

# The Materiality of Death

Bodies, burials, beliefs

Edited by

Fredrik Fahlander

Terje Oestigaard

BAR International Series 1768

2008

This title published by

Archaeopress  
Publishers of British Archaeological Reports  
Gordon House  
276 Banbury Road  
Oxford OX2 7ED  
England  
bar@archaeopress.com  
www.archaeopress.com

BAR S1768

*The Materiality of Death: Bodies, burials, beliefs*

© the individual authors 2008

ISBN 978 1 4073 0257 7

Printed in England by Butler and Tanner

All BAR titles are available from:

Hadrian Books Ltd  
122 Banbury Road  
Oxford  
OX2 7BP  
England  
bar@hadrianbooks.co.uk

The current BAR catalogue with details of all titles in print, prices and means of payment is available free from Hadrian Books or may be downloaded from [www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

## Chapter 12

### **”Death Myths”: Performing of Rituals and Variation in Corpse Treatment during the Migration Period in Norway**

*Siv Kristoffersen and Terje Oestigaard*

**ABSTRACT** Why are there variations in rituals and differences in funerary practices when the descendants share the same cosmological ideas and beliefs? The variation in the mortuary record cannot be solely explained as a representation of different religion or ethnicity. In this article we introduce the analytical concept “death myths” in order to explain parts of the ritual variation which exists in the archaeological material. In death we are not equal. The descendants compose specific rituals for each of the deceased in accordance with an overall “death myth” prescribing how and why certain rituals have to be conducted in order for the deceased to reach the preferable realms in the Otherworld. By using both archaeological and ethnographic data we aim to illustrate how “death myths” may have operated in the past.

Based on variation in corpse treatment during the Migration Period in Norway, we aim to trace possible identities, structures and ritual processes manifested in funerals by identifying which of these categories are *not* evident in the mortuary remains. By focusing on variation in burial customs in the same cist, within the same mound, and within a collection of graves of the same settlement unit, it was impossible to identify categories such as gender and economic status as relevant to variation in the funeral material. Still, there is variation over a theme in these funerals. By introducing the concept of “death myths” as a set of ritual possibilities whereby the descendants compose the rituals according to specific causes of death or aimed outcomes of the funerals, it is possible to shed new light on the variation in mortuary practices. Each funeral is composed according to myths prescribing the ideal death and death rituals which secure the deceased the best destiny in the Otherworldly spheres. Hence, the funerals are not a fixed set of ritual sequences, but an interaction between the descendants and the gods whereby the ritual practitioners compose and perform the most auspicious death rituals for the dead based on various “death myths”.

Similarities and differences in grave material may be understood from a perspective in which individual variation in burial customs is focused upon. Variation would then be a result of rituals being arranged in each individual case in order to assure that the deceased arrives at the intended or most favourable existence in the hereafter. One condition of such an approach is that at death we are not equal. Equality before death would in fact annul the role and function of the rituals. Equality in death is on the other hand the intention of performing the rituals – *“in death we are all equal”*. By focusing on the

rituals as ceremonies full of meaning that are performed by the survivors so that the deceased shall attain an optimal life in another existence, it is thus possible to analyse variation in the rituals as an expression for ritual arrangements and compositions. Such a perspective emphasises the rituals’ roles and importance in society; through performing various rituals, the survivors may not only assure the deceased an advantageous life in an existence in the hereafter, but also define and transform the society so that it is adapted to the divine world.

If the deceased was in a “perfect” state for the ancestors, gods and the divine world, both bodily and spiritually, the rituals would then theoretically have been unnecessary. Death rituals are performed because the deceased is not ready for the divine world: the rituals prepare the departed for the meeting with the gods and ancestors. Regardless of where and how one dies, or social and religious status, everyone shall pass through the same “door” at one point or another. Everyone has different “baggage” as a consequence of the life lived. These can be positive or negative factors that influence the life to come. The rituals can counteract unfortunate cosmic consequences and strengthen the positive aspects.

At the moment when the dead are “delivered” to the gods, everyone shall be equal or satisfy certain divine demands or criteria, and it is the role of the rituals to ensure that all are equal or fulfil these requirements in the best way possible. If one does not appear before the gods in a proper and prepared manner, one can end up with negative lives in the hereafter or not progress further at all, but live in a limbo-state here on earth.

In Old Norse religion, there are a series of examples of the deceased visiting the surviving family, with the result that the grave must be broken into in order to ensure peace for, and peace from, the deceased. In Christian folklore, murderers and suicide victims did not reach the hereafter. Children who were not baptised and not buried in the churchyard did not go to heaven according to orthodox teachings, but lived in a state of limbo. Which rituals and where they were performed, in addition to the life lived and the final burial have decisive meaning for the departed one's life to come. All these variables, among others, have been decisive for what happens in the hereafter.

This implies that there is an often implicit and undefined understanding and agreement as to what is the ideal death. The ideal death prescribes a set of rituals that define and structure all other death rituals. If the ideal death involves a certain set of rituals, then other deaths, social positions and statuses prescribe different forms of rituals that compensate and re-establish, or create conditions that correspond to the ideal death. Where it is possible to combine different rituals in order to obtain a special desired result, such practice will be based on a "death myth". "Death myths" prescribe how the survivors can create a divine and cosmological situation through the arrangement of different rituals where the deceased appears before the gods as though they had died the ideal death despite this not actually having occurred. The rituals create an ideal situation and "repair" cosmological consequences of having died in the wrong way or place, in addition to individual sin that must somehow be dealt with.

The analytical approach to burial customs through "death myths" will be illustrated through variation in corpse treatment beginning in the Migration Period of Western Norway, in the regions of Sogn, Voss and Hardanger (counties of Sogn og Fjordane and Hordaland). Here a grave typology is represented where both cremation and inhumation graves are found in close connection within various contexts; within the same cist, within the same mound and within collections of graves of the same settlement unit. The approach depends on access to an archaeological material which is distinguished by a certain degree of variability and which is found within a limited time and space. The chosen material fulfils such requirements.

The research areas represent smaller regions, which allow variations in burial custom to be considered within contexts where they can be related to the same sets of ideas, and to rule out larger trends in religious beliefs. In order to rule out long term changes in religious beliefs the chosen burials represent rituals performed within a fairly short period of time (for discussions on Migration Period chronology in western Norway, see for example Kristoffersen 1999). Furthermore, the Migration Period burials within the mentioned areas are numerous and distinguished by well equipped assemblages enabling the

tracing of variation, which again can be related to the concept of "death myths".

## Late Roman Period and Migration Period in Western Norway

To begin with the more general characteristics in the area, they will be touched upon through the analysis of Jenny-Rita Næss from 1968 (Næss 1996[1968]); a study of variations in burial customs at Voss, a large inland village in the county of Hordaland in the western part of Norway. Also the nearby areas of Nordhordland, Sunnhordland, Hardanger and Sogn were discussed. For western Norway in general the two treatment principles, burned and unburned corpse treatment (cremation and inhumation), endure side by side throughout the entire Iron Age (ibid:130). Further, the continual use of mounds is typical as are grave constructions dominated by cists or chambers of stones/flagstones, the orientation of these not in accordance with the cardinal points, but rather determined by the view towards settled areas. The individual mounds are frequently used as common graves for one or several generations, often intensely during a short period, so short that the burial remains can only be separated by stratigraphy. The impression is that the variation in grave forms and corpse treatment is distinguished by nuances (ibid:122-123). At Voss, Næss has shown variations in corpse treatment and burial customs between the various parishes, and also a continuity of tradition within such units. Even so, the pattern is often broken by different corpse treatment in certain graves. There are no drastic geographic dividing lines in burial practices. The burial custom is comprised of individual elements, and it is the similarity in these elements and the variation in their composition that are distinctive, a composition that varies from place to place and where new elements may appear and be integrated in the prevailing tradition. Essential in Næss' explanation of these patterns is that corpse treatment is connected to the single individual more than to the group, neighbourhood and family<sup>1</sup>.

