

SMS
Studia Medievalia Septentrionalia

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Edited
by
Rudolf Simek

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**Conversions:
Looking for Ideological Change
in the Early Middle Ages**

Conversions: Looking for Ideological Change in the Early Middle Ages

Edited
by
Leszek Słupecki and Rudolf Simek

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The Dangerous Dead?

Rethinking Viking-Age Deviant Burials

Leszek Gardeła (Aberdeen)

1. Introduction

In popular imagination a typical Viking funeral involved a large dragon-ship on which a deceased chieftain was laid and accompanied by a range of exclusive weapons, jewelry, clothing, animals and even human slaves. After complex mortuary rituals, often involving ostentatious drinking, the ship is pushed off to the sea or fjord and sometimes set on fire. The deceased Viking passes to the Otherworld in glory and visual splendor.

While such visualizations of Norse funerals may indeed be accurate to a certain degree, they were certainly not the only way of dealing with the dead. Archaeological excavations at Viking-Age sites revealed a wide plethora of funerary practices. These could generally fall into two categories of inhumations and cremations, but within them an immense level of diversity can be observed with regards to the treatment, placement and positioning of the body as well as the internal and external “composition” of the grave. The dead may have been buried without any objects at all or accompanied by artefacts made from both organic and non-organic materials. In some instances the graves included sacrificed animals and even other humans. Some graves were visible above the ground, manifesting themselves in the form of mounds, cairns or different kinds of stone settings or wooden chambers/houses, while others remained completely flat and hard to distinguish in the landscape.

The diversity of funerary rites, both in relation to inhumations and cremations is very difficult to interpret.¹ It is plausible to argue, however,

¹ Johann Callmer: “Territory and Dominion in late Iron Age southern Scandinavia” in: Kristina Jennbert / Lars Larson / Rolf Petré (eds.): *Regions and reflections. In honour of Märta Strömberg*. Lund: Almqvist & Wiksell International 1991 (= Acta Archaeologica Lundensia, Series in 8, 20), 257-273; Johann Callmer: “Interaction Between Ethnical Groups in the Baltic Region in the Late Iron Age”, in: Brigitta Hardh / Bożena Wyszomirska-Werbart (eds.): *Contacts Across the Baltic Sea*. Lund: University of Lund 1992 (= Institute of Archaeology, Report 43), 9-107; Neil S. Price: “Dying and the dead: Viking Age mortuary behaviour”, in: Stefan Brink / Neil S. Price (eds.): *The Viking World*. London / New York: Routledge 2008, 257-273; Neil S. Price: “Bodylore and the

that different forms of burial may have had some relation to the beliefs regarding afterlife. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to think that in Viking eschatological beliefs only one place existed to which people went after death.² The available sources suggest that warriors could continue their “existence” in Valhöll – the abode of the god Óðinn or join Freya in her Folkvangr. In addition to that, less fortunate people went to the gloomy Hel, of which we know very little, while others could reside in their mounds and enjoy the grave goods that have been deposited within them. Moreover, some of the dead were reluctant to leave the world of men and had a tendency to reappear as animated-corpses whose nature may have been either positive or malevolent.

My focus in this article will concentrate on burials that appear to be somewhat out of ordinary even with regard to the whole diversity of the Viking-Age mortuary behavior. In order to explain what they may have signaled, I will refer to the textual evidence from the Old Norse sagas and comparative materials from other areas of Europe. One of the fundamental questions that I will seek to answer is whether there was a relation between the considerably late saga accounts and the archaeological evidence dating from the ninth to the eleventh century AD. Towards the end of the article I will also try to reconsider the appropriateness of using the term ‘deviant burial’ with regards to the peculiar and diverse ways in which the Norse dealt with their dead.

2. “Bad Death” in the Viking world

A survey of the Old Norse written accounts demonstrates that alongside the amazing variety in treating the “normal” dead there also existed various forms of “unusual” burials, which were conducted on special occasions and for people being somewhat out of the ordinary.

From historical written accounts and ethnographic sources we learn that peculiar funerary behaviour, which often included apotropaic rites, was usually employed when a person died what could be considered a ‘bad death’. If someone passed away in anger or unexpectedly in their bed

archaeology of embedded religion: Dramatic license in the funerals of the Vikings”, in: Kelley Hays-Gilpin / David S. Whitley (eds.): *Belief in the past. Theoretical approaches to the archaeology of religion.* Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press 2008, 143-165; Neil S. Price: “Passing into poetry: Viking-Age mortuary drama and the origins of Norse mythology”, in: *Medieval Archaeology* 54 (2010), 123-156; Fredrik Svanberg: *Death rituals in south-east Scandinavia AD 800-1000*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell 2003.

² Hilda Roderick Ellis: *The road to Hel. A study in the conception of the dead in Old Norse literature*. Cambridge: CUP 1943.

or chair and left behind unfinished business, the members of the household may have feared their return as animated corpses. Therefore, in order to prevent the dead from haunting, special precautionary measures had to be undertaken. At times, these procedures may have been highly complex and long lasting.³

In the Norse context, unusual approaches to the dead can be observed in the *Íslendingasögur*, *Fornaldarsögur*, *Konungasögur* and Eddic poetry. Particularly rich in the supernatural motifs is *Eyrbyggja saga*. Therein we read about a man named Þorólfr bægifótr (Eng. Thorolf Twist-Foot), who was a father of a certain Arnkell and lived in Iceland. Þorólfr is described in the saga as a violent character, who in his old days had an increasing tendency to get into arguments with his son (*Eyrbyggja saga* 30). One evening, after another quarrel, Þorólfr returned home and sat down on the high-seat without saying a word. As the saga relates, he sat like this all evening and had nothing to eat. In the morning Þorólfr was found dead, still seated and with his eyes wide open. As we read in the saga, everyone in the household considered his passing as gruesome and this probably lead to the further actions, which are worth quoting in full (*Eyrbyggja saga* 33)⁴:

Gekk Arnkell nú inn í eldaskálann ok svá inn eptir setinu á bak Þórólfi; hann bað hvern at varask at ganga framan at honum, meðan honum váru eigi nábjargir veittar; tók Arnkell þá í herðar Þórólfi, ok varð hann at kenna aflsmunar, áðr hann kæmi honum undir; síðan sveipaði hann klæðum at höfði Þórólfi ok bjó um hann eptir siðvenju. Eptir þat lét hann brjóta vegginn á bak honum ok draga hann þar út. Síðan váru yxn fyrir sleða beittir; var Þórólfr þar í lagiðr, ok óku honum upp í Þórsárdal, ok var þat eigi þrautarlaust, áðr hann kom í þann stað, sem hann skyldi vera; dysjuðu þeir Þórólfr þar rammliða.

“When Arnkell went into the living-room he crossed the hall to get behind Thorolf, warning people to take care not to pass in front of the corpse until the eyes had been closed. He took Thorolf by the shoulders but had to use all his strength before he could force him down. After that he wrapped some clothes around Thorolf’s head and got him ready for burial according to the custom of the time. He had a hole broken through the wall behind Thorolf, and the corpse was dragged outside. After a yoke of oxen had been hitched to a sled, Arnkel laid Thorolf on it, and they began driving it up through Thorsdale. It

³ Jan Kozák / Katarina Ratajová: “Mrtví a jejich poklady. Funkce mohl podle staroseverských ság”, in: *Archeologické Rozhledy* 60 (2008), 3-35.

⁴ Text after Einar Ól. Sveinsson / Matthias Þórðarson (ed.): *Eyrbyggja saga. Brands þátr örva. Eiríks saga rauða. Grænlinga saga. Grænlinga þátr*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag 1935 (= Íslensk Fornrit 4), 92. Translation after Hermann Pálsson / Paul Edwards (transl.): *Eyrbyggja saga*. London: Penguin 1989, 92-93.

was hard work hauling Thorolf to his burial-place. When they got him there, they built a solid cairn over him.”

