

Chapter 13

Reproduction and Relocation of Death in Iron Age Scandinavia

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ABSTRACT What is death? The answer is surely dependent upon who you ask. What death represents for the living is the most frequent asked question amongst archaeologists. What if we reversed the perspective and asked: What do the living humans represent for the dead ones? This may be an odd question to raise but if we accept that dead persons, or rather agents, interact with the living community in the Scandinavian Iron Age, or that the living society responded to such beliefs, this may have implications for our interpretation of the archaeological record. In my discussion of these matters I will explore some examples from the Icelandic sagas, and ask questions about dead agencies.

As archaeologists we trace past ways of handling and dealing with death. We also know that what people do is intimately connected to what they believe. We may, however, turn it the other way around and depart from the anticipation that belief may form material expressions, such as grave customs. I want to start a process where I take a closer look at the stories about the active dead. What kind of role or status did they have in these stories? If we anticipate that episodes in the sagas reflect commonly held beliefs, this may have archaeological consequences. Hence, my aim is to discuss ideas and issues concerning the role of the dead in Iron Age Scandinavia.

Before we continue I have to be explicit about what I mean when referring to death in this article. Since I will discuss the active dead, or dead people with agency, it is rather hard to outline definitions without taking metaphysical issues into consideration. These metaphysics are not commensurate with the methodological platform, which is based upon material culture. Thus, this may lead to paradoxical formulations due to the modern logical and the western rational way of thinking phrased in a scientific language.

I define death as a state of being, which is not defined in opposition to life. On the one hand, it is necessary to operate with a theoretical concept of death which draws upon anthropology and written sources (Bloch & Parry 1982). But on the other hand, as an archaeologist I will need a methodological and empirical definition of death that may be operational and traceable in the material culture (see Fyllingen 2003). In this way the methodological definition of death will be linked to a biological notion of death as a physical state appearing after life. At the outset this may seem to contradict the theoretical notion of death as death and not life, but that is what this article is about.

The question is whether people in the Iron Age Scandinavia believed that dead agents existed or not. We cannot know exactly what was going on in people's minds in Iron Age in Scandinavia, but let us read their stories with an open mind. It is obvious that the dead have not written the stories themselves so we will always look upon the dead from the perspective of the living. That is a challenge.

In earlier works I have argued that swords may be looked upon as bodies with their own personhood, given names and created through a ritual-technical process that may incorporate bones, both from humans and animals (Gansum 2004a, 2004b). The swords may inherit ancestral spirits through the bones used in the process of making steel. This interpretation of material culture may lead to more questions. Is this a way people relocated forces connected to death? Or are dead bodies the force of death itself in Iron Age Scandinavia? Bones, either from animals or humans, are often handled as "leftovers" from life. Maybe flesh and bones are as close as archaeologists may come to a materialised concept of death? It is from this perspective I want to look at the reproduction and relocation of death in material culture. This may broaden the possibilities and challenge old concepts of death that are common in studies of Iron Age Scandinavia.

Death may change, relocate and transform places, landscape and artefacts. Bjørnar Olsen proclaims that we need to re-emphasise the significance of the material world and look upon "things as members of collectives" (Olsen 2003:100). This may be a fruitful way to start analysing the transformation of material culture, where death has been implemented in one way or another (Andrén 2002, Gansum 2004b).

In written sources from the 12th and 13th centuries it is described that people were afraid of what the dead might do to them (see below). This may sound odd, but the dead

seemed to have some sort of agency and they were capable of acting in accordance with their own will. Seen from this perspective death is not the end of life. Death may be much more and something else. Hence, in order to understand death in ways similar to the way death was understood in the Iron Age, we have to broaden our perspectives. Death has to be dealt with in metaphors. It is a foreign place with unknown existence. What kind of pictures and associations are used to represent death? Darkness is without a doubt one of the most frequent metaphors. If we were to use this metaphor and draw upon this analogy, we may ask: Can we get to know darkness by using light? My answer is no. Instead of imposing our rational and Western thoughts of death on these descriptions, but rather trying to look at the dead as agents, we may get something out of these sources which sheds new light on both life and death in Iron Age Scandinavia.

Death, myth and agency

It is the history of the consequences, or the fore-meanings or past actions, which have important effects on the way we understand and continue conducting our lives (Gadamer 1993:267, Giddens 1993:295, see also Olsen 1991). Hence, what people believed must be of interest to me if I want to understand how they related to death. If people believed that death was something that had to be dealt with according to some schemes, rules or rituals, it will be of interest for archaeologists because these structures will influence the material record we are trying to interpret. My point of departure is that death may have agency, either as dead agents or as an ancestral force. If people acted and responded to such beliefs, they probably also organised and transformed the material world within this framework.

