Bones of the Earth Imitation as Meaning in Viking Age Burial Ritual

Tore Artelius & Mats Lindqvist

From excavation results of a pre-Roman Iron Age and Viking Age burialground in Västergötland, an example is presented of how religious meaning became projected into Viking Age burial ritual through imitation of an already then ancient custom. The burial-ground was abandoned for a period of at least 600 hundred years in between the two periods. In the Pre-Roman Iron Age and Viking Age graves the custom of depositing flakes of firecracked natural stone was documented. From a Viking Age perspective the tradition was imitated and derived from the urnfield burial-grounds of the late pre-Roman Iron Age. The authors link the Viking Age ritual behaviour to the sagas, where stones are presented as symbolical representations of the human body and as cosmological parts of the skeleton that kept the earth together. In the interpretation it is argued that the very concrete use of older graves was essential in the Viking Age burial custom. In this specific example, the deposition of stones in the Viking Age ritual context is interpreted as a projection and representation of the past and the bodies of the dead.

Tore Artelius & Mats Lindqvist, The National Heritage Board, Kvarnbygatan 12, SE-431 34 Mölndal, Sweden.

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"och den som	"and he who
dräpte Högne	slayed Högni
doldes under	was concealed under
jordens ben"	the bones of the earth"
(Ynglingasaga 35, Eng. transl. By the authors)	

"BONES OF THE EARTH"

Scandinavian Viking Age religion and cult is generally regarded as most functional and very concrete in its religious symbolism and expressions of meaning (Ström 1967; Clunies Ross 1998). Meaning was created and communicated in cultic action, and thus religious meaning in many ways can be described as synonymous with the form of its expression – the collective religious ritual. With such a functional approach it was natural that humans in the physical sense, in relation to the overall cosmology, represented the centre and origin from which collective ritual became created and recreated in all its complexity. To Scandinavian archaeologists, Viking Age ritual and cult nowadays represents far more than a passive display of general sacral conceptions and ideas.

From the lines in Ynglinga Saga it is evident that Högni of Östergötland was not just any person and provincial king. Högni and his brother-in-law, Granmar, were the only kings that survived Ingjald Illråde's and Önund's bloodbath in the Hall of the Seven Kings. The Saga reveals that Högni until his death was Ingjald's sworn and foremost enemy. Högni's death is not more closely described in the text. The only information the Saga provides is that Önund, Ingjald's father, had Högni assassinated. The murder of Högni is only mentioned in the lines that describe Önund's own death. Ingjald Illråde's father and all his men were buried under a massive landslide in a narrow mountain valley at Himmelshed.

