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♦ *EARLY MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA:
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TÜBINGEN

THE DEAD AS RESOURCES: THE UTILIZATION OF DEATH AND BURIAL FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL IDENTITY AND LEGITIMACY IN VIKING AGE SCANDINAVIA¹



*This article is dedicated to the memory
of Prof. Dr. Jörn Staecker (1961-2018)*

THE MODERN PERCEPTIONS OF ANCIENT RITES

In 2013 the story of the eccentric Brazilian billionaire Chiquinho Scarpa and his car burial spread via internet and newspapers. The businessman, famous for his luxurious and flamboyant lifestyle, announced that – being inspired by watching a TV documentary about Ancient Egypt and the rich burials of Egyptian Pharaohs – he planned to bury his \$500,000 luxury car – a black Bentley Flying Spur – so that he could drive it even after his death in the afterlife (fig. 1).² The intense popular indignation that followed this announcement on social media, in blogs and comment sections of online newspapers, criticizing Scarpa as elitist, blasphemous, corrupted and downright insane, highlights very clearly our modern, western conception of burials, death and afterlife in contrast to burial

¹ The present article was prepared in the Collaborative Research Center SFB 1070 ResourceCultures, promoted by the German Research Foundation (DFG). For information about the SFB 1070 see: <https://uni-tuebingen.de/en/research/core-research/collaborative-research-centers/sfb-1070/>. English revised by Jennifer Gechter-Jones.

² J. Tappin Coelho, *Brazilian Businessman Inspired by Egypt's Pharaohs Buries His £310,000 Bentley so He Can Use it in the Afterlife*, "Daily Mail Online" 23 September 2013. Available from: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2425452/Brazilian-businessman-buries-310-000-Bentley-use-afterlife.html> (accessed 11 November 2018).

rites in most societies in pre-history, where grave goods were commonly deposited as a sign of wealth and prosperity or as furniture for life in the afterworld, e.g. in ancient Egypt or of course in Viking Age Scandinavia. Actually, Scarpa's announcement was simply a brilliant PR-gag. He never really intended to bury the Bentley but wanted to illustrate that most humans are literally dumping unique and precious resources when being buried with their body intact instead of donating their organs to hospitals.³ However, Scarpa's sage PR-gag illustrates impressively how far modern ideas of a proper burial and the belief (or better perhaps disbelief) about the otherworld have shifted away from the conceptions that dominated human life for millennia.

FUNERALS AS PUBLIC EVENTS

Scarpa's "Bentley burial" illustrates two important aspects of a funeral ceremony that must be reconsidered when dealing with Viking Age funerary customs. A funeral was not mainly a private event for the close relatives to mourn, to bid farewell and to perform the rites of passage, that were regarded as necessary within their specific culture/religion, as it is often the case in modern Western society, but it was a public event that took place in the midst of the local community. By this, every rite performed during the funeral ceremony was not solely an interaction between the relatives and the deceased or spiritual entities but rather a communication between the relatives and the local community with the deceased as a form of medium.⁴ During this communication, the relatives could utilize the funeral ceremony for the exhibition (and finally often the elimination of parts) of their wealth. Both aspects are pivotal to the supposed intention of Scarpa's "Bentley burial"; the ostentatious destruction of precious goods in the form of the expensive car as an exhibition of wealth and status which needed a public orchestration via social media and (online) newspapers to be perceived as interaction between Scarpa and society and to gain benefit.

A similar situation is presented in the famous travelogue of the Arab traveler Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān, who attended the funeral of a Rus chieftain – East Scandinavian Vikings that travelled through Eastern Europe as traders and mercenaries – near the city of Bolghar on the Upper Volga (Russia) in

³ *Grotesque Burying of Bentley Proves Winner at ad Oscars*, "The Irish Times" 23 June 2014. Available from: <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/media-and-marketing/grotesque-burying-of-bentley-proves-winner-at-ad-oscars-1.1842354> (accessed 11 November 2018).

⁴ See S. Brather, *Kleidung, Bestattung, Ritual. Die Präsentation sozialer Rollen im frühen Mittelalter*, in: *Zwischen Antike und Spätmittelalter*, Archäologie des 4. bis 7. Jahrhunderts im Westen, Berlin-New York 2008, p. 256.

922 AD (fig. 2).⁵ Being sent as an ambassador from the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad to the khaganate of the Volgar Bulgars, he wrote in astonishing detail about all his observations during his voyage, which makes his travelogue – later entitled as “Risala” (Arabic for “letter”/“report”) – an inestimable precious and unique source especially for the funeral customs of the Scandinavian Rus. Ibn Fadlān reports a funeral ceremony lasting several days, that was witnessed by the Rus community – and even by a stranger such as ibn Fadlān himself – and which involved the destruction of extensive amounts of wealth and resources, with complex rituals and animal as well as human sacrifices.⁶

Even if most funerals in Viking Age society will have been less elaborate than the picture provided by ibn Faḍlān’s detailed eye-witness account – which astonishingly matches many elements of the famous ship burials at Oseberg, Gokstad or Ladby⁷ – the overall conception is in principle the same. The burial takes place among relatives and members of the local community and by this public character the burial ceremony can be utilized as an ostentation of wealth and social status, affiliation or social identity,⁸ which is defined by ethnical, religious and cultural aspects or by social status or function. Even the intended relinquishing of grave goods must be regarded as a presentation of specific ideas, mentalities or purposes.

WHAT ACTUALLY IS A BURIAL?

This interplay of interactions between the relatives and the dead or spiritual entities/deities and between the relatives and the local community illustrates the multidimensional functions of a burial ceremony. On an emotional level, it provides the opportunity for a last farewell, of coping with grief and loss for the bereaved. On a religious level, the funeral is the significant phase, in which the soul of the deceased would be transported from this world into the otherworld. Thus, the burial ceremony consists of an array of rites, the “rites de passages”, which should enable a comfortable and undisturbed transition

⁵ Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness. *Arab Travellers in the Far North*, eds. P. Lunde, C. Stone, London 2012.

⁶ J. Staecker, M.S. Toplak, T. Schade, *Multimodalität in der Archäologie. Überlegungen zum Einbezug von Kommunikationstheorien in die Archäologie anhand von drei Fallbeispielen*, “IMAGE” XXVIII (2018), pp. 66-68.

⁷ N. Price, *Passing into Poetry. Viking-Age Mortuary Drama and the Origins of Norse Mythology*, “Medieval Archaeology” LIV (2010), p. 133.

⁸ “Social identity” is defined after Goffmann as sum of those social categories which an individual belongs to or is regarded as belonging to. By this, “social identity” acts as a categorization of an individual within different reference groups (amongst others ethnically, religious, cultural, geographical, or defined by status, function or profession) for the orientation within society and the perception of and by other individuals. See E. Goffmann, *Stigma. Über Techniken der Bewältigung beschädigter Identität*, Frankfurt a. M. 1972, pp. 255-256.

for the soul of the deceased and which are defined by several religious and cultic aspects such as ideas about the afterlife, veneration of the dead or apotropaic provisions.

But as a public event, the funeral fulfills social functions as well. The death of a member of the local community might lead to a vacancy within the social, political or religious structure, so that it becomes necessary to reconstruct the social organization through symbolic actions. This might happen e.g. by handing over symbols of status to the successor of the deceased or – on the contrary – by burying specific artifacts with the deceased to withdraw them from further (symbolic) usage.

However, the most important aspect for the understanding of burials is the opportunity for the relatives to utilize the funeral as a social statement, to negotiate or manipulate by presenting an advantageous and idealized picture of the social reality via prestigious or precious objects as grave goods.

THE “DISTURBING MIRRORS OF LIFE”. ABSENT BLACKSMITHS AND INFANT WARRIORS

While for a long time it was common in tradition of the New Archaeology to regard burials as being “mirrors of life”⁹ that reflect an unadulterated picture of the social reality in which the deceased lived, this view has been challenged by an increasingly growing number of burials that present a “mise en scène” of the deceased which hardly matches with reality.

The classical examples are male burials with weapons from the Viking Age which today are still often regarded as inevitably being the graves of warriors, even if no indications of an actual role in active warfare are present or even if the deceased was obviously not able to handle these weapons in a combat situation, e.g. when young boys were buried with weapons.¹⁰ A good example of this is the grave of a boy of approximately 10-12 years of age from the Viking Age cemetery of Ire, Hellvi parish, on Gotland.¹¹ The boy

9 H. Härke, *The Nature of Burial Data*, in: *Burial and Society. The Chronological and Social Analysis of Archaeological Burial Data*, Aarhus 1997, p. 25.

