

Anna Röst

*Fragmenterade platser, ting och människor:
Stenkonstruktioner och depositioner på två
gravfältslokaler i Södermanland, ca 1000–300 f.Kr.*

[Fragmented Places, Things and People: Stone
Constructions and Depositions in two Burial
Grounds in Södermanland, c.1000–300 BC]

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Anna Röst's PhD thesis *Fragmented Places, Things and People*, defended at the Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies at Stockholm University in December 2016, brings us a close-up of the grave customs of the Late Bronze Age and Pre-Roman Iron Age in the Mälars valley region of south-central Sweden. In her rigorous study, Röst is able to show that the much-maligned burial traditions of the period can provide exciting insights into attitudes towards the dead, memory, the passing of time and the body in these communities. This review will begin with a brief introduction to the burial traditions in question, followed by an outline of the main arguments and findings and, finally, some reflections on avenues for future research opened by Röst's work.

It is fair to say that the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age cemeteries in this region are considered some of the least exciting remains from Scandi-

navian prehistory. Their modest stone structures lack the monumentality associated with the commemoration of the dead in many past and current societies. The main rite is cremation, with burials found alone or clustered as grave fields, often on moraine-ridges or other slightly elevated parts of the rocky, forested terrain. Arranged flat on the ground-surface, the modest round or irregular stone-settings are often hidden beneath the turf and are therefore difficult to identify in field surveys.

To add to their nondescript character, grave finds are sparse and inconspicuous. Common object types include ceramic pots and pottery fragments, burnt animal bones, whole or fragmented bronze items (typically small personal attributes such as pins, knives, razors or buttons), and occasional stone or flint tools. Moreover, graves contain only a fraction of the bones resulting from each cremation, making the age, sex and health of the diseased individuals elusive. Probably one key to their unpopularity as objects of study is the vagueness of the links between bodies and objects, which leaves burial archaeology's all-time favourite questions – those of social status and identity – difficult to answer (though for an attempt on this material see Feldt 2005). So far, we lack explanations of the partial nature of this evidence, as we have not yet understood what type of actions and intentions formed these burials. In Röst's thesis, this lack of answers is finally seen as an exciting challenge instead of a problem.

The starting point for Röst's study is the mismatch between current archaeological expectations of graves and the actual burial remains recovered from the Late Bronze Age. The features generally designated as 'graves' contain only a small fraction of the cremated body, and in some cases they are completely empty. The 'grave goods' of the period similarly disappoint, being generally described in reports as fragmented and sparse. 'Grave monuments' are often disturbed, and considered incomplete. Demonstrating the inadequacy of traditional approaches and concepts – such as grave, monument, funerary deposit, inner and outer burial customs – Röst suggests a more inclusive and less prejudicial conceptual framework. She re-labels the remains as 'depositions' (grave finds, human remains), and 'stone constructions' (primarily stone-settings and cairns, but also all other grave types and grave-like structures). Employing these categories and notions of archaeological *assemblages*, *relating actions*, *consociality* and *performativity*, Röst explores the burial practices of the time through detailed micro studies. Further theoretical inspiration is drawn from practice theory, symmetrical archaeology and the archaeology of the senses.

The thesis is structured in eight chapters. The introduction, research background, theoretical background, and introduction to the two case study burial grounds are followed by three analytical chapters, including new ¹⁴C-datings and osteological analyses (chapters 5, 6 and 7), and a

final synthesis and reflection. The main argument, as I perceive it, is that human bones were not buried in ‘graves’ with the intention of a final resting place: ‘graves’ can rather be understood as places of transformation, where cremated bones were subjected to a number of processes in order to be transfigured from an individual into a dividable substance with new meanings. This builds on previous work recognizing that the monuments we call ‘graves’ were not only places for depositing the dead, but also could serve as ‘altars’, arenas for transformation processes, or nodes for prolonged and repeated rituals (most notably Kaliff 1997; Bolin 1998; Thedéen 2004). While starting from previous observations, Röst is able to take these interpretations into new and further directions by reconstructing the actual content, sequences and as far as possible meanings of the rituals.

