

Cultivating Corpses

A Comparative Approach to Disembodied Mortuary Remains

Anders Kaliff & Terje Oestigaard

Disembodied remains of corpses are often found in the archaeological record but seldom interpreted and understood. This mortuary practice challenges our traditional understanding of funerals and what constitutes a “grave”. Through a comparative analysis of prehistoric Bronze Age and Iron Age mortuary remains and contemporary funeral practices in Nepal, it is argued that the disembodiment is a cosmogonic act whereby the corpse is an intrinsic part of the agricultural and hydrological cycle. An explicit combination of the past and present for interpretations of the past is a premise for understanding and knowledge production in archaeology, and this theoretical stance is developed and explored.

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION – EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND ANALOGIES

Real people have done real things in the past, and it is a challenge for today’s archaeologists to approach not only what prehistoric people thought and felt but, more importantly, what they did. It is appropriate to undertake a study of these problems with direct application to excavated archaeological material. This approach has been defined as microarchaeology, which aims to focus on executed practice or how actions were actually performed (Cornell & Fahlander 2002; Fahlander 2003). However, there are no interpretations without presupposition. Even our most private emotions and thoughts are related to something. Unless we clearly perceive our analogies we will, without further reflection, use our own points of reference and our own time as analogy. Ethnographic analogies are invaluable as inspiration for new ways of interpreting archaeological material (cf. Parker-Pearson 2002:44). This is not the same as taking ready-made interpretations from one cultural context and importing them to another. On the contrary, analogies are a powerful and necessary tool for any archaeological interpretation. If we as

scientists are not aware of this we will most certainly use our own time and culture (or any other known context) as an unconscious analogy: There is no possibility to make interpretations, or even to think, without references outside oneself, and such references are nothing but analogies.

In March 2002 we both studied cremations and corpses at the Pashupatinath temple in Nepal along the sacred river Bagmati. Each year between 4500 and 6000 people are cremated at the ghats, and the ashes are scattered in the river. By witnessing actual cremations, despite the cultural differences, one is often struck by similarities in *practice*. Thus, our aim is to focus on cultivation of corpses from a cross-cultural perspective. Cultivation of corpses is not an actual practice but an interpretative framework imposed by us for an understanding of the different practices and the totality of rituals performed, including both the hydrological circle and re-creation of the cosmos. By comparing Swedish Bronze Age and Early Iron Age funerary remains with contemporary mortuary treatments in Nepal, we aim to explore structural similarities in death rituals, and hence, how knowledge production of *both* the past and the present takes place in a contemporary archaeological discourse.

THE CONCEPT OF “GRAVE”

One of the basic problems of archaeological documentation is the semantic problem connected to the use of common words as terms for different features and objects. When discussing the features we call graves, as well as other apparent remains of rituals, from the past or any other cultural environment that we cannot fully know, a certain confusion of concepts arises. The very designation *grave* in itself contains an interpretation of the function of the structure being described. It is a designation for features which, according to our present-day reference system, are perceived primarily as burial places. It is impossible to use the word “grave” without ascribing meaning from our own social context, which implies a certain practice.

To a varying degree, this is also valid for most other archaeological terms, but it becomes particularly clear when we use words that have strong emotional connotations today. “Grave” is often used as a more or less unproblematic term, but it is in fact an advanced interpretation embedded in a particular historical setting. Accordingly, the nomenclature is in itself of great significance for the interpretation of excavated material. In the archaeological feature that we call grave, which includes our whole repertoire of sentiments of death such as angst, hope, grief or even indifference, our personal references collide with the wish to make a scientific description and an analysis of *the past* (Kaliff in press). The difference between two languages, our own sentiments and the will to describe objectively, is always present in a scientific work. It clearly shows the impact from our own cultural environment: a grave is a grave only if it is the container for the dead body. It is not self-evident that stone-settings and other “grave forms”, from the Scandinavian Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age, primarily had a function that is even similar to what we associate with the word “grave” today.

There are several features in Scandinavian cemeteries from the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age that cannot easily be categorized as graves in our modern western way of understanding this word. The majority of the features present in (the sites we call) cemeteries contain only a small amount of the bones from the cremated body. Furthermore, there is often great variety in the amount of bones present in different features. This differs from only one fragment to approximately all the remains from the cremation (1500 – 3000 g), with or without debris from the pyre. At the same time there are often several features present that contain no bone material at all. Many of these features can generally be termed hearths, pits and areas of soot, but they often lack more specific interpretation. The majority of the “graves” containing bones consist of pits without any pottery urn, or any other container. Many similar pits contain no bones or objects, only a filling that is dissimilar to the surrounding area. Some of them have a strong morphological resemblance to so-called graves, but most often these are not included in our analyses since they are not “real graves” (Kaliff 1997:68ff; Kaliff 2001:446f).

Traditionally, the presence of bones (preferably a complete skeleton, or at least the major part of the bones) is the main feature that defines a “grave”. In general, labelling a structure “grave” is considered to be rather unproblematic as soon as there are one or more bones present, while the “empty” features are considered enigmatic. There is, however, another problem. The archaeological emphasis is put on the bones, not the flesh, but the differences between funeral practices are in fact variations in the treatments of the flesh, where cremation and mummification are opposites regarding ritual consumption of the flesh (Oestigaard, *in press*).

