

Photo essay

11

The rescue excavation and reburial of late pet animals as explorative archaeological autoethnography

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Abstract

Autoethnography is founded on personal participation, description, and analysis that results in a higher consciousness of the studied subject when personal experiences are transformed through systematic sociological introspection into understanding regarding other people's feelings and behavior. Hence, the chapter describes the rescue excavation of late family companion animals from the backyard flowerbed and their subsequent re-burial to the local pet cemetery through the lens of explorative archaeological autoethnography. While being physically routine, the excavation caused deep emotions of self-reflection and self-confrontation ranging from the questioning of the author's capabilities as a field archaeologist to human-animal relationships and the afterlife. On the contrary, the activity at the pet cemetery involved significant physical input, as each pet owner is responsible for backfilling their pet burial. Emotional and physical are here argued to enrich and deepen the interpretative framework of pet cemetery studies by offering new insights into the motives and actions of pet owners. Along this line, a somewhat excessive and constantly evolving memorial combining elements from several religions and cultures was set up on the grave. It aims to establish a material-culture-based dialogue with other pet owners in a dynamic deathscape, where pet memorials designs constantly seek to redefine and renegotiate the acceptable limits of pet animal commemoration.

Keywords: companion animal, excavation, re-burial, pet cemetery, autoethnography, gerbils

11.1. Introduction

In August 2018, after a decade of immediate repairs and constant insecurity caused by groundwater-induced damage to our single-family house, we decided that it had to be sold as a plot. There was simply no point in carrying the burden of extended liability for any further damage for a five-year period as required by law (1994/843) had it been sold as a house. This meant that we had to clear out the house, as people normally do when moving out, but there was an additional twist: we also had to

take care of those who would otherwise have been left behind. Before earth-moving machinery was introduced to the site, something had to be done to the remains of our family pet animals (for the definition, see Grier 2014: 125), six gerbils and a dwarf hamster, that my wife had buried over the years into a backyard flowerbed (Figs. 11.1–11.2). Being an archaeologist, it was quite natural for me to assume the responsibility for this operation.



Figure 11.1. A view from the late Ikäheimo residence at Tervastie 32 (Oulu) towards the backyard. Note the haphazard collection of unwanted items placed on the windowsill indicating the last stage of preparations before the move.



Figure 11.2. A flowerbed flanking a glacial erratic – too big and heavy to be moved away – was meant to be the final resting place of the family’s pet gerbils and dwarf hamster.

11.2. Excavation

Surprisingly, the excavation that took place over an hour and a half on one misty Saturday morning in late September 2018 was mentally the most challenging one for me in my career of more than 25 years as an archaeologist. Practicalities, on the other hand, could not have been easier: the site was located fifteen metres from our back door and the field equipment needed was very basic: a trowel, a dustpan, a child's rake, and, most importantly, a camping mat to provide necessary insulation and comfort against the cold ground (Fig. 11.3). The only device was a cell phone camera that was used to document the appearance of the site before, during, and after the intervention. Moreover, a permit for the excavation was not needed and there was no obligation to report the results or store the finds.



Figure 11.3. Improved tools of the trade. While a proper trowel was essential for the success of the excavation, other tools like a plastic dustpan and a child's rake were items that just happened to be around.

A flowerbed full of heart-leaved bergenia (*bergenia cordifolia*) turned out to be a highly unpleasant environment for excavation, as this plant species produces plentiful roots that are also very tough and resistant to mechanical stress (Fig. 11.4). Removing these roots, together with decayed leaves, took a good while, but after this, the physical work progressed quite easily. However, the mental template regarding my potential finds posed a challenge. Thus, I had a very good idea of what I should or could find, but I really did not want to find anything at all. This sentiment was further accentuated by the distant chime of a lone church bell announcing an on-going funeral service at the nearby churchyard of the Oulujoki parish.



Figure 11.4. After the removal of green heart-leaved bergenia, the site presented itself as a mess of decayed leaves and densely grown roots. Some stones used to delineate the flowerbed can be seen next to the glacial erratic.