Two fully excavated grave fields of comparable sizes and use periods – Rogsta and Tystberga, both in the county of Södermanland – were selected as case studies. Both are typical of average-sized burial grounds in the region, each comprising about 40 ‘graves’ located on moraine ridges. The sites were in use from the Late Bronze Age to the Pre-Roman Iron Age (c.1000–300 BC), with a main phase c.800–400 BC. This unfortunately corresponds to the so-called Hallstatt plateau, which reduces the utility of radiocarbon dating in their precise chronology (for Röst’s approach to this issue see pages 35–36, 95–98 and 290–292).

Based on an analysis of the morphology of the stone constructions in the cemeteries, Röst identifies three different types of ‘graves’: the R-type, the O-type and the D-type (Röst 2016:120–126). R-types are cairn-like constructions with arched profiles, usually containing one or several depositions. O-types are round or nearly round in shape, usually with a flat profile, and with a distinctive stone-lined outer rim. Finally D-types are irregular or round in shape and often appear damaged, with incomplete stone-lined outer rims. D-types are interpreted by Röst as re-arranged R- or O-types, or as features appended to larger stone constructions.

In addition, the burial grounds feature various heaps or packings of stones, each of which is sometimes constructed around a large boulder. Although generally referred to in the archaeological literature as ‘graves’, these features rarely contain human bones, and are often arranged along the edges, or at more peripheral activity areas of the cemetery. Röst therefore interprets them as remains of activities relating to commemoration, claims of affiliation or claims to territory. Hearths and other traces of fire are common and mostly relate to the stone-constructions, suggesting that fire was an integral part of mortuary rituals. However, the cremation pyres themselves do not appear to have been found at these sites. Röst states two main arguments for this point. First, there are fewer traces of fires than expected considering the number of cremated individuals. Second, bones always ap-

pear cleaned, even when found in connection with soot or ashes, suggesting they were processed after cremation (Röst 2016:169). However, drawing on studies by osteologist Caroline Arcini (2005), she also suggests that cremation pyres (layers of ash and coal with small overlooked, uncleaned bones) may have eroded if left in the open, leaving no detectable traces.

Through analysis of repeated practices, especially relations of complete/incomplete, visible/invisible, Röst is able to observe a sequence in mortuary rituals. Reconstructing patterns in depositions, re-arrangements and absences, she infers various stages of mortuary processes, showing that some of the apparent variety in 'grave' forms in fact relates to extended sequences of deposition, retrieval, and re-deposition of human remains and other materials (chapter 6 and 7). During an initial stage, a large proportion of the bones from each cremation were deposited in a complete ceramic pot, which was often placed at a well-marked, central location within an O-type construction. After some time had passed, such pots with bones appear to have been extracted and removed: only selected fragments of bones and pots were left behind, deposited close to the stone-lined outer rims of the burial monuments. Most cremated bones ended up elsewhere, sometimes evidently as relics among the living (Röst 2016:313–314; for example Eriksson 2005).

Cranial bones were often given special treatment as they are over-represented compared to bones from torso and extremities, alternatively completely omitted (Röst 2016:229–236, figure 7.1). Through a detailed and innovative osteological analysis, Röst identifies several intriguing patterns in the processing and selection of bones: differences at various stages of the burial process, differences between the handling of children versus adults, as well as differential selection of body parts, noting a special focus on head, hands and feet (chapter 7). Such patterns are partly left unexplained, thus forming promising trails to be followed up in further studies and excavations.

In chapter 7 Röst also notes that drinking cups, in contrast to other pots, were not used as containers for human remains and thus when found at these sites must have served other functions in burial rituals. Another intriguing observation regards the use of large, rustic cooking pots as bone containers. This, suggests Röst, a possible reference to the 'original' use of such pots for preparing food stuffs through fermentation, and thus an extension of its purpose as transformer of substances over time (Röst 2016:267). Besides pottery and cremation urns, Röst also notes interesting patterns in other find categories. For example fragmented bronze objects were generally deposited in association with human remains, whereas other artefacts, including stone tools, lack connections with human bones (Röst 2016:204–206). This raises questions about the 'functions' of various ob-

jects in relation to identity and ritual, versus other, secondary processes. Partial objects and bodies were subjected to a range of manipulations and selections, suggesting that complex practices of commemoration and association are more relevant here than traditional ideas of ‘gifts’ and ‘resting places’ for the dead.