The main focus of the following investigation is the relationship between cremations and inhumations. We will explore in depth examples where the relationship is clarified in various ways through a close connection between different corpse treatment in the examined grave contexts.

---

<sup>1</sup> Næss discusses several cases where unburned and burned burials/cremations and inhumations occur in the same context. In one case (the farm of Li in Voss) two women are buried in two different mounds in the early 400's A.D., with identical burial equipment and grave construction (Næss 1996[1968]: 108-111). One is burned, the other unburned. From the investigation it is also evident that burned female graves are more common than burned male graves. In addition, no burned male graves containing weapons occur.

## Variation within the same cist

### **Bø, Voss municipality, Hordaland county**

The *Byrkjehaugen* mound (fig. 1) was situated by Lake Vangsvatnet on the farm Bø. It was a large mound, which measured about 50 m in diameter with a height over 4.3 m (Shetelig 1912:90-103). The mound consisted of a central cairn of large blocks, covered by four layers of alternating clay and stones and a fifth layer of sand and earth. Shetelig concluded from the stratigraphy that the mound was built in one stage. Small collections of burned bones and charcoal were apparent in several places in the mound, including just above the ground level below two flagstones. He did not consider these collections to be graves, but remains from rituals performed during the construction of the mound.

The central cairn represents the core and starting point in the mound and contained what Shetelig interpreted as being the original and only grave construction: a long flagstone cist (3.7 x 1 x 1 m) with a stone paved floor. During the construction of the mound, the midpoint shifted toward north and the cist came to be situated a-centric and fairly close to the surface. This was, according to Shetelig, done in order to facilitate future burials. The cist contained three burials. The bottom grave was an inhumation, of a female, as indicated by the assemblage, and was placed on a layer of birch bark. Human bones with fragments of the skull were preserved (table 1). Over this grave, and completely covering it, was a cremation, which consisted of a 25-30 cm thick layer of coal and burned bone (table 1). With the exception of a bucket-shaped clay pot, the objects were quite burned and fragmented. Rivets and nails indicate the presents of a small boat.

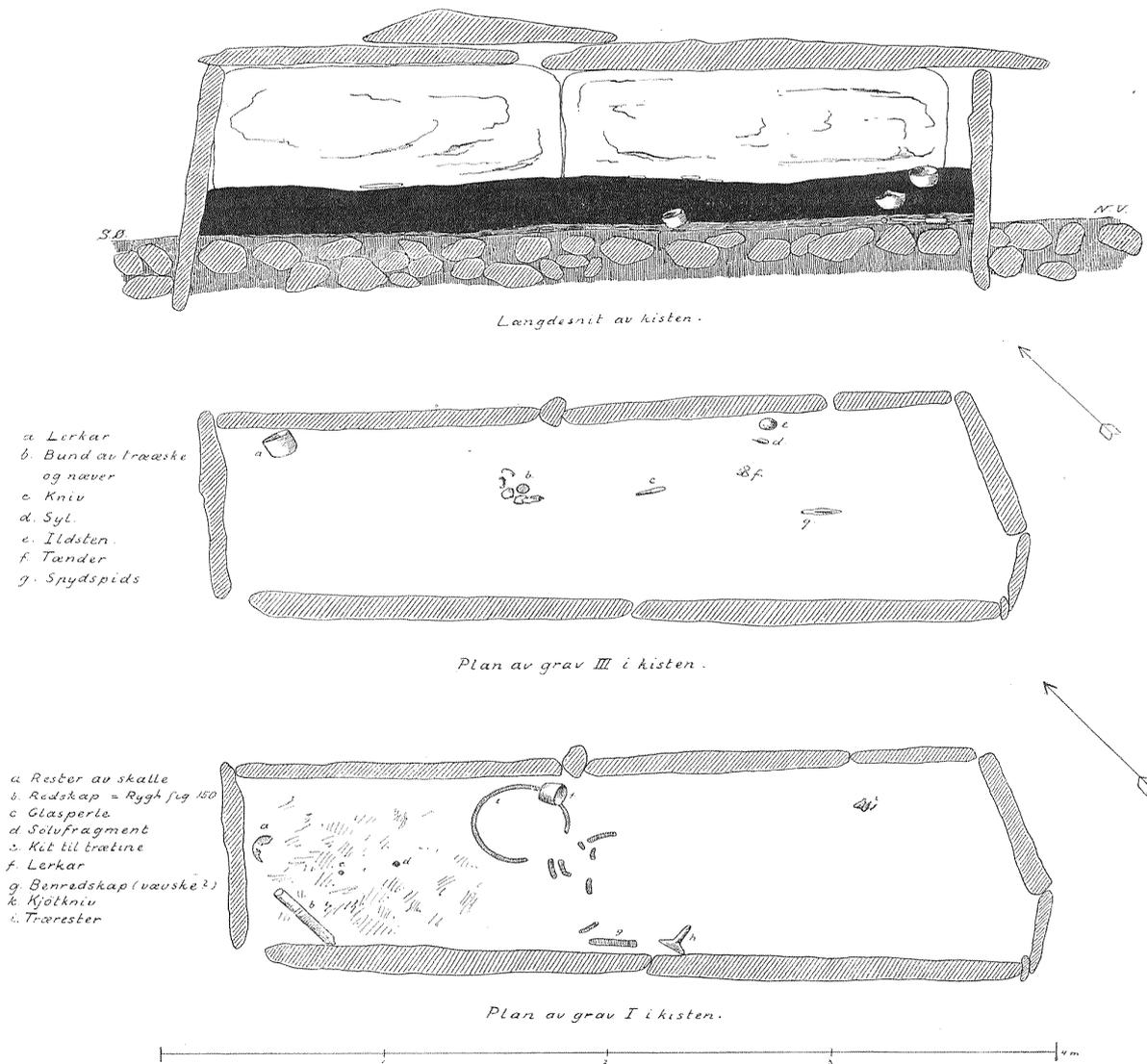


Fig. 215—217.

Figure 1. *Byrkjehaugen*, Voss municipality, Hordaland county. From Shetelig 1912, figures 215-217, p.96.