After Þorólfr's burial, strange things began to happen in the district and people were afraid to leave their houses after sunset. Þorólfr did not lie quietly in his grave and as the saga relates (*Eyrbyggja saga* 34), he kept haunting the local people. He even murdered a shepherd, whose body was found all black with every bone in it broken. The violence escalated even further and all living things, the sheep and birds especially, that came near Þorólfr's mound were found dead. Further killings of men continued. In the following spring Arnkell decided to take action and move his father's body to another place. Along with eleven other men he broke into Þorólfr's cairn and pulled him out. Apparently, Þorólfr's body was uncorrupted, but very ugly in appearance and extremely heavy. After experiencing some serious problems during the transportation the people managed to bury him on a small knoll. Interestingly, Arnkell had a wall of exceptional height built across the knoll behind the grave – perhaps as another form of protection against his father's return. For some time the trouble caused by the restless dead was over. However, after Arnkell's death the haunting and malevolent deeds of Þorólfr started to occur again. The Icelanders decided to take action and this is what they did (*Eyrbyggja saga* 63):⁵

Fara þeir út til Bægifótshöfða ok til dysjar Þórólfs; síðan brutu þeir upp dysina ok fundu þár Þórólfr; var hann þá enn ófúinn ok inn trollsigsti at sjá; hann var blár sem hel ok digr sem naut; ok er þeir vildu hræra hann, þá fengu þeir hvergi rigat honum; lét Þoroddr þá færa undir hann brot, ok við þetta kómu þeir honum upp ór dysinni; síðan veltu þeir honum á fjöru ofan ok kvistuðu þár bál mikit, slógu síðan eldi í ok veltu þar í Þórólfi ok brenndu upp allt saman at köldum kolum, ok var þar þat þó lengi, at eigi orkaði eldr á Þórólfr. Vindr var á hvass, ok fauk askan víða, þegar brenna tók, en þeiri ösku, er þeir máttu, sköruðu þeir á sjó út.

“Off they went to Twist-Foot's Knoll, where Thorolf was buried, broke open the grave, and saw Thorolf still lying there, uncorrupted with an ugly look about him. He was as black as death and swollen to the size of an ox. They tried to move the dead man, but were unable to shift him an inch. Then Thorodd put a lever under him, and that was how they managed to lift him out of the grave. After that they rolled him down to the foreshore, built a great pyre there, set fire to it, pushed Thorolf in and burnt him to ashes. Even so, it took the fire a long time to have any effect on Thorolf. A fierce gale had

⁵ Text after Einar Ól. Sveinsson / Matthias Þórðarson, *Eyrbyggja saga*, 169-170. Translation after Hermann Pálsson / Paul Edwards, *Eyrbyggja saga*, 156.

blown up, so as soon as the corpse began to burn the ashes were scattered everywhere, but all they could get hold of they threw into the sea.”

A similar procedure in treating a person who died what could be regarded as “bad death” is recorded in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Skalla-Grímr was the father of Egill, the protagonist of the saga and a fairly peculiar character. Not only was he a blacksmith – which already adds a certain “oddity” to him – but also a shape-shifter. His death was an unusual one because his body was found sitting stiff on the edge of a bed. As is said in the saga (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* 58):⁶

Gekk Egill fram í setit ok tók í herðar Skalla-Grími ok kneikði hann aptr á bak, lagði hann niðr í setit ok veitti honum þá nábjargir; þá bað Egill taka graftól ok brjóta vegginn fyrir sunnan. Ok er þat var gört, þá tók Egill undir höfðahlut Skalla-Grími, en aðrir tóku fótahlutinn; báru þeir hann um þvert húsit ok svá út í gegnum vegginn þar er áðr var brotinn. Báru þeir hann þá í hriðinni ofan í Naustanes; var þar tjaldat yfir um nóttina; en um morgininn at flóði var lagðr Skalla-Grímr í skip ok róit með hann út til Digraness. Lét Egill þar gera haug á framanverðu nesinu; var þar í lagðr Skalla-Grímr ok hestr hans ok vápn hans ok smíðartól; ekki es þess getit, at lausafé væri lagt í haug hjá honum.

“Egil went through to the bench and stood behind Skallagrím, taking him by the shoulders and tugging him backwards. He laid him down on the bench and closed his nostrils, eyes and mouth. Then he ordered the men to take spades and break down the south wall. When this had been done, Egil took hold of him by the head and shoulders, and the others by his legs. They carried him like this right across the house and out through where the wall had been broken down. They carried him out to Naustanes without stopping and covered his body up for the night. In the morning, at high tide, Skallagrím’s body was put in a ship and they rowed with it out to Digranes. Egil had a mound made on the edge of the promontory, where Skallagrím was laid to rest with his horse and weapons and tools. It is not mentioned whether any money was put in his tomb.”

The parallels between the two passages from *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* are startling. In both instances we may observe an almost exactly the same sequence of apparently apotropaic procedures. The people responsible for disposing of the body first make sure to close the eyes and other orifices of the deceased. Interestingly in *Eyrbyggja*

⁶ Text after Sigurður Nordal (ed.): *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag 1933 (= Íslensk Fornrit 2), 174-175. Translation after Bernard Scudder (transl.): “Egil’s saga”, in: Jane Smiley / Robert Kellogg (eds.): *The sagas of the Icelanders. A selection*. London: Penguin Classics 2000, 108.

saga this is done by wrapping it with clothes. In this context it is worth recalling that in the famous account of Ibn Fadlān, the man responsible for setting fire to the ship on which the deceased chieftain was laid walked towards it backwards, being completely naked and covering his anus.⁷ Perhaps this act could in some way parallel the ones quoted above.

The most reasonable explanation for such actions, where the body is approached from behind (or perhaps also by walking backwards) is the fear of the “evil eye” – the gaze of the dying or the dead which could bring misfortune or even death.⁸ In the sagas, what happens next is the destruction of one of the house’s walls in order to carry the body not through the door of the house, but through a different, artificially made passage. There are numerous folkloristic parallels to such a behavior, especially in the West Slavic context.⁹ The most frequent explanation is that the body of a person who died a bad death should not be taken out of the house through the door, because the dead could remember the way back and return from the grave to haunt the living.

However, the details of the two aforementioned saga-burials demonstrate some variety. Þorólfr is buried in a cairn and the placing of stones over his body might also express a desire to keep him in his grave. As we learn from further chapters of *Eyrbyggja saga*, the apotropaic measures conducted in the house and at the graveside did not suffice – Þorólfr returned and haunted or even killed living beings. This malevolence could not be overcome even after his exhumation and a second burial in another place. What ended it was cremation and scattering the bones in the sea. It appears, therefore, that the complete destruction of the body through fire was the only way to ensure the dead would never return again.

Although Skalla-Grímr died a bad death and some apotropaic measures were undertaken while preparing for the burial, the final treatment of his cadaver is not very unusual. The only special aspect is the fact that his horse, weapons and smithing tools were laid by his side, which could be seen as an indicator of his prominent social status.

The cremation of Þorólfr and disposing his bones in the sea would leave practically no archaeologically identifiable traces of the complex apotropaic rites that were conducted beforehand. What we could find, however, after a similar kind of burial is an empty grave. Such graves are usually considered as cenotaphs or interpreted as examples of removing

⁷ Cf. James Montgomery: “Ibn Fadlān and the Rūssyyah”, in: *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000), 1-25.

⁸ Cf. Arthur M. Hockart: “The mechanism of the evil eye”, in: *Folklore* 49 (1938), 156-157.

⁹ Adam Fischer: *Zwyczaje pogrzebowe ludu polskiego*, vol. 3. Lwów: Wydawnictwa Biblioteki Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich 1921.

the bodies and reburying the “pagan” dead elsewhere, usually in consecrated ground. In light of the account discussed above perhaps there could be an alternative interpretation of the occurrence of empty graves. The body may have been taken out from the grave not with the intention of burying it somewhere else, but with the will of destroying it completely. Such a variant is of course extremely difficult or even impossible to prove archaeologically, but I think nonetheless, that it is not too much of a stretch of imagination to regard it as possible in some instances.

3. Burial in the doorway

Speaking of unusual burials it is necessary to recall one more example from *Laxdæla saga* (17). The saga features the story of a man named Hrapp who came to Iceland from the Hebrides. He was a malicious character during his life and his evil nature continued even in his old days. Dying of illness, on his deathbed he asked his wife Vigdis to bury him in the kitchen doorway so that he could keep a watchful eye over his home. Vigdis was afraid to act against her husband’s will and did what he desired. As we learn from the saga, after the burial Hrapp’s malevolence did not cease. He continued haunting the area and even began killing his own servants. In result the farm became deserted. Finally, to prevent further trouble, a certain Hoskuld along with several others decided to exhume the body and bury it away from men and sheep, but as the later chapters of the saga relate this did not prove to be enough. After some further aggressive encounters his body was exhumed, burned to ashes and taken to the sea. The total cremation, like in the case of the aforementioned Þorólfr of *Eyrbyggja saga*, finally restored peace among the local communities.