In chapter 8, Röst then maps developments at Tystberga and Rogsta over time. Both sites feature three or four main clusters of stone constructions. Each such cluster was initiated by R-types placed at topographical peaks and containing the oldest depositions. Other constructions were then successively added around them, sometimes linked by adjoining components. The oldest, focal R-types always contain at least one adult individual in addition to secondary bone deposits. The surrounding O- and D-types contain individuals of all age categories. Although not a major focus of her analysis, in this context Röst also discusses how grave-clusters may represent particular groups or social formations. She suggests that the women, men and children transformed at these sites probably belonged to special categories in society, since this treatment was not given to everyone after death (Röst 2016:292–296, 310).

Röst’s thesis provides several ideas readily applicable to excavations and research into burials of the Mälars valley Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age in particular, and to burial archaeology more generally. From a regional perspective, her alternative categorization of stone constructions as R, D and O-types should be explored as a complement to traditional classifications in excavation reports. This is straightforward to implement in the excavation of cemeteries, but could also be explored as a descriptive and analytical tool for solitary grave monuments. The patterns identified in terms of the selection of specific pots and artefacts for different functions in the transformation process is also important to follow up in future studies. Further, the detailed and innovative osteological analyses presented in this study will hopefully inspire methods and questions in development-led excavation projects.

A point which requires further exploration is to what extent the results of the micro studies can be generalized for other types of graves and for contemporaneous burial traditions in other regions. The focus on ‘typical’ burial grounds stimulates the question of what could be accomplished if burial grounds of other types and sizes would be subjected to the same analysis. There is an urgent need to map the relationships between and within different cult sites, grave contexts and settlements in the region as a way to better understand settlement organization in the Swedish Late Bronze Age.

For burial archaeology in general, the study underlines the theoretical and empirical importance of micro-scale, human-level analysis of qualities perceivable with the senses and body. The textures and colours of rocks and

pots, the visibility, invisibility and orientation of deposits, the exact selection of skeletal parts and artefacts were all highly meaningful to users of these burial grounds. Adding more such variables to our descriptions – beside traditional characterizations of size, shape and composition – not only makes the remains easier to visualize, but also provides a basis for new observations. Further, this study also presents a strong example of burial traditions where the remains cannot primarily be translated into expressions of status and identity. Asked different questions, they can instead provide insights into attitudes towards death, memory processes, and manifestations of social hierarchies and relationships in ways other than conventionally expected. Thus the methodology and conceptual tools provided by Röst revitalise archaeological analysis of ritual and commemorative processes at Late Bronze Age–Early Iron Age burial grounds, but also have wider application for other periods and types of remains.

More general research questions stimulated by this work concern the attitudes behind fragmentation and selection of bronzes and the circulation and multiple depositional contexts of human skeletal material. This study makes new intriguing observations of the handling and selection of human body parts as well as fragmented objects – as for example fragments of the same bronze object found in *different* graves (Röst 2016:238) and the special treatment of bones from the skull. There is an increasing sense that fragmentation was a central practice in Late Bronze Age communities of Europe (for example Fontijn, 2002; Brück 2006), but we still only have a very general idea of how and why these relics were selected, transformed and used. What objects were broken, how were they broken, and how can we understand the values and beliefs that shaped patterns of circulation and deposition? I am convinced that further studies of how, where and why these partial objects were used will provide one of the most stimulating areas of future research.

As is evident from my summary above, this study contributes significant and thought-provoking findings. With a professional background in graphic design, Röst has created a clear and attractive layout which is rare in publications of university series. However, the results as presented are not always straightforward to apprehend, either in the diagrams or text. Some of the most important diagrams in analytical and synthesising chapters suffer from information overload (for example figure 7.6–7.8 and 8.1–8.4). The intricacy of the synthesizing illustrations hinders overview and makes relationships between different variables difficult to grasp. This is partly the reason why an extensive summary of the arguments and results have been prioritised in this review. The complexity of argumentation, theoretical reasoning and attention to empirical detail are at the same time the strongest and the weakest qualities of this thesis. Strongest, because they enable

a clever research design resulting in multiple new observations. Weakest, because they sometimes obscure the driving ideas, and disguise important results in complicated prose. Therefore, I look forward to future papers, crystallizing the results of this ground-breaking study for a broader and international audience.

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