I will begin with one of the Norse myths, which have an interesting parallel structure. The mythological death is described in the poetic Edda. Balder, the good and wise god, was killed by his blind brother Hod. Balder's death was a tragedy and his mother Frigg sent a tenant to Hel, the goddess of death, with hope of getting Balder back. The tenant Hermod rode to Hel. It was a long way, and he kept it going for nine days and nine nights. On his way it was confirmed that Balder and his men were ahead of him. From this, we can draw the conclusion that Balder's body was complete and intact on his way to Hel. It seems that at the same time the gods in Asgard prepared Balder's cremation (Sturluson 2003:188). Odin whispered something in the ear of Balder, and gave him Draupne, his ring of gold. After some difficulties, the gods cremated Balder, his wife, and his horse. The cremation took place onboard on his ship Ringhorne, which was pushed out on the sea. Moreover, we can draw the conclusion that Balder was cremated, which is of importance and which will be discussed below.

This history has a mythological parallel structure. Balder rode to Hel, and the goddess of death was willing to return him on certain conditions. The tenant and Balder spoke and Balder gave him the gold ring Draupne, which he should return to Odin. The tenant rode home and this journey took the same amount of time as the passage to Hel. In the mythological logic Balder may return from Hel even after his body was cremated. It is also obvious that there was communication between the living and the dead. Thus, it is challenge to understand what kind of status the dead had. Let us turn to the descriptions in the sagas.

The agency of death in the Icelandic literature

If we take a closer look at the sagas, there are stories of dead creatures doing things that seem rude. The dead have to be killed again if the social order is to be reconstituted. The stories are told from the perspective of the living. We know that the living worshipped their dead forefathers in cultic praxis (Birkeli 1938, 1943, 1944). There are even archaeologists who have seen the opening of barrows as communication initiated by the living to gain power from the dead (Brøgger 1945, Brendalsmo & Røthe 1992). Now these works focus on the living world, but let us change the perspective and look upon the histories where the dead takes the active role.

Of course the stories are written by the living and we must be aware of source criticism. Christians wrote the texts some 200 years after the time they describe. Nevertheless, I will start with chapters 33 and 34 from *The Story of the Ere-Dwellers*. The story is about Thorolf Halt-foot. We meet him when he and his son Arnkjell parted after a heavy discussion. Thorolf journeyed home and did not speak to anyone, but sat down in his high-seat. He sat there after the men went to bed, and in the morning, when people woke up, he was still sitting, and he was dead. The housewife sent a man to Arnkjell to tell him about the death of his father. And when Arnkjell and his men came to Kvam, the people were all full of dread, because all of Thorolf's face seemed loathsome. Arnkjell had to go behind the body and use his strengths to drag it out of the high-seat. He made a hole in the wall behind the high-seat and took the body of Thorolf out of the dwelling. They put the body on a sledge and dragged it up to Thorswaterdale. It took a lot of effort to get the dead up to the place where the body was buried (*The Story of the Ere-Dwellers* chapter 33).

As an archaeologist it is interesting to note that the burial was given rather little attention in the saga description. Arnkjell took precautions by taking his father out through the wall; this was done to prevent Thorolf from coming back through the door. People on the farm became afraid after the sun went down because they became aware that Thorolf did not lay quiet. Thorolf was walking again; or rather it was the dead Thorolf, with quite another agency and status. The language used to describe this situation

may be questioned, and analysed more thoroughly, but that is a task I can not get into here.

Now other things started to happen. The two oxen that dragged the body of Thorolf were troll-ridden, and all the cattle that came near the place where the dead Thorolf was buried went mad, and bellowed till they died. The deceased also haunted the herdsman at the farm, and one autumn night neither the herdsman nor the majority of the cattle came home. The following morning they found him dead nearby the grave of Thorolf. He was all coal-blue and every bone in him was broken, and the herdsman was subsequently buried beside Thorolf.