4. Stones and evil eyes

Apart from being a response to a “bad death” an unusual form of burial can also result from a violent punishment executed upon individuals who conducted the crime of murder or dealt with sorcery (ON: *seiðr*). The *Íslendingasögur* contain a number of accounts where malevolent magic workers are executed in brutal ways such as drowning, burning or stoning.¹⁰

¹⁰ Folke Ström: *On the sacral origin of the Germanic death penalties*. Lund: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien 1942; François Xavier Dillmann: *Les magiciens dans l’Islande ancienne: Études sur la représentation*

One of the most extensive accounts regarding the punishment of ritual specialists is recorded in the aforementioned *Laxdæla saga*. There, we encounter a family of four sorcerers who are said to have come to Iceland from the Hebrides. Like in the case of Hrapp, we are dealing with people who are representatives of the strange “outside world” – known to historians of religions as *útgarðr* or *orbis exterior*.¹¹ From the very beginning these Hebridean sorcerers are presented as rather suspicious characters and as the saga relates, the local communities did not feel comfortable in their presence. In the developing course of events the family is accused of the theft of horses and forced to move to a different location. One evening they are said to have mounted a special platform (ON *seiðhjallr*) and uttered malevolent spells which lead to a shipwreck and the deaths of some men. Ultimately, the sorcerers are chased to the mountains and executed. Kotkell and his wife Gríma are stoned to death and buried at a ridge between Haukadal and Laxárdal. Their grave was described in the saga as being shallow and covered with stones. Interestingly, the saga writer observed that it was still visible in his time and known as *skratta-varði* (“evil sorcerer’s cairn”).

Kotkell’s sons – Stígandi and Hallbjörn sliðisteinsauga – were also executed in an unusual manner. Although at first Stígandi managed to escape and remained in hiding for a while, he was soon found by the pursuers. The saga records that a bag was placed over his head and that he was stoned to death like his parents. After the stoning procedure, his body was also covered with stones. His brother was captured earlier and a bag was placed over his head. Afterwards he was taken to the sea and drowned with a stone tied to his neck. In this case the drowning procedure

de la magie islandaise et de ses agents dans les sources littéraires norroises. Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för Svensk Folkkultur 2006; Leszek Gardela: “The good, the bad and the undead. New thoughts on the ambivalence of Old Norse sorcery”, in: Agneta Ney / Henrik Williams / Fredrik Charpentier Ljungqvist (eds.): *Á austrvega. Saga and east Scandinavia. Preprint papers of the 14th International Saga Conference, Uppsala, 9th-15th August 2009*, vol. 1. Gävle: Gävle University Press 2009, 285-294; Leszek Gardela: “Kamienie i śmierć. Groby czarowników i ambiwalencja magi seiðr w epoce wikingów”, in: Jacek Wrzesiński / Wojciech Dzieduszycki (eds.): *Tak więc po owocach poznać ich. Funeralia Lednickie – spotkanie 12*. Poznań: Stowarzyszenie Naukowe Archeologów Polskich 2010, 273-293.

¹¹ Gro Steinsland: “The late Iron Age worldview and the concept of ‘utmark’”, in: Ingunn Holm / Sonja Innselset / Ingvild Øye (eds.): *‘Utmark’. The outfield as industry and ideology in the Iron Age and the Middle Ages*. Bergen: Universitetet i Bergen 2005 (= Universitetet i Bergen Arkeologiske Skrifter. International 1), 137-146.

did not suffice, because Hallbjörn soon returned as an animated corpse. The malevolence ended after he was defeated by man named Þórkell in a fight (*Laxdæla saga* 38).

Yet another example of stoning magic workers – known as Þorgrímur nef and Auðbjörg – in a similar ritualistic manner to that described above, is recorded in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (19). Interestingly, as in the case of the two brothers – Stigandi and Hallbjörn – during the execution of Þorgrímur nef a bag was also placed over his head. This act may be interpreted as reflecting the aforementioned fear of the evil-eye. A dying sorcerer was particularly powerful – his gaze was extremely dangerous and last words could easily turn into a curse.

It is often hard to find concrete reflections of such apotropaic rites in the archaeological material. Due to various post-depositional processes it is practically impossible to determine whether a certain individual was buried with a bag over the head, since larger fragments of leather or textile are rarely preserved in graves. However, there seem to have been alternative ways of protecting oneself from the evil eye and curses uttered by the dying. Those rituals could potentially leave some archaeological traces. One such example is given in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (33), where the treatment of a dying, malevolent sorcerer named Grim Ægir is described in detail. First, a piece of wood was struck into his mouth, then a sword was thrust into his chest and finally a shield was placed over his face. All this was done with the intention of protecting oneself from the effect of the evil eye and a curse which Grim Ægir may have spoken out. Graves where objects – particularly stones – are placed over the heads of the deceased will be discussed further below.

5. The ambivalence of funerary violence

The review of different forms of unusual burials could so far suggest that in most cases the peculiar treatment of the body was a reflection of popular superstitions and apotropaic measures. However, the available written accounts suggest that instances existed where the violence was sanctioned and even desired. Instead of signaling contempt for the dead it was regarded as an act of utmost respect and affection. One of the most illustrative cases of such a perception of funerary violence is recorded in *Hálfðanar saga Svarta* (9) and is associated with the funeral of King Hálfðan:¹²

¹² Text after Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (ed.): *Heimskringla*, vol. 1. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag 1941 (= Íslensk Fornrit 26), 92-93. Translation after Lee M.

Hann hafði verit allra konunga ársælstr. 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, þá fóru ríkismenn af Raumaríki ok af Vestfold ok Heiðmörk ok beiddusk allir at hafa líkit með sér ok heygja í sínu fylki, ok þótti þat vera árvænt þeim, 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 allt kallaðir Hálfðanarhaugar.

“There had been excellent seasons during his rule; and people were so affected by his death that when they learned of his demise and that his body was being taken to Hringaríki in order to be interred there, men of influence of Raumaríki, Westfold, and Heithmork came and prayed, all of them to take the body with them to be buried in their lands; for it was thought that he who got possession of it could expect good seasons. They reached an agreement in this wise, that the body was assigned to four places: the head was laid in a mound at Stein in Hringaríki, but each of the others carried away their share and interred them in burial mounds in their home lands, and all are called the Mounds of Halfdan.”

We have now discussed several instances of unusual burials and demonstrated that there may have been some ambivalence in the perception of funerary violence and “deviant burials” in the Old Norse textual sources. Therefore, we can now turn to the archaeological evidence in order to determine if some parallels between the two categories of evidence – textual and archaeological – could be found.

6. Deviant burials in Viking-Age archaeology

The term “deviant burials” was first used in the Anglophone archaeology by Helen Geake who defined it in the following way:¹³

They are characterized by a scarcity or complete lack of grave-goods and by an unusual way of positioning both the grave and the body within the grave. Individual grave-cuts may be absent, with all the bodies placed within one enormous trench (...). The graves may be disposed around a barrow (...). Bodies may be found decapitated or with the neck broken, or in a variety of other positions indicating that some sort of ritual abuse or mutilation was carried out before or just after death.

Hollander (transl.): *Heimskringla. History of the Kings of Norway*. Austin: University of Texas Press 2002, 58.

¹³ Helen Geake: “Burial practice in seventh- and eighth- century England”, in: Martin Carver (ed.): *The age of Sutton Hoo. The seventh century in north-western Europe*. Woodbridge: Boydell 1992, 87.

Since the publication of Geake's article the term "deviant burial" started to be employed frequently in relation to newly found graves that differed from what is usually considered a "norm".¹⁴ In Viking-Age scholarship, however, the term "deviant burial" was probably first used in the work of Thäte¹⁵ where it received a most detailed treatment.¹⁶ In her view "a burial has been regarded as 'deviant' when it differed from the normative burial custom" and within this category she included the following aspects:¹⁷

- Marked variations of orientations (for instance, few east-west oriented graves in a cemetery where west-east orientation is common).
- Non-normative positions of bodies in graves (for instance, flexed or prone positions of bodies in a cemetery where supine position is prevailing).
- Multiple burials, re-used graves (within same period), intersecting graves (within same period).

¹⁴ Cf. Eileen Murphy: *Deviant burial in the archaeological record*. Oxford: Oxbow Books 2008; Andrew Reynolds: *Anglo-Saxon deviant burial customs*. Oxford: OUP 2009.

¹⁵ Eva S. Thäte: *Monuments and minds. Monument re-use in Scandinavia in the second half of the first millennium AD*. Lund: Almqvist & Wiksell 2007 (= Acta Archaeologica Lundensia, ser. in 4, 27).

