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Fredrik Fahlander

I very much welcome the opportunity to comment on Mark Haughton's study of social relations in local burial grounds. The proposition to emphasise nuances in burial analysis is especially welcome in times flooded with large-scale studies based on isotope – and aDNA signatures. I find much to agree with in the text and will take some of the arguments as grounds for further exploration. My commentary will focus on three areas: the question of scale and scope, social complexity, and the formation of burial assemblages.

Haughton expresses concerns for how large-scale statistical analyses principally tend to treat different burial grounds from approximately the same period as analytically one. The problems with such approaches are well known. Grand scale analyses of the burial practices of a larger region have a tendency to underestimate the potential of local variability (as Haughton's own case study shows). A perhaps more problematic issue is that large-scale analysis, treating all burials as more or less contemporary, is seldom able to detect subtle changes in burial ritual and/or social relations. Large-scale datasets thus run the risk of homogenising each period and generate a totality that was never really experienced nor lived by anyone. As Marilyn Strathern puts it: 'patterns themselves may be regular without being similar, or similar without being regular' (Strathern 1991, p. xxiii). It could, of course, be argued that the whole

point of large-scale studies is to sift out the 'major' trends and tendencies. Be that as it may, we should always remember that the seemingly objective percentages and numbers of large-scale analyses normally build upon subjective and qualitative interpretations on the small scale.

On the other side of the coin, local and small-scale analyses are no less problematic. A small grave field is not necessarily representative even for local social relations or ideologies. There can be several generations between the earliest and the latest grave, individual burial grounds for different social collectives, and a portion of the population may not have received burial at all. The fact that a burial is an event related to the death of an individual makes the representative value of each grave uncertain. Burial grounds are rarely planned compositions, but perhaps best characterised by improvisation and necessity. In Haughton's example, children are only buried together with adults. To me, this implies that children are buried only when the death of a child coincides with the death of an adult (if not burials are subsequently added to the cist).

While I agree with Haughton about the problems of generalisation, we should nonetheless be careful to maintain a dichotomy between the local and particular on the one hand and the general and large scale on the other. The same is also true for the different techniques and methods. Statistical analysis

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is not problematic *per se*. On the contrary, the very process of creating databases often encourages systematisation, distinctions, and elaboration. In the best of worlds, this should inspire exploration of different forms of classification. That is, instead of only recording the presence or absence of a typical item in a grave, parallel classification can be worthwhile. For example, a harpoon is not only a tool, it also belongs to fishing gear and can be grouped with hooks, bobbers, etc. in a similar way as an arrowhead can be categorised as hunting gear. Following a polythetical type of classification, no special type of item needs to take precedence. Moreover, the physical properties and qualities of the materialities in the graves are often rewarding to elaborate upon. For example, aspects of origin, manner of production, handling and experience (e.g. material, surface finish, feel, colour, marks from use, etc.) (see e.g. Spaulding 1977). In order to find nuances, we need to understand why different things end up in the graves and how they relate to each other. In my view, this is essential for any burial analysis, small or large scale, manual or aided by statistical tools.

This leads to my second point: the complexity of social identity and ideology. In his article, Haughton discusses issues of intersectionality and the life-course. I believe he is on the right track here in the quest of finding nuances. An intersectional perspective is crucial for any study of social identity (not necessarily restricted to age and sex only). The same goes for a life-course perspective. For example, consider the Middle Neolithic burial ground Ajvide on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea (Fahlander 2013). A straightforward analysis aiming at relating burial interments to age and sex does not result in any significant correlations. This does not necessarily imply that age and sex are irrelevant social factors, only that such aspects are not directly emphasised in the burial ritual. However, at closer inspection, employing a life-course perspective, aspects of age and sex seem indeed to be related to the way the graves are arranged. The site comprises a series of evocative intersections between pairs of graves that are placed at a 90-degree angle to each other, in the shape of a 'T'. These burials contain both young and old individuals of both sexes. Yet, when looking more closely at the superimposing graves, it becomes apparent that they contain elderly individuals that suffered from problems related to advanced age (e.g. spondylolysis, eburnation, and pseudoarthritis). The intersected graves, on the contrary, comprise younger individuals of the opposite sex with no pathological or traumatic changes, but which have had their skulls removed post-mortem. The intersections thus seem to be a deliberate arrangement combining an elderly with a headless young of the opposite sex. In this particular case, age may not be a social factor per se, but physical aspects of disability related to advanced ageing apparently are. Such nuances are seldom possible to establish by simple correlations between age and sex without considering how bodily aspects intersect during the life-course.