10 A.-S. Gräslund, *A Princely Child in Birka*, in: *Studien zur Archäologie des Ostseeraumes. Von der Eisenzeit zum Mittelalter. Festschrift für Michael Müller-Wille*, Neumünster 1998; J. Staecker, *Geschlecht, Alter und materielle Kultur. Das Beispiel Birka*, in: *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde. Festschrift für Heiko Steuer zum 70. Geburtstag*, Berlin 2009, p. 485; M.S. Toplak, *Burial Archaeology and Embodiment. Der tote Körper im “Zerrspiegel des Lebens”*, *Zeitschrift für Archäologie des Mittelalters* XLV (2017), p. 131.

11 M. Stenberger, *En ryttagravn på Ihrefältet*, “*Gotländskt arkiv*” XIV (1942), pp. 25-32; M. Stenberger, *Das Gräberfeld bei Ihre im Kirchspiel Hellvi auf Gotland. Der wikingzeitliche Abschnitt*, “*Acta archaeologica*” XXXII (1961), pp. 122-123; L. Thunmark-Nylén, *Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands. III:2 – Text*, Stockholm 2006, pp. 600-608.

was equipped with a sword, two spears, riding equipment and a dog as well as a horse (fig. 3), so the whole arrangement of this burial presents this boy as a mounted warrior, the high-ranking manly ideal of the Vendel and Early Viking Age society and member of the social elite. But when comparing the size of this boy and the measurements of the sword, it is obvious that this boy would not have been able to swing this weapon and was certainly no warrior fighting in battle. This burial provides no glimpse of a first-hand past reality, but it presents an intentionally constructed picture, that should (re)construct or manipulate the social reality in favor of the relatives.

The same can be said, when certain individuals were buried with special tools that are interpreted as signs of the profession of the deceased, e.g. blacksmithing tools or equipment for trading activities. The distribution of burials with blacksmithing tools from Viking Age Scandinavia and the combination of tools in these graves indicate rather clearly that some of these graves might actually be the burials of blacksmiths. In contrast working as a blacksmith during the lifetime of the dead is not inevitable reflected in the grave goods, as the lack of blacksmithing graves in eastern Scandinavia shows.¹² It seems to be more plausible that blacksmithing tools – which occur most often not as a functional kit in the graves but as single tools¹³ – must be regarded as symbols of status and power,¹⁴ which are perhaps associated with the social importance of the blacksmith, being vital for the functionality of the society.

Equally symbolic functions as tokens of status seem to be present in the inclusion of trading equipment such as weights for scales or touchstones for testing the value of metals. Both artifact groups appear in the burials of males as well as in the burials of females, or even infants,¹⁵ who were clearly not working as professional traders or metallurgists. The appearance of these artifacts in graves – either of adult males or infants – does not depict the life

¹² M. Müller-Wille, *Der Schmied im Spiegel archäologischer Quellen. Zur Aussage von Schmiedegräbern der Wikingerzeit*, in: *Das Handwerk in vor- und frühgeschichtlicher Zeit, II: Archäologische und philologische Beiträge*, Göttingen 1983, p. 249.

¹³ M. Müller-Wille, *Der Schmied im Spiegel...*, p. 251.

¹⁴ M. Ježek, *Archaeology of Touchstones. An Introduction Based on Finds from Birka, Sweden*, Leiden 2017, p. 59.

¹⁵ For the distribution of weights in the burials of females and infants at the case study of Birka see A.-S. Gräslund, *Barn i Birka*, "Tor. Tidskrift för nordisk fornkunskap" (1972-1973) [1973], p. 174; O. Kyhlberg, *Vikt och värde. Arkeologiska studier i värdemätning, betalningsmedel och metrologi under yngre järnålder, 1: Helgö, 2: Birka*, Stockholm 1980, pp. 204-210; A. Stalsberg, *Women as Actors in North European Viking Age Trade*, in: *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, Glasgow 1991, pp. 77-79; I. Gustin, *Mellan gåva och marknad. Handel, tillit och materiell kultur under vikingatid*, Stockholm 2004, pp. 229-230; J. Staecker, J. Staecker, *Geschlecht, Alter und materielle Kultur...*, pp. 488-489. For the distribution of touchstones in Birka see M. Ježek, *Archaeology of Touchstones...*, p. 83.

reality of those individuals but were deposited to communicate a certain statement.

THE “SOCIAL” AND THE “SYMBOLIC CAPITAL”. DEATH AND BURIAL AS RESOURCES

These obvious examples show that through the deposition of specific grave goods, the overall investment of resources, wealth and labor during the funeral ceremony as well as through the construction of the grave itself, the people responsible for the burial – normally the closest relatives – could utilize the funeral ceremony within a socio-political competition. Doing so, they can present their deceased and with them their whole family in a favorable perspective – which does not necessarily have to match reality – in order to legitimize their status or to claim a new socio-political function or position. By burying e.g. their infant son with a full complement of weapons according to the ideal of a mounted warrior, the family of this boy ascribes itself to a certain social group – in this case some kind of warrior elite, which uses weapons and riding equipment as tokens of power. The affiliation to this social group provides credit and prestige, and offers social connections and other advantages. Pierre Bourdieu defines the benefit of belonging to a certain group as the “social capital”, one of three forms of capital beside the “economic capital” (actual valuables) and the “cultural capital” (knowledge, education, habitus).¹⁶ These three categories accumulate in a fourth form, the “symbolic capital”, which is the prestige or reputation that results from possessing aspects from the three basic forms of capital.

So, burials can be used as media to create symbolic capital by constructing affiliations to certain groups which are regarded as influential, reputable or at least widely networked, and thereby to negotiate or to manipulate the social reality according to the interests of particular groups (e.g. the close relatives).

The potential character of a burial ceremony – the recollection of this act and even of the grave itself – as an expression of a (constructed or factual) social capital offers a methodological approach to interpret death and burial as a form of resource for past societies. This approach follows a new conceptualization of the definition of resources that has been established by the Collaborative Research Center SFB 1070 Resource Cultures at the University of Tübingen, and which rejects the classical definition of solely material resources such as precious metals or fertile soil but specifies resources

¹⁶ P. Bourdieu, *Ökonomisches Kapital, kulturelles Kapital, soziales Kapital*, in: *Soziale Ungleichheiten*, Göttingen 1983, pp. 183-198.

as every material or immaterial media that can be used by human actors to negotiate or manipulate social reality:

Resources are defined as the tangible or intangible means by which actors create, sustain or alter social relations, units or identities. This definition abolishes the opposition between “natural” and “cultural” resources because even raw materials extracted from natural environments are subjected to cultural constructions.¹⁷

CASE STUDIES. WHERE HAVE ALL THE CHILDREN GONE? MISSING INFANT BURIALS IN VIKING AGE SCANDINAVIA

A general problem within the archaeology of Viking Age Scandinavia is the lack of infant burials in most excavated cemeteries. Based on the investigations of Caroline Arcini at the late Viking Age/early Medieval churchyard in Lund, Sweden,¹⁸ the mortality rate for children lies at around 20% for neonates and 40% for children and teenagers (age groups *infans I/II* to *juvenilis*¹⁹).²⁰ This leads to an expected average proportion of sub-adult burials between 25-30%²¹ and 40-45%,²² even if far higher proportions might occasionally occur in some Medieval cemeteries.²³ However, on most cemeteries in Viking Age Scandinavia the proportion of infant burials is far below the percentage of around 25-40% (fig. 4) and sub-adults seem to be highly underrepresented in the skeleton material e.g. in Denmark or Norway.²⁴

17 *Resource Cultures. Sociocultural Dynamics and the Use of Resources – Theories, Methods, Perspectives*, eds. A. Scholz, M. Bartelheim, R. Hardenberg, J. Staecker, Tübingen 2017, p. 7.

18 C. Arcini, *Health and Disease in Early Lund*, Lund 1999.

19 Classification of age groups: Infant: 0-1 year; Neonatal: 0-1 month; Postneonatal: 1-12 month; *Infans Ia*: 0-2 years; *Infans Ib*: 2-7 years; *Infans II*: 7-14 years; *Juvenilis*: 12/14-17/19 years. Based on L. Scheuer, S.M. Black, *Developmental Juvenile Osteology*, San Diego 2000, pp. 468-469; extended by B.J. Sellevold, U.L. Hansen, J.B. Jørgensen, *Iron Age Man in Denmark*, Copenhagen 1984, p. 32.

20 C. Arcini, B. Jacobsson, *Vikingarna från Vannhög*, “Ale. Historisk tidskrift för Skåneland” I (2008), p. 6.

21 H. Helmuth, *Anthropologische Untersuchungen an menschlichen Skelettresten der frühmittelalterlichen Siedlung Haihabu (Ausgrabungen 1966-1969)*, in: *Untersuchungen zur Anthropologie, Botanik und Dendrochronologie*, Neumünster 1977, p. 47; C. Arcini, B. Jacobsson, *Vikingarna från Vannhög*, p. 6.

22 G. Ascádi, J. Nemeskéri, *History of Human Life Span and Mortality*, Budapest 1970, pp. 236-251; M. Rundkvist, *Barshalder 2. Studies in late Iron Age Gotland*, Stockholm 2003, pp. 79-80.