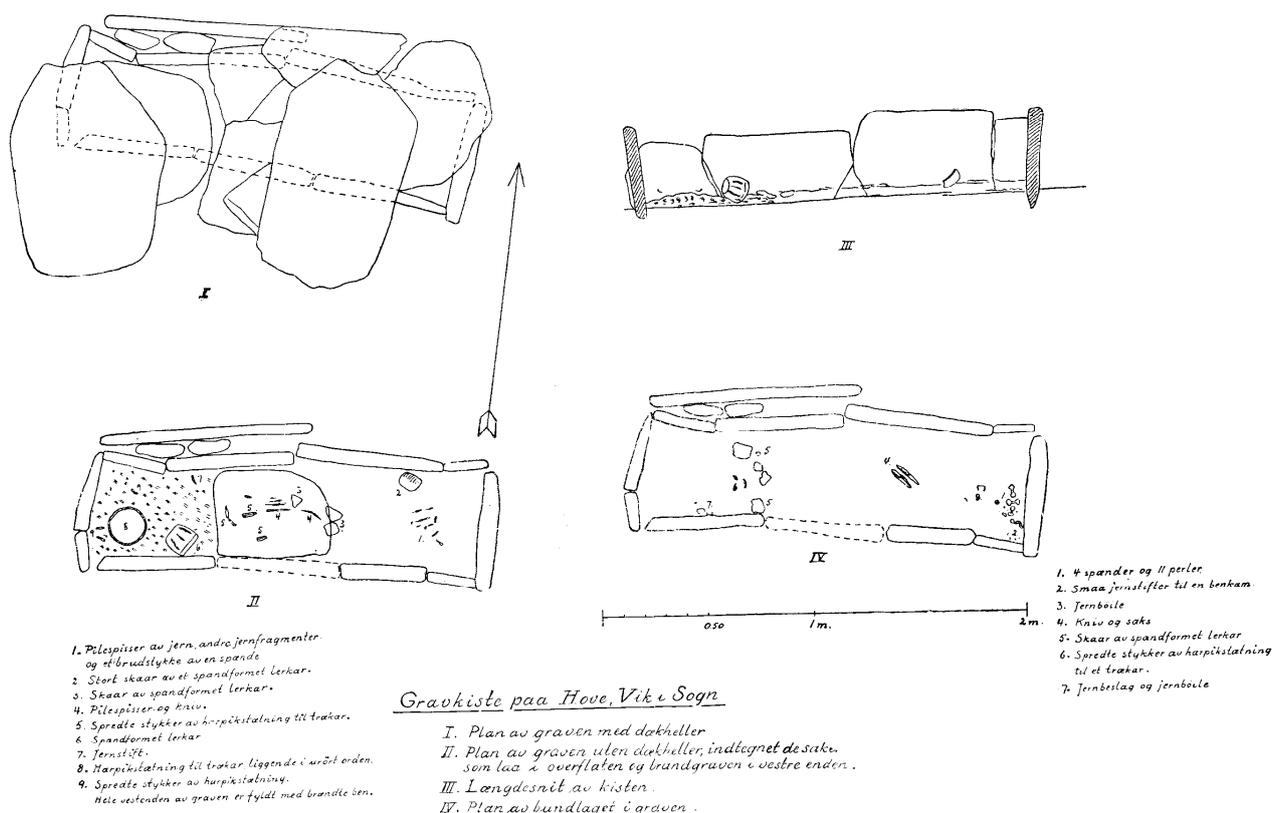


Figure 2. The cist at Hove, Vik municipality, Sogn og Fjordane county. From Shetelig 1917, plate III.

The bone determination suggests that there may have been several individuals in the grave, among them a young female (Næss 1996[1968]: 138). The top grave consisted of an inhumation of a male, based on the assemblage. Remains of teeth showed that he was placed in the opposite direction of the female in the bottom grave.

The typological relationship between the bucket-shaped clay pots in the three burials indicates that there is little difference in time between them. According to Shetelig, the individuals in the grave had belonged to the same generation, and were probably closely related in life. He compared the grave in *Byrkjehaugen* with a grave in a large mound at Kolve, also in Voss, where there was an inhumation in the bottom and a cremation on top in an acentric cist located in the mound. (see also Næss 1996[1968]: 151-152).

#### *Hove, Vik municipality, Sogn og Fjordane county*

The grave was located close to, but not covered by, a large mound with a diameter of 30 m (Shetelig 1917:15-30; Kristoffersen 2000:354). The mound constitutes one of several large mounds situated up on a high terrace on the Hove farm. The grave construction consisted of a long flagstone cist (1.8 x 0.4-0.5 x 0.4 m) (fig. 2) which

contained three burials. The bottom grave was a relatively well-equipped inhumation on a layer of birch bark, of, as indicated by the assemblage, a female (table 1)<sup>2</sup>. Over the western part of the bottom grave there was an approximately 5 cm thick gravel layer, while over the eastern part was a cremation (table 1). When the cremation was placed in the cist, the inhumation had been cleared somewhat off to the side. The assemblage and the deposit of 26 bear claws suggested that there were two or more individuals in the cremation, possibly, based on the composition of objects, male and a female. The top grave in the cist consisted of an inhumation, probably a male, according to the assemblage, and probably plundered (table 1). All three burials date back to the late Migration Period and the difference in time between them was short.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Shetelig considered it possible that there also was a child in the burial. His assumption is based on the occurrence of two knives in the burial.

<sup>3</sup> The conditions in the eastern part of the cist are, according to Shetelig, such that the unburned objects in the bottom and top graves cannot always be easily separated from one another.

## Variation within the same mound

### *Lydvo, Voss municipality, Hordaland county*

The *Sakrishaugen* mound was situated by Lake Vangsvatnet on the farm Lydvo. Excavated in 1988, it was then a mound of 19 m in diameter and 4.5 m in height (fig. 3), however it was originally larger (Randers 1988). It contained two cairns, one large and centrally situated and one smaller with an acentric location. The central cairn was covered by three clearly separate layers of earth and is considered by the excavator to have been built in several stages. The small cairn was covered by one layer of earth. A long cist built of huge flagstones (5.5 x 1.3 x 1.5 m) was centrally situated in the large

cairn. The cist contained an inhumation, probably plundered, with only a few objects left *in situ* (table 1).

The presence of sherds from a bucket-shaped pot dates the grave to the late Migration Period. A spinning wheel most likely suggests a female, but this was not necessarily the only individual in the cist. An older cremation, interpreted as such based on stratigraphic evidence, was situated close to the cist. The typological relationship between the bucket-shaped pots in the two graves indicates that the difference in time is short. The grave consisted of an up to 10 cm thick coal layer with a diameter of 1.7 m. The fill contained burned bones and fragmented objects (table 2). The smaller cairn was on