Few people in our society would consider the burial of only one bone from their deceased relative as a proper burial. However, religious relics are nothing more than a fragment of the deceased’s remains. Turning to prehistory, the number of “graves” present from the Late Bronze Age – Early Iron Age in Scandinavia does not match the estimated number of deceased people (Baudou 1991:73ff; Runcis 1995:25; Kaliff 1997:72). This leads us to the question: were all dead people placed in graves? Evidently, in view of investigated cemeteries from the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age (e.g., Sigvallius 1994; Stålbom 1994; Ericsson & Runcis 1995; Runcis 1996), a large proportion of the cremated bones from most of the buried individuals were placed somewhere else than in the “grave”. Therefore, we have reason to believe that only some individuals were buried; and to complicate the matter, those who were buried were not always buried with all their bones. And finally, the vast majority of people may have been cremated without the bones being deposited in the ground.

The burial of some of the bones is likely to have been a supplementary ritual based on complex beliefs. Such a ritual was probably not undertaken with the remains of every deceased. Nevertheless, it seems to have been an important ritual when carried out, at least in some cases. There is a variety of more or less complex bone deposits, and with a great variety in the amount of bones present.

Disembodiment of the deceased's corpse implies complex representations involving more than just a concern for the dead and the closest kin, and hence, this brings us to Nepal and cosmogony.

ASTU – CULTIVATING THE DEAD

Cosmogony is the re-creation of the world (Eliade 1987:105). "The sacred reveals absolute reality and at the same time makes orientation possible; hence it *founds the world* in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world" (Eliade 1987:30). Rites are reproductions of the original creation but on a microcosmic scale; and holy sites are perceived as the centres of the world and temples as links between earth and heaven, but also as connecting the lower realms to this world (ibid:39). Almost all rituals invoke the mythological beginning, and then comes the cosmogony (ibid:83). There is continuity between the worlds of the living and the supernatural, and death mediates the two. Corpses are vehicles that can be used to move from this world to the other world. The recent dead cling to this world although the spirit is being transformed into other spheres. The dead is truly a *liminal* being, and as such highly polluted (Kinsley 1997:237-238).

Man is a replica of the cosmos, and the body is constituted by the five elements; and consequently the life cycle and mode of thought are steered by cosmic laws. The five elements in Hinduism are air, water, fire, earth and ether. The elements are life-givers and creative forces from which everything derives and to which everything will return and then become transformed into other constellations and new forms of life, again and again. In Hinduism a god dwells in each element: Vishnu in air; Varuna in water; Agni in fire; Brahma in earth; and Shiva in ether or sky (Oestigaard 2000:18). Cremation is cosmogony because all elements are dissolved and transferred back to their origin from which they are redistributed again. This is cosmogony per definition, and the human flesh is the most potent and powerful agency in such a re-creation of the society, world and cosmos. Fire is the prime agent in the transformation, and the Indian fire is not primarily for cooking or food preparation, but for *sacrifices* (Frazer 1974), of which cremation is the most important. In the ancient Vedic tradition, cremation was regarded as a person's last act of sacrifice, in which his/her own body was sacrificed at the pyre. Through this sacrifice the deceased was believed to be reborn into a new existence, together with his/her ancestors. In Hindu texts this is referred to as the third birth of a person. Cremation was considered a *rite de passage* from one existence to another (Olivelle 1987:389).

The funeral pyre consists of five layers of wood, each of which symbolises one of the elements. Thus, the fire goes to the fire, air to air, ether to ether, and water to water when the ashes are immersed in the river. The earth element is, however, taken care of in a special manner, which is called *astu*. *Astu* is a small part of the deceased's flesh, which is either cut from the corpse prior to the cremation or kept apart while the cremation is completed. In ordinary *astu* rituals it is a piece of flesh that is buried, but in some cases it may contain some bones.



Fig. 1. *Astu* being prepared at the end of the cremation. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

The *astu* always has to be buried in water, whether this is in the same river as all the other remains or in a different river. Today, the practice of burying *astu* is conducted among some Brahmans and Chhetris in Nepal. At Pashupatinath, it is only a minority of the cremations

of common people that includes the *astu* part. On one occasion the *astu*-ritual was performed after most of the other ashes were given to the river. The small parts of burnt and charcoaled flesh were wrapped in a piece of white cloth (Fig. 1). The two sons of the deceased dug a hole in the riverbed while the cremation platform was washed and cleansed with water by the Cremation priest. An elderly relative looked through the pyre to see whether or not there was any more flesh lingering on the bones. He instructed the priests to search through the ashes and the pyre, to make sure that all the flesh was burnt except the *astu*-part. The sons buried the *astu* in the middle of the river (Fig. 2). This planting of the flesh in the soil is a regenerative act, but this pro-creative process is only one of several which take place during the funeral.