23 See e.g. B.J. Sellevold, U.L. Hansen, J.B. Jørgensen, *Iron Age Man in Denmark*, p. 210, table 9-2-1.

24 Ibidem, p. 212; F.-A. Stylegar, *The Kaupang Cemeteries Revisited*, in: *Kaupang in Skiringssal*, Aarhus 2007, p. 86.

Several explanations have been put forward for this situation; the poor preservation of fragile children's bones in contrast to the skeleton material of full-grown individuals, incomplete excavations of cemeteries, by which the smaller children's graves simply were overlooked or shallow grave pits for infants that were prone to being ploughed away or disturbed by erosion or other surface factors, or the practice of burying children together with adults.²⁵ While it is possible to identify the burials of infants even in cases of bad bone preservation through their shorter grave pits,²⁶ the identification of juvenile and almost full-grown individuals requires sufficient preserved bone material for anthropological analysis.²⁷ Missing or merely perfunctory anthropological investigations would therefore presumably distort the final ratio of sub-adults.²⁸ But even when taking into consideration the methodological and source-critical objections, the proportion of sub-adult burials – and especially infant burials – in many well excavated cemeteries is that low that the only valid explanation must be that not all children were buried in the “regular” cemeteries.²⁹

As in some cemeteries, especially in early proto-urban settlements, the proportion of children's burials correlates with or is higher than the expected ratio of around 25% – e.g. in Sigtuna in the early phase between 970-1100 AD or in several churchyards in early Lund or in the Viking Age section of the cemetery at Ire, Hellvi parish, on Gotland – the lack or low ratio of infant burials in most cemeteries might be due a special function of the associated settlement and a different population structure. Typical examples would be early trading places with a high proportion of non-native traders that stayed only seasonally, or for a limited time and left their families at home,

²⁵ See e.g. A.-S. Gräslund, *The Burial Customs. A Study of the Graves on Björkö, Birka IV*, Stockholm 1980, p. 82; B.J. Sellevold, U.L. Hansen, J.B. Jørgensen, *Iron Age Man in Denmark*, pp. 208-210.

²⁶ E. g. A.-S. Gräslund, *The Burial Customs...*, pp. 8-9; O. Kyhlberg, *Vikt och värde...*, pp. 204-210; U. Arents, S. Eisenschmidt, *Die Gräber von Haithabu, Die Ausgrabungen in Haithabu*, XV, Neumünster 2010, pp. 272-275. However, the length of the grave pit does not necessarily need to reflect the size of the interred individuum, as crouched adult burials in short grave pits illustrate, see A.-S. Gräslund, *Barn i Birka*, p. 164; L. Mejsholm, *Gränsland. Konstruktion av tidig barndom och begravningsritual vid tiden för kristnandet i Skandinavien*, Uppsala 2009, pp. 172-173, fig. 8.3.

²⁷ M.S. Toplak, *Das wikingerzeitliche Gräberfeld von Kopparsvik auf Gotland. Studien zu neuen Konzepten sozialer Identitäten am Übergang zum christlichen Mittelalter*, Tübingen 2016, p. 184.

²⁸ It has to be taken into consideration that the modern differentiation between juveniles and adults – based on medical aspects – does not necessarily conform with the perception of adulthood in past societies. By this, the separation between juveniles and adults might be an artificial construct that had nothing to do with life reality in Viking Age Scandinavia. For the situation on Gotland according to the medieval law collection “Gutalagen” see L. Thunmark-Nylén, *Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands...*, p. 427.

²⁹ B.J. Sellevold, U.L. Hansen, J.B. Jørgensen, *Iron Age Man in Denmark*, p. 213.

as reflected in an overrepresentation of males as at Kopparsvik on Gotland with a dominance of male burials (68%)³⁰ and the absence of infant burials. A high number of non-natives in the burials of cemetery 116 on Helgö was also mentioned as a potential explanation for the lack of infant graves,³¹ even if the number of sexed skeletons was too small to prove a dominance of male burials.³² In these cases, the lack of infant graves is simply due to a mainly adult population and reflects the reality of these societies.

But as many cemeteries belonging to settlements without evidence of trading activities or the presence of a larger non-native population exhibit a low ratio of children's burials – e.g. cemeteries as Havor, Barshalder or Broa on Gotland – it has to be assumed that a divergent treatment of deceased infants was common practice among many communities in Viking Age Scandinavia.

Based on the historical accounts of the pagan tradition of infant exposure in Viking Age society – e.g. in the *Íslendingabók* (chapter 7) and later law collections as the *Grágás*³³ but also in contemporary historical sources such as the travel account of the 10th century Jewish merchant Ibrāhīm ibn Ya'qūb, who reported on the practice of child exposure in Haithabu (Schleswig)³⁴ – the low ratio of infant burials might result from the exposure of newborn or younger children. In the same way, this practice can be taken as an indication, that for some children – perhaps especially for younger infants – proper burials were not regarded as being necessary.³⁵ The infants were buried according to a rite which leaves no traces in the archaeological record – e.g. through cremation or disposal in the sea as ibn Ya'qūb mentioned – or were at least buried apart from the regular cemeteries as settlement burials.³⁶ Evidence for this explanation could be found at Haithabu, where several neonates were buried within the settlement area, e.g. under the hearth.³⁷

Another explanation is offered by the small Viking Age cemetery of Triberga on Öland, Sweden. Only three out of the 24 burials were the graves of adults, the rest (87,5%) were the burials of individuals younger

30 M.S. Toplak, *Das wikingerzeitliche Gräberfeld*, Tübingen 2016, p. 65.

31 B. Sander, R. Jonsson, *Excavations at Helgö XIII. Cemetery 116*, Stockholm 1997, p. 97.

32 Ibidem, pp. 92-94.

33 G. Kreutzer, *Schwangerschaft, Geburt und früheste Kindheit in der altnordischen Literatur*, habilitation thesis, Kiel 1982, pp. 206-213.

34 *Ibn Fadlān and the Land of Darkness...*, p. 163.

35 See the analysis of grave goods in infant burials at Fjälkinge in L. Meijsholm, *Gränsland...*, p. 200.

36 I. Beilke-Voigt, *Das "Opfer" im archäologischen Befund. Studien zu den sog. Bauopfern, kultischen Niederlegungen und Bestattungen in ur- und frühgeschichtlichen Siedlungen Norddeutschlands und Dänemarks*, Rahden 2007, pp. 186-187.

37 U. Arents, S. Eisenschmidt, *Die Gräber von Haithabu*, p. 275.

than two years old (Infans Ia) and in one grave younger than seven years old (Infans Ib).³⁸ A similar situation appertains to the larger Viking Age cemetery of Fjälkinge in Scania.³⁹ More than half (60,8%) of the 125 graves⁴⁰ contained young individuals of up to three years of age (Infans Ia), most of them (86,8%) died within the first year of life (age group Infant), while older children and teenagers were absent.⁴¹ Given the circumstance, that the high number of children's burials was not conditioned by some epidemic or plague,⁴² these two cemeteries might represent separate areas⁴³ or special burial places for larger communities that were intended mainly for the interment of children, which were not allowed (or able) to be buried in the regular cemeteries.

However, it is axiomatic, that there existed some form of separation between the deceased infants in Viking Age Scandinavia and that not all sub-adults were buried in the regular cemeteries among their adult family members.

As all sub-adult age groups are represented and roughly equal in many cemeteries, this separation seems not to be a matter of age. Instead a likely reason might be the social status of the particular family,⁴⁴ which seems especially obvious with regard to the "princely" warrior burials of young boys.⁴⁵ While the situation at Birka is much more ambivalent with some exceptionally rich infant burials (e.g. Bj 758, Bj 977, Bj 846) and a larger number of sub-adult graves with no or only few grave goods – especially coffin burials – a social separation is evident at the cemetery at Ire, Hellvi parish, on Gotland. A closer investigation of the 24 burials of sub-adults from Ire which are registered by Thunmark-Nylén⁴⁶ shows, that nearly all individuals from the age group Infans Ia/b for boys and the age group Infans

38 A. Ingvarsson-Sundström, *Osteologisk analys. Skelettgravar från Triberga Raä 73, Hulterstad sn, Öland, SAU Rapport 2005:14*, "Arkeologiska Enheten, Rapport 2006:2, Kalmar Läns Museum" (2006), p. 6, fig. 1.

39 C. Arcini, *Osteologisk Rapport av skeletten från gravarna i Fjälkinge*, in: *Rapport – Arkeologisk undersökning 1990*, Kristianstad 1990; C. Arcini, B. Helgesson, *A Major Burial Ground Discovered at Fjälkinge. Reflections of Life in a Scanian Village*, "Lund Archaeological Review" II (1996); F. Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age. Death Rituals in South-East Scandinavia 900-1000*, Stockholm 2003, pp. 301-306; L. Mejsholm, *Gränsland...*, pp. 165-201.