It is remarkable that they choose to bury the herdsman together with the body of Thorolf. Sheep and birds that came close to the grave died, and people heard deep sounds from Thorswaterdale. At night the roofs were ridden upon, and when the winter came, the dead Thorolf was seen home at the house many times, troubling his wife most. Seen from the living point of view, we should not be surprised if this was sexual harassment. She was so troubled by the deceased that she died. Again, we have to notice that she was brought up to Thorswaterdale and buried beside the body of Thorolf. If we leave the perspective of the living, and view this from the angle of dead Thorolf, he got himself a herdsman and a wife. He follows his own agenda that seems to be to conquer the valley.

“Thereafter men fled away from the homestead, and now Thorolf took to walking so wide through the dale that he laid waste all steads therein, and so great was the trouble from his walking that he slew some men, and some fled away; but all those who died were seen in his company” (The Story of the Ere-Dwellers chapter 34).

If we take a closer look at the situation we recognise that the dead agents have an agency of their own and they are in opposition to the living. In Norse mythology we hear that Odin chooses men to follow him to Valhalla. He took no precautions as to whether he let good men live or die, because his needs for warriors were of greater importance than the human society. The dead Thorolf is playing that role and strengthening his position by killing the chosen ones and scaring off the others. The human society is competing with the dead for control of the landscape.

Only Arnkjell’s farm and men were not troubled by the dead. People fled the valley and called for Arnkjell to do something about the situation. The following spring Arnkjell and some of his men set out to Thorswaterdale to move Thorolf to another place. The twelve men broke in to the grave of Thorolf and found the body undecayed, and it was evil to look at. They put the dead on a sledge and when the two oxen should drag it up the hill, the oxen went mad and fled. The dead was now so heavy that he could not be moved far, so they buried the body of Thorolf in earth on top of the hill named Halt-foot’s Head. A wall of stone was built to fence the mountain

head. There lay Thorolf quiet as long as Arnkjell lived, says the saga (The Story of the Ere-Dwellers chapter 34). People believed that the dead Torolf had to be moved from the grave to a new location, and they reopened the grave. In the saga it is obvious that the grave construction was reopened several times, and it has to be understood as a dynamic ritual place (Gansum 2004c). Thorolf lay in the grave, but did not lay quiet, and the forces connected to the dead Thorolf were immanent in his body.

The other examples I want to draw upon are The Saga of Grettir the Strong (Grettir’s Saga). The man Glam plays much the same role as Torolf did in the story of the Ere-Dwellers. He reanimates and he kills people of both sexes with the same determined goal to conquer the valley (chapter 32-34). At last Grettir fights the deceased and kills him. At the end of the fight Glam casts a spell on Grettir: “And this I lay upon you, that these eyes of mine shall be ever before your vision. You will find it hard to live alone, and at last it shall drag you to death.” (Grettir’s Saga chapter 35, for a similar evil see Landnåmsboken 1997:109-110, chapter 180). In the other saga, the eyes of Torolf were also feared. Why do we always close the eyes of the dead? Is this a referent to a necrophobic motif (Birkeli 1944:184)?

The two stories are parallel in many aspects. This does not mean that they support each other as independent sources, but rather that the concept of the acting dead and the consequences of their actions were recognised. There are also stories where men go into grave barrows and opens chambers where they fight dead men (Gretti’s Saga chapter 18). The dead have to be physically parted and in that sense killed again (Soga om Egil Einhendte og Åsmund Berserksbane 1989:34, Chapter 7). We may ask; what kinds of ontological status do the killed dead have? In archaeological literature there is documentation of bodies that have been exposed to so much violence that it is obvious that they have been ritually killed several times (Fyllingen 2003).

Discussion on the reproduction and relocation of death

In our language “corpses” do act, and we have to understand their agenda. They conquer and establish a regime led by themselves. The dead male does things to the living female that causes her death, and they are buried together. Seen from the living point of view it is awful, but seen from the point of view of death, he gets himself sexual satisfaction and in a short time he is rewarded with a wife. His powers grow as he gets more men. The dead community grows. It is a totally deserted landscape, but what is sound logic in the world of the living is not logical in the same way in the world of the dead. We face some of the same difficulties as we did with the death of Balder. The mythical parallel existence may explain the fact that dead may die again. This is recognised in Norse mythology where we are told that

people that came to Hel may also die. Odin woke up an old giantess, a volve, east of the door to Hel (Vegtamskvadet versus 4), and the giant Vavtrudne says that the dead from Hel goes to Niflhels deep (Vavtrudnesmål versus 43). There are several levels of death whereas Niflhel and the beach called Næstrand can be named. Hence, we may open our minds to more differentiated concepts of deaths in the Iron Age Scandinavia.