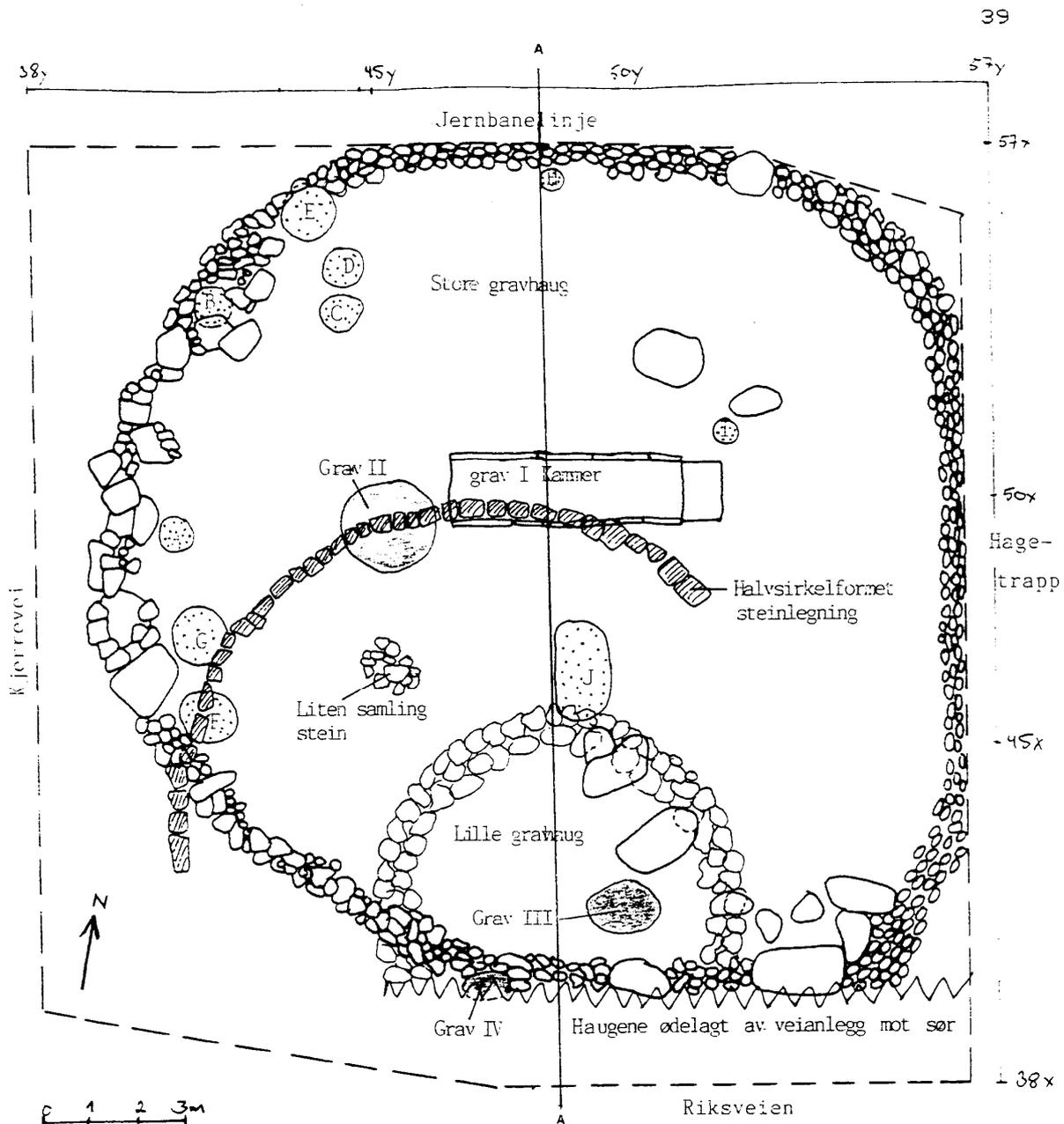


Figure 3. Ground plan from *Sakrishaugen*, Lydvo, Voss municipality, Hordaland county. From Randers 1988, fig. 3a.

the same level and towards the southern edge of the mound. It contained a Roman Period cremation in a coal layer, 10 cm thick and with a diameter of 1-1.5 m, covered by flagstones (table 2). Coals and burned bones indicate that there has been another cremation in this cairn, probably younger than the aforementioned.

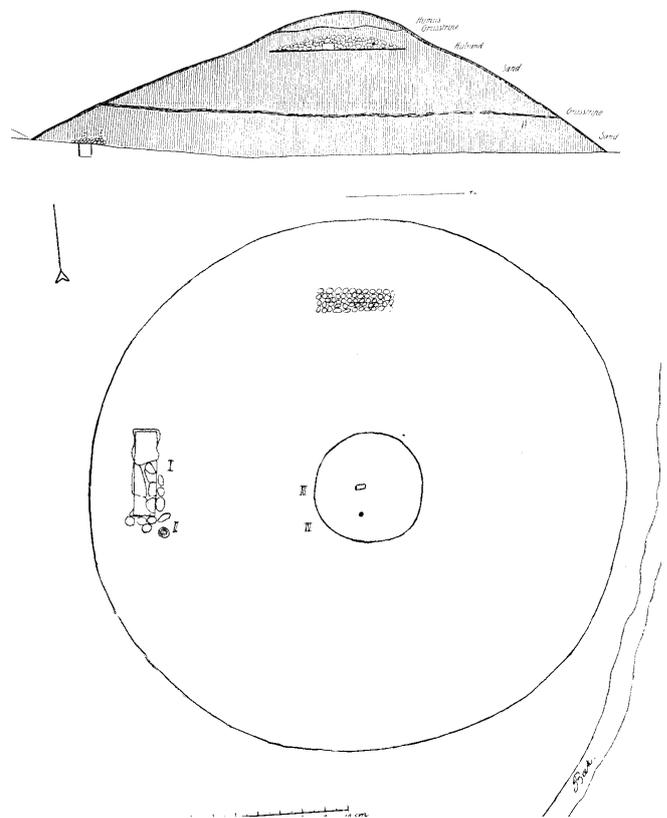
**Kvåle, Sogndal municipality, Sogn og Fjordane county**

This mound was situated high up on a terrace, overlooking the fjord, a few hundred meters from the Kvåle farm. It was one of the largest mounds in Sogndal, 17 m in diameter and 2.5 m in height (Ringstad 1988; Kristoffersen 2000:362-364; Kristoffersen 2001:507-513 and Kristoffersens catalogue in the accession list from Historsk museum, Bergen 1996). Excavated in 1983, the mound had a central cairn covered by several layers of earth and gravel. There were at least two graves located in the cairn. Centrally situated on ground level was a cremation located in a pit and a surrounding layer of blackened soil and coal with a diameter of 2.5-3 m. This was probably the primary and oldest burial in the mound. The assemblage indicates that the cremated individual was a male (table 2)<sup>4</sup>. Acentric in the mound, also on ground level and outside the coal layer, was a cist or frame construction of stone. This contained an inhumation with an exceptionally rich assemblage (table 2) on a layer of birch bark and covered by sand. Preserved bones suggested that the buried individuals were a female adult and a ten year old girl. The cist measured 4 x 1.2 m and was divided into two, with both individuals lying together in the largest section. The objects date the inhumation as well as the cremation to the early Migration Period, and there might be a short time difference between them.

**Bondehaugen, Mundheim, Kvam municipality, Hordaland county**

The *Bondehaugen* mound was situated on a terrace by the fjord, near houses on the Mundheim farm (de Lange 1918:1-25). At the time of the excavation the mound measured 24 m in diameter and 6 m in height, though it may originally have been larger. Situated on a natural rise, the mound fill consisted of sand and gravel and contained two cairns, one centrally situated high in the mound and one irregular and smaller acentric deposit situated on ground level. There were four graves in the mound, two in the central cairn, one in the smaller cairn and one close to this cairn (figs. 4 and 5). The central cairn contained two cremations, both with clean bones without the presence of coal. The primary one was centrally placed in the cairn, in a small flagstone chamber measuring 50 x 25-30 cm (table 2). The assemblage indicates that the cremated individual was a male (see note 4). Under the chamber was a layer of blackened earth with coal that covered the entire bottom of the cairn and stretched beyond its limits. It contained burned bone, four bear claws and pieces of a die that matched a die