40 Kjellström provides slightly different data with 128 graves in total and among these 67,1% burials of individuals in the age group Infans I as well as single older sub-adults (0,8% Infans II and 2,3% juveniles), see A. Kjellström, *The Urban Farmer. Osteoarchaeological Analysis of Skeletons from Medieval Sigtuna Interpreted in a Socioeconomic Perspective*, Stockholm 2005, p. 42, table 4.8.

41 L. Mejsholm, *Gränsland...*, p. 167, table 8.1.

42 See C. Arcini, B. Jacobsson, *Vikingarna från Vannhög*, p. 5.

43 See e.g. L. Mejsholm, *Gränsland...*, p. 168 for Fjälkinge.

44 B.J. Sellevold, U.L. Hansen, J.B. Jørgensen, *Iron Age Man in Denmark*, p. 210.

45 A.-S. Gräslund, *A Princely Child*, Neumünster 1998.

46 L. Thunmark-Nylén, *Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands...*, pp. 429-430.

II onwards for girls⁴⁷ were buried with typical adult grave goods, including weapons and rich jewelry.⁴⁸ According to the burials of sub-adults at Ire, the boundary concerning grave goods lies not between infants and adults⁴⁹ but between neonates and infants. This leads to the assumption, that the sub-adults which were buried at Ire must be regarded as belonging to the higher social strata.

Even with the ratio of around 21% of burials of sub-adults among the inhumation graves at Ire, these graves do not reflect the total infant population. It can be hypothesized that up to one half of the deceased sub-adults were not buried among the adult population in the regular cemetery but either disposed of without a regular grave or buried at a separate location.

The distribution of infant burials reflects an intentional decision by the relatives or the local community, that a child should be buried according to the burial rites for adults and within the adult sphere in a regular cemetery⁵⁰ or that it should be buried together with other children at a separate burial spot, or be deposited in a specific way, which leaves no archaeological traces. According to the case study of the cemetery at Ire, the social status of the particular family seems to have been the relevant factor.

Following the classic concept of resources, children are a typical future-orientated resource for their family and society, which loses its primary value with the child's premature death. Through the presentation of infants in the burial ritual or through the decision for a regular burial among the adult members of society, a social status or the affiliation to a certain social elite ("social capital") can be presented or constructed, so that the death and burial of an infant can act once more as a resource. This function of infant burials as media of social representation becomes evident when children were not only buried with adult dress attire, but even with grave goods as status symbols

⁴⁷ The current boundaries between the single age groups are fluent, presumably due to the low sample of burials, inaccurate age determinations as well as the inadequacy of the age group-classification as modern scientific construction, which does not necessarily match with life reality.

⁴⁸ In contrast to the burials at Birka, where young girls were normally not buried with the full dress of an adult female as oval brooches are missing in the burials of most sub-adult girls (see A.-S. Gräslund, *A Princely Child*, p. 285), the sub-adult females at Ire were buried with full dress attire.

⁴⁹ An interesting observation can be mentioned with the fact that in at least three burials of boys at Ire (233, 380, 505) elements were found that are normally related to the female sphere, as a higher number of glass beads, L-shaped keys (*Hakenschlüssel*), dress pins or a grave orb. This might relate to the idea that children in general were associated with the female sphere, see A.-S. Gräslund, *A Princely Child*, p. 287; L. Thunmark-Nylén, *Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands...*, p. 428.

⁵⁰ See even C. Hedenstierna-Jonson, *She Came from Another Place. On the Burial of a Young Girl in Birka*, in: *Viking Worlds*, Oxford 2015, p. 97; L. Mejsholm, *Gränsland...*, p. 255.

that relate to a social role, that could hardly be fulfilled by infants during their life time. The classical examples are the burials of “infant warriors” as in Birka or Ire, graves of young boys – often on the border between the age groups infans I/II – that were buried with rich furniture, including weapons, riding equipment and horses. Through this presentation of the infants, the burial ceremony was used as a(n) (immaterial) resource by the relatives to gain social prestige and to legitimize or to secure an actual or a desired social position. The weapon equipment was intended to show the military and socio-political position and function which the boy – and with him his relatives – would have possessed in the future, if he had survived until adulthood.

INTEGRATION IN DEATH. OTHERNESS AS A RESOURCE

Another example for the shift in the use and function of (human) resources can be observed in a recently discussed phenomenon of body modifications in Viking Age Scandinavia.⁵¹ Three females with deliberately deformed skulls were found in Viking Age cemeteries on Gotland, buried according to the local funerary customs within the local community and equipped with the attire which was typical of the female dress on Gotland (fig. 5). The custom of artificial cranial deformation – an intentional distorting of the growth of a child’s skull using tapes that were wrapped around the soft skull bones in the first years of life – is usually associated with nomadic tribes from Central Asia and the Eurasian steppe⁵² and appeared also in Central and Western Europe between 3rd-8th century AD, especially under the influence of the Hun Empire⁵³ in the late 5th and early 6th century AD.⁵⁴ In contrast to the eastern

51 M.S. Toplak, *Körpermodifikationen als Embodiment von sozialer Identität und als sozio-kulturelle Ressource. Das Fallbeispiel der artifiziellen Schädeldeformationen in der skandinavischen Wikingerzeit. Mit einem Beitrag zur Kraniometrie von Valerie Palmowski* (2019, in preparation).

52 S. Hakenbeck, *Infant Head Shaping in Eurasia in the First Millennium AD*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Childhood*, Oxford 2018, pp. 485-486.

53 See also P. Mayall, V. Pilbrow, L. Bitadze, *Migrating Huns and Modified Heads. Eigenshape Analysis Comparing Intentionally Modified Crania from Hungary and Georgia in the Migration Period of Europe*, “Plos one” XII (2017) 2.

54 K.W. Alt, *Die artifizielle Schädeldeformation bei den Westgermanen*, in: *Искусственная деформация головы человека в прошлом Евразии*, Moskau 2006, pp. 115-126; S. Hakenbeck, “Hunnish” Modified Skulls. *Physical Appearance, Identity and the Transformative Nature of Migrations*, in: *Mortuary Practices and Social Identities in the Middle Ages*, Exeter 2009, pp. 64-80; B. Tobias, K. Wiltshcke-Schrotta, M. Binder, *Das langobardenzeitliche Gräberfeld von Wien-Mariahilfer Gürtel. Mit einem Beitrag zur künstlichen Schädeldeformation im westlichen Karpatenbecken*, “Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums” LVII (2010), pp. 296-301; B. Trautmann, B. Haas-Gebhard, A. Boos, A. Rott, M. Groß, J. Burger, M. Harbeck, *Eine Reevaluation artifiziell deformierter Schädel des Frühen Mittelalters aus Bayern*, “Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt” XLVII (2017) 2, pp. 263-282.

regions from Central Asia to Eastern and Central Europe, artificial skull deformation in Western Europe was almost exclusively limited to females, which were buried in several Migration Period cemeteries in southern and southwestern Germany, Switzerland and southern France.⁵⁵ Although these females were buried according to local burial customs and furnished with the characteristic dress attire,⁵⁶ analyses of aDNA,⁵⁷ stable strontium and carbon isotopes⁵⁸ suggest, that they were of non-local origin and came to Western Europe as adults, presumably in the context of exogamy.⁵⁹

Even if no scientific analyses of these three skulls from Gotland are available to date, it can be assumed that these females did not grow up locally as all three roughly date to the same period – around the second half of the 11th to the beginning of the 12th century AD – and no indication could be found that these females passed on this custom to their descendants.⁶⁰ Based on the current state of research, it seems to be most likely that these individuals came to Gotland as juveniles or adults from Southeastern Europe or maybe even Central Asia, having their heads been deformed in early childhood. They

55 See S. Hakenbeck, “Hunnish” Modified Skulls..., p. 73; eadem, *Infant Head Shaping...*, p. 487 for a detailed survey.

56 S. Hakenbeck, “Hunnish” Modified Skulls..., pp. 74-75.

57 K.R. Veeramah, A. Rott, M. Groß, L. van Dorp, S. López, K. Kirsanow, C. Sell, J. Blöcher, D. Wegmann, V. Link, Z. Hofmanová, J. Peters, B. Trautmann, A. Gairhos, J. Haberstroh, B. Paffgen, G. Hellenthal, B. Haas-Gebhard, M. Harbeck, J. Burger, *Population Genomic Analysis of Elongated Skulls Reveals Extensive Female-Biased Immigration in Early Medieval Bavaria*, “Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America” CXV (13) (2018) 13, pp. 3494-3499.