However, the moment I had most feared came very soon (Fig. 11.5), as the delicate movement of my trowel unearthed the decayed remains of a green-striped wool sock. I recognized it immediately, as it was the burial shroud of Kaapo, the kindest and wisest gerbil of them all, that I had recently been forced to put down due to a malignant scent gland tumour. After fully exposing the sock-shroud but also taking great pains not to examine its content (Fig. 11.6), I carefully lifted it from the soil and then lowered it into a container on top of the body of Kassu, a more recent and very unfortunate gerbil victim of a vicious scent gland tumour, clad in a pink-striped wool sock. Together, the two gerbils that had been best friends in life were going to be (re)buried in a ceramic urn (Fig. 11.7). Although the urn was cheap Portuguese porcelain, it would form a nice closed context and evoke thoughts of the afterlife by means of the coloured fruit relief adorning its flank that has parallels in Roman art, especially in funerary sarcophagi (e.g. Ögüş 2014: Fig. 1).



Figure 11.5. An encounter of the (un)wanted kind. The trowel has exposed the first traces of a wool sock encasing the body of Kaapo the gerbil. Also note the walkway paving stones delineating the flowerbed.



Figure 11.6. The poor state of preservation of the wool sock/burial shroud deposited in the flower-bed just one year earlier reflects its harshness as a post-depositional environment in the northern boreal zone.



Figure 11.7. A soup pot of Portuguese porcelain recycled into a burial urn had been used to contain the remains of Kassu the gerbil before the excavation.

As the excavation proceeded further down, I made no new pet-related discoveries, which led to moments of serious self-reflection and self-confrontation. On the one hand, I was very relieved not to have to face any older burials, as they had been made without a concealing shroud of any kind; on the other hand, the inability to locate the remains of five other gerbils made me seriously question my abilities as a field archaeologist. While ludicrous images related to the resurrection of innocent animals filled my incredulous atheist's mind (however, see e.g. Kenney 2004; Royal et al. 2016; Magliocco 2018), the reality was probably blunter. Buried to a depth of hardly more than ten centimetres, their lifeless bodies could have been easy prey for neighbourhood cats on their daily wanderings outside (e.g. Baker et al. 2005). Alternatively, the post-depositional conditions in the flowerbed with annually repeated freeze-thaw cycles might have consumed the remains of these small rodents in no time (see e.g. Carter et al. 2007).

Thus, instead of fragile gerbil bones, a haphazard collection of items pertaining to the post-construction period of our house emerged (Fig. 11.8): a fragment of stoneware, several glass shards, a partly molten piece of plastic, and a tag indicating the plant species that had originally occupied the flowerbed. During the course of the excavation, walkway paving stones that had been used to delineate the flowerbed also resurfaced. They provided the much-needed reference for the sufficient extent of the excavation, which was briefly continued over the following weekend as my informant-wife started to doubt where exactly she had buried the gerbils (cf. Davenport and Harrison 2011: 184). No further discoveries were made, and the burial urn was stored for a while in the otherwise empty storage room of our soon-to-be-demolished house (Fig. 11.9).



Figure 11.8. Most of the finds from the flowerbed – from upper left: a molten piece of plastic, a shard of earthenware, a plastic tag, and glass shards – pertained to the earlier history of the house and backyard. Finds not to scale.



Figure 11.9. A lone burial urn in the house storage waiting for transportation to the Mikonkangas pet cemetery. Note the stains on the ceiling that record a substantially long history of roof leaks.

11.3. Reburial and monumentalization

As the next step, a burial plot was acquired for our late animal friends from the nearby pet cemetery at Mikonkangas (Fig. 11.10), where a ten-year lease for a plot suitable for the burial of a small pet animal costs no more than 50 euros. At this cemetery, other companion animal species than horses are buried into pre-dug ditches with temporary plywood or chipboard partitions used as aids during the backfill (Fig. 11.11; see Äikäs et al. *in press*). After the ceramic urn was placed at the bottom of the ditch, the tedious and sweaty task of covering it with sand began (Fig. 11.12). A small mound was raised above the burial and a walkway paving stone carrying the epitaph “Our beloved gerbils Kaapo and Kassu” inked on its side was placed as a headstone at its other end (Fig. 11.13). Three cherub statuettes from my late mother-in-law’s inexhaustible collection of kitschy artefacts provided the much-needed adornment in the peculiar context of a pet cemetery where (e.g. Schuurman and Redmalm 2019), as formulated by the Swedish heavy metal guitar-god Yngwie J. Malmsteen, “*more is more*” (BangerTV 2015: 5:31–6:20).



Figure 11.10. The pet cemetery at Mikonkangas, established in 1993 near the city of Oulu, is currently the final resting place for c. 4,500 companion animals.