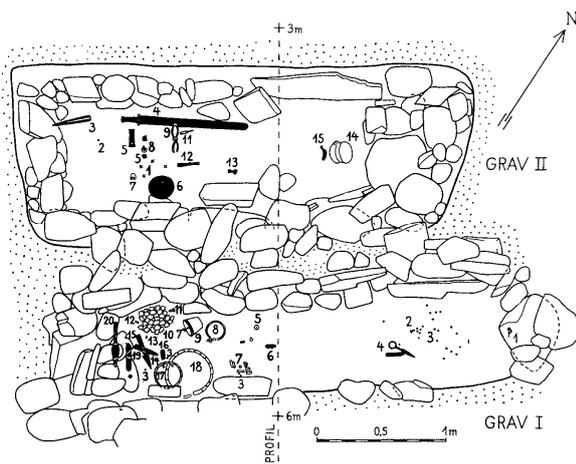
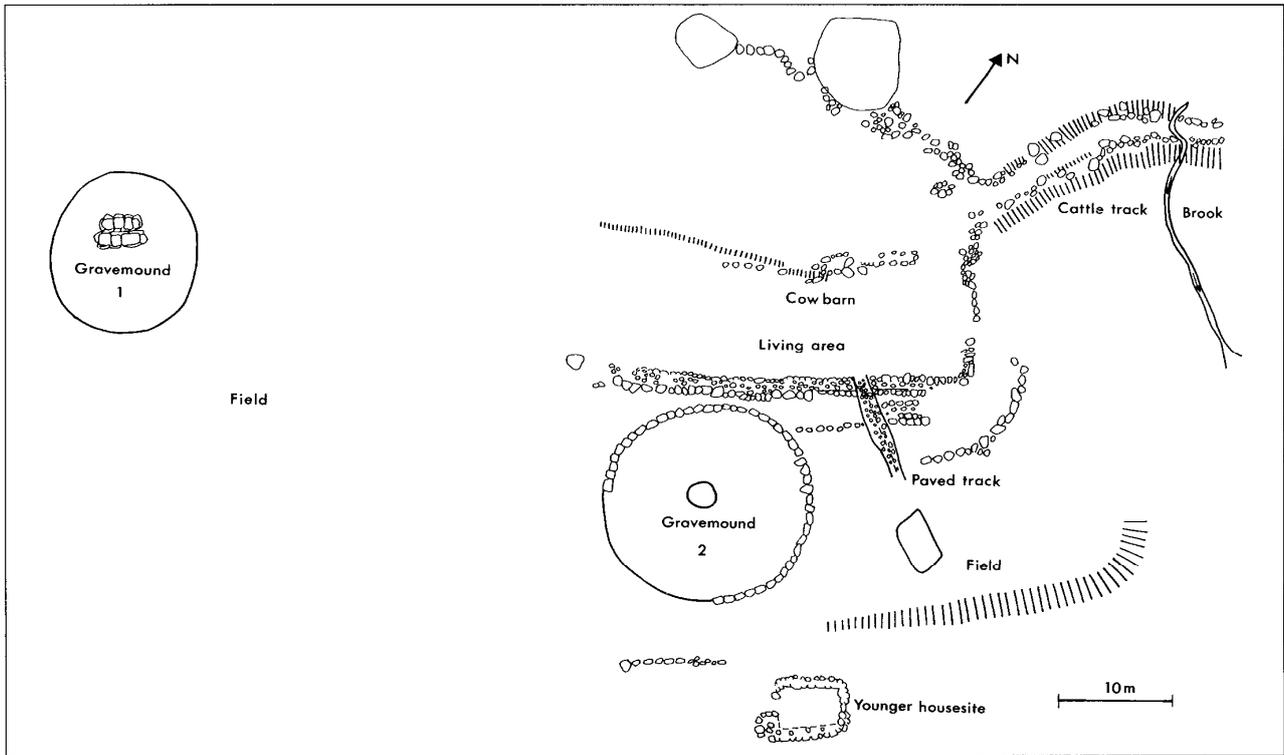
from the flagstone chamber. The layer is interpreted as a cremation patch or remains of the funeral pyre. Towards the edge of the cairn was the secondary cremation, with the bones placed in a wooden container a flagstone (table 2). The acentricly situated cairn contained an inhumation in a cist that measured 2.8 x 0.7-0.8 m. It was cut into the sterile soil below and covered by large flagstones. The deceased was placed on birch bark and covered by sand. Based on the assemblage, the buried individual was a female. A cremation was situated close to the cist but outside the irregular cairn. It consisted of clean bones without coal, placed on a flagstone without a container or cover. There were no bear claws among the bones. De Lange interpreted the inhumation to be the youngest burial in the mound and the cremation somewhat older. The four graves are all dated to the Migration Period, and he considered there to be little difference in time between them – hence the term *family grave* in the title of his paper.<sup>5</sup>



**Figures 4 and 5. Bondehaugen, Mundheim, Kvam municipality, Hordaland county. Cross-section and layout. From de Lange 1918 figs. 1 and 3.**

<sup>4</sup> The burial contained no weapons, but did contain gaming pieces, which seems to occur mainly with male burials.

<sup>5</sup> See also de Lange's reference to Shetelig's discussion of the graves from Døsen in Os (Shetelig 1912:121-149) and his own excavation at Nygård in Hafslø, Sogn (de Lange 1909) for similar "family graves" – at Nygård a female grave (the primary grave) and a child's grave in two flagstone cists at the base of the mound, in addition to a cremation in a clay pot (with bone pins and comb) in the top of the mound (all late Roman Period).



**Figures 6 and 7. Modvo, Luster municipality, Sogn og Fjordane county. Survey of the farmyard and burial mounds with layout of the grave cists with inhumation graves. From Kristoffersen and Straume i Bakka et al. 1993, fig. 6 and fig. 40.**

in front of the house site, occupying most of the farmyard (figs. 6 and 7). This mound, which is the oldest, is relatively low and measures about 20 m in diameter. It is built as a cairn with a kerb and covered by a thin layer of earth. A cremation was located in the centre of the cairn, a 2.3-2.5 m area with burned human bones (table 3) (Sellevold i Bakka et al. 1993:247). The cremation is typologically dated to the Late Roman or the Migration Period (Straume *ibid.*). The stratigraphy shows that the mound was erected during the earliest settlement phase on the farm. The younger mound, with a diameter of 12-14.5 m and a height of 0.5-1 m, was built of earth, gravel and rock. Two parallel stone cists covered with flagstones were located acentrically in the northern half of the mound. The cists contained three inhumations. Based on stratigraphy the northernmost cist constituted the primary grave consisting of a well-equipped weapon burial of a young adult, probably a male (table 3). The grave is typologically dated to the late Roman Period. The other cist contained two Migration Period burials, one male and one female. This determination was based on materials in the assemblage. The male's equipment was in disarray, something which may indicate that he represents the primary burial, and was disturbed when the female was buried.

Variation within collections of graves of the same settlement unit

**Modvo, Luster municipality, Sogn og Fjordane county**

The Migration Period farmstead Modvo is situated on a mountain slope overlooking the valley, in the direction of the fjord. There are two mounds on the farm site (Straume i Bakka et al. 1993:207-229; Kristoffersen i Bakka et al. 1993:201-202), one situated close to the path leading to the village, while the other is centrally placed

Identify and limit variation: which variables have been decisive in death rituals?

In the grave material of western Norway, there were no clear patterns regarding either a) corpse treatment – burned or unburned, 2) the grave property that showed general structures where there were variations on a theme, 3) the monument – mound or cairn or 4) internal construction inside the mound or cairn. The absence of clear patterns that can be connected directly to things like

gender or status is meaningful data, and in itself of great interest, as it may allow the determination of which relevant dimensions one can trace in the burial custom. By delimiting which identities and social or religious processes that *have been absent*, other structures, identities or relations can be made probable.

Cremation/inhumation does not represent different social/economic status or gender since both women and men have received the same types of corpse treatment. Double burials in the same mound may represent some kind of family relationship that is significant. Therefore the differences will not relate to various relatives or families that have different ethnic origin and religious connection. The differences in burial customs are within a superior and uniform religious understanding since the different practices can occur in one and the same grave, as at Byrkjegraven, which is most likely a family grave.

The wealth of the grave property and the size of the monuments may reflect social status, but the repertoire of objects that should be included and whether a mound or cairn should be built, not to mention whether the burial form should be cremation or inhumation, has been defined based on other terms. After eliminating gender, social status, different ethnicity and religion as possible explanations, other variables may be considered.

The cause of death may be an explanation for variations in burial customs. During the Viking Period, honourable death in war was the ideal death, while it was negative to die of disease in bed at an old age. To what extent there were similar conceptions during the Migration Period is more difficult to determine. The cause of death can also be related to various diseases or animal attacks, and last but not least death at childbirth. "Fortunate" or "unfortunate" deaths may prescribe different rituals. The rituals' roles can therefore counteract the negativity surrounding an unfortunate death.