In this context, however, it is not the dramatic story in itself that is interesting, but rather the choice of words that the poet has used to relate Önund's death and the landslide. The lines declare that Önund with all his men were covered by "the bones of the earth". The choice of words is in this case a symbolical and metaphorical euphemism, a kenning for stones, and in this particular context for the stones that killed the king's father, Önund (Sturluson: Nordiska Kungasagor 1992:60). In the sagas and myths stones and mountains are described as parts of a skeleton; the natural stones form the skeleton that keeps the earth and consequently the world and cosmos together and steady. A striking example of such a bodily metaphor is that the earth is synonymous with the goddess Jord (earth). Bodily metaphors occurr in many passages in Viking Age literature and mythology. In Grimnesmal the whole of the world, the sea and the forest is created from the body of the giant Ymer. In a passage it is underlined that the mountains were created from Ymer's bones. Again stone in the texts is synonymous with the human skeleton and its bones (Grimnesmal 40). Recently Kristina Jennbert has emphasised that, because of the close connection in the Viking Age between meaning and action, the repeated metaphorics related to the human body in the Scandinavian texts, should have had their equivalents in concrete ritual action and hence in material culture (Jennbert 2004:184). Maurice Halbwachs claimed that the human body always represents the starting point from which humans structure cosmos. To Halbwachs, the body was the principal symbol and container of memories, incapsulating history and cultural identity in both an individual and a collective sense. Like places, myths and occurrences, the body serves as a "container" and symbol for religious (social) experiences and works as a complex hierophany and vessel of collective memories and cosmological conceptions (Halbwachs 1992 [1952]). In complex collective religious rituals the human body represents the starting-line from which we structure all our actions and experiences (Jennbert 2004:184). In such a complex social and religious context of meaning as an ordinary Viking Age burial, it is likely that the concrete fusion of cosmology and the human body became symbolically emphasised. A. D. Napier and Louis-Vincent Thomas in their research have stressed that the metaphors between the body and cosmos, man and nature, become ritually highlighted and culturally resonant especially at collective burial ceremonies. One reason for this is that the body in the ritual process becomes transformed through the cremation. The body is destroyed, structured and assigned in to a new reality. In this sense the concrete cremation of the body, the sorting of bones, resembles the structure of the ritual process itself (Thomas 1987:459). In the burial ritual we literally create "new bodies" or "foreign bodies". The living human being is transformed into an object that becomes a small part of the structure itself, and living people eventually must become part of the ancestral identity and history. Essential is that the picture of the body must remain in some shape, material or immaterial. Facial features are painted upon mummies, death masks are produced, fallen Chinese warriors are portrayed in full size and dead kings look at us from coins. Human subjects "need" a new container for the afterlife (Napier 1992:141 f). To an average Viking Age local population, it is likely that this transformation and transition was regarded as a very concrete transitional process, from a collective of subjects into a collection and collective of objects.

In this article attention is given to a specific ritual behaviour related to the Viking Age burials ceremonies that took place at a burial-ground in Vittene in the province of Västergötland. The burial-ground contained graves from the pre-Roman Iron Age and the late Vendel period and Viking Age. There is a large discontinuity in the use of the place for burials. No burials were conducted in the slope for a period of approximately 600 years. In a third of the pre-Roman Iron Age graves, numerous small flakes from natural stone were found. The tradition of putting a lot of stone flakes in the urns along with the cremated bones was common in this region during the period. This tradition does not occur in Viking Age burials in general. But here at Vittene this pre-Roman Iron Age tradition had been imitated by an ordinary Viking Age population almost seven centuries later.

The behaviour is interpreted as an example of how bodily metaphors were communicated in the Viking Age rituals. In the burials an ancient ritual custom, dating back to the pre-Roman Iron Age, had been imitated. In our view this Viking Age imitation was related to the ancestors and the dead. In all its simplicity the imitation served as a projection of the past and as a very concrete way to identify ancestors. The ancestors had used stones just as these. The behaviour is in some sense a parallel to the mythological comprehension of stones as human bones, as parts of skeletons, and in the symbolical sense as parts of the structure that kept the earth together, and in the end as a symbol of the preservation of both society and the world. The Viking Age behaviour copies ritual actions that had been abandoned more than 600 years ago.

STONES AS SYMBOLS

From Carl-Martin Edsman's paper titled "Stones" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* it is evident that also scholars of religion believe that, when it comes to the meaning which through symbolism and hierophanies became mediated in ritual, it is primarily the functional aspects that can be understood. From Edsman it is also evident that stones have been globally used as symbols in all types of societies and at all times (Edsman 1987:50).