Cremation is a human sacrifice; the son kills his father, the chief mourner symbolically commits a homicide. Death is regarded as a process, and a person is not believed to be completely dead until the soul leaves the body. Thus, the death pollution starts at the moment of death or when the soul is released from the body. The mourning period is the repayment of the sin of burning the flesh, but the funeral is a paradox because, although the son symbolically kills his father on the pyre, both the son and father are “born” again and raised to a higher level both socially and religiously. Pragmatically, one may see both the father and the son as reborn through this sacrifice; the father in another sphere and preferably in the heavenly abode, whereas the son takes the father’s place in the

family and society (Parry 1994: 181-184). “Through a son he conquers the worlds, through a son’s son he obtains immortality, but through his son’s grandson he gains the world of the sun” (Manu IX, 137). Finally, the corpse is returned to the river as ashes. The



Fig. 2. The sons bury the *astu* in the riverbed. Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

ashes are often referred to as “bones”. Bones are the product of the father’s semen and thus a source of future fertility; and the cremation destroys what one has to get rid of; namely sin and female flesh (Parry 1994:188). When the body is burnt and the ashes are immersed in the Bagmati River, this is a symbolic copulation of the male semen (ashes) with the female water (the river). Reincarnation of the soul is like a seed that is planted. A new plant needs a seed from its parents in order to be born, and the old soul is transferred and replanted when a new human is born. Thus, the cosmological reproduction is parallel to the biological reproduction – a cosmogonic process uniting micro- and macrocosmos.

COSMOS AND COPULATION

The soul clings to the corpse or stays close to it as long as there is something left of the dead body, and the soul continues to exert influence on the materiality of the person’s former residence, the body (Weber 1964:5). The main problem is how the soul is transferred from one sphere or state to another; how and by which processes the soul is transferred from the deceased in cemeteries to the womb of a birth-giving mother. The soul is believed to be the size of a thumb, with the fingerprint of the previous lives determining the future existences – but how does a soul reincarnate and enter a new body? This is a question of the relation between man and woman and their lives in society *and* the cosmos.

The cosmos is dialectic with both male and female forces, and a cosmic world-view is also human centred because it opens up for transcendental divinities. Procreation is a complex process in which consumption plays a crucial role. “Food is in truth the Lord of Creation. From food seed is produced and from this beings are born” (The Upanishads, op. cit. Mascaró 1965:68). Without food, or in more general terms fluids, of which water is the most important, humans will inevitably die. Semen, the main male essence, is often used metaphorically to symbolise fertile processes rather than only a substance, including the fructifying rain from heaven as the “seeds of clouds”. Similarly, Agni is kindled by the seeds of heaven, and the Soma oblation into flames is regarded as seeds (O’Flaherty 1981:20). Women have also seeds, and this substance is a liquid called “virile milk”. This has to be seen in relation to male metaphors. Women may give seeds and take milk-seed from men, but this may also be understood and presented as such that the women take seeds and that they are “milked” of children (ibid:21).

Fluids are seen as female attributed and transferred by mothers, and solids are the products of the fathers; and therefore, blood is given from the mother and the bones from the father. Menstrual blood is often seen and regarded as the female counterpart to semen (O’Flaherty 1981:33). There are, however, many ambiguities regarding whether the female creative fluid in the womb is female semen or menstrual blood. If the female seed is menstrual blood sexual intercourse is forbidden, but if one interprets it as some kind of female semen intercourse is mandatory, and the latter understanding is in accordance with the Hindu doctrine by which the man has to impregnate a woman when she comes into season

(ibid:35). Metaphorically, seed and sperm have many similarities. Seed is often seen as food, and the drinking of semen metaphorically (in the vagina) is the basic description of the birth process; the soul of man who is reborn goes to the moon, pours down onto earth as rain, enters plants, is eaten by man and transformed into semen that fertilises a woman.

There are many metaphorical relations between fire and water, and water is indeed created by fire in the process described in Rig-Veda through the fire-sacrifice. When fire from sacrifice goes to heaven, it becomes clouds, and from the clouds the earth receives its rain, which gives life to the grain and seeds. When the harvest is collected and eaten, it becomes sperm and when finally injected into the vagina it becomes new life. Sacrifices give new life in the form of rain from the clouds, and this in turn gives a successful harvest. This link is most specifically expressed on the funeral pyre when the fire that dissolves the deceased creates clouds, which eventually will bring new life. Thus, the hydrological cycle produced the sperm that is “planted in the fields” in metaphorical terms, and that creates new humans.

The semen is secreted from the food eaten. From the semen, the birth of another body is made possible. When the semen unalloyed is deposited in the vaginal passage during the prescribed period of cohabitation after the monthly menses, then the semen blown by the vital wind mingles with the blood of the woman. At the time when the semen is discharged the individual soul with the causal body or unit of sense-organs etc. enters the vaginal passage fully covered and urged by its past actions. The semen and blood in the unified state become foetus in a day. (Siva-Purana III, 22.14-16, p. 1542)

Sperm and rice are necessary components in the creation of life. Copulation and cosmos are two parallel life-giving processes. Macrocosm is directly linked to microcosm in the actual act of copulation. Man needs to copulate, and the grains of rice “invest” the vital breath in the foetus. This happens during the fifth month of pregnancy when the “vital breath” enters the embryo through the suture at the top of the skull – the same place where it is released during cremations. This rite is called *kapal kriya*, and throughout pregnancy the “vital breath” is sustained by the digestive fire, which resides in the mother’s belly (Parry 1994:179). Manu writes on the topic,

By the sacred tradition the woman is declared to be the soil, the man is declared to be the seed; the production of all corporeal beings (takes place) through the union of the soil with the seed (Manu IX, 33). A male child is produced by a greater quantity of male seed, a female child by prevalence of the female; if (both) are equal, a hermaphrodite or a boy and a girl; if (both are) weak or deficient in quantity, a failure or conception (results) (Manu III, 49).

