dr. Julius Lemoyne constructed a crematory in Washington, Pennsylvania, basically to cremate his own body, not for use by the public.

By the turn of the 20th century, cremation was again on the ascendency. As always happens, history was repeating itself.

Cremation is still rising in acceptance today. However, remember that historically, cremation fell out of favor and remained there for 1,500 years. We have seen the acceptance of cremation in contemporary life only since the late 1800s, a brief period of time historically speaking.

It is time for our last transition in our gray area of history: Cultural nuances that affect attitudes toward death.

Cultural attitudes

Cultures are somewhat fickle, yet the members of every culture think the way they do things is the right way. Sociologists call this "ethnocentrism," and ethnocentrism (meaning the emotional attitude that my culture is the best) is alive and well when it comes to death rituals and the choices people make concerning the ultimate disposition of their dead.

However, for all our cultural diversity, historically one gold thread has united most cultures worldwide where the issue of death has been concerned, and that common thread was the mystery of death.