All sacral symbols are in a basic psychological sense mental projections containing distinct social intentions and religious qualities. In this particular case the stone renders visual and transfers a sacral content; a certain meaning to a beholder, through a set of hierophanies that must be well known in general and also historically anchored in traditions. In a sacral context one result of such a projection is that any object or feature – a stone, lock of hair, flower or feather – can function as the container and mediator of a religious content. Basically a form or motif or as in this case a simple stone, is ascribed with a certain meaning; or as Maurice Halbwachs puts it, the container reproduces a content (Moon 1987:381; Lévi-Strauss 1977:210). A hierophany simply points to an object, like the stone, that within a certain sacral context, like a Viking Age burial ceremony, makes a reality of an entirely different order than that manifested by the profane world: The hierophany makes something happen; it simply "does something" to the beholder, and it creates ritual action (Eliade & Sullivan 1987:313). The motifs used in religious symbolism function as hierophanies, material culture opens up, reveals and reflects the nature and power of the numinous sphere to the beholders and "consumers" (Wikström 1993; Rolston 1999). Simple things, in this case small natural stones, are used as potent motifs in religious symbolism and are supposed to function as the obvious symbolical corner-stones in a religious system and cosmological universe (Berger & Luckmann 1979). In this sense symbolism can be looked upon as an ever ongoing functionalistic project: The formation of history through ritual tradition and the concrete and repeatedly performed constructions of materialised memories.

STONES AT VITTENE

For a total of ten weeks during the years 1997 to 2001 excavations were carried out at a pe-Roman/early Roman Iron Age and Viking Age burial-ground at Vittene in Västergötland. The excavation had its starting point in the spectacular find of several neck- and arm-rings of gold at a nearby Iron Age settlement with wellpreserved structures of nine long-houses dating primarily to the early Iron Age (Fors 2002). The partly contemporaneous burial-ground was located in a grove only a few hundred metres away from the settlement and the gold finds. The burials can be dated to two separate prehistoric periods, firstly the late pre-Roman Iron and early Roman Iron Age; and secondly to the late Vendel Period and the Viking Age. Different aspects of the results from the excavation have been previously published in a number of articles (Artelius 1999, 2004; Artelius & Lindqvist 2002) In these it is described how the graves from the older period were deliberately used in the Viking Age burial rituals, but not in any sense in a destructive way. The Viking Age graves and monuments were all constructed in close and careful relation to the older graves. It was evident that the old graves were quite important to the Viking Age population.

Amongst many other things the context of burials from both periods reveals that the common pre-Roman Iron Age custom of using flakes of rock in the burial ceremonies had been re-adapted in the Viking Age burial ritual. When it comes to projections of religious meaning through the use of symbols, the fact that an ancient custom was imitated in the Viking Age increases the complexity with which one must look upon the burial ritual.

Why was it that an ancient custom of using small stones and flakes of rock during the burials, was imitated in the Viking Age? Can the Viking Age use of stones be regarded in accordance with the metaphors between stone/skeleton and earth/body as expressed in the old norse sagas?

The oldest monument at the burial-ground in Vittene is a large stone setting, erected over an urn with cremated bones dating back to the Bronze Age. The grave is the only one in the burial-ground from this period. During the late pre-Roman and early Roman Iron Age, about 30 urn-graves and cremation pits were located immediately south of the Bronze Age monument. Together the 30 urn-graves form a typical pre-Roman Iron Age urnfield, which in its design and construction is similar to many other burial-grounds excavated in Västergötland during the last century.

After the second century AD and up until the late Vendel period and the Viking Age, no further burials were conducted at the burial-ground in Vittene. During the 8th century AD the burial-ground was once again "colonised". Stone settings, large mounds, stone circles and a 13-metre long ship-formed monument were being built during the different phases of usage. In the 11th century AD a couple of individuals were buried in rectangular stone settings. The Christian influence on these burials and monuments is distinct.

It is also evident that the pre-Roman Iron Age graves were re-utilised in the Viking Age burial rituals. The re-colonisation of older burial-grounds is a fairly common occurrence in Västergötland during the Viking Age. The tradition may

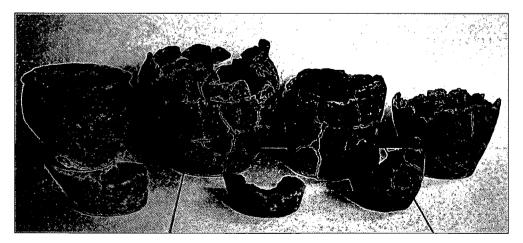


Fig. 1. Pre-Roman and early Roman Iron Age urns from Vittene (Photo: Mats Lindqvist).