¹⁶ See also earlier discussions on unusual graves in: Ove Hemmendorff: "Manniskooffer. Ett inslag i järnalders gravritualer, belyst av ett fynd i Bollstanas, Uppland", in: *Fornvännen* 79 (1984), 9-10; Gunnar Andersson: "Med eller utan avsikt? Om ett människoöde speglar i en märklig grav på Valsta ättebacke", in: Lars Ersgard (ed.): *Manniskors platser – tretton arkeologiska studier från UV*. Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetet 2000 (= Riksantikvarieämbetet Arkeologiska Undersökningar Skrifter 31), 9-26; Frans-Arne Stylegar: "The Kaupang cemeteries revisited", in: Dagfinn Skre (ed.): *Kaupang in Skiringssal*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 2007 (= Kaupang Excavation Project Publication Series 1 = Norske Oldfunn 12), 65-101; Gardęła, "The good, the bad and the undead"; Gardęła, "Kamienie i śmierć"; Leszek Gardęła: "Zatrzymani kamieniami? Zachodnio-słowiańskie groby atypowe na tle skandynawskich i anglo-saskich praktyk funeralnych", in: Jacek Wrzesiński / Wojciech Dzieduszycki (eds.): *Kim jesteś człowieku? Funeralia Lednickie – spotkanie 13*. Poznań: Stowarzyszenie Naukowe Archeologów Polskich 2011, 169-192; Leszek Gardęła: "Buried with honour and stoned to death? The ambivalence of Viking Age magic in the light of archaeology", in: *Analecta Archaeologica Ressoviensia* 3 (2011), 339-375; Leszek Gardęła: "Wiking bez głowy. Dekapitacja we wczesnośredniowiecznej Skandynawii", in: *Pomniki Dawnego Prawa* 13 (2011), 36-69; Leszek Gardęła: "Gryź ziemię! Pochówki na brzuchu we wczesnośredniowiecznej Polsce w perspektywie porównawczej", in: *Pomniki Dawnego Prawa* 16, 26-47.

¹⁷ Thäte, 266.

- Physical variations such as injuries or “abnormalities” in the skeletal evidence.
- Special treatment of the body such as decapitation, tied limbs, stones on parts of the body, knife placed in hand.
- Unusual grave goods such as fossils, shells, etc. which do not indicate wealth and do not have an obvious technical function and may therefore have had a symbolic meaning.

In her discussion of “deviant burials”, Thäte¹⁸ briefly examined a number of such graves from Denmark and Sweden. Particular attention was paid to multiple burials, which were interpreted as possibly belonging to masters and their sacrificed slaves. Thäte argued, that in double graves where one of the individuals was decapitated, this violent act could be seen as representing fear of their return as living dead. In other instances, however, such a procedure may have been a result of a violent execution. But of course double graves could also belong to people who died at the same time – they need not be a result of human sacrifice at all.

An important conclusion for Viking-Age deviant burials which was drawn by Thäte, and to which I fully adhere, is that it seems impossible to provide a single explanation for them. The concepts and motivations of those involved in the funerary procedures may have varied in different regions and “it cannot be ruled out that what has been identified as ‘deviant’ was a common custom for a particular society in a particular area”.¹⁹ Furthermore, Thäte observed that none of the re-use sites which she has discussed in her work (perhaps except for Kumle Høje) consisted of only deviant burials. This led her to conclude that “the ‘deviants’ were perceived as part of society and not regarded as ‘outcasts’ who had to be buried in separate cemeteries”.²⁰ Moreover, there seems to be a necessity to acknowledge that within the categories distinguished by Thäte a wide sense of variety is evident. This might imply that although seemingly similar, the “deviant” acts in particular graves may have been actually attributed more than just one meaning. In order to better demonstrate this “diversity in deviance” I will herewith critically examine selected graves with traces of decapitation, prone burial and the stoning of corpses.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, 267-272.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, 272.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*

7. The headless Norsemen

Graves where the dead were found with their heads dislocated (decapitated) from the rest of the skeleton do not occur too often in Viking-Age material.²¹

One of the best known graves which included a decapitated individual was found at the cemetery in Stengade II (Langeland, Denmark).²² In a chamber grave F II, covered by a rectangular layer of stones, two male individuals were laid in a supine position. Although the first individual seems to have been buried without conducting any special measures, the second man had his head detached from the spine. His legs and probably hands too appear to have been tied with a rope. The deceased were accompanied by only one object – a barbed spearhead laid diagonally over their bodies. In the archaeological literature this grave is usually interpreted as belonging to a master and slave.²³

Another example of a double grave where one of the individuals was decapitated was found in Lejre in Zealand, Denmark.²⁴ The grave 55 was 1.15m deep and included two men who were buried superimposed, one above the other. The “upper” individual was laid in a prone position and his head was severed and dislocated. It seems that his hands and legs were tied. About 20cm below him was a grave of another man. Interestingly, an anthropological analysis of the “lower” individual revealed deformations of his feet. He was accompanied by an iron knife, a whetstone, a bronze buckle decorated in Borre style and a belt fitting. Andersen argued that both men must have been buried at the same time. In his opinion, the man lying prone who was superimposed over the other individual was a slave, perhaps ceremonially killed to serve his master in the afterlife.²⁵

²¹ For a detailed discussion on Viking-Age “decapitation graves” see: Gardela, “Wiking bez głowy”; Leszek Gardela: “Deviants and decapitations. Heads and apotropaic practices in the Viking Age”, in: Leszek Gardela / Kamil Kajkowski (eds.): *The head motif in a comparative perspective, International Interdisciplinary Meetings Motifs Through the Ages*. Bytów: Muzeum Zachodnio-Kaszubskie w Bytowie 2012.

²² Jørgen Skaarup: *Stengade II. En langelandsk gravplads med grave fra romersk jernalder og vikingetid*. Rudkøbing: Langelands Museum 1976 (= Meddelelser fra Langelands Museum), 56-59.

²³ Cf. Else Roesdahl: *The Vikings*. London 2nd ed. 1998, 31.

²⁴ Cf. Steen Wulff Andersen: “Lejre – skibsætninger, vikingegrave, Grydehøj”, in: *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* (1993), 14, 24, 97, 138-139; Judith Jesch: *Women in the Viking Age*. Woodbridge: Boydell 1991, 25; Thäte, 268.

²⁵ Andersen, 139.

Apart from the generally unique appearance of this double grave, it is vital to give further attention to the deformations of the “lower” individual’s feet. In various medieval written sources and folktales, individuals experiencing some problems with their feet are usually related to the underworld or generally chthonic powers. Blacksmiths, for example, were frequently presented as hobbling characters and in the Norse tradition Völunör is the best example (cf. *Völundarkviða*). In the Slavic beliefs the god of magic and underworld, Weles (Veles, Wołos), was also perceived as hobbling, as may be deduced on the basis of Russian folkloristic material.²⁶ The Devil himself was occasionally also presented as such.²⁷ This kind of bodily deformation allows for the entry into another world which is itself “opposite” or crooked. Walking backwards is also related to the concept of entering a supernatural domain. In this context we may speculate, whether the deformations of the feet of the man buried in Lejre made him somewhat special. Perhaps they predestined him to play some special function in his society?

Another grave where one may observe an example of decapitation was found in Kumle Høje (grave F). It was similar to the grave from Lejre (grave 55) in a sense that the two buried men were also superimposed. The “lower” individual was laid in a supine position while the one above him was buried prone. It appears that the legs of both individuals may have been tied. Moreover, the head of one of them was cut off. Thäte²⁸ agreed with the earlier interpretation put forward by Kjær Kristensen²⁹ according to which this was a grave of two convicts.

Apart from the male graves with traces of decapitation there are also two Viking-Age female graves in which the women were buried with their heads detached from the rest of the skeleton. An intriguing grave (Bj. 959) of a decapitated female was found at the cemetery in Birka (Uppland, Sweden).³⁰ The head was placed on her right forearm. Contrary to the relatively “poor” male graves already mentioned, the woman from

²⁶ Borys A. Uspieński: *Kult Św. Mikołaja na Rusi*. Lublin: Red. Wydawn. Katol. Uniw. Lubelskiego, 1985, 136-143.

²⁷ Cf. Jacek Banaszkiewicz: *Polskie dzieje bajeczne Mistrza Wincentego Kadłubka*. Wrocław: FNP 2002, 179; Joanna Tomicka / Ryszard Tomicki: *Drzewo życia. Ludowa wizja świata i człowieka*. Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza 1975, 36-37.

²⁸ Thäte, 268.

²⁹ Inge Kjær Kristensen: *Beretning LMR journ.nr. 12854, Kumle Høje, Lindelse sogn, Svendborg amt, sb. 41*. Rudkøbing: Langelands Museum 2002 (unpublished excavation report).