Figure 11.11. The burial urn placed on the bottom of the ditch used for burying small pet animals. Beams and plywood/partitions are used for the demarcation of individual burial plots.



Figure 11.12. As the pet owner backfills the ditch, physical strain is added to the experience of emotional grief.



Figure 11.13. The first three stages of the *Monumentum gerbillorum ikaheimoense* before the insertion of grass and oriental decorations.

In reflection to these words of wisdom, the memorial grew in the course of the following year from its humble beginnings to a proper monument light-heartedly known as *Monumentum gerbillorum ikaheimoense* (Fig. 11.14). While it still incorporates the three original cherub statuettes, pretty much everything else has been changed. Stones that once paved the walkway to our former house now frame a patch of green grass and carry two additional display items acquired from Kyoto, Japan: a Shinto torii gate from the Fushimi Inari Taisha shrine and a Buddhist prayer stick from Kondo Hall of To-ji shrine. Moreover, the original epitaph has been replaced with a proper funerary inscription written in Latin that follows the classical *Dis Manibus* formula the Romans used for commemorating their deceased with a dedication to the gods of the underworld (e.g. Tantimonaco 2013), the names and ages of the deceased, and information about the person responsible for the erection of the monument.



DIS MANIBVS
CAIVS GERBILLVS
VIX ANN III MENS XI
ET
CASSIVS GERBILLVS
VIX ANN III DIES XXV
VNGVICVLATIS DVLCISSIMIS
IANVS CALVVS
PATRONVS FECIT

Figure 11.14. The current state of the *Monumentum gerbillorum ikaheimoense* with a Shinto torii gate, a Buddhist prayer stick, and a funerary inscription in Latin (right).

The great pains I took to construct a proper and perhaps also slightly excessive memorial for our late family pets was partly stimulated by my interest in gathering first-hand observations on new memorial designs and how they are copied and their use is spread in the context of a pet cemetery. Nonetheless, I do not expect to see other torii gates or Latin epitaphs at Mikonkangas, but as the gerbil monument is among the rare memorials at the site incorporating a patch of green grass, I hope that other pet owners replicate this idea in their future memorials. Previous development of this kind has taken place with wooden funerary monuments reproducing the short façade of a front-gabled house, which became fashionable spontaneously judging by their spatial distribution at Mikonkangas (Fig. 11.15).

Secondly, I seized this opportunity to practice a sort of grassroots culture jamming (see e.g. Harold 2004) in this age of intolerance characterized by a growing tendency to oppose everything foreign. At the Mikonkangas pet cemetery, one can spot quite a few graves adorned with Christian crosses, which have been banned altogether from many Finnish pet cemeteries. Thus, to counterbalance their presence, I thought it was about time to introduce some elements from eastern religions too, as conscious exposure to new elements like them can sometimes lead to elevated tolerance. On the other hand, if my gerbil memorial gets vandalized in some way in the future, it is a different but similarly interesting response to this material-culture-based dialogue that seeks to redefine and renegotiate the acceptable limits of pet animal commemoration (see also Schuurman and Redmalm 2019) through the meditated insertion of somewhat unconventional and lavish elements in this public space.



Figure 11.15. Pet burials with a funerary monument reproducing the short façade of a front-gabled house were in fashion for a while at the Mikonkangas pet cemetery.

11.4. Discussion

Practical issues aside, why bother to set up a memorial of any kind for such small and universally insignificant rodents or to carry out a serious attempt to relocate all the animals buried into a flowerbed in our backyard? The answer is related to an ongoing trend of research that focuses on diverse aspects of companion animal death and pet cemeteries (e.g. DeMello 2016; Kogan and Erdman 2020) with the aim of not only shedding light on the material culture associated with them but also examining more conceptual subjects like longing, remembrance, and grief along with manifestations of religious beliefs.

From this point of view, the process narrated above gave me a further insight related to a missed opportunity to do community archaeology at the Hiironen pet cemetery. Hiironen is the older pet cemetery in the city of Oulu, Finland, that was actively used for animal burials from the early 1970s

up to 1993. During the summer of 2017 (Rintala 2017), the western stretch of the site was severely disturbed by earthworks related to the installation of a new sound barrier for the adjacent motorway that was experiencing a major overhaul (Fig. 11.16). The pet cemetery users – some people keep visiting the graves at this site on major public holidays related to commemoration like All Saints' Day and Christmas (Fig. 11.17), even if their companion animal died in the 1980s – had been informed about the expected disturbances in advance by means of a note posted by the entrance.