An example from Hinduism which can shed some light on this issue is an old widow who died in her house in Katmandu, Nepal, with no sons to cremate her. This was doubly unfortunate. The ideal is to die with the legs in the holy Bagmati River; she died in her house. This is negative since it is assumed that the soul is emotionally attached to its home and be reluctant to leave the house and with that the body, which implies that the next reincarnation will be more difficult. Furthermore, it was negative that she did not have a son who could cremate her – she only had daughters, while sons are necessary in the death rituals to achieve the most perfect cremation. From a religious perspective, the deceased woman's possibilities were far from ideal, and based on normal understandings she would have an unfavourable reincarnation. Despite this, possibilities existed. Even though orthodox religions basically have a formal and authoritative view of cosmological conditions and structures, it is still possible to get around these by performing other extraordinary rituals. The family

therefore engaged a priest who carried out many long rituals that compensated for the negative circumstances. When he was done with the rituals, she was "nullified", and free from the negative cosmic encumbrances due to her dying in her home with no sons to cremate her. The cost for performing these rituals was nearly an annual salary for a poor Nepalese.

If corresponding ways of thought and processes have existed in the past, including expenses for building large burial monuments and giving expensive gifts to the deceased, then it will be expressed in variation in the rituals precisely because they are composed based on an ideal and a conception of how the "perfect" ritual should be. A parallel is found in Catholicism. The Catholic purgatory purifies the dead of sins before the person concerned can enter heaven. Everyone going to heaven must be pure and free of sin. They must be "perfect dead". This is a variant of the ideal death. If one dies free of sin, something which is impossible for Christians, then according to Catholicism one will not go through purgatory but directly to heaven. Since no one is free of sin, everyone must go through the fire, and the more sinful one has been, the longer one must burn away one's sins. This corresponds with performing various rituals in order to at any time come to the religious "zero" in the form of spiritual purity that allows the meeting with the divine. The fact that in the Middle Ages one could buy oneself out of purgatory through an act of indulgence shows the power in the idea of a "religious zero" that one must reach before one is good enough for God. The more money, the quicker the exit from purgatory; money took over for the rituals since rituals could not influence or reduce the time in purgatory. The logic is however still the same: the more money or the more rituals (which often cost money), the more one can reduce negative consequences in the hereafter, accelerate an advantageous situation and/or come to the divine starting line where the next life begins.

In Christianity, it is a requirement that one is pure before entering heaven. Corresponding purifying processes are found in Hinduism (see Oestigaard 2005). Even though, in theory, heaven functions on the "come as you are" principle, in Catholicism it is not like this in practice. Everyone can stand sinful, impure and sullied before God and ask for forgiveness, but one does not come in until one is pure. In Christianity, the rituals play a smaller role in this process. How it all happens is a bit vague and unclear, especially in Protestantism which does not have purgatory. In Hinduism, however, it is the family and the sons who purify their dead and take upon themselves their impurity as a "debt in advance" so that the deceased meets the divine world in a pure state. The sons and the whole family are therefore contaminated by death – most intensively the first 11-13 days, and the first year thereafter. Finally, the death rituals are infinite: they last the entire life. Therefore it is important to have a son who performs the rituals, because he as head of the household is the one who is ritually responsible (Oestigaard 2005).

To what extent there have been corresponding ideas during the Migration Period is difficult to express clearly, but it sheds light on structural aspects of the rituals' role and function in society and the cosmos. Furthermore, we have identified a desired function in rituals that counteracts negative consequences in an afterlife for incidents occurring in, or consequences of, this life. This differs in shape from prayer, but not in function. The words in a prayer vary based on what one has done: the goal is forgiveness. If a death ritual functions in the same way based on a "death myth", then an optimal life in a further existence is defined and recognised: the rituals are "tailored" through different ritual elements of action in the best interests of the deceased, the survivors and the gods.

Different "death myths" can prescribe various rituals and objects in the grave besides choice of corpse treatment based on criteria determined by deities in defined, qualitatively distinct and specific spheres in another dimension. If there are more kingdoms of the dead, then there are most likely also particular "entries", or in ritual terms; special rituals prescribed in order to come to the different kingdoms of the dead.

In Christianity, the rituals are, on the one hand, unnecessary, but on the other hand, fundamental for the deceased's life in the hereafter. The official doctrine imparts that whether one reaches heaven or hell depends solely upon what one has done as a human here on earth, evaluated and judged by God based on premises we have partial knowledge of, but otherwise the Lord's ways are inscrutable and we do not know what will happen. However, the same teaching has prescribed quite a few rituals that are necessary for people to come to this stage where one can be condemned, or else be rewarded with eternal life in heaven. Christianity does not differ in this respect from other religions where the rituals prepare the deceased for the meeting with the divine. Although the rituals in Christianity may seem simple, they have decisive meaning for the deceased one's further life:

**1) Place:** the deceased is to be buried in sacred earth in a graveyard. If one is not buried in holy ground, one does not go to heaven.

**2) Burial form:** Cremation was forbidden in Norway until 1898 when a law appeared allowing cremation. If one was cremated, one did not go to heaven.

**3) Direction:** The deceased shall lie in the coffin on their back with legs pointed towards the east and head in the direction of west so that the dead can rise upon resurrection. Today some graveyards are in fact oriented differently.

**4) Resurrection:** According to orthodox teaching, God needed at least the thigh bones and the skull for resurrection. Without this skeleton material, God could not incorporate the deceased into heaven, despite any

possible good deeds. The prohibition of cremation must be understood among other things based on this premises.

**5) Priests and rituals:** Rituals performed by priests within the church's institutionalised framework were necessary in order to enter heaven. Without baptism a baby could not go to heaven, even though it had not sinned. Christian burials without priests have been and are unthinkable.

In Christianity, the rituals were necessary so that the deceased arrived at the state where the person was condemned or rewarded for their actions. The survivors had to ensure that the deceased arrived at a place where God could take them into his countenance. If they did not do so, the deceased would go to hell no matter what or else end up in a limbo sphere independent of what good deeds they had done. Based on such a perspective, the death rituals themselves are an "initiation ritual" where the dead are prepared by the survivors for meeting with God. If the survivors do not perform these "preparations", then it does not matter what the deceased themselves have done in the way of good deeds. Through rituals, the survivors "initiate" and "present" the dead to God, so that the deceased can answer for his deeds, possibly first after a purifying process (purgatory) that makes everyone equally pure before God.

One interpretation is therefore that without the relatives' rituals, no one can reach God in order to receive their reward. Judgment and judgment day will arrive no matter what, but reward implies rituals performed by the survivors. This is a necessary condition in religion, otherwise the rituals will be unnecessary and pointless. For those who arrive in hell, the rituals have not had much meaning. Thus the role and function of the rituals in addition to peoples' place in society and the cosmos in relation to the gods can be determined: the rituals are necessary in order to ensure the most optimal life in the hereafter, but they are no guarantee. As it is stated in another connection, - they are necessary, but not sufficient prerequisites (Haaland 1991:14). In ritual terminology, humans are thus obliged to perform the rituals but the divine powers are not obligated to fulfil the mortals' wishes and goals expressed through the ritual practice.

Different existences in the hereafter should be able to prescribe various types of death rituals. Another angle of incidence can be status, not defined in economical or primary social terms, but instead religious status that legitimises social status. The role of the mistress of the house may be such a status and position and, although based on completely different premises, voves and norms will most likely have corresponding defined positions in the society that prescribed a special type of death ritual.

## “Death myths”

– why are burial rituals as they are?