58 M.M. Schweissing, G. Grupe, *Local or Nonlocal? A Research of Strontium Isotope Ratios of Teeth and Bones on Skeletal Remains with Artificial Deformed Skulls*, “Anthropologischer Anzeiger” LVIII (2000) 1, pp. 99-103; idem, *Stable Strontium Isotopes in Human Teeth and Bone. A Key to Migration Events in the Late Roman Period in Bavaria*, “Journal of Archaeological Science” XXX (2003) 11, p. 1377; S. Hakenbeck, E. McManus, H. Geisler, G. Grupe, T. O’Connell, *Diet and Mobility in Early Medieval Bavaria. A Study of Carbon and Nitrogen Stable Isotopes*, “American Journal of Physical Anthropology” CXLI (2010), pp. 244-247; A. Wisnowsky, R. Schleuder, S. Wilde, G. Grupe, J. Burger, M. Harbeck, “Fremde” Sitten im frühmittelalterlichen Bayern. Kulturtransfer oder Migration?, in: *Archäometrie und Denkmalpflege 2010*, Bochum 2010, pp. 190-191; O. Heinrich-Tamaska, M.M. Schweissing, *Strontiumisotopen- und Radiokarbonuntersuchungen am anthropologischen Fundmaterial von Keszthely-Fenékpuszta. Ihr Aussagepotenzial zur Frage der Migration und Chronologie*, in: *Keszthely-Fenékpuszta im Kontext spätantiker Kontinuitätsforschung zwischen Noricum und Moesia (Castellum Pannonicum Pelsonense)*, Rahden 2011, p. 466; M.A. Vohberger, “Lokal oder eingewandert? Interpretationsmöglichkeiten und Grenzen der lokalen Strontium- und Sauerstoffisotopensignaturen am Beispiel der Altgrabung in Wenigumstadt”, PhD thesis, München 2011, pp. 195-196; B. Trautmann, B. Haas-Gebhard, A. Boos, A. Rott, M. Groß, J. Burger, M. Harbeck, *Eine Reevaluation artifiziell deformierter Schädel des Frühen Mittelalters aus Bayern*, “Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt” XLVII (2017) 2, p. 274.

59 S. Hakenbeck, “Hunnish” modified skulls, pp. 77-78; eadem, *Infant Head Shaping...*, pp. 491-492.

60 M.S. Toplak, *Körpermodifikationen...*

were integrated into the local community, presumably by marriage, but were not allowed or able to transmit the custom of artificial cranial deformation within their new environment, even if they had female offspring.

Artificial cranial deformation was intended as a marker of identity, as a token of affiliation to a certain social group in the original homelands of the three females from Gotland. Therefor it must be interpreted as a resource, as it constructed and presented a social identity – being part of a group of people and gaining benefit from social connections and group prestige – and by this social capital. In their new community on Gotland, this resource – the apparent affiliation to a social group – lost its value, presumably as this special identity was unknown on Gotland.

Instead, the perception of the cranial deformation and its exploitation as a resource shifted from the resource “membership” to the resource “otherness” and from the three females to the surrounding society. Through the burial according to local funerary customs and furnished with typical Gotlandic dress attire such as animal head brooches, the three females were ultimately and ostentatiously assimilated into the local community, although they were distinctly marked as foreign. It can be assumed, that the “otherness” of these females, manifested by their deformed heads, was utilized as a resource by the surrounding community, perhaps to demonstrate their far-reaching trading connections. This assimilation is especially significant in the case of one individual who was not only buried with the typical Gotlandic dress but with an exaggerated set of brooches which is an almost unique example on Gotland and was intended to conspicuously emphasize her new affiliation to the Gotlandic society. Thus, the females with their distinctly foreign appearance were instrumentalized in the same way as exotic and foreign artifacts were utilized as status symbols, as a resource of “otherness” (or “foreignness”) which must be regarded as important social capital within a society dominated by trading and far-reaching travel.

TO BURY YOUR FAMILY INTO HISTORY. BURIALS AS A CLAIM TO LAND AND LEADERSHIP

Turning from the actual orchestration of the burial ceremony to the grave itself, it is obvious that those famous grave monuments at Oseberg, Gokstad or the Anundshög at Västerås were intended as explicit statements about political claims and lordship and thus constitute resources in a situation of social competitions.⁶¹ But even in average rural cemeteries as distinct from

⁶¹ See e.g. O. Sundqvist, *An Arena for Higher Powers. Ceremonial Buildings and Religious Strategies for Rulership in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, Leiden 2016, pp. 433–475.

the centers of power, the location and construction of graves might have been affected by the attempt to manipulate the social reality.⁶²

A good example for this concept is the cemetery of Havor in Hablingbo parish on Gotland.⁶³ The oldest of nearly 400 preserved graves date to the early Iron Age (younger La Tène) from around 400 BC⁶⁴ and the cemetery was in use almost continuously until the late Viking Age for around 1500 years, with only one interruption between older Vendel Period and later Viking Age (fig. 6).⁶⁵ The cemetery developed linearly from east to west with the oldest graves lying in the east and some of the ca. 70 graves from late Viking Age in the western area of the cemetery. However, many of the youngest graves from late Viking Age were lying in two separate clusters in the central area of the cemetery between the older graves from the late Iron Age and the Migration Period as so called regression graves. More than a dozen of them were even dug into older burial mounds from the late Iron Age.⁶⁶ This must be seen as an intended rite, as the area of the cemetery was not limited towards west, so there was enough space for more graves in accordance with the linear development of the cemetery. The burials from the late Viking Age were mostly placed exactly in older graves, e.g. on the cremation layer or in stone cists (fig. 7).

The intention behind these frequent secondary burials remains unknown – perhaps some cultic or religious ideas existed connected to the veneration of remote ancestors or the dead in general – but at least familiar relations between the late Iron Age and the Viking Age population can be ruled out because of the enormous chronological discrepancies.⁶⁷ A likely explanation however might be the intended construction of continuity. By burying the deceased next to or even in older graves, the relatives wanted to display their pretended descent from the local Iron Age population and thereby writing (or digging in the very sense of the word) themselves into the local traditions of this place. This constructed descent and continuity should grant them legitimacy in their claim to land or rulership as distinct from other social groups, that buried (or had to bury) their deceased in the western area of

⁶² See e.g. F. Fahlander, *The Materiality of the Ancient Dead. Post-burial Practices and Ontologies of Death in Southern Sweden AD 800-1200*, "Current Swedish Archaeology" XXIV (2016), pp. 137-162.

⁶³ E. Nylén, *Die jüngere vorrömische Eisenzeit Gotlands. Funde, Chronologie, Formenkunde*, Uppsala 1955, pp. 61-65; L. Thunmark-Nylén, *Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands...*, pp. 619-621; J. Staecker, M.S. Toplak, *Die spätwikingerezeitlichen Bestattungen auf dem Gräberfeld von Havor, Hablingbo sn* (2019, in preparation).

⁶⁴ E. Nylén, *Die jüngere vorrömische...*, p. 61.

⁶⁵ L. Thunmark-Nylén, *Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands...*, p. 595.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 619.

⁶⁷ E. Nylén, *Die jüngere vorrömische...*, p. 64.

the cemetery away from the older graves. So, even the location of graves can reflect explicit socio-political agendas and might be utilized as a resource to construct or to illustrate certain claims.

A distinct religious aspect in the construction or presentation of certain claims to leadership by re-using older burial monuments is visible in one of the oldest burial mounds at the cemetery at Valsta, Uppland, in Sweden. The cemetery, which was in use for around 350 years between the 9th-12th century AD⁶⁸ represents a transitional phase between the traditional pre-Christian cult – as seen in cremation graves or amulets such as thorshammerrings or single thorshammer pendants⁶⁹ – and the up-and-coming Christian faith.⁷⁰ One of the oldest burials and probably the foundation grave was the burial mound A1, which lay in the center of the northern area of the cemetery surrounded by later graves and which can be dated to the pre-Christian period in the early 9th century. The excavator G. Andersson considered the mound A1 as the manifestation of an “Odal mentality”,⁷¹ that would illustrate or construct claims to land or rulership. During the time of Christianization in the later phase of the cemetery around 1100 AD, the burial mound was reopened and re-used in an exceptional way. The primary cremation grave was destroyed, and three stone cists were erected inside the mound, together forming a large cross (fig. 8).⁷² This symbolic action must be regarded as an ostentatious statement on several levels. Based on Andersson’s convincing interpretation of the burial mound as a socio-political statement of a leading family or group, the re-use might be interpreted as an occupation by another party, as the older cremation burial was destroyed (intentionally or carelessly),⁷³ so that a closer lineage between the person in the primary burial and the deceased in the cross-shaped burial pits seems to be unlikely. Furthermore, the “Christianization” of the burial mound as a central monument of an “Odal mentality” at Valsta is an explicit affirmation of the legitimacy of leadership. The claim to sovereignty is no longer based merely on local traditions and inheritance, but in addition also on the religious (and the increasing political) authority of Christianity. And – with this cumulative political claim to power of the early Christian church in mind – the demonstration of the affiliation

68 G. Andersson, *Gravspråk som religiös strategi. Valsta och Skälby i Attundaland under vikingatid och tidig medeltid*, Stockholm 2005, p. 44.