Fig. 2. Section of urn grave (no 46) (Photo: Mats Lindqvist).

be seen as an expression of the essential role which the cult of the ancestors, the dead and the past had in the Viking Age cosmology and philosophy (Artelius 2004).

Flakes in pre-Roman Iron Age graves

In 12 of a total of 33 graves dating to the late pre-Roman and early Roman Iron Age, flakes of ordinary rock were found. The flakes were most common in graves that had been covered by small slabs of stone. From the context it is clear that the deposition of the flaked stones in the graves shows a ritual pattern in traditions during the approximately 300 years the burial-ground was in use in the early Iron Age. The custom has also been documented at other burial-grounds dated to the pre-Roman Iron Age. Karl Esias Sahlström noted the same phenomenon in many of the slightly more than 200 urn-graves at Kyrkbacken at Horn in Västergötland (Sahlström 1948:131).

In Vittene the flakes of rock had been deposited in two different manners. They could be deposited as in Fig. 3, where the stones have been wedged among the burnt bones in the urn itself. In several cases the urns actually contained more stones than cremated bones. In the other manner of deposition flakes were put on top of the cremated bones and around the urn.

The flakes vary in appearance, shape and sizes (Fig. 4.). Some of them resemble flakes and blades of flint. Others appear more as stones that had simply cracked due to the heat of the cremation pyre. It cannot be excluded that some of the flakes are remains of stones that had been heated and then intentionally cracked.

As mentioned, the phenomenon is not newly discovered. It has been noted at some occasions before. The example from Kyrkbacken does not provide us with any further information. The location of the flakes is not registered, and they are not mentioned by Sahlström in the account of the finds or in the description of the individual graves. This is probably because Sahlström did not consider them as "real artefacts". The flakes were regarded as rubbish remains from the cremation, which by coincidence had ended up in the urns. But Sahlström's brief description of the flakes at Kyrkbacken match very well the context of the flakes found at Vittene.

The same sort of flakes are mentioned already in 1873 by Emil Vedel. Between 1868 and 1872 he excavated thousands of pre-Roman Iron Age urn-graves at Bornholm. In 1873 he noted that there often were tiny, sharp-edged, fire-cracked stones in the graves (Vedel 1873:9). In another publication he noted that there

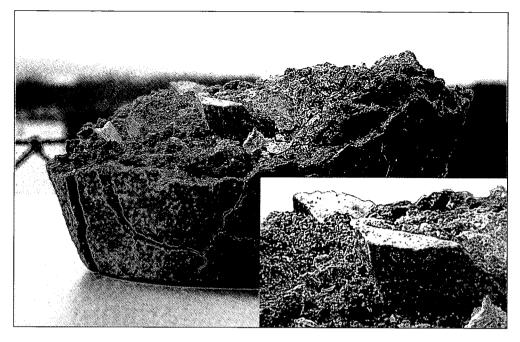
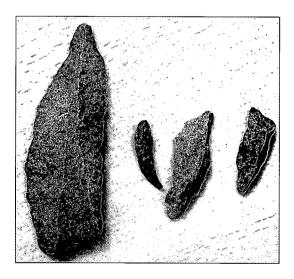


Fig. 3. Pre-Roman Iron Age urn (no. 43). The flakes have been wedged into the packed cremated bones (Photo: Anders Andersson).

were burnt stones or pieces and chips of stones, sometimes so many that they constituted the major part of the contents of the urns (Vedel 1886:64). Vedel interpreted, like Sahlström 60 years later, the flakes as waste from the cremation pyre, and his description of the context is very brief. However, from Vedel's documentation it becomes clear that the flakes were found with regularity in a very large number of graves, and Vedel also noted that there were graves containing



more flakes than human bones.