³⁰ Holger Arbman: *Birka. Untersuchungen und Studien. Die Gräber. Text*. Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien 1940, 384.

Birka appears to have been very well dressed. On her breast she had two oval brooches with a string of beads and a small bronze pendant with spiral ends. At her waist iron shears with a bronze foil were found, as well as iron tweezers, an iron ring and an iron knife with a handle adorned with thin silver thread. Nearby lay a bone needlecase which had a hole drilled through and a bronze ring for suspension. One of the more striking features of this grave (apart from the decapitated head) was the presence of a pig's jawbone which was found lying horizontally on the woman's neck. By some scholars the object was interpreted as potentially serving as a kind of magic charm³¹ or as reflecting a ritual act of entangling the woman with the animal.³² Pig jawbones are also known from other Viking Age graves. Price³³ observed that in case of the cremation graves at Birka the jawbones "were placed in the grave after other rituals have been completed, perhaps to guard the corpse or to protect others from it, or to react in some way with a power present in the grave and/or its occupant". Another way of interpreting the jawbone in Bj. 959 is that it served as a musical instrument.³⁴ This, of course does not exclude a possibility that it was employed in rituals too. Such instruments were already in use during the Stone Age in Europe and elsewhere. Examples of similar finds from the Germanic culture-zone are known from Ostermoor and date to the second century AD.³⁵ In Poland, instruments of this kind are known as *tarło*. The name could be translated as "something which you rub" or "something with which you rub" and the instrument worked by rubbing a piece of wood or a bone against the teeth in the jawbone, which in effect produced a sound. An early medieval male inhumation grave (45/92) which contained such an object was found at the cemetery in Dziekanowice (Wielkopolska, Poland). It is possible that the deceased man played an important role in the local society and perhaps was in-

³¹ Cf. Neil S. Price: *The Viking Way. Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*. Uppsala: Uppsala universitet 2002 (= Aun 31), 206; Sven Kalmring: "Of thieves, counterfeiters and homicides. Crime in Hedeby and Birka", in: *Fornvännen* 105 (2010), 286.

³² Lotte Hedeager: *Iron Age myth and materiality. An archaeology of Scandinavia AD 400-1000*. London / New York: Routledge 2011, 101.

³³ Price, *The Viking way*, 206.

³⁴ Leszek Gardela: "What the Vikings did for fun? Sports and pastimes in medieval northern Europe", in: *World Archaeology* 44 (2012), 234-247: 234.

³⁵ Annemies Tamboer / Jadwiga Kurkiewicz-Laskowska: *Dźwięki z przeszłości. Archeologiczne instrumenty muzyczne na przestrzeni wieków. Wystawa prezentowana w Muzeum Instrumentów Muzycznych, Maj-Wrzesień 2000*. Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe 2000, 64.

volved in ritual practices.³⁶ If the jawbones in some Viking-Age graves were indeed used as musical instruments, then this could also shed a new light on Viking-Age music (and playing it at funerals, perhaps), of which we know very little about. Again, this shows the importance of discussing “deviant graves” and unusual finds in a cross-cultural context.

Another grave of a decapitated female was found at the Viking-Age cemetery in Bogøvei (Langeland, Denmark).³⁷ In grave T the deceased woman was lying in a supine position in a wooden coffin. Her hands were on the pelvis and on the right arm there lay a horizontally placed knife. The skull was lying on the woman’s left tibia close to the knee. Interestingly, her jawbone appears to have been detached from the skull and broken in half. It was found between her thighs along with a cervical vertebrae and a small shell. Among other items identified in the grave were two glass beads: one lying near the woman’s right collarbone and the other in the western part of the grave along with fragments of a cervical vertebra. The peculiar alignment of both the items in this grave and skeletal remains suggest, that it may have been disturbed sometime after the burial. Perhaps the people who opened it cut the woman’s head off because she haunted the local society? Maybe she was seen as responsible for some misfortunes that fell upon the members of the nearby farms? Examples of similar dealings with the restless dead are also confirmed in the sagas where the hero enters the mound and fights an undead corpse that dwells within it.³⁸ Only after its head is cut off can the peace be restored.

8. Biting the dust

Among the different variants of peculiar funerary behavior, prone burial is rarely observed at the Viking-Age cemeteries. Such a treatment of the

³⁶ Jacek Wrzesiński: “Tarło – kim był mężczyzna pochowany na cmentarzysku w Dziekanowicach”, in: *Studia Lednickie* 5 (1998), 67.

³⁷ Ole Grøn / Anne Hedeager Krag / Pia Bennike (eds.): *Vikingetidsgavpladser på Langeland*. Rudkøbing: Langelands Museum 1994, 17-19.

³⁸ Nora K. Chadwick: “The Norse ghosts. A study in the draugr and haugbúi”, in: *Folklore* 57 (1946), 50-65; Nora K. Chadwick: “The Norse ghosts II. A study in the draugr and haugbúi”, in: *Folklore* 57 (1946), 106-127; Ellis; Leszek Gardela, “Wiking bez głowy”; Kozák / Ratajová; Bernardine McCreesh: “Ghosts and pagans in the Family Sagas”, in: *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 1 (1983), 55-61; Vesteinn Ólason: “The un/grateful dead – from Baldr to Baegifótr”, in: Margaret Clunies Ross (ed.): *Old Norse myths, literature and society*. Odense: Univ. Press of Southern Denmark 2003, 153-171.

cadaver can be seen, for example, in cases of the aforementioned graves 55 from Lejre and grave F from Kumle Høje, but also grave P from Bogøvei (Langeland, Denmark), grave 25/89 from Fröjel³⁹ and grave GF C 12675: 126 from Visby, Land Sud (Kopparsvik, Gotland).⁴⁰

Of particular interest is grave P from Bogøvei belonging to an adult man.⁴¹ In addition to burying him in a prone position his body was covered with two stones. The largest stone was found on the pelvis and a smaller one laid on his left arm. The grave did not contain any artefacts except for an iron knife which, interestingly, was found struck in the ground by the man's right foot.

In an earlier article I made a suggestion that grave P could perhaps be an example of a live burial.⁴² The knife which was found by the man's foot could have been used in the execution, perhaps to slit his throat. Its occurrence in the grave could be a result of some kind of belief in its impurity and a desire to leave it with the person that was killed with its use. However, the fact that it was found standing vertically in the ground could bear additional meanings. Vertically set weapons (usually spears, but also other weapons) are known from a number of Viking-Age graves (both inhumations and cremations), where they have been interpreted as a related to a rite connected with dedication to Óðinn.⁴³ In the West Slavic context, knives found struck vertically in graves are usually interpreted as an apotropaic ritual intended to prevent the dead from rising.⁴⁴

In addition to associations with witchcraft, as proposed by Karl von Amira⁴⁵ or Stephen J. Sherlock and Martin G. Welch⁴⁶ prone burial may

³⁹ Dan Carlsson: "*Ridanäs*". *Vikingahamnen i Fröjel*. Visby: ArkeoDok 1999 (= ArkeoDok Skrifter 2, CCC Papers 2), 146-151.

⁴⁰ Lena Thunmark-Nýlen: *Die Wikingerzeit Gotlands*, 4 vols. Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien 1998-2006, 574.

⁴¹ Grøn / Krag / Bennike, 14-15.

⁴² Gardela, "Buried with honour and stoned to death?", 348-349.

⁴³ Cf. Andreas Nordberg: "Vertikalt placerade vapen i vikingtida graver", in: *Fornvännen* 97 (2002), 15-24; Andreas Nordberg: *Krigarna i Odins sal. Dödsföreställningar och krigarkult i fornnordisk religion*. Stockholm: Stockholms universitet 2003; Anna Wickholm: "'Stay where you have been put!' The use of spears as coffin nails in late Iron Age Finland", in: Heiko Valk (ed.): *Etnos Ja Kultur*. Tartu-Talinn: Ülikooli arheoloogia õppetool ja TLÜ Ajaloo Instituudi arheoloogia osakond 2006 (= Uurimusi Silvia Lauulu auks, Muinasaja Teadus 18), 193-205; Stylegar, 89.

⁴⁴ Jacek Wrzesiński: „Czarownice – próba podsumowania warsztatów”, in: Jacek Wrzesiński (ed.): *Czarownice. Funeralia Lednickie – spotkanie 2*. Poznań: Stowarzyszenie Naukowe Archeologów Polskich 2008, 143-156.