69 Ibidem, pp. 67-71.

70 Ibidem, p. 100.

71 G. Andersson, *Valsta gravfält, Arkeologisk undersökning, Arlandabanan, Uppland, Norrsunda socken RAÄ 59. UV Stockholm Rapport 1997:9/1(2)*, Stockholm 1997, p. 53.

72 See also S. Tesch, *A Lost World? Religious Identity and Burial Practices during the Introduction of Christianity in the Mälaren Region, Sweden*, in: *Dying Gods – Religious Beliefs in Northern and Eastern Europe in the Time of Christianisation*, Stuttgart 2015, p. 198; F. Fahlander, *The Materiality...*, pp. 143-144.

73 F. Fahlander, *The Materiality...*, pp. 144.

with the Christian community by this public funeral might be an attempt by a leading family to present their faith and their claim as spokespersons within the early Christian community. The graves at Havor and the central burial mound A1 at Valsta and their use as burial spot provide a socio-political statement which illustrates the potential and the importance of funerals and graves as a resource within the social competition for prestige, leadership and authority.

TO ENGRAVE MEMORY. COMMEMORATION AS RESOURCE FOR SOCIAL PRESTIGE AND INHERITANCE CLAIMS

The custom of raising rune stones in memory of deceased relatives or close companions is the main expression of literacy ("runacy" as Bianchi calls it)⁷⁴ in Viking Age society and provides a direct approach towards a mentality and ideas of commemoration. While the first rune stones, written in the older futhark, date back to the 4th/5th century,⁷⁵ the classical period of the more than 3.000 currently known rune stones lies in the second half of the 10th century in Denmark, Norway and southern Sweden.⁷⁶ On Bornholm and in Uppland in East Middle Sweden – with more than 1.300 examples⁷⁷ the hot spot of rune stones – most rune stones were erected in the 11th century and partly even in the early 12th century.⁷⁸

Most rune stones exhibit a laconic and standardized inscription, mentioning the donator in first place, followed by the name of the commemorated and their relationship with the donator (father, son, brother, companion, husband), occasionally supplemented by further information about the deeds of the deceased or the circumstances of death and Christian blessings. On the one hand, rune stones were certainly intended as a memorial,⁷⁹ especially in the

⁷⁴ M. Bianchi, *Runor som resurs. Vikingatida skriftkultur i Uppland och Södermanland*, Uppsala 2010, p. 25.

⁷⁵ B. Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones. Custom and Commemoration in Early Medieval Scandinavia*, Oxford 2000, p. 7-8; L. Klos, *Runensteine in Schweden. Studien zu Aufstellungsort und Funktion*, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, LXIV, Berlin-New York 2009, p. 36.

⁷⁶ B. Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones...*, p. 10.

⁷⁷ B. Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones...*, p. 7; L. Klos, *Runensteine in Schweden...*, p. 41, tab. 1.

⁷⁸ A.-S. Gräslund, *Runstenar – om ornamentik och datering*, "Tor. Tidskrift för nordisk fornkunskap" XXIII (1991), pp. 113-140; eadem, *Runstenar – om ornamentik och datering*, "Tor. Tidskrift för nordisk fornkunskap" XXIV (1992), pp. 177-201; L. Klos, *Runensteine in Schweden...*, pp. 138-143.

⁷⁹ I.-M. Back Danielsson, *Walking Down Memory Lane. Rune-Stones as Mnemonic Agents in the Landscapes of Late Viking-Age Scandinavia*, in: *Medieval Stone Monuments*, Woodbridge 2015, pp. 62-86.

context of the process of Christianization.⁸⁰ On the other hand, based on the location of most rune stones at important and frequented places such as roads or bridges,⁸¹ and the fact, that every inscription starts with the name of the donator,⁸² even the standardized rune stones must be regarded as a medium of propaganda for the donator, and as a resource in social competition. This becomes particularly apparent in regard to the enormous number of rune stones in Uppland, where more than 1.300 rune stones were erected in a maximum of four or five generations. Donating a rune stone for a deceased relative seems to have been a social convention among the local elite and indispensable in terms of social prestige and political ambitions.⁸³ Thus, the death and memory of a relative served as capital for social prestige and the affiliation to a certain social elite.⁸⁴

This is illustrated in an outstanding manner on a rune stone from Bornholm.

: asualdi : risti : stein : pinsa : iftR : alfar : brupur : sin : drinr : koþr || :
trebin u:syni : auk : skogi : suek : saklausan :⁸⁵

The first half of the inscription from the rune stone Vestermarie V (DR 387) follows the classical schema, mentioning the donator Ásvaldi, raising a rune stone for his brother Alfarr. In contrast, the second part of the inscription is unique, accusing against a man called Skógi, who was said to have betrayed – and perhaps even killed – the commemorated Alfarr. This interesting aspect of the inscription leads to the question, why Ásvaldi invested resources

⁸⁰ L. Klos, *Runensteine in Schweden...*, pp. 338-339; M. Bianchi, *Runor som resurs*, Uppsala 2010, pp. 29-31.

⁸¹ For an analysis of the material from Sweden see L. Klos, *Runensteine in Schweden...*, pp. 65-134.

⁸² An interesting question is the stability of the mnemonic aspect of rune stones as neither patronyms nor concrete affiliations to certain families or farms were mentioned. Was there some form of oral transmission, that passed down the central mnemonic aspect in addition to the rune stones for several generations, thereby securing a definite attribution to certain individuals? Or were the rune stones simply not intended for a longer lasting transmission, so that their value and utilization as a resource was bound only to the donator and became obsolete after his death? Given this possibility, the propagandistic aspect of rune stones as a resource might have been assumed by later individuals without any relation to the original donator in the same way as it can be detected in the case of re-used burials.

⁸³ See e.g. M. Ozawa, *Rune Stones Create a Political Landscape. Towards a Methodology for the Application of Runology to Scandinavian Political History in the Late Viking Age, Part 1*, "Hersete: Journal of Hermeneutic Study and Education of Textual Configuration" I (2007), pp. 43-62; M. Bianchi, *Runstenen som socialt medium*, "Studier i svensk språkhistoria" 13 (2016), pp. 9-30.

⁸⁴ See also Bianchi and his interpretation of use and function of rune stones in the period of religious transition in M. Bianchi, *Runor som resurs...*

⁸⁵ "Ásvaldi raised this stone in memory of Alfarr, his brother, a good valiant man, shamefully killed, and Skógi betrayed the guiltless one." (Citation and translation after Projektet Samnordisk runtextdatabas).

to manifest this accusation. A potential explanation might be the function of rune stones as a medium of propaganda, e.g. to proclaim or secure inheritance claims.⁸⁶ Alfarr, the deceased, and the accused Skógi must have been related to each other in some way, possibly as trading partners with common property (Old Norse *félag*⁸⁷). According to the testimony of some runic inscriptions concerning the rules of inheritance for trading partners in a *félag*, the surviving partner – Skógi in this example – might have had the claim to his partner's share of their common property.⁸⁸ The accusation of being a traitor – and perhaps even a murderer or at least being guilty of the death of Alfarr – could be regarded as an attempt by Ásvaldi to refuse Skógi his (or even also Alfarr's) part of the common property due to his deeds, while at the same time referring to his own inheritance claims as brother of the deceased.

This example – even if one of the more dramatic ones – illustrates, how the death of an individual and the commemoration in form of a runic monument could be utilized as some form of resource to manipulate the social reality.

A TRANSMISSION TO LITERATURE. SOME REMARKS ON THE FUNCTION OF DEATH AND BURIAL IN OLD NORSE SAGA LITERATURE

Death is one of the main subjects in Old Norse saga literature and the concern with this central element of human life characterizes the deeds of most protagonists, last but not least in form of the dominating blood feuds. So, it is not surprising that the death – and in several interesting cases also the burial – of one of the protagonists appears to be utilized as some form of resource within the narrative of Old Norse literature, that fulfills specific functions at different levels.

The first example is a short citation from chapter 17 in *Laxdœla saga* about the burial of a man called Víga-Hrapp, who is denoted as a troublemaker and potential revenant⁸⁹ by his byname “Víga” (eng. killer) from his first appearance onwards. Hrapp demanded to be buried in a standing position beneath the door of his house, so that he might control his household even in

⁸⁶ B. Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones...*, pp. 47-91; L. Klos, *Runensteine in Schweden...*, pp. 33-34.

⁸⁷ See J. Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age. The Vocabulary of Runic Inscriptions and Skaldic Verse*, Woodbridge 2001, pp. 232-235.

⁸⁸ B. Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones...*, p. 63.