When the spirit is blessed by Shiva, the spirit waits until intercourse takes place, and after ejaculation it picks a sperm and actually drags it to meet the egg. After

this fertilisation occurs, the spirit ensures that the zygote is safely implanted into the wall of the uterus. What happens then is a process of growing the *Jiva* – an individual soul – and every sperm has *Jiva* (Svoboda 1993:190-191).

For creation you must use the semen in a different way than for the way you use it for procreation. Semen is that substance in the male body that has the ability to create. Only procreation is possible if it is expelled from the body, ejaculated during the sexual act. It is retained within the body, stored instead of being wasted; the real creation becomes possible through *ojas*. *Ojas* is the source of the body's metabolic energy, the *Jathara Agni*. Loss of semen means loss of *ojas* and thus loss of digestive powers. (Svoboda 1993:260)

Consequently, holy men and ascetics have to live a life of celibacy because if they waste sperm they lose parts of the body's metabolic energy – the essence of life. Combining the different layers of metaphors, the most explicit use of these symbolic powers in funerals is seen in the *dagbatti* rite – the lighting of the pyre. The deceased is given raw rice in the mouth as a grave-gift. The last breath of life left from the mouth, and the next incarnation will start with a new “vital breath”. Thus, the funeral starts by lighting the rice in the mouth of the deceased (Fig. 3). The raw rice is a symbol of fertility, which encompasses the pro-creative powers of semen. The hydrological cycle of the year, which includes rain and a successful harvest in the form of rice, has its parallel in the human cycle, which includes copulation and the creation of offspring. Together, these two cycles of metaphors work together and give each other strength and rationale, and in practice it is impossible to separate these two because cosmos and copulation are a part of the cosmogonic process which links microcosm to macrocosm. Bodily carnality encompasses spiritual qualities, and the hydrological cycle and agricultural

products possess divine powers. Mind is embodied in matter, and they are inseparable. The process of reincarnation is not a simple matter of a sexual act, but a cosmogonic event, which starts with the lighting of the pyre. It is therefore logical that the pro-creative means are included from the very beginning, which eventually leads to sexual intercourse. The latter act is, however, only a minor but necessary component in the process of recreating and reincarnating a soul.



Fig. 3. Lighting the rice in the mouth of the deceased.
Photo: Terje Oestigaard.

KNOWLEDGE IN THE MAKING

Our aim is to follow the progress of knowledge production from the cradle to the grave. We started in Nepal, developing perspectives while witnessing cremations, and with this point of departure we have spun webs of significance (Geertz 1973) in a Hindu context. This interpretation will subsequently be used as a theoretical framework to create an understanding of structural processes and mortuary practices in the Scandinavian Bronze Age. This is in one sense, of course, an analogy, but we will argue that it is not a simple and randomly chosen analogy, but a theoretically developed perspective which enhances our knowledge of the past.

The distinction between argument and assumption, and the use of untested generalisations and unsupported inferences reconstructed by a process of sympathetic imagination, are some of the main weaknesses of many post-processual interpretations (Trigger 1995:455). It is generally agreed that it is impossible to construct a coherent *methodology* for how contemporary knowledge is used in interpretative practices. Nevertheless, “all archaeology is based on analogy and the process of analogical reasoning can be explicit or rigorous. But we cannot strictly test the analogies and hypotheses, which result from their use. Archaeologists cannot prove or falsify their hypotheses on independent data. All they can achieve is *a demonstration that one hypothesis or analogy is better or worse than another, both theoretically and in relation to data*” (Hodder 1982:9, our emphasis).

Although it is impossible on methodological grounds to give an explicit statement of how the knowledge production occurs, we will nevertheless strive to be as explicit as possible in this process with regard to our prejudices and each interpretative step that we take. It is, of course, easier to just bypass these considerations, but it makes the interpretative practice less stringent. According to Shanks and Tilley, all interpretations and archaeology contain a fourfold hermeneutics (Shanks & Tilley 1987). One has to understand:

1. the relation between the past and the present.
2. other societies and cultures.
3. contemporary societies.
4. the communities of archaeologists conducting interpretations.

Starting with the two last aspects first, our understanding of contemporary societies is insufficient for an understanding of the past, but it is often the only prejudices at work within the archaeological community. By understanding other societies and cultures, in this case structural processes in Hinduism, we have aimed to broaden the interpretative horizon, which will hopefully lead to a better understanding of the past and the relation between the past and the present.

The journey into Hindu mythology is therefore a thoroughly, and theoretically, developed analogy. Relational analogies “demonstrate that similarities between past and present situations are relevant to the “unknowns” that are being interpreted,

whereas the *differences* that can be observed do not really matter; they are not relevant because there is little link between what is different and what is suggested as being the same” (Hodder 1982:19). Therefore it is necessary to examine why one variable is relevant to another, that is, the relevant causal links between different parts of an analogy (ibid:21). Hence, an analogy is more than just a process where a “pick-and-choose” ethnography fits an already made interpretation.

While most archaeological interpretations are based on blurred and implicit analogies, which are nevertheless analogies but methodologically and scientifically flawed, we have aimed to give a detailed account of the processes of knowledge in the making. Moreover, most analogical reasonings are totally out of context, arbitrary and opportunistic, which makes any ethnographic account suitable for a prehistoric interpretation. We have, on the other hand, constructed a theoretical, interpretative framework based on contemporary ethnography which we will use as a perspective to generate a qualitatively different kind of knowledge of the past.