⁴⁵ Karl von Amira: *Die germanischen Todestrafen. Untersuchungen zur Rechts- und Religionsgeschichte*. Munich: Verl. d. Bayer. Akad. d. Wiss. 1922 (=

be regarded as a way of protecting the people present at the site from the potentially evil eye of the dead.⁴⁷ The fear of the evil eye, as was already observed above, was present among the Norse communities and certain precautions against this are known from the saga accounts. The belief in the evil eye was also common among the Slavs. In the context of prone burials it is interesting to note that folklorists recorded cases when on some occasions the bodies of the deceased were transported from the house to the cemetery with their faces directed towards the ground. This was done because it was believed that the dead, if they had been carried in a normal (supine) position, would remember the way back to the house and attempt at haunting or hurting its inhabitants. In the Slavic world, burying someone face down has also been interpreted in the light of anti-vampire practices. The vampire would, instead of biting humans, 'bite the dust' and dig his way down and not up, towards the surface. However, the placement of the body in a prone position can also be seen as a kind of statement. Andrew Reynolds⁴⁸ and Arkadiusz Koperkiewicz⁴⁹ noticed that the father of Charlemagne, Pepin the Short, wanted to be buried in a prone position to repent the sins of his own father. A man lying prone may also be encountered in Dante's description of the purgatory – this is interpreted as an attempt at hiding his greed and unsophisticated ambitions.⁵⁰

In the light of these interpretations the reasons for the unusual treatment of the man from grave P in Bogøvei could have been manifold. It is significant to observe that as many as three acts were conducted here: 1. prone burial, 2. the covering with stones and 3. thrusting a knife in the bottom of the grave-pit. Taken collectively all these acts may imply that

Abhandlungen der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philos.-Philol. und hist. Kl. 31.3).

⁴⁶ Stephen J. Sherlock / Martin G. Welch: *An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Norton, Cleveland*. London: Council for British Archaeology 1992 (= Council for British Archaeology Research Report 82), 26.

⁴⁷ Cf. Edeltraud Aspöck: "What actually is a deviant burial? Comparing German-language and Anglophone research on 'deviant burials'", in: Eileen M. Murphy (ed.): *Deviant burial in the archaeological record, Studies in Funerary Archaeology*, vol. 2. Oxford: Oxbow books 2008, 17-34: 20. On prone burials in the Slavic context see also Gardela, "Gryź ziemię"!

⁴⁸ Reynolds, 69.

⁴⁹ Arkadiusz Koperkiewicz: "Święci czy przekłęci? Kilka refleksji o anomaliach w pochówkach wczesnośredniowiecznych", in: Kalina Skóra / Tomasz Kurasiński (eds.): *Wymiary inności. Nietypowe zjawiska w obrzędowości pogrzebowej od pradziejów po czasy nowożytne*. Łódź: Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe 2010 (= *Acta Archaeologica Lodziensia* 56), 65-77: 75.

⁵⁰ *Op. cit.*

someone really wanted to make sure that the man stayed in his grave – but for what reasons this was done remains unsolved. The spatial location of grave P is also interesting, because in its vicinity the grave of the aforementioned decapitated woman was found (grave T).

9. Death by stoning

Among the so called “deviant burial” rites observable in Viking-Age archaeology, the case of graves where stones were found lying directly on the cadavers is particularly interesting and diverse.

One of the most intriguing graves of this kind was found in Gerdrup (Zealand, Denmark). In a large grave-pit two individuals, a male and a female, were buried in a supine position.⁵¹ The man probably died by hanging as is suggested by his twisted cervical vertebrae. Furthermore, he may have had his feet tied. Only one artefact was associated with his burial – an iron knife laid on the chest. The cause of the woman’s death could not be determined, but at some point during the funerary procedures two stones were laid (or thrown) directly on her body – one on the chest and the other on her right leg. In addition, the woman was accompanied by a wider range of objects than the man. At her waist an iron knife and a bone needlecase with an iron needle were found. By her right leg lay a long iron spearhead with the tip directed towards the foot end of the grave. In the archaeological literature the grave was interpreted as belonging to a woman who had some connection with magic⁵² or as belonging to a man who committed the act of rape and murder and his female victim.⁵³ The presence of the spear was usually discussed in the context of the Old Norse written accounts in which the *valkyrjur* (“valkyries”) are depicted as carrying such weapons. However, in a number of my articles I suggested (in the light of Old Norse written accounts) that there is a strong possibility that in this particular situation the spear could have functioned as a kind of magic staff.⁵⁴ In my opinion, this view gains even more support in the light of yet another grave, recently

⁵¹ Tom Christensen: “Gerdrup-graven”, in: *Romu. Årsskrift fra Roskilde Museum* 2 (1981), 19-28; Tom Christensen: “The armed woman and the hanged thrall”, in: Frank Birkebæk (ed.): *The Ages Collected – From Roskilde Museum*. Roskilde: Roskilde Museum 1997, 34-35.

⁵² Christensen, “Gerdrup-graven”; Christensen, “The armed woman”.

⁵³ David Wilson: *The Vikings in the Isle of Man*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 2008, 34.

⁵⁴ Gardela, “The good, the bad and the undead”; Gardela, “Kamienie i śmierć”; Gardela, “Buried with honour and stoned to death?”.

found in the vicinity of Roskilde, at the Viking-Age cemetery in Trekroner-Grydehøj (Zealand, Denmark).⁵⁵ Let us briefly examine it below.

The composition of the grave A505 from Trekroner-Grydehøj involved a long-lasting range of procedures. At the bottom of the pit an adult woman was laid. Her body was partly covered with that of a horse, whose head was directed towards the foot end of the grave. At the woman's feet, nearby the horse's head was a dog that had been cut in half and a *bauta*-stone. A range of objects accompanied the deceased woman – a chest, a bucket and an unusual bronze item with an iron tip, perhaps also some kind of magic staff. After the body of the deceased woman, the grave goods and the animals were laid, everything was covered (or rather crushed) with stones of varying sizes. Interestingly, one of the largest stones was placed or thrown directly on the woman's head. In the light of the Old Norse written accounts and cross-cultural parallels discussed above it is possible to argue that this may have been an apotropaic act conducted because the people responsible for the burial feared her evil eye. After the placing of the large stones, further stones were thrown inside the pit and then everything was covered with a layer of soil. This was not the end of the funerary procedures, however. Some time later a mid-sized pit was dug directly above the woman's grave. Into this pit fragmented parts of a male and female bodies were thrown. Since the woman was buried with an unusual bronze item which may be interpreted as a kind of staff, accompanied by animals and covered with large stones, it is plausible to argue that she may have been perceived as some kind of ritual specialist – perhaps even a *seiðr*-worker. Her treatment in death also shows rather clear signs of ambivalence. On the one hand she had been buried with exclusive objects and animal sacrifices, which could be seen as an act of respect, but on the other everything was later destroyed by covering it with stones. The purposeful destruction of the bodies and objects could perhaps signal fear and reflect some superstitions about the sorcerers and the living dead.

An interesting example of a grave where the stones may have been used not necessarily to protect the living but rather the dead themselves, is known from Vað (Suður-Mulasýsla, Iceland).⁵⁶ There a man was laid on his right side with the feet flexed (grave Kt-145). He was accompanied by

⁵⁵ Jens Ulriksen: "Spor af begravelsesritualer i jordfæstegrave i vikingetidens Danmark", in: *KUML* (2011), 161-245: 173-179, 187, 193-196, 216-218, 235.

⁵⁶ Þóra Pétursdóttir: "*Deyr fé, deyja frændr*". *Re-animating mortuary remains from Viking Age Iceland*. Tromsø 2007, 54 (Unpublished M.A. Thesis in Archaeology, defended at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tromsø).

a large whetstone placed by his face. A dog killed with a blow to the head was laid at his feet. During the funerary procedures the man's body was covered by colourful rhyolite slabs. The reason for doing so appears to have been intended to prevent the intrusion of animals or grave robbers. Placing stones with a similar desire in mind is also known from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, for example from Raunds Furnells in Northamptonshire (England). There, stone slabs were frequently placed around the heads of the deceased, sometimes covering them completely.⁵⁷ Since the rite is so frequent there, it may be argued that the mourners wanted to protect the bodies of the deceased from any further damage. In other instances the stones placed inside the grave may have been used to position the body in a more aesthetic way or even with a 'magic' attempt to heal diseases or ailments.⁵⁸

In discussing the variability within the "stoned" graves it is vital to take a closer look at the funerary materials from the cemetery in Fröjel (Gotland).⁵⁹ The accumulation of peculiar treatment of the dead there implies that this site may have functioned as an execution cemetery. One of the most interesting and unique graves which was excavated there (grave 19/89) included two individuals that were laid one on top of the other at right angles, in a cross-like position. The lower individual (19a/89), a youngster, was laid partly on his right side with the feet flexed. He had a large stone placed directly on his chest. Then an old man (19b/89) was laid over him and the stone. In addition, his feet were also overlaid with a stone. In another grave (32/88) from the same site a woman was buried with two large boulders on her thighs. Only a single object accompanied her – a gold gilded ring of bronze with a stone fitted into its "eye". Another grave (9/89) from Fröjel which included a stone placed on the feet of the deceased also belonged to the woman. She was exclusively dressed and had two animal-head brooches, a "tool-brooch" with two bronze chains attached as well as a round box-brooch at her neck and a bronze pin. It is interesting that contrary to most of the other "stoned" graves from Fröjel this individual was apparently buried fully clothed and adorned with good quality jewelry.