In twelve of the graves at Vittene from the pre-Roman Iron Age varying quantities of flakes were documented. The context varied in the graves, but the pattern is that the flakes either were found carefully and transversely placed in the urn, or as a concentration in the centre of the pit that was dug to hold the urn. In some cases there were only 20 grams of cremated

Fig. 4. Examples of pre-Roman Iron Age flakes (Photo: Anders Andersson).

bones, but over 200 grams of flakes. Noteworthy is that the weight of cremated bones and flakes respectively in some of the graves was almost exactly the same by the gram. All in all the behavioural pattern and the complexity of the context reveal that the flakes must have had a distinct function and symbolical meaning in the burial rituals.

Flakes in the Viking Age graves

After the first century AD and up until the 8th century AD no burials were conducted at the burial-ground in Vittene, which means that there is a distinct discontinuity in the use of the burial-ground. Even if there are urnfields that are continuously used also in the late Roman and Migration periods, the overall pattern in Västergötland is that the urn-grave burial-grounds were abandoned during the second century AD (Artelius & Linqvist 2002). The late Vendel and Viking Age re-use of the ancient holy place at Vittene indicates that the character of this place in some sense must have been known throughout the centuries. The ancient burial-ground must have survived within a set of local collective memories and myths. The structure of the place itself also must have had an exterior, that to a Viking Age population, corresponded with conceptions of how ancient holy places were manifested in the landscape - places that in a Viking Age ideology represented the dead, the ancestors and the past (Artelius 2004). Even in 1997 there were still some slabs of stones visible in the grove, and it cannot be excluded that wooden posts, which initially had marked some of the pre-Roman Iron Age graves, actuelly had been replaced over time and that some remains were visible in the 8th century AD (Artelius & Lindqvist 2002).

Six large mounds, a number of smaller circular stone settings, a 13-metrelong ship-formed stone setting, and a couple of stone circles were built at the burial-ground during the late Iron Age. As mentioned above, the last burials were conducted in the 11th century AD. The burial-ground was then permanently abandoned as a result of the conversion. A number of 11th century inhumations were documented inside square and rectangular stone-settings. No skeletons were preserved in these 2×1 metre large, coffin-shaped imprints with east-western direction.

Flakes of natural rock were found in several of the 9th and 10th-century cremation layers at the Vittene burial-ground. The context, appearance and shape of these flakes differed somewhat from those of the pre-Roman Iron Age. The Viking Age stones seem to have been flaked in a much more random manner. No special technique had been used.

The context for eleven of these flakes, found in a square-shaped stone setting dated to the 11^{th} century AD, is of particular interest. The grave (no. 10) was quadratic in form and 4×4 metres wide, and demarcated by carefully selected stones. In the middle of the stone setting was a row of stones that divided the construction into two separate burial compartments. The burial custom is the most common that distinguishes early Christians in Västergötland, Östergötland and



Fig. 5. Eleventh century square-shaped stone-setting containing inhumations (no 10). Flakes had been deposited along the eastern gable-side in the northern compartment (no 10b). (Photo: Ola Erikson, Regionmuseum Västra Götaland)

Svealand (Gräslund 2001:52).

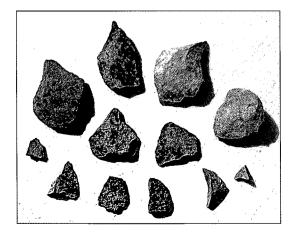
At least one individual had been buried in each of the compartments. There were two small concentrations of deposited cremated bones above both inhumations. Under one of the stones in the northern part of the stone-setting was a cremation pit (no. 44), from which the youngest radio-carbon dating from the entire burial-ground originates (1010 ± 65 BP, AD 890-1190, Ua-14403). As stated above, also feature 10 was visible as a rectangular imprint in the ground. The northern compartment (no. 10b), was surrounded by a light frame – the remains of an entirely decomposed wooden coffin or border of wood. Even though no imprint was visible, there must have existed a similar coffin for the southern inhumation (no. 10a), since four, large iron nails with preserved wooden remains were found there. Under inhumation 10b was a thin charcoal layer, stratigraphically situated underneath the coffin. The layer has been carbon-dated to AD 820-1160 (Ua-14398, 1055 ± 60 BP). In the eastern gable-side of the light frame, eleven (no. 10b) flakes had been stuck down in a line.