Still, we have to make some comments on the analogy as *an interpretation in its own right*. Chris Gosden has rightly claimed, “ethnoarchaeology is immoral, in that we have no justification for using the present of one society *simply to interpret the past of another*” (Gosden 1999:9, our emphasis). Therefore, a good analogy is not only an interpretative approach to the past, but an interpretation which enhances the knowledge of the respective community or culture. Thus, an archaeological approach may reveal other insights into the present as well as the past. Hinduism is a construct (e.g., Stietencron 1995; Chakrabarti 1999), and every religion develops through the ages (Hinnells 2000). The interpretation put forward here is a typical “cosmogonic understanding” of the life-giving forces in the world. Methodologically it is a hybrid (see Latour 1993), but for instance holy men combine all cosmic levels in their world-view, which includes the creation of cosmos, the different holy scriptures, their own penance and, not least; their forthcoming release from the cycle of birth and death. Therefore, an archaeological inquiry aiming to study both the past *and* the present may contribute to understandings of contemporary societies and processes as well as prehistoric ones, since archaeologists ask different questions.

Finally, there is the relation between myth and ritual. Although Edmund Leach once argued that “myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, they are one and the same” (Leach 1954:13ff), most researchers argue that the relationship is more complex and that myths and rituals possess qualitatively different aspects (e.g., Bell 1992, 1997; Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994; Rappaport 2001). This is not our concern here since the ethnographic context is from now on a theory, or framework of interpretation, for an understanding of prehistory. What was myth has become theory since we have shown, as Hodder argues, the relevant causal links between different parts of the analogy. These structural similarities will be elaborated later. Ethnographic analogies are therefore mainly a source of ideas to broaden the horizons of possibilities about how the past might be interpreted (Hodder 1999:46).

These data are subsequently used to develop models and theoretical frameworks, which we have done regarding astu and cultivation of corpses.

EARTH, STONE, FIRE, WATER AND “SOUL”

The idea of the liberation of the soul, or life force, by combustion is a feature found in many cultures practising cremation (e.g., Schlenker 1960). Also the divine origin of fire is a widespread belief, where fire represents the fertile element in the cosmos and is present in all living things (Edsman 1987:343f). Turning to Scandinavian prehistory, there are reasons to believe that burial rituals included several steps, mirrored in some of the features documented in the cemeteries. The cremation and subsequent deposition of some of the bones in the ground are only part of this procedure. Other steps in the funeral and mourning ritual are most certainly possible to trace in the archaeological material.

Enclosed areas and buildings of special design have been documented on several sites in Sweden, dated to the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. One type has been termed *stone-foundation houses* (in Swedish often referred to as “Brobyhus”), and another *post houses* or *small ritual houses* (Victor 2002:103f). The stone-foundation houses consist of rectangular stone- and earth-walled enclosures and have not been houses in the literal sense of the word. This type of structure is mainly dated to the earlier part of the Bronze Age, and is connected to ritual complexes with burial mounds or cairns. Some enclosures are also connected with deposits of burnt bones, scattered pottery, grindstones and fire-cracked stones (Victor 2002:147f). The small ritual houses are dated to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age and have been documented at several cemeteries/cultic places in Sweden. They consist of small, almost quadratic structures and are often located in close connection to urn-burials and other bone deposits, hearths, pits and layers of fire-cracked stone (Kaliff 1997:54ff). Documented finds and features from the contexts of both the larger enclosures and the small buildings indicate that they are places for complex rituals in connection with death. They are probably the locations for different steps in the funeral and mourning ritual.

The deposition of bones in the ground and beneath stone constructions is well documented, as is the cremation of (at least) some bodies. The treatment of the burnt bones by throwing them into water, or by pouring water on the pyre, is indicated by finds of fine cracked bones, and also by experimental evidence (Rönkvist 2001:41-51). It has also been suggested that the bones have been washed in water (Mc Kinley 1989:72f). Different kinds of features, objects and other traces of ritual behaviour may be interpreted in accordance with this. This is for instance a valid interpretation for depositions in soil or water/wetland. The meaning could have been to put some parts of the dead body in the ground – or near the rocks. One part is given to the *earth*, one part to the *air* (smoke), one part to the *fire* (the pyre), and one part to *water* (perhaps where some bones were washed, or the major part thrown). This “parting” of the elements has its clear parallel in Hindu rituals, as presented above. A similar cosmology separating the

world into different elements may be seen in the processing of the dead body in the prehistoric Scandinavian context as well.

Pits without bones in cemeteries and heaps of fire-cracked stones could be interpreted in light of the disembodiment of corpses. Pits as well as heaps of fire-cracked stones have earlier often been explained as part of everyday activities and indicators of Bronze Age settlement sites (e.g., Hyenstrand 1979; Jensen 1989), at the same time as they doubtless also contain more problematic remains. The occurrence of cremated human bones in such heaps has been regarded as secondary burials (e.g., Rentzhog 1967). During recent years the close association between graves and heaps of fire-cracked stones have also attracted attention (Lundquist 1991; Kaliff 1997; Widholm 1998). It is obvious that fire-cracked stone was commonly used as building material in stone-settings, and also that its occurrence may be connected with cremation places.