In conclusion the 'stoned' graves differ from one another in terms of their furnishings, gender and age of the deceased. There are even further

⁵⁷ Andy Boddington: *Raunds Furnells. The Anglo-Saxon church and churchyard, Raunds Area Project*. London: English Heritage 1996 (= English Heritage Archaeological Report 7), 38-47.

⁵⁸ Cf. Reynolds, 39; Howard Williams: *Death and memory in early medieval Britain*. Cambridge: CUP 2006, 109-111.

⁵⁹ Carlsson.

variations with regards to the size and number of the stones which they held. An interesting aspect of such graves in Scandinavia and Poland is the relatively frequent occurrence of just three stones placed on or in association with the deceased. Fischer⁶⁰ wrote in his seminal ethnographic work on Polish mortuary customs that during funerals one had to throw three handfuls of soil onto the coffin in order to make sure the dead won't rise from their graves. Perhaps the number three in relation to the Norse graves also had some special significance?

The interpretations of "stoned" graves, as I have shown, may be manifold. In some instances stones may have been employed to protect oneself against the potential, malevolent afterlife of a ritual specialist. In other cases they were used to prevent animals or other humans from damaging the cadaver or robbing the grave. The Anglo-Saxon examples demonstrate that the stones in addition to protecting the body could also help to position it in a more aesthetic way or serve as potential healing charms. Even more meanings could be attributed to such graves in the Slavic context, where they appear from the 10th to as late as the 11th century AD.⁶¹ Therefore, as with all other forms of the so called "deviant burials" there is a necessity to always discuss them in the broadest possible context and avoid simplistic solutions. Referring to various cross-cultural parallels from other areas of early medieval Europe can prove to be helpful in arriving at the most plausible interpretation.

10. Rethinking deviance. Deviant burial vs deviant grave

Throughout the pages of this article I sought to better understand the various motivations which may have stood behind the concept of "deviant burial" in the Viking Age. I argued that graves of this kind demonstrate a wide range of diversity and that it may not be appropriate to interpret them all only as bearing signs of apotropaic rituals intended to prevent the animated corpses from rising. The "oddity" of a particular grave need not necessarily signal that the people responsible for its composition regarded the deceased with contempt. Some acts, although violent to our modern Western minds, may have been seen by the Viking-Age people as sanctioned and necessary. Violence could therefore signal not only fear but also affection.

In future studies much more attention ought to be given to the unusual features observable in relation to the cremation graves. I have already

⁶⁰ Fischer.

⁶¹ Gardela, „Zatrzynani kamieniami?”.

mentioned the peculiar ritual of using spears (or spearheads) to “pin” the cremated bones. These acts may have also held a whole plethora of meanings and need not only signal the fear of the dead or dedication to Óðinn. A recent cross-cultural analysis of such instances has shown that a similar spear-rite was employed at the territory of Poland and Germany already around the first century BC.⁶²

Further attempts should be made at trying to see reflections of mythological beliefs in the graves themselves.⁶³ Perhaps the stoning of sorcerers had some conceptual relation to the myths of Þórr fighting the giants with a stone / thunder weapon? Could the execution by stoning and burial under stones be a form of a mythical reenactment intended to restore peace and order? According to the sagas, the sorcerers were often seen as representatives of both the human and supernatural world and in some instances even equated with giants – and therefore this new interpretation seems plausible.

Ultimately, we need to bear in mind that the final composition of the grave came as a result of a complex array of funerary actions which may have been understood in multiple ways by their participants.⁶⁴ The messages which could be read from the ancient burials are far from straightforward. We must be open to acknowledging the subtleties and notions of individuality with which they were endowed. It must also be taken into consideration that there may have been many factors leading to a particular form of burial although they are not always visible to the interpreters of archaeological material. Moreover, we should not limit ourselves only to the considerations of what we see in the “static” grave today but also be more open to speculations on all the “dynamic” aspects that were present at the graveside in the past – the sights, the sounds, the smell and so on.

Given these observations I would strongly agree with Aspöck⁶⁵ that the term “deviant burial” should be seriously reconsidered. It is too biased to encompass the changing perceptions of the dying and the dead as well as manifold actions which may have occurred at the graveside. As I have sought to demonstrate on the basis of saga evidence (cf. the burial of

⁶² Łukasz Ciesielski / Leszek Gardela: “Włócznie śmierci. Włócznie w obrzędowości pogrzebowej w epoce żelaza. The spears of death. Spears in Iron Age funerary practices”, in: Maciej Franz (ed.): *Barbarzyńcy u bram*. Toruń: Adam Marszałek 2013.

⁶³ Cf. Tore Artelius / Martin Lindqvist: “Bones of the earth. Imitation as meaning in Viking Age burial ritual”, in: *Current Swedish Archaeology* 13 (2005), 25-37; Price, “Passing into poetry”.

⁶⁴ Cf. Fischer; Williams; Price, “Passing into poetry”.

⁶⁵ Aspöck.

Skalla-Grímr in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*) a deviant burial may not necessarily result in finding a deviant grave. To my mind, seeking a different term for the peculiar (to our eyes) funerary behaviour is not a solution. Rather, we should try to embrace the multivalence of all sorts of actions and reactions to what may have happened at the graveside and try to approach their diverse archaeological remains with an open mind.

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Abstracts

The Dangerous Dead? Rethinking Viking-Age Deviant Burials.

This article deals with the phenomenon of “bad death” and the problem of deviant Viking-Age burials. The first part deals with ON narrative sources including passages about persons whose manner of dying caused fear to people in their environment. The second part analyses samples of deviant burials known from archeological sources, concentrating on graves with beheadings, stoning or prone burials. The author suggests that every one of these burials should be considered by itself – which has not been the rule so far –, even if they show certain similarities. Not all these graves must testify to a belief in revenants, as they could also be interpreted differently, and sometimes even show extra care for the dead.

Gefährliche Verstorbene? Neue Überlegungen zu den Sonderbestattungen aus der Wikingerzeit.

Der folgende Beitrag befasst sich mit dem Phänomen des “schlechten Todes” sowie mit dem Problem der sog. Sonderbestattungen in der Wikingerzeit. Im ersten Teil wurden die altisländischen Schriftquellen untersucht, die Informationen über Personen beinhalten, die auf solche Art gestorben sind, die in der Gemeinschaft Angst hervorgerufen hat. Der zweite Teil des Artikels widmet sich der Analyse ausgewählter Beispiele der Sonderbestattungen bekannt aus archäologischen Quellen der Wikingerzeit. Es wurden Gräber untersucht, in denen Enthauptungen, Bestattung in Bauchlage oder Steinigung vermerkt wurden. Der Verfasser ist der Meinung, dass alle von ihm besprochenen Gräber – auch wenn sie viele Gemeinsamkeiten besitzen – separater betrachtet werden sollten, wie es bis jetzt nicht der Fall war. Nicht jedes muss davon zeugen, dass man Angst vor der Rückkehr der bestatteten Person aus dem Jenseits hatte. Die Gräber könnten auch andere Inhalte ausdrücken, oder eine besondere Sorge um die Verstorbenen.

