



Til deaath do us part?

‘Loving couple burials’
from the Neolithic period to today

In 2016, Indian and South Korean archaeologists discovered a grave – dug 4,500 years ago – in which a man and a woman were buried together in a sprawling cemetery in Harappan (or Indus Valley), one of the world's earliest urban civilisations. For the last two years, they have examined the possible reasons behind the deaths, but it remains a mystery.

"The man and the woman were facing each other in a very intimate way. We believe they were a couple, and they seemed to have died at the same time. How they died, however, remains a mystery," archaeologist Vasant Shinde, who led the team, told a professional journal.

The couple were buried in a half-a-metre-deep sand pit. The man was around 35-years old and the woman around 25, when they died. They do not display signs of either injuries or diseases.

The archaeologists say this unique "joint grave" does not relate to a funeral custom commonly performed at that time but, for some reason, it appears that the man and the woman "died almost at the same time and that, therefore, they had been buried together in the same grave."

Joint burial sites have always evoked interest. In a Neolithic burial site in an Italian village, archaeologists found a man and a woman in an embrace. In another joint burial reported from Russia, the couple were holding hands and facing each other. Nearly 6,000-year-old skeletons in Greece were found embracing each other, with their legs and arms interlocked.

In Ukraine, a similar discovery revealed a wife who made the ultimate sacrifice -

having been buried alive with her dead husband. The two bodies, dated 3,000 years old, were found close to the western Ukrainian city of Ternopil and it is believed that she may have drunk poison as she climbed into the grave and embraced her recently dead partner.

Professor Mykola Bandrivsky, Director of the Transcarpathian branch of the Rescue Archaeological Service of the Institute of Archaeology of Ukraine, has conducted a study of what is known as 'loving couple burials'. She told *Social News Daily*. "It is a unique burial, a man and a woman lying there, hugging each other tight. Both faces were gazing at each other, their foreheads were touching. The woman was lying on her back, with her right arm she was tenderly hugging the man, her wrist lying on his right shoulder. The legs of the woman were bent at the knees, lying on the top of the man's stretched legs. Both were

touching forehead of a woman, or arms of both dead people hugging each other," she continued.

Three years earlier, in Romania, archaeologists discovered skeletons of a couple buried together holding hands. The bodies were discovered in the former cemetery of the monastery, and it is believed the double grave dated back to the Middle Ages - somewhere between 1450-155.

Adrian Rusu, from the Cluj-Napoca Institute of Archaeology and History of Art, said: "It is a mystery - and rare for such burials at that time. We can see that the man had suffered a severe injury that left him with a broken hip, from which he probably died. We are speculating that the woman possibly died of a broken heart at the loss of her partner."

In rural communities, blacksmiths were the ones who most often built coffins and wooden vaults, boxes that protected the coffin in the grave.

clad in bronze decorations, and near the heads was placed some pottery items - a bowl, a jar and three bailers."

The ancient Vysotskaya culture was known for the 'tenderness' of its burials, said Dr Bandrivsky, but this example is very striking. In other cases, burials from this culture have revealed "a man holding the hands of a woman, the lips of a man

Over in Greece, archaeologists found a skeleton couple in a loving embrace - in what remains possibly the oldest grave ever to have been found - at an archaeological site near the Diros Caves in the Peloponnese region of Greece. The two skeletons belong to a man and woman in their early to mid-twenties and date back to 3,800 BC. They were buried surrounded by grave



(Madison County, 1937). Easter's eighty-two-year-old husband, Sog, then lay down on his bed and began praying to die. "I'm going now, daughter," he announced, and died soon after of a heart attack. Local blacksmith George Harriman, assisted by three other men, made the couple's immense double coffin - a first for him."

Although rare, there are still examples of couples being laid to rest together where they die at the same time or in close proximity to each other. For example, in 2016, the remains of an elderly couple in Kitui County, Kenya were buried in the same grave in line with the couple's wish. Malonza Ngambi, who died aged 101, and his 94-year old wife, Elizabeth Mukeli, were married for 76 years and died within three days of each other.

Similarly, in the United States, a couple who had been married for 77 years and died within hours of each other were laid to rest in the same casket in Montana in 2017. Raymond and Velva Breuer died just 30 hours apart at the retirement community where they lived. Raymond had reportedly even joked with the medical staff in the days before he died saying he and his beloved might as well be placed in one coffin. His wish was carried out by his family, with the support of their funeral director. "Dad told one of the nurses before he passed that, if they went close together, they should just be buried together in the same casket," their son Bobby Breuer told the *Columbia Daily Tribune*. "We asked the funeral director," he said. "Mother was a very small woman and dad wasn't that big."

Examples in the UK are few and far between. In 2015, a devoted couple from Sheffield who had been together 60 years and died within days of each other were buried together in a double coffin and, the previous year, husband and wife Kevin and Christine Shearson, both 64, were cremated side by side in the same casket at a crematorium in Watford, Hertfordshire.

goods, which were either supplies to ease the deceased's journey into the afterlife or offerings to the gods, including a ceramic urn and beads. The Diros Caves are thought to have been used as a shelter, workshop, burial site and place of worship during the Neolithic period.

Although many of the stories behind loving couple burials involve the partners dying at a similar time to each other – but not out of choice – there are rare examples where partners (like the wife discovered in the Ternopil grave) actively chose to join their partner in death in a Romeo and Juliet-style act of love.

Local historian Kaitlyn McConnell - who writes about the Ozark Mountains, which cover a significant

part of the states of the US states of Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Kansas - tells the story of Sog and Easter Eubanks, who shared a coffin when buried in 1937.

"In rural communities, blacksmiths were the ones who most often built coffins and wooden vaults, boxes that protected the coffin in the grave. Oversized containers were occasionally built to accommodate multiple family members killed in a tornado, or a mother and child burial. Though extremely rare, a double casket would be made to hold two adult bodies.

"The best documented of these double burials was that of Easter Eubanks, who died at nine in the morning, probably from malaria

▲Photo courtesy of the Madison County Genealogical & Historical Society, Huntsville, Ark.