Fire sacrifice seems to have been an important ritual practice in Scandinavia, as on the European continent, during the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. The presence of large geometrical systems of hearths is one phenomenon that has been interpreted in light of this (e.g., Thörn 1996). It has also been suggested that the heaps of fire-cracked stones might be sacrificial cairns (Bellander 1938) or traces of cremation places (Nylén 1958:32ff; Kaliff 1997:60ff). Yet another indication of the association between fire-cracked stone and remains of a sacrificial character is the fact that layers of soot and fire-cracked stone, often with shards of pottery, have been found just beside rock carvings (e.g., Johansen 1979:108ff.; Wigren *et al.* 1990:9ff). A cosmological interpretation of the rock-carvings could also fit into this pattern. Rock-carvings can be seen as a symbolic fertilisation of the very thin layer separating heaven (air and/or light) from the ground/rock (cf. Hauptman-Wahlgren 1998:96). Only in the border-zone between the elements, and in the combination of different elements, can fertilisation occur and the cosmos be recreated. The penetration of air and sky into the rock/earth, through the carved patterns of the stone surface, brings the elements together. This surface of the rock is a meeting-place for the heavenly powers of the cosmos (Kaliff 1999:104). With respect to cup-marks, it has been suggested that they could be interpreted as female fertility symbols, which could be important to ensure the rebirth of the dead (Bengtsson 1999:309-319). The fertilisation of the rock is performed in principally the same way as when



Fig. 4. A heap of fire-cracked stones during excavation. The base of selected white stones was covered by a thick layer of charcoal and fire-cracked stones. To the east of the heap was a square stone-setting (Fig. 5). From an excavation 2002, at Sunneränge, Aneby parish, in the province of Småland, Sweden (Ericsson & Nilsson 2003). Photo by Alf Ericsson.



Fig. 5. The square stone-setting east of the heap of fire-cracked stones at Sunneränge. Photo by Per Nilsson.

objects, flesh or bones are placed in a pit in the ground. Could, then, the deposition of bones, different objects and waste products in heaps of fire-cracked stones be the remains of a similar ritual?

The remains of cremations appear to be one of several special kinds of waste material found in piles of fire-cracked stones. Other waste consists of the remains of metal production, burnt clay, pots, burnt animal bones, and objects connected with harvesting and agriculture such as sickles and querns. Material of a similar kind is often found in stone-settings and internal burials from the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. This also suggests that similar ideas were associated with the features we label as graves and heaps of fire-cracked stones.

Archaeological interpretations often find it difficult to get away from the idea that fire-cracked stone must necessarily be the waste or by-product of a process that is functional in our eyes. Nevertheless, in the same way as the cremation of the deceased person separates the elements, the cracking of stone – when it is heated to high temperatures by fire – can be perceived as a release of other entities. The stone may have been imagined to be the dwelling of spiritual powers, which could both emit and enclose strength. Thus, it does not seem improbable that fire-cracked stone had also been deliberately produced as a ritual act in itself, which may or may not have been part of the actual funeral (Kaliff 1999: 103-108). When the heated stone is cracking, fire, earth (stone) and air are connected. Furthermore, if the cracking were achieved by dropping the heated stone into water (a probable scenario), the combination of elements would be complete: Fire, air, water and earth would all be present in the cracking stone. And perhaps a fifth element was considered to be the power emanating from the stone.

Making fire by striking metal against stone, or stone against stone, may give the impression that the spark – the spirit – is born from the stone. The power of the stone can therefore be imagined as compressed and petrified fire, or even as the result of a combination of elements. Just as the soul – or life force – is released from the disintegrating body, the fire is born of the stone. The fire produced from the stone is also the power that is supposed to liberate the elements from the body at the funeral pyre. This might be a reason for the presence of fire-cracked stones around depositions of cremated bones; it could symbolise the liberating fire. The bones are then surrounded by fire at the same time as they are placed in the ground – perhaps a symbolic fertilisation, bringing the elements together.

THE DIFFERENT ELEMENTS OF THE COSMOS

The occurrence of complex conceptions of the soul in prehistoric times in Scandinavia has previously been discussed on the basis of different methods of burial and elements of mortuary practice. The various features included in a cremation tradition – the burning of the body, the burning of grave goods, and the burial of the remains – have been studied from this point of view (e.g., Gräslund 1994; Kaliff 1997:20ff). By destroying the body and “locking” the remains in the cemetery, people could have manifested materially that the soul had been separated from the body. Different aspects of the deceased may have been associated with the material remains (bone and ash), the fire and the smoke. The fire and smoke in turn may have been associated with the air, or a heavenly aspect of the deceased person.

An earthbound aspect of the dead may correspondingly have been identified with the earthly remains, and the burial may have been an important ritual that supplemented the act of cremation. There is reason to believe that there occurred other important ritual acts, besides the cremation and the more well-defined bone deposits, that are less visible in the (hitherto) known archaeological material. Some of these actions may have taken place at the ritual houses and enclosures mentioned above, as well as at the heaps of fire-cracked stones. Where the major part of the cremated bones from the majority of the populations was deposited, is still an open question. One suggestion would be in running water, another in the agricultural land. The latter interpretation has support from archaeological finds of human bones in connection to ancient agricultural land. The presence of bones in such an environments is documented in clearance cairns as well as in features with a morphological resemblance to stone-settings (Ericsson 2000:25f; cf. Varenius 1994:56 ff; Kaliff 1999:111). Taking bones from cemeteries and depositing them in the field to improve the fertility is a ritual known also from historical times, and is documented in the ethnological material from different parts of Scandinavia (Hagberg 1935: 640f).