⁸⁹ For the concept of revenants in Old Norse literature see Vésteinn Ólason, *The Un/Grateful Dead – from Baldr to Bægifótr*, in: *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society*, Viborg 2003, pp. 153-171; K. Bödl, *Eigi einhamr. Beiträge zum Weltbild der Eyrbyggja und anderer Isländersagas*, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, IIL, Berlin-New York 2005.

death: “En þá at ek em andaðr, þá vil ek mér láta gröf grafa í eldhúsdurum, ok skal mik niðr setja standanda þar í durunum. Má ek þá enn vendiligar sjá yfir hýbýli mín”.⁹⁰ This passage illustrates the general concept of death and burial as a resource on two levels. On the one side, in a cultural interpretation, this specific form of burial serves as a resource for Hrapp himself to express his claim to ownership of his farmstead even beyond death. His standing position with the line of sight directed over his property can be interpreted as a non-acceptance of death in contrast to the classical lying position in burials which denotes eternal sleep. Even if no burials in such a vertical position are known from Viking Age Scandinavia, the idea of a posthumous “eternal” watch, that might be intended as a claim to possession, control or rulership seems to have existed in Viking Age mentality and can be detected in some burials. Examples are three chamber graves from Birka, in which the weapon-bearing deceased was buried – possibly even in a seated position as can be documented in some chamber graves from the Birka cemeteries⁹¹ – facing the settlement area and the harbor in contrast to most of the other burials, that were directed away from the settlement towards the center of the island of Björkö⁹². On the other narrative level, this form of burial is the precondition for the inevitable return of Hrapp as a revenant and serves as a resource for the inner logic of the narration. Through not accepting his death and his separation from the world of the living, emphasized by his demanded form of burial, his return as a “dangerous dead”⁹³ is of a structural necessity for the further development of the saga.

The next example is last chapter of the *Hálfðanar saga svarta* from Snorri Sturlusons *Heimskringla*, reporting the death and burial of beloved king Hálfðan⁹⁴.

Svá mikit gerðu menn sér um hann, at þá er þat spurðisk, at hann var dauðr, ok lík hans var flutt á Hringaríki ok var þar til graptar ætlat, þa fóru ríkismenn af Raumaríki ok af Vestfold ok Heiðmörk ok beiddusk allir at hafa líkit með sér ok heygja í sínz fylki, ok þótti þat vera árvænt,

⁹⁰ “Now, when I am dead, I wish my grave to be dug in the doorway of my fire hall, and that I be put thereinto, standing there in the doorway; then I shall be able to keep a more searching eye on my dwelling”, *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 17, in *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit, V, Reykjavík 1934, p. 39.

⁹¹ N. Price, *The Viking Way. Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, Uppsala 2002, p. 133.

⁹² M.S. Toplak, *Burial Archaeology...*, pp. 136-138.

⁹³ For the “dangerous dead” in Old Norse saga literature see M.S. Toplak, *Das wikingzeitliche Gräberfeld*, Tübingen 2016, pp. 269-271.

⁹⁴ O. Sundqvist, *An Arena for Higher Powers...*, pp. 462-465. For the archaeological context of non-normative “deviant” burial rites see L. Gardela, *Worshipping the Dead. Viking Age Cemeteries as Cult Sites?*, in: *Germanische Kultorte*, München 2016, pp. 174-175; M.S. Toplak, *Burial Archaeology...*, p. 141.

þeir er næði. En þeir sættusk svá, at líkinu var skipt í fjóra staði, ok var höfuðit lagit í haug at Steini á Hringaríki, en hverir fluttu heim sinn hluta ok heygðu, ok eru þat alt kallaðir Hálfðanar-haugar.⁹⁵

The local rulers from the different parts of the kingdom asked to bury king Hálfðan in their realm as the dead body of the king has turned into a resource of power. Through the burial of the king a particular region would – on the one hand – have highlighted it as an important center of the kingdom by housing the burial of the king, and would have strengthened the political position of the particular chieftain. On the other hand, and according to the narration in the *Heimskringla*, the remains of the king were explicitly perceived as being sacred, giving prosperity and some form of spiritual salvation to the country, an idea which resembles Christian beliefs of the holiness and thaumaturgy of relics, but might stem from older, pagan traditions of the veneration of deceased rulers⁹⁶. On a narrative level, the story about the dismemberment of king Hálfðan acts as an explanation for the tradition of the Hálfðanar-haugar, burial mounds that are associated in folklore with the burial of king Hálfðan. Thus, the outstanding form of the burial of king Hálfðan serves as a resource for the reliability of the whole story as it is linked with and embedded into local folklore⁹⁷.

A third example comes from the second to last chapter from Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar, which tells of the discovery of Egil's bones on a churchyard.

Grímr at Mosfelli var skírðr þá er kristni var í lög leidd á Íslandi. Hann lét þar kirkju gera, en þat er sögn manna at Þórdís hafi látit flytja Egil til kirkju ok er þat til jartegna, at síðan er kirkja var gør at Mosfelli, en ofan tekin at Hríðbrú sú kirkja er Grímr hafði gera látit, þá var þar grafinn kirkjugarðr. En undir altarisstaðnum þá fundusk mannabein. Þau váru miklu stærri en annarra manna bein. Þikjask menn þat vita af sögn gamalla manna at mundi verit hafa bein Egils.⁹⁸

95 "People thought so much of him that when it became known that he was dead and his body was taken to Hringaríki and was going to be buried there, then the rulers came from Raumaríki and from Vestfold and Heiðmörk and all asked to take the body with them and bury it in a mound in their own district, and it was considered a promise of prosperity for whoever got it. And they came to this agreement that the body was divided into four parts, and the head was laid in a mound at Steinn in Hringaríki, and they each took back with them their own share and buried it, and these are all known as Hálfðan's mounds", Hálfðanar saga svarta, chapter 9, in *Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit, XXVI, Reykjavík 1941, pp. 92-93.

96 O. Sundqvist, *An Arena for Higher Powers...*, pp. 464-465.

97 See M. Egeler, *Constructing a Landscape in Eyrbyggja saga. The Case of Dritsker*, "Arkiv för nordisk filologi" CXXXII (2017), pp. 108-109.

98 "Grim of Mossfell was baptized when Christianity was established by law in Iceland. He had a church built there, and this is common report that Thordis had Egil moved to the

As in the two previous examples, the burial fulfills again two functions on two levels in this narration. On the one hand, the alleged burial of Egill in the churchyard of one of the first churches of Iceland attests to the social position and importance of Grímr of Mossfell and his descendants, as one of the great heroes of the Landnám was buried next to his church. The transmission of Egil's bones and his later burial in this churchyard – the saga tells, that Egill was originally buried in a burial mound according to pagan burial rites⁹⁹ – serves as a resource for the social standing of a certain group of people. On the other hand – as in the example of king Hálfðan – the description of the finding of these enormous bones which were assigned to Egill proves the reliability of the saga accounts and the local tradition concerning Egill.

THE USE OF DEATH AND BURIAL AS RESOURCES. AN OPPORTUNISTIC APPROACH

Even if the death and burial of a beloved person was in the first place an emotional matter – presumably even in Viking Age Scandinavia – archaeological as well as historical and literary evidence illustrate rather clearly, that the memory of the deceased, their funeral ceremonies and graves were sometimes utilized as means for the negotiation or manipulation of the social reality. This demonstrates, that even death and burial – as well as most other aspects of human behavior – should not be underestimated in their multidimensional functions and their potential as resources in social competition. Therefore, a much more skeptical view of the settings and intentions behind every single burial seems to be of paramount importance for the understanding of the social reality. Archaeology needs to scrutinize the general perception of burials as being completely normed disposals of human bodies, characterized by religious or cultic aspects which are typical for the particular cultural group. First of all, burials must be regarded as social statements, in which every aspect of the funeral ceremony and the grave was deliberately designed and in which the deceased functions as a medium and a resource, closely interwoven with the social and political situation, and with the intentions, claims and aims of their relatives.

church. And this proof there is thereof, that later on, when a church was built at Mossfell, and that church which Grim had built at Hrísbú taken down, the churchyard was dug over, and under the altar-place were found human bones. They were much larger than the bones of other men. From the tales of old people it is thought pretty sure that these were Egil's bones", *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 86, in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit, II, Reykjavík 1933, pp. 298-299.

⁹⁹ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*..., chapter 87.

ABSTRACT

Beside the aspect of the technical removal of a dead body, a burial is mainly a public ritual within the local community which fulfils several religious, cultic but also social and political functions. As other public feasts like weddings, the highly dynamic burial ceremony allows a negotiation or manipulation of the social reality through grave goods, the outer form of the grave or the position of the dead body itself. By this, death and burial can serve as an immaterial resources for the bereaved to reconstruct, legitimize or secure their social position or political claim, which will be analyzed within the research project "SFB 1070 Resource Cultures B06 – Humans and Resources in Viking Age".



Fig. 1. The Brazilian millionaire C. Scarpa during the alleged funeral ceremony for his Bentley. Picture taken from "Daily Mail Online"; 21 September 2018. By C. Scarpa.



Fig. 2. Interpretation of the funeral of a Rus chieftain, based on ibn Fadlan's travelogue. Painting by Henryk Siemiradzki, 1883.