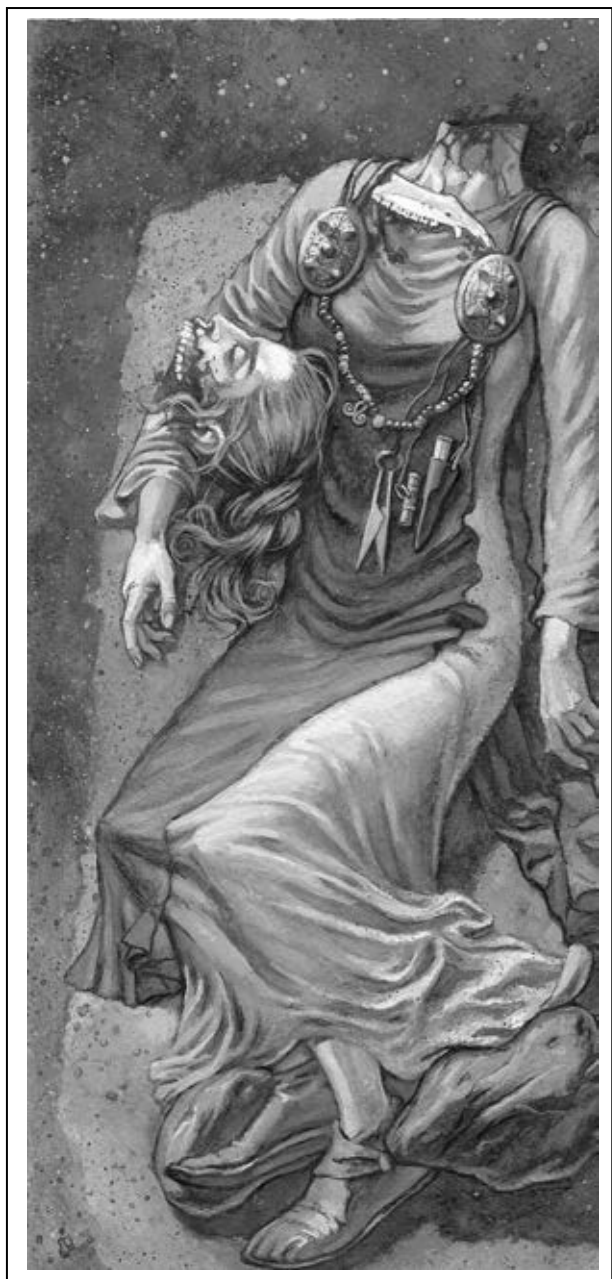


Fig. 1. An artistic reconstruction of grave Bj. 959 from Birka, Sweden.
Drawing by Mirosław Kuźma © Leszek Gardela and Mirosław Kuźma.



Fig. 2. An artistic reconstruction of grave T from Bogøvei, Langeland, Denmark. Drawing by Mirosław Kuźma © Leszek Gardela and Mirosław Kuźma.



Fig. 3. An artistic reconstruction of grave P from Bogøvei, Langeland, Denmark. Drawing by Mirosław Kuźma © Leszek Gardela and Mirosław Kuźma.

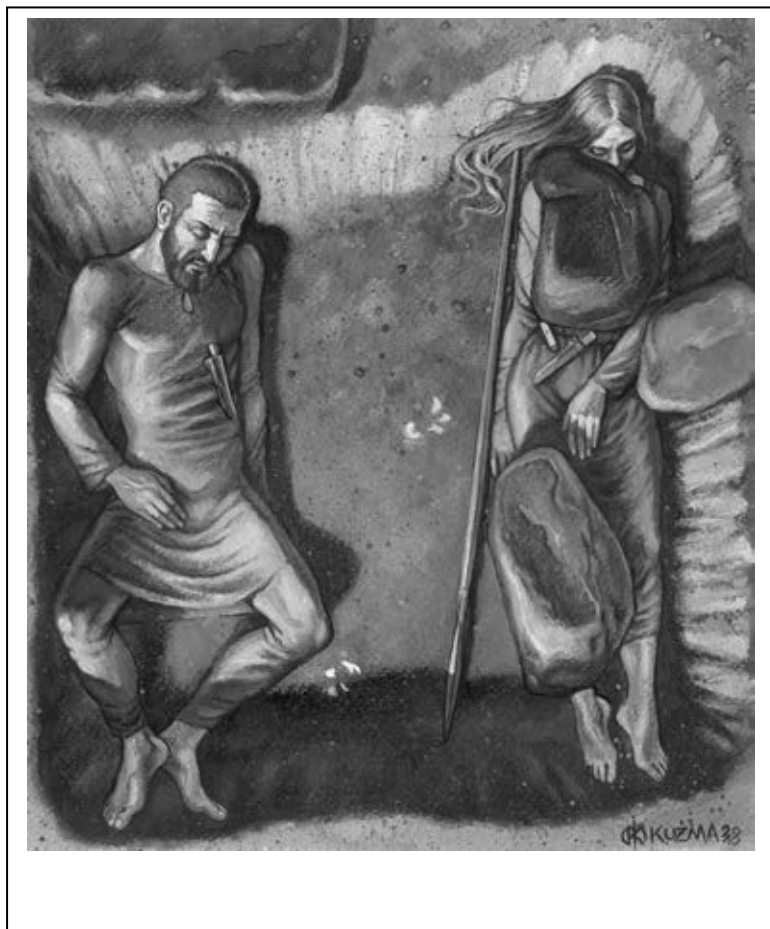


Fig. 4. An artistic reconstruction of the Gerdrup grave, Zeeland, Denmark. Drawing by Mirosław Kuźma © Leszek Gardela and Mirosław Kuźma.



Fig. 5. An artistic reconstruction of grave A505 from Trekroner-Grydehøj, Zealand, Denmark. Drawing by Mirosław Kuźma © Leszek Gardela and Mirosław Kuźma.

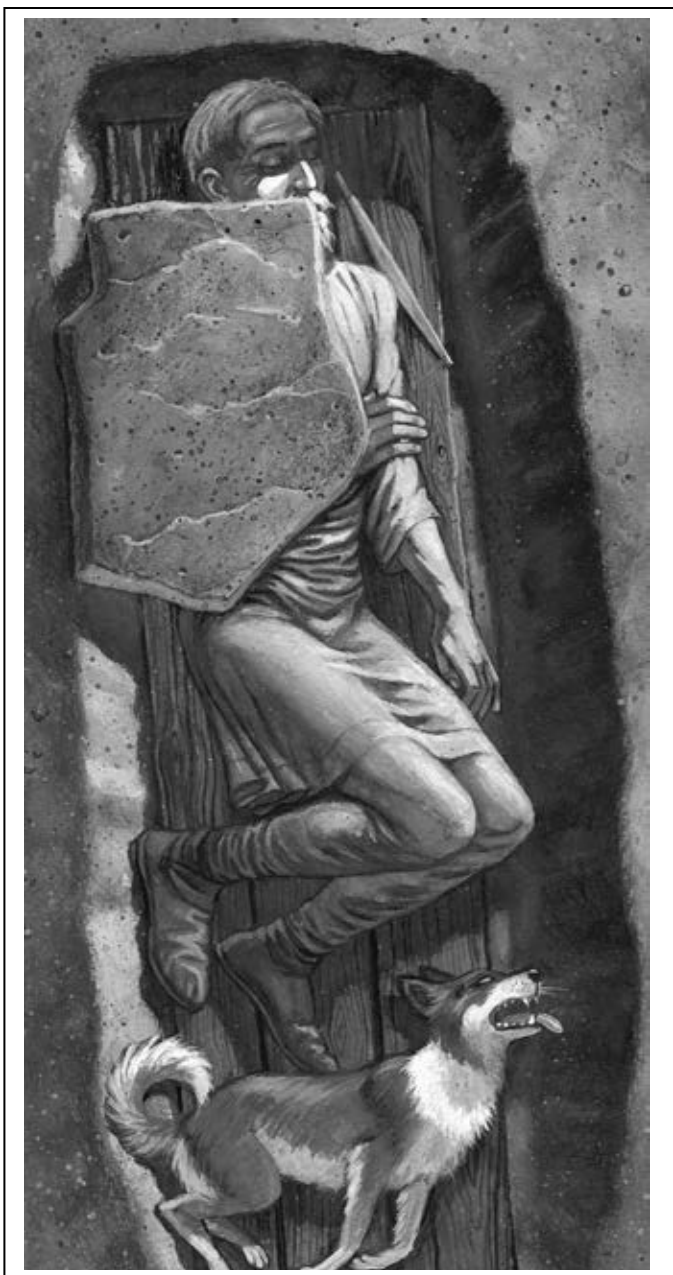


Fig. 6. An artistic reconstruction of grave Kt-145:2 from Vað, Suður Múlasýsla, Iceland. Drawing by Mirosław Kuźma © Leszek Gardeła and Mirosław Kuźma.



Fig. 7. An artistic reconstruction of grave 5056 from Raunds Furnells, Northamptonshire, England. Drawing by Mirosław Kuźma © Leszek Gardela and Mirosław Kuźma.



Fig. 8. An artistic reconstruction of grave 19/89 from Fröjel, Gotland.
Drawing by Mirosław Kuźma © Leszek Gardela and Mirosław Kuźma.