THE IMITATORS

A tradition connected with pre-Roman Iron Age burials was deliberately imitated in the Viking Age burials. What context of meaning was projected into the Viking Age burial ritual through this repeated imitation? In the pre-Roman Iron Age, flakes of stone were deposited in the small urns together with cremated bones. In several graves the context reveals that the flakes have been put into the urns with great care. In opposition to Vedel and Sahlström, who concluded that the flakes were waste remains of stones that had accidentally become fire-cracked in the cremation pyres, we mean that the flakes have been deliberately flaked and deposited in a certain manner as an important part of the ritual. The stones have been "cremated", probably cleaned, flaked into pieces, sorted, mixed with the cremated human bones and put in or on top of the urns in the small pits. The stones occur in many of the pre-Roman Iron Age graves and the tradition obviously has been widespread in the late pre-Roman Iron Age and early Roman Iron Age. In Bornholm Vedel documented hundreds of graves with such flakes.

In comparison, the natural stones were treated almost exactly in the same manner as the human bodies that were to be buried. In the grave, the flaked stones and cremated bones are deliberately mixed and intimately brought together, which obviously was the purpose of the actions. The parallels in the treatment of human bodies and the handling of the stones are obvious. Like the human bodies the stones were "cremated" on the pyre, thereby causing a natural fragmentation. The stones, are like the human bodies, also were deliberately divided into pieces. At a certain stage of the ritual the stones were either carefully flaked or smashed altogether into hundreds of pieces. From the handling of the stones and the context can be assumed that the stones were deliberately buried in the monuments in almost exactly the same way as the human remains. Noteworthy is that the stones and flakes do not compensate other objects that are found. The traditional pre-Roman Iron Age symbols of transition are also found in the ceramic vessels – artefacts such as fibulae, tweezers, knives, needles and sickles.

According to Carl-Martin Edsman, the religious function related to stones always is at least fundamentally two-fold. On the one hand there is a very large ethnographic and archaeological material describing religious functions connected with certain specific stones, memorials, rune-stones, the Gotlandic picture-stones, "holy" white stones, etc. There are numerous examples from Scandinavian



prehistory alone. Entirely different in its projection is the symbolism that is related to stones in general and to stone as a material and concept of meaning. Natural stones and the material stone are often ascribed a symbolism related to the relation between man, nature and the divine powers. Edsman means that more specific and absolute

Fig. 6. Flakes and natural stones from the gable-side of the square-shaped ston-setting (no 10b) (Photo: Anders Andersson).

Current Swedish Archaeology, Vol. 13, 2005

interpretations concerning stones in general would be too speculative. Instead the context in each case must represent the starting-point for all specific interpretations of the meaning in the symbolism (Edsman 1987:49 ff). Examples that stones were symbolically used are, however, frequent in Scandinavian iron Age. Holger Arbman noted that large amounts of ordinary stones had been hurled into the sacrificial bog of Käringsjön. Lennart Lundborg demonstrated that large quantities of quartzite were deposited in and on the large Bronze Age mounds in Halland.

Ordinary stones are put on mosaic grave-stones as well as on top of Shinto temple gates. It is their place in the religious and holy context that reveals the qualities of the symbol and the hierophany. Avoiding speculation, it seems fair to postulate that the treatment of the stones, the parallels to the treatment of the deceased and the depositional pattern in the graves reflect a symbolism in which both man and nature are being transformed.