The issues of categorisation and social relations bring me to my third point. In order to understand what nuances in burial data mean, we need to come to grips with how burial assemblages are configured. Why are some individuals buried in a particular manner? Why and how does stuff end up in the urns, cists or pits? On a general level, this relates to a matrix of eschatological criteria on one axis and social on the other, or in other terms, to actions undertaken out of care for the dead in the afterlife and for the benefit of the living (which sometimes coincide). In the case of the intersecting burials at Ajvide, the main issue seems to be concern for the dead in the afterlife, by providing an able companion for the disabled old.

Haughton implores us to detail the evidence for practice at each locale, to ask

what happened on the same level as the practices are enacted. I fully agree with this, and when it comes to burials, the full line of practices involved needs to be considered – from the construction of the pyre to when the pot with cremated remains is put into the ground (and in some cases even after that) (Williams 2004). To partly bypass the quagmire of symbolism, the real, physical aspects of the ritual are especially rewarding to consider here. A cremation is seldom a process that one has full control over. Some things on the pyre may end up completely incinerated, while others are less affected by the fire. This suggests that when collecting the bones for the actual burial, all preferred pieces are not necessarily found. It may thus be necessary to supplement missing bones or items from the pyre with other stuff. This phenomenon can perhaps partly explain the various odd, unburnt materialities frequently found in the graves. My point is that a cremation burial seldom is a random collection of remains of the pyre, but a planned and structured composition of different materialities (Fahlander 2014, see also Gramsch 2007). Such a scenario makes the pieces of burnt flint found in the cremations in Haughton's example more understandable. My guess is that they were put there to *do* something rather than symbolise or represent something.

The emphasis on physical properties of the materialities in burials resonates well with the increasing interest in ontology and materiality in the humanities and social sciences in the new millennium (Harris and Cipolla 2017). Hence, in the quest for understanding nuances in burial data, there might be something to gain from expanding the relational approach advocated by Haughton to involve ontological matters. In such perspective, the distinctions between the corpse and other materialities in a grave are blurred and viewed as a bundle of relations – an assemblage in becoming (Fowler 2013, Pauketat 2013). An ontologically oriented outlook

encourages us to consider what the materialities in the graves are supposed to *do* rather than their possible symbolic potential. It also stresses alternative classifications of materials and materialities, different from the Linnaean and the western scientific traditions (Conneller 2011). For example, consider the presence of a single piece of cat bone in a cremation pot. Why is it there at all? Is it at all related to the dead individual's person or social standing? Was it randomly picked from the remains of the pyre? Was it selected because of its physical properties and qualities (shiny, large, peculiar form etc.) or because of the individual characteristics of a particular animal (sex, age, origin, and experiences etc.)? Was it deliberately added to compensate for something missing? In any case, it would be reductive to see animal bones in graves as simply representing a personal pet, food offering, or a particularly symbolic species. Such an ontological take on burials may seem speculative and could easily turn into just another type of relativism if taken too far. However, also a small pattern is still a pattern; it is no less interesting because it is locally restricted in time and space.

Nuances are fascinating and every little burial ground is full of them. Perhaps they are more likely to be found on the small to mid-scale level, but the main question is really more about ascertaining relevant relations – how the graves work as an assemblage.

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