A ritual fulfils many aspects, from legitimising purely social hierarchies to merely having a spiritual or religious dimension (see Oestigaard 2006). The rituals have further practical functions that are important in this connection. There is a distinction between transcendental and cosmogonic religions, where the deities in the previous are independent of their own creation of cosmos and people, while in cosmogonic religions the gods are mutually dependent on people’s rituals and offers. Christianity, Judaism and Islam are transcendental religions, while most of the prehistoric were cosmogonic (Trigger 2003:473). One of the functions of rituals must be understood in this context. The purpose of rituals is to influence the gods to do what we want or to attain a certain effect. Even in religions such as Christianity, prayer is a means or medium for attaining a desired goal. In other religions, fertility- and rain producing rituals in particular are active interventions by people with a clearly defined goal they wish the gods to fulfil. Rituals can produce the most important, practical results, which is one of the main reasons for performing rituals (Hocart 1954:33). If the rituals did not fulfil certain functions for people themselves, then they would be neither meaningful nor performed.

This is an aspect that to a large degree has been omitted in archaeological interpretations. If one begins with the premise that in death we are not all equal but that we shall be and that the rituals are the process that prepares the deceased for the further life, then parts of the burial customs may be understood. Variation in burial customs is an expression for different rituals having been performed according to certain objectives based on a given repertoire of ritual possibilities. Despite this, there is still a relatively large degree of homogeneity in burial customs. There are variations on a theme, which in its time must have been within a relatively strict and regulated set of rules that has prescribed what has and has not been allowed. The find amount, and not least that which is placed in the graves, is limited and represents only a small portion of that which would have been possible to give as burial gifts. The Oseberg grave is an exception, where it seems as though an entire farm is given on the boat. There are also other graves that are lavish. Otherwise, most burial rituals are performed within a superior whole which has both prescribed and limited that which has been possible to do.

It is this religious, defined code that is the “death myth” in its basic structure, where the ideal death and the ideal death ritual are prescribed. There has been a collective conception of how and why, and last but not least who can perform the various death rituals at a given time in a defined and limited place.

The “death myths” tell death’s who, what, where, why and when. What should be done, by whom, the various

reasons for why there must be different rituals in order to attain the desired results both for the deceased and as a legitimisation foundation in society, and last but not least when the different ritual sequences or sub-rituals shall be performed and where: holy places define and legitimise the practices. All of these aspects cannot have been coincidental because had they been, the rituals would either not have worked or else the participants would have broken a succession of norms and taboos.

In order to understand the character of the “death myth” as a set of ritual possibilities and compositions, one can take a closer look at that which characterises myths. Myths operate on many different levels simultaneously. Mortals create their own picture of the gods: the gods are both like mortals but at the same time different. Between the gods and people there are heroes and characters that are partially divine, but at the same time human. The myths represent the truth for those who believe in the myths. Common for mythological systems is that the most important stories appear in several different versions. When myths are used in society and in religious connections, they are understood as being “true” and present: the myths describe and represent real events *here* and *now* (Leach 1969:7).

Leach once argued that “myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, they are one and the same” (Leach 1954:13), but today most will argue that the relationship between rite and myth is more complex and that they contain qualitatively different aspects (e.g. Bell 1992, 1997, Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994, Rappaport 2001). Even so, there is a relation between rites and myths, and myths are made up of mythical themes. They are not static. These mythical themes can be arranged in such a way that they neutralise a chronological cause-effect outcome: if the son killed his mother in a myth, the mother can kill the son in another myth (O’Flaherty 1995).

A parallel to various mythical themes may be that which we see in the “death myths”, where there is variation on a theme, which has made plausible but also limited that which has been possible to perform of burial rituals: that is, ritual productions and compositions based on culturally prescribed and religion-defined rules. The actions have been part of a superior cosmologic whole that included the divine world and a further life in the hereafter. With that the death rituals can be connected to the mythology through the “death myths”.

## Conclusion

The term “death myth” is an analytical conception and a manner of approaching the variations in grave material that seeks to identify which social and religious variables have been decisive for choice of burial custom. By analysing a death ritual *as a ritual* and observing its function in a cosmological context where *no one is equal*

when they die, a probable explanation is given for why variation in the performance of the rituals was necessary. A death ritual is a consciously-performed action of the survivors who wish to fulfil specific goals through the performance itself. In this connection, we have focused on the continuing life of the deceased, but the rituals have also had a function in social legitimisation for the survivors. The death rituals are just as important for the deceased as for the living (Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006).

By focusing on variation in burial customs in the same cist, within the same mound, and within a collection of graves of the same settlement unit, it has been possible to identify which identities, statuses and structures were not decisive for choice of burial custom. Since many of the examples we have discussed have been performed on the same farm and probably by the same family, neither ethnicity nor religion have been deciding factors since all the rituals have been part of a superior cosmological whole. Furthermore, social status in the form of gender has not had decisive significance since there are no clear patterns that can be related to either man or woman or one particular age group. The cause of death, however, may have been a central factor in the choice of rituals or

which ceremonial components have been combined for a complete burial ritual.

Parts of the grave goods relate to specific social and/or religion-defined roles, such as the mistress of the house, but besides these burial gifts there have been other ideas and structures that have prescribed most of the rituals that have been performed. To build a mound or a cairn may be viewed as a ritual in itself (Gansum & Oestigaard 2004). The choice of cremation or inhumation has cosmological significance. There is great variation on the inside of the mounds or cairns, among other things cist or no cist, and finally there is variation inside the cist itself, where there can be several burials. If we expect that those who performed the rituals were conscious about what they were doing and that they had different reasons for why they performed them just as they did, then they have performed and composed the rituals based on rules that have been generally accepted and legitimised through religion: "death myths". Whether or not they were specialists, the laity or family members who carried out the rituals have varied by period and location (Goldhahn & Østigård 2007).

## References

- BAKKA, E., S. KRISTOFFERSEN, E. STRAUME, R. LIE and B. SELLEVOLD, 1993. Modvo - et gårdsanlegg fra eldre jernalder i Hafslø, Indre Sogn. In B. SOLBERG (ed.), *Minneskrift til Egil Bakka*: 151-206. Bergen: Arkeologiske Skrifter 7 fra Historisk Museum, Universitetet i Bergen.
- BELL, C. 1992. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BELL, C. 1997. *Ritual. Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BJØRGO, T., S. KRISTOFFERSEN and C. PRESCOTT, 1992. Arkeologiske undersøkelser i Nysseteggjevassdragene 1981-1987. Bergen: *Arkeologiske rapporter 16*, Historisk museum, Universitetet i Bergen.
- GANSUM, T. and T. OESTIGAARD, 2004. The Ritual Stratigraphy of Monuments that Matter. *European Journal of Archaeology*. Vol. 7(1): 61-79.
- GOLDHAHN, J. and ØSTIGÅRD, T. 2007. *Rituelle spesialister i bronse- og jernalderen*. Gothenburg: Gotark. Göteborgs Universitet.
- HOCART, A. M. 1954. *Social Origins*. London: Watts & Co.
- HUMPHREY, C. and J. LAIDLAW, 1994. *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.
- HAALAND, G. 1991. The Ecology of Choice and Symbol. In R. GRØNHAUG, R. HAALAND and G. HENRIKSEN (eds.). *The Ecology of Choice and Symbol: Essays in Honour of Fredrik Barth*: 9- 22. Bergen: Alma Mater.
- KRISTOFFERSEN, S. 1999. Migration Period chronology in Norway. In J. HINES, K. HØILUND-NIELSEN & F. SIEGMUND (eds.). *The Pace of Change: Studies in Early Medieval Chronology*: 93-114. Oxford: Oxbow Books.
- KRISTOFFERSEN, S. 2000. *Sverd og spenne. Dyreornamentikk og sosial kontekst*. Studia Humanitatis Bergensia 13. Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget.
- KRISTOFFERSEN, S. 2001. Kvåle. In R. MÜLLER (ed.). *Realleksikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde. Band 17*: 507-513. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- LANGE, de, E. 1909. Utgravninger i Hafslø prestegjeld. *Bergen Museums Årbok 1909*:3. Bergen.
- LANGE, de, E. 1918. En familiegrav fra folkevandringstid i Hardanger. *Bergen Museums Årbok 1917-18*:2. Bergen.
- LEACH, E. 1954. *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- LEACH, E. 1969. *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- NÆSS, J.-R. 1996[1968]. Undersøkelser i jernalderens gravskikk på Voss. *AmS-Rapport 7*. Stavanger:

- Arkeologisk museum i Stavanger.
- OESTIGAARD, T. 2005. *Death and Life-giving Waters – Cremation, Caste, and Cosmogony in Karmic Traditions*. Oxford: BAR International Series 1353.
- OESTIGAARD, T. 2006. Introduksjon til variasjon i gravskikk. In T. OESTIGAARD (ed.). *Lik og ulik. Tilnæringer til variasjon i gravskikk*: 9-36. Bergen: UBAS Nordisk 2.
- OESTIGAARD, T. and GOLDHAHN, J. 2006. From the dead to the living: death as transactions and re-negotiations. *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2006:27-48.
- O'FLAHERTY, W. D. 1995. Foreword. In Lévi-Strauss, C. *Myth and Meaning*: vii-xv. New York: Schocken Books.
- RANDERS, K. 1988 Sakrishaugen på Voss. Report (unpublished). Bergen: Historisk museum, Universitetet i Bergen.
- RAPPAPORT, R. A. 2001. *Ritual and religion in the making of humanity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- RINGSTAD, B. 1988. Ein Webschwert der Völkerwanderungszeit mit Entrelacs-Ornamentik aus Kvåle, Sogndal, Westnorwegen. *Offa* 1988. 145-158.
- SHETELIG, H. 1912. *Vestlandske graver fra jernalderen*. Bergen: Bergens Museums Skrifter.
- SHETELIG, H. 1917 Nye jernaldersfund paa Vestlandet. *Bergen Museum Årbok 1916-17:2*.
- TRIGGER, B. 2003. *Understanding Early Civilizations. A Comparative Study*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.

Table 1. Graves within the same cist

Byrkjehaugen B6227: Bottom grave	Inhumation: Iron weaving sword, beads, fragment of clasp, sherds from a bucket shaped pot, resin calking from a wooden vessel, bone items, among these a skin knife. Fragments of textiles. Human bones with fragments of the skull.
Grave in the middle section	Cremation: a layer, 25-30 cm thick, of coal and burned bone: Fragments of clasps, bronze pins and a silver ring, fragments of a leather belt with bronze belt ring and mountings and iron buckle, fragments of a comb of bone, flat bone pins, bone skin knife, spinning wheel, belt- and whet stone and bucket shaped pot. 60 small rivets and 12 iron nails, probably from a small boat. Burned bone (mixed with coal): human: several individuals, among them a young female. 14 bear claws and bones from a dog.
Top grave	Inhumation: Spearhead, firestone and a strike a light, knife, birch bark box and a bucket shaped pot. Human bones: Fragments of teeth. (fragmented find?)
Hove, B6691 Bottom grave	Inhumation: fragments of textiles, silver and bronze brooches, iron belt ring, knife, scissors, key, clay pots and wooden vessels, fragments of a casket and two bone combs. No bones preserved.
Grave in the middle section	Cremation: bone items: comb, pins, skin knife, spoon, arrow heads, bronze fragments (all burned). Bones: burned, clean bones without coals from two or more individuals. 26 bear claws (from more than one bear skin).
Top grave	Inhumation: arrowheads, buckle, iron ring and awl (strike a light?), bucket shaped pot and resin calking from a wooden vessel.

Table 2. Graves within the same mound

Sakrishaugen, Grave I (in large cist) B14491	Inhumation: spinning wheel, clasp button, sherds of bucket shaped pot (fragmented find). Human bones: 5 fragments. In addition 10 fragments of human bone just beneath the cist.
Grave II (grave below the cist) B14492	Cremation: a layer (10 cm thick, diameter 1,7m) of coal and burned bone: two bucket shaped pots, bone comb, bronze- and iron fragments. Burned bones, mixed with coals: 120g (the bones).
Grave III (grave under older cairn)	Cremation: a layer (8-10cm thick, diameter 1-1,5 m) of coal and burned bone: Fragment of bone comb, silver fibulae, sherds of clay pot, bronze- and iron fragments. Burned bones, mixed with coals: 60g (the bones).
Kvåle Grave in coal layer and pit: B13955-56	Cremation: bronze brooch, belt accessories, bucket shaped pot, handled pot, bone gaming-pieces. Burned, human bones. Bear claws.
Grave in cist: B13954	Inhumation: various silver and bronze brooches, clasps and pins, bronze spinning wheel,

	fragmented spindles, iron weaving swords, iron skin knives, various vessels of glass, clay and wood, wooden chest, a collection of tiny silver masks and different remedies, originally probably in a leather pouch: round, egg-shaped stones, mica, two small discs of glass - one with an eyelet, a ball of clay and a Stone Age adze. Human bones: Young female and a girl about 10 years.
Bondehaugen B6756 Grave in small cist of flagstones and cremation patch	Cremation: comb, dice and gaming-pieces of bone, shards of three clay vessels. Burned bones without coal mixing. Bear claws: 10.
Grave in a wooden bucket on a flagstone	Cremation: Bone pins, comb and fragments of other bone objects, shard of a bucket shaped pot. Burned, cleaned bones. Bear claw:1.
Grave on a flagstone without container	Cremation: bone pins, comb and skin knives. Burned, cleaned bones.
Grave in cist of flagstones	Inhumation: bronze brooches, silver pins, belt ring, bronze, knife and key of iron, bucket shaped pot, resin calking from a wooden vessel.

*Table 3. Graves within the same settlement unit*

Modvo B11432 Mound with cremation	Cremation with bones spread over a 2,3-2,5m area: shard of a clay pot and flat bone pin. Burned, cleaned human bones: 987 g: 928 human with most of the skeleton represented, probably of a young adult (25-35 years old). Burned animal bones: 59g.
B11430-31 Mound with two parallel cists of stones and flagstones	Inhumation: Weapon (sword, lance, shield boss and handle), brooch, belt buckle and belt ring, bronze, girdle stone, quartz, fragments of girdle box, wood, strike a light, knives and belt buckle, iron, clay vessel. Human bones: Fragments of teeth from an adult, 25-40 years old.  Inhumation grave: Weapon: lance, spear-head, and fragments of a shield handle, iron; belt buckle, ring, mountings and strap end bronze; clay vessel. Brooches, beads of glass and amber, clay spinning whorl, knives, key and belt buckle, iron; resin for 3 wooden vessels, clay vessel.

Dr.art Siv Kristoffersen works at the Archaeological Museum in Stavanger, Norway, and she has specialised on the Migration period.

Email: [siv1kr@ark.museum.no](mailto:siv1kr@ark.museum.no)

Dr.art Terje Oestigaard works at UNIFOB-Global, University of Bergen, Norway, and he has a particular interest on cremation.

Email: [terje.ostigard@global.uib.no](mailto:terje.ostigard@global.uib.no)