Bones deposited in running water would most certainly be difficult to detect. Modern examples show that, even when vast amounts of burnt bones are deposited in running water (such as at Pashupatinath in Nepal), there is surprisingly little evidence visible in the sediment of the riverbed downstream. After hundreds or thousands of years the fragments of burnt bones are scattered and probably dissolved by the water. Moreover, depositions in fertile land would need good preservation conditions in order to be detected after centuries or even millennia.

A cremation and the subsequent burial can be analysed as a set of technological, social and ritual transformations, consisting of three parts. Firstly, there is the place where the body was burnt or cremated. Secondly, there is the intermediary period in time and space (where the bones are either cleaned or not and then often transported). This interval increases the room for manoeuvring in those aspects concerned with the renewal, reorganisation and re-legitimation of relations among the living. Finally, there is the place where the ashes or the bones

were deposited or buried, which may be the same place where the body was cremated, but normally is not (Oestigaard 1999).

It is reasonable to assume that the actual cremation was a matter of great significance for the continued destiny of the deceased. How, then, should we interpret the further treatment of the burnt bones within this tradition? The deposition of bones and other earthly remains in the ground probably mirrors important cosmological concepts. A corresponding interpretation would be that this forms part of a belief in different elements where the separation of the elements is death, while the composition of the same elements forms life through a process of fertilisation. Putting the elements together is the re-making of the world, or cosmogony. Alternatively, the burial of certain remains in the ground may have been performed as a method to bind the remains of the deceased to the soil and earthly life – a kind of burial in the strict sense of the word. The latter interpretation does not contradict the former since the “binding” of the earthly remains in the ground could also mark the separation of elements.

AN ANALOGY: EMPTY PITS AS REMAINS OF “ASTU”?

As an inspiration for further interpretations, we will here put forward a hypothesis that the Late Bronze Age society of Scandinavia had eschatological beliefs related to the Hindu tradition. It would, by many researchers, be considered speculative to suggest any overall similarity between the Hindu tradition and the Late Bronze Age society of Scandinavia. Such interpretations could easily be rejected as based on the kind of uncritical ethnoarchaeology mentioned above. Nevertheless there are several general patterns in the Hindu tradition that could be of interest as inspiration for the interpretation of the cremation burial practice in other cultural contexts, regardless of whether or not those contexts have any direct relation. Furthermore, the Vedic tradition goes back to at least 1000 BC, probably earlier, and to a time when both religious and other ideas are presumed to have travelled over great geographical distances (e.g., Larsson 1997; Kristiansen 1998).

One aspect that makes this connection even more intriguing is, of course, the old problem of the origin of the Vedic tradition and its possible connection to the Indo-Europeans. Even if the research for a common Indo-European origin has been much criticised during recent years (Arvidsson 2000), there is little doubt that there are huge research potentials in this field. In the same way as comparative linguistic studies are fruitful, it might be meaningful to compare the ritual patterns of the ancient Indo-Iranian area with the prehistoric European context. A possible connection does not have to involve any direct contacts, although it is evident that there were direct contact between India, Iran and Greece at least in the sixth century BC (Oestigaard *in prep*). For the time being, we will put emphasis only on the indirect exchange of ideas, or a common origin of certain beliefs and religious practices.

Fundamental to the Hindu cosmology is that the living person, micro-cosmos, is identical with macro-cosmos, and that everything consists of the five elements:

fire, air, water, soil and “ether” (or “life-force”). Using this as an analogy, what would then be the possible interpretation of the features and other material remains that we can document on a Scandinavian site from the Late Bronze – Early Iron Age? We will here present some common features of the cemeteries, and their possible interpretations in light of this:

- Heaps of fire-cracked stones, stone-settings (of special design), hearths: Traces of complex altar-constructions are of great ritual importance in general, and for the funeral in particular. Fire-altars are an important cultic tool in the Vedic rituals. The altar-construction was built as a symbolic micro-cosmos, repeating the creation of the world. The main altar (*Vedi*) could be in the form of a heap or a pit where the sacrificial fires were lit, and where sacrificial utensils were placed to preserve their power. Around this were three other altars of different shapes, symbolising different aspects of the cosmos: a quadratic in the east (*Āhavaniya*); a circular altar in the west (*Gārhapatya*); and a semicircular in the south (*Dakṣina*). The fire (*Agni*) was seen as a link between earth and the heavenly fire – the sun (Hopkins 1971:20; Staal 2001; Edsman 1987:223). The interpretation of some heaps of fire-cracked stones as altars could explain their occurrence in different contexts, in cemeteries as well as at central locations in settlements. Moreover, it does not contradict the interpretation that some of the heaps were cremation-places (see below).
- The pyre: This would be the place for the transformation of the body into the separate elements. Fire would not only be the consumer of the body, but one of the elements of which it consisted. Some heaps of fire-cracked stones are likely to be cremation sites (Kaliff 1997:60ff). They could also be places where debris from the pyre had been put. The enigmatic mixture of different materials in the heaps of fire-cracked stones could indicate that the material from the pyre, or the cremation place itself, had been reused for other activities. It may have been reused in the same way as half-burnt logs and other material from the pyre is reused in Hindu societies today. Heaps of fire-cracked stones show variation both in shape and location and in the find material present. This type of feature probably represents more than one activity.
- More well-defined cremation-graves; urn-pits and other structures with large amounts of bones: These would represent only a part of the population, which would receive a burial place for the bones, thanks to a special spiritual or social status. Bone depositions of this kind could possibly be interpreted as relics of importance for the living, instead of graves in our modern western understanding of the word.
- Inhumations: Could be compared to the burial tradition concerning holy men – *sadhus* – who are not cremated. The soul is believed to be separated from the body without any special rituals, because of the spiritual maturity of the *sadhu*; they are living corpses with divine qualities. The Scandinavian inhumations could be reserved for people with a special status, but not necessarily the

same kind of status as that of the holy persons of India.