From the specific circumstances at Vittene it becomes obvious that the, for a Viking Age burial context, very unusual tradition of depositing flaked stones in the Viking Age graves is an "imitation" that derives from an ancient ritual behaviour. Evidently the Viking Age population in some sense must have "studied" the ancient urn-graves from the pre-Roman period, even though they were not very keen students. It is obvious that in the Viking Age ritual the stones have not been used and shaped in exactly the same manner. The technique of handling the stones is different. The stones were not deliberately struck into flakes with the same kind of precision. In Viking Age society there existed no such specific stone-working technique. One hypothesis is that the reason for the differences in the handling of the stones during the different periods, is that the Viking Age population did not know that originally the "ancestors" had prepared the stones in many more ways.

Even if it is hard to prove from the archaeological record that some of the pre-Roman Iron Age graves at Vittene were partly excavated already in the Viking Age, there are many indirect traces of such a ritual behaviour in the burial-ground. Stratigraphically, the Viking Age cremation layers underneath the large mounds in most cases were put immediately on pre-Roman urn-graves. Most remarkable is that the large Viking Age ship-formed stone-setting was constructed around a grave from the pre-Roman period. In the bow of the ship-formed stone-setting that was situated in the middle of the burial-ground, a pre-Roman Iron Age burial was found. The context reveals that the pre-Roman Iron Age graves were central in the Viking Age rituals. The most reasonable interpretation is that the simple urn-graves in the Viking Age cosmology and cult were considered as representations of a remote past and genealogically unknown history in the same sense as described in anthropological research (Lévi-Strauss 1977). The human remains, the graves, the place in itself and the small stones were used in a social strategy whose overall purpose was the constant creation and upholding of an identity and local history. For this strategy the active use of the ancestors and their graves was an excellent social and religious tool. In this way the importance of the past and the ancestors became projected into Viking Age burial ritual in a very typical and extremely concrete manner.

The aim of this paper has been to demonstrate that the Viking Age local population at Vittene actively imitated an already then ancient ritual tradition the flaking and deposition of small stones alongside the dead. In the most obvious examples the small stones had been deliberately put in a grave that, at least in the archaeological sense, must be determined as clearly Christian. In the quadratic stone-settings very different concepts of the world became ritually combined; the complex context of feature 10 is an early Christian burial accompanied by pre-Christian traditions. In this case the are represented by an imitation of an already by then ancient tradition deriving from the pre-Roman Iron Age. The handling of the stones ensured, even to a proto-Christian, that the necessary link to the past, the ancestors and the remote mythical history was established; this was done through the imitation of ritual actions once conducted by those who, in the Viking Age cosmology were regarded as ancestors. According to the sagas and myths, stones to a late Viking Age population symbolised "the bones of the earth". Although the world in the 11th century was changing in its fundamental structure, it was essential for an ordinary population of farmers to manifest the divine powers of the past by using the old burial-ground and even small stones as a very concrete and "physical" display of the past and the ancestors.

SLIGHT RETURN TO THE "BONES OF THE EARTH"

Interpretations based on analogies with written sources can easily be overworked and therefore appear as less plausible. Even so, we mean that to a certain extent, the ritual behaviour and handling of stones at the burial-ground in Vittene can be used in analogy with the saga's information regarding the use of stones as symbols and as a "kenning" for a skeleton, the human body and the composition of the earth. Stones were considered as parts of a universal skeleton that kept the world and cosmos together. Put in such a context, Snorri's lines about the dramatic death of Önund and the assassination of King Högni become even more grave and symbolical. If the stone in the Saga was regarded as a projection of natures divinity the fatal landslide that killed Önund is transformed into a punishment, a punishment that in its meaning was easy to grasp also for Snorri and other Christian scholars. In a wider sense the stones that were "buried" alongside the dead in the Viking Age context can be interpreted as a symbolical projection of figures made of flesh and blood that had lived in the same place over 600 years earlier. Viewed from a Viking Age perspective the deposition of the small stones became a representation of the past, and symbolically the bodies of the ancestors were present right in the centre of the Viking Age burials.

Revised by Laura Wrang.

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