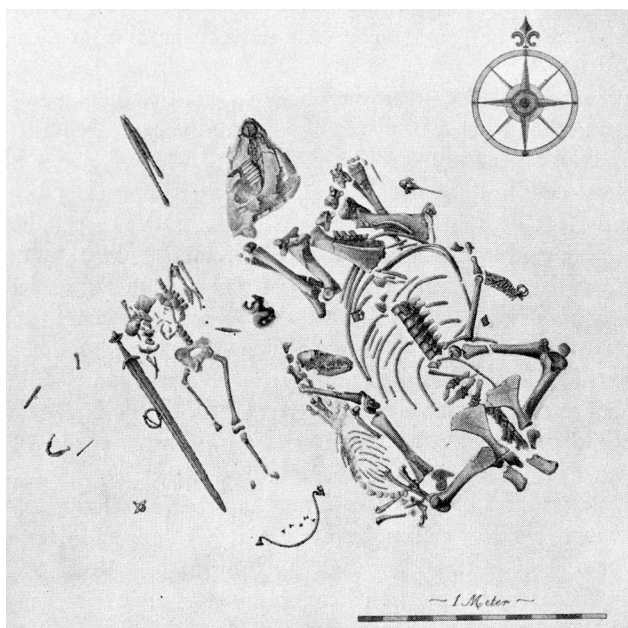


Fig. 3. Drawing of the burial of a young boy with sword, spears, riding equipment and a horse in the Viking Age cemetery of Ire on Gotland. Taken from M. Stenberger, *En ryttagravn på Ihrefältet*, "Gotländskt arkiv" XIV (1942), p. 29.

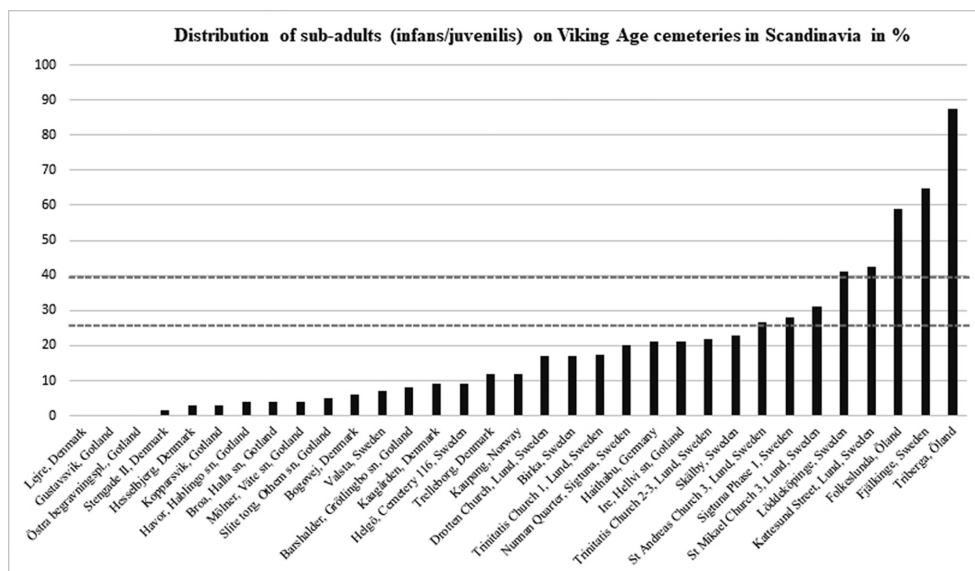


Fig. 4. Chart with the distribution of the burials of sub-adults (infans/juvenilis) in Viking Age cemeteries in Scandinavia in percent. The expected proportion of infant burials between 25-40% is marked. By M. Toplak.

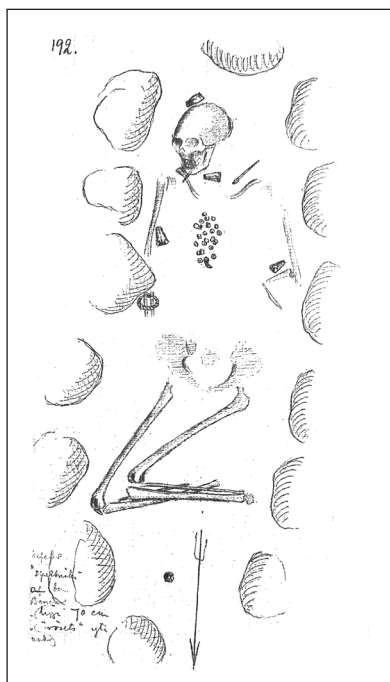


Fig. 5. Drawing of the burial of a female with an artificially deformed skull, equipped with typical Gotlandic dress attire, from the cemetery of Havor, Hablingbo sn, on Gotland. Drawing by G. Gustafson 1886 (RAÄ/ATA, Stockholm), modified by M. Toplak.

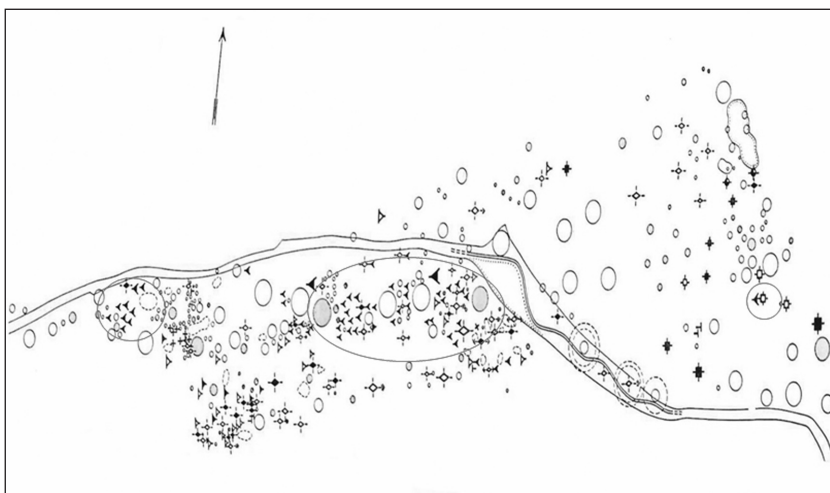


Fig. 6. Plan of the cemetery of Havor, Hablingbo sn, on Gotland, with clusters of late Viking Age burials (marked as triangle) among older Iron Age graves. Drawing by G. Gustafson 1887 (RAÄ/ATA, Stockholm), modified by M. Toplak.

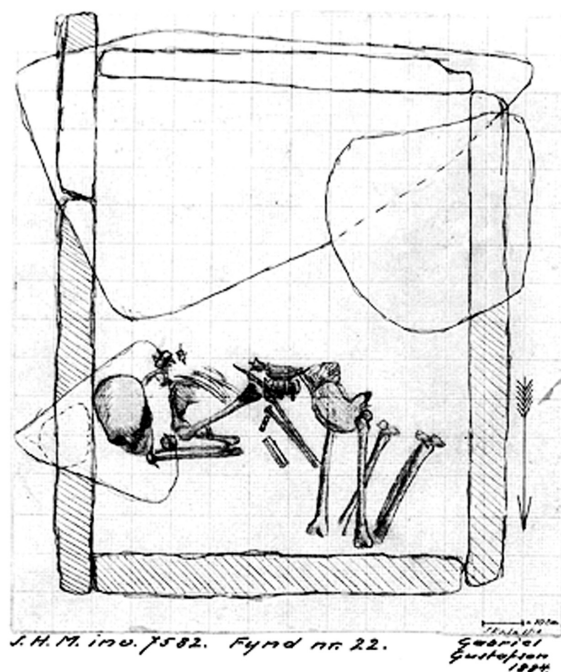


Fig. 7. Drawing of a late Viking Age burial in an older Iron Age stone cist. Drawing by G. Gustafson 1884 (RAÄ/ATA, Stockholm), modified by M. Toplak.

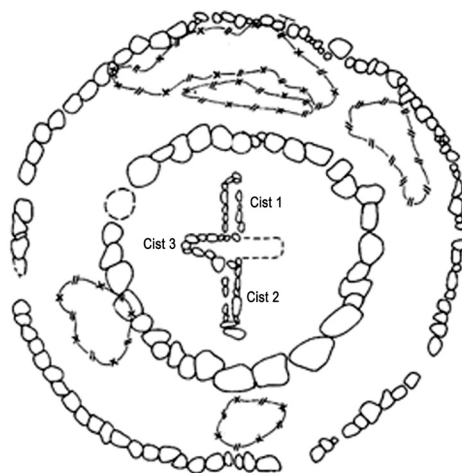


Fig. 8. Drawing of the central burial mound from Valsta, Uppland, with a cross-shaped burial pit.

Taken from F. Fahlander, *The Materiality of the Ancient Dead. Post-burial Practices and Ontologies of Death in Southern Sweden AD 800-1200*, "Current Swedish Archaeology" XXIV (2016), p. 143, fig. 3, modified by M. Toplak.