Figure 11.16. The foundation trench needed for the installation of a sound barrier caused a deep temporary scar on the western side of the Hiironen pet cemetery.



Figure 11.17. A clandestine burial at the Hiironen cemetery, officially closed down in 1993, on Christmas Eve 2018 shows how pet animal graves are visited on holidays related to remembrance and how some pet owners see no problem in using a cross as a grave marker.

As a result, some pet owners came to the site to dig up their former pets animals: one couple unearthed altogether four cats and a dog (Jäntti 2017). Unfortunately, my colleagues and I became aware of these efforts only retrospectively. Had we had any advance knowledge of them, we could easily have set up a complimentary excavation service that could potentially have opened up a convenient way to interview the people about their sentiments related to and practices performed at the site. Now, our input was limited just to a survey of visible burials before the earthworks took place and the resurvey of the site after the foundation ditch for the sound barrier had already been dug. Especially the results of the latter campaign were truly underwhelming: only a handful of burials disturbed to different degrees by the excavator could be seen in the section of the trench – there were no scattered bones or smashed headstones.

These attempts to recover past animal friends from the Hiironen pet cemetery align well with my own project focusing on the recovery and reburial of family pets. Thus, from a methodological standpoint, the previous narrative can be identified as autoethnography or alternative ethnography, which aims in part to be both interesting and evocative enough to provoke an emotional response in the reader by offering concrete experiences and intimate details (Ellis 1999: 669; Bochner 2000: 268, 271). But more importantly, autoethnography is founded on personal participation, description, and analysis that results in a higher consciousness of the studied subject when personal experiences are transformed through systematic sociological introspection into understanding regarding other people's feelings and behaviour (Foss and Foss 1994: 39–40; Ellis 1999: 671–673; Furman 2005: 24; Lyons 2013: 624). Existential issues, as my own narrative demonstrates, can also come up and be dealt with using this method (Furman 2005: 35) that – according to a recent review article on qualitative research related to companion animal loss (Kemp et al. 2016) – has previously been used in only two studies (Furman 2005; Lyons 2013).



Figure 11.18. A visit to the 'abandoned' Bohnice pet cemetery in Prague added another, quite an unusual chapter to my personal pet animal necrography, as I literally stumbled across a dead pet rat thrown into the cemetery from the adjacent road. As soon as I had decided to bury the animal, the site seemed to attract surprisingly many human visitors, thus enhancing the excitement related to my clandestine deeds.

From this point of view, an approved construction project – public or private – threatening the future existence of a pet burial site or a proper pet cemetery, both of which act as a focus of memories regarding past animal friends, represents an unstoppable force in itself. It has the potential to induce psychological trauma that is quite comparable to the loss of a pet animal in a natural disaster (see Zottarelli 2010). Therefore, the decision to excavate and rebury the late animal as a preventive measure is not only about dignity shown towards the animal (Fig. 11.18), as the act itself is equally about renegotiating and challenging the conception of a human as superior being (Lyons 2013: 625). As pet animals today are considered increasingly less as property (Zottarelli 2010: 120) and increasingly more as family members (e.g. Ambros 2010), the question of securing a safe place for them after their death is a serious issue for a growing number of people, entwined with ideas of animal afterlife, be it something like the Rainbow Bridge or Christian Heaven (e.g. Brown 2006: 416–418; Royal et al. 2016; Smith and Golomb 2020).

As these pursuits may sometimes be contradicted by economic and logistic realities, it is hardly a wonder that even “abandoned” pet cemeteries are nowadays rather active stages for the insertion and maintenance of clandestine pet burials (see also Davenport and Harrison 2011: 182–183). Even my reaction in August 2019 to a surprise encounter with a dead pet rat that someone had thrown over the fence in the “abandoned” Bohnice pet cemetery in the suburbs of Prague becomes understandable against the background of increased sensitivity gained through previously experienced emotional and physical strains as a pet caretaker (see also Furman 2005: 35). I spontaneously decided to bury the poor animal in secret and felt very good about this deed afterwards.

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Readers who might want to experience *Monumentum gerbillorum ikaheimoense* in person and pay their respects to my late pet animals can find the monument by using the following RTK-GPS-determined coordinates: 7205871.473/437385.319 (ETRS89-TM35FIN), or N 64°58'15.345", E 25°40'24.83" (WGS84).

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