As an archaeologist I will depart from the corpse, i.e. from the material world. It is as dead as it gets in our physical view, but people may have experienced it in other ways and therefore acted upon beliefs, taking precautions from the acting forces. Corpses may be treated in many ritual ways (Kaliff & Oestigaard 2004). As archaeologists we seek explanations that support our own framework where dead and living are separate categories, and graves may be seen as a mirror of the living society. But what if we were wrong? Do death rituals tell us something about a new ontological position of the dead? What kind of connotation does the death society have to the concept we name grave field? Do we seek such questions? Do the graves tell us about the living and the precautions they took handling deaths? Removed bodies may tell a story of fear, but it may also be incorporated in the ontology of death and the differentiated statuses the dead may reflect in the archaeological record.

I think we ought to reconsider the many locations and relocations that are possible if the body was fragmented, either by cremation or partition. Cremation and inhumation are both practises dealing with corpses in Iron Age Scandinavia. Cut-marks are found on skeletal remains from cremated bones, and we have to consider parting of the corpse as a frequent practise (Holck 1987, Stylegar 1997, Oestigaard 2000, 2004). In Iron Age graves containing cremated bones there are approximately 2-300 grams of cremated bones, which is circa 10% of a cremated human body (Sigvallius 1994). I have reasons to believe that most of the bones never ended up in the constructions the archaeologists name graves (Gansum 2004c). The cremations seldom took place at the same spot where the constructions with bone deposits were erected. We can not be sure that the entire body was cremated, although it is possible. Burnt human bones are found in many different contexts and have given archaeologists difficulty with the traditional concept of grave (Hufthammer 1994:2, Johnson 1995:30-31). The mental picture of the body as something whole and holy may only mirror our Christian conception and may be totally anachronistic.

Many inhumations are not displaced after they were put into the ground, but there are examples of displacement and relocation of bones from inhumations (Krogh 1993, Stutz 2003). Often this documentation is interpreted as robbery or disturbance (Brendalsmo & Røthe 1992, Myhre 1994, Andersson 1997). I am not convinced by

these interpretations and have argued for alternatives; the mounds might be the location where the journey in the underworld took place and where the ritual communication depended on several openings (Gansum 2004c: 178-202). If we are allowed to think along these lines, new material culture studies may be operational and very relevant. Places may be changed, loaded or opened or closed to the living, or the flesh and the bones may be used for different purposes in death rituals (Andrén 2002, Oestigaard 2004).

The use of bones in transformation processes may also totally change the view on the material culture (Gansum 2004a). In excavations reports there are sometimes documented close relations between graves and smelting (Appelgren & Broberg 1998). There are graves inside furnaces that indicate a close connection (Appelgren & Broberg 1998:34-35). Birth and rebirth, death and fertility are discussed in the anthropological literature (Bloch, M. & Parry, J. 1989, Barndon 2001, 2004, Haaland 2004). The relation between iron and earth is also noticed in the literature (Burström 1990), but seldom treated in a symbolic perspective (Hjærtner-Holdar 1993, Nørbach 1997, Englund 2002, Lyngstrøm 2002). The fact is that sometimes the production of iron was situated at cemeteries. If we consider bones as a material or vehicle for death, we may consider the smiths' ritual labour at the cemetery as a way of giving the artefacts the agency of death, far beyond life. Death was incorporated through bones. This may add to our understanding of the smith as having a liminal position in society. In the Norse mythology the dwarves gave artefacts souls and an agency of their own. If we view the production of steel in this perspective we may be able to understand why swords and other material entities had names (Gansum 2004b). In this sense, the "defence of things as members of collectives" that Olsen asked for (2003:100), is already there. Death agencies may be marked or strengthened by collective ornaments that interconnect death, objects and life in a social context.

Concluding remarks

I am aware of the fact that in early Christianity there were descriptions on how to prevent dead people returning to the living. Many of these conceptions are possible to find in the Icelandic sagas. It is also true that these concepts may have intervened with the Norse mythology long before the Christianisation of Scandinavia. Items, such as pieces of Jesus' cross, have played an important role as vehicle for death in the Christian world. In this short article I have tried out some thoughts on the ontology of death in Iron Age Scandinavia. I am certain that it will be met with sound criticism. My critique to archaeologists is that we have to be more specific when we put ourselves in the position of the living dealing with the dead. Death revalues and transforms material culture and changes the living human's minds. Excavating the mind is of utmost importance.

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