- Bones in the fields: The analogy between bones/ash from the dead and semen gives a reasonable explanation for the deposition of bones in the agricultural land. By “planting them in the field” the soil is fertilised by the bones/semen, and this helps the regeneration of life. A ritual based on a strong belief in the regeneration of the fertile land by the bones from the dead ancestors, is a reasonable hypothesis to explain why the tradition of bringing bones of the dead into the fields has lived on in parts of Scandinavia into the 19th century.
- Ritual houses/enclosures: Places for ritual acts during the mourning period and to make sure that the transformation process of the deceased proceeds in a favourable way. These could also be places for repeatedly performed festivities for the deceased.
- Pits with few or no bones: Part of the “separated” body would be placed here to mark that the *flesh* (or bones) returns to the soil. This would be an analogy to the burial of *astu* in the Hindu tradition, when a small part of flesh from the still burning body is taken and buried in the riverbed.

This is only a brief suggestion. There are of course other possible interpretations for the concepts behind each of the features/finds presented above. Nevertheless, there is a need for a broader interpretation of the whole context where they are present. This way of using an analogy could be useful for creating a deeper understanding of the actual practices (and beliefs) behind the pre-historic funerary rites. For an archaeologist, it is often relatively easy to make the interpretation that a feature probably had a ritual meaning, but much more difficult to say anything about the actual meaning of this ritual. To conclude, we will make some further comparisons between one of the more enigmatic (but often neglected) features present in the prehistoric cemeteries in Sweden, namely the “empty” pits, and the *astu*-ritual of the Hindu funeral.

As mentioned above, the presence of only a few bones in the “graves” has been discussed in general terms as symbolic representations of the body, *pars pro toto*, etc. There are seldom more specific interpretations concerning the actual meaning of this kind of feature, with a few exceptions (e.g., Ericsson & Runcis 1995; Runcis 1995). When it comes to the empty pits of the cemeteries, there have hardly been any interpretations at all. The high frequency of such features makes the interpretation of a cemetery incomplete without a discussion of the rituals that created them, as well as the conceptions behind those rituals. Pits are actually one of the most common features in cemeteries, and as such they are likely to have had a significant meaning. The presence of a large number of pits at a sacred place must have had a specific (and important) reason. This reason is likely to be found in some important eschatological belief.

If a ritual similar to the *astu*-ritual were part of the funeral tradition during the Scandinavian Bronze Age – Early Iron Age, some of the pits in the cemeteries could be possible remains of this. As discussed above, the majority of pits present

at the sites are “empty”, with no bones present. Many pits (the majority of the features containing bones) hold a small number of bones, or often only a single fragment. The empty pits may well have contained soft tissues from the body. This could be as likely as other suggested interpretations: as remains of food or libation offerings. Also the pits with one or just a few bones could be given the same interpretation: If a piece of flesh is taken from the burning corpse at a late stage during the cremation process, it would be difficult to avoid some bone fragments. Regardless whether the remains are flesh, with or without bones, or only cremated bones, the basic idea is to symbolically give one of the elements of which the body consisted back to the elements. This interpretation would match the pits in the cemeteries well. In the Hindu tradition both soft tissues and bones are sometimes included in the *astu*, even though the *astu* is buried in the riverbed rather than in the agricultural fields or pits at cemeteries. For this analogy we find the principal similarities of the cosmological conception behind the ritual to be the important factor. Consequently, the *astu*-ritual and the ritual behind the “empty” pits could be similar, without necessarily being performed in exactly the same way.

STRUCTURAL COMPARISON – A SUMMARY

We are not suggesting, of course, that contemporary Nepal is identical with a prehistoric area in what is now Sweden. What we are saying is that there are some structural variables that might be similar in the way death is incorporated into society, and how corpses are used as a means in cosmogony. It is these structural variables that we have tried to conceptualise, and this interpretative practice needs some clarification. Structural comparison is associated with the heyday of processual archaeology. Similarly, explicit analogical reasoning is often, despite equally explicit statements that these inferences are relational analogies, criticised as being formal analogies. The main argument against analogical reasoning is on which epistemological grounds it is possible to transfer knowledge from one context (in the present) to another context (in the past). The debate is often blurred and boring since all knowledge construction takes place in the present; every archaeologist uses the present as a body of references for constructions of the past, not because this situation is preferred but because nobody can escape their own contemporary society.

It is a paradox that, despite the current emphasis on agency and structure (e.g., Bourdieu and Giddens), there is an inherent reluctance in archaeology to compare structures. This hesitance has its basis in various epistemological views on structure, and here we will follow Gananath Obeyesekere (2002) in his criticism of the traditional structuralism, which opens up a field of structural comparison as a mode for investigating social phenomena.

Claude Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism is epistemologically unacceptable because it contains four fundamental premises. Firstly, it is based on the distinction between *langue* (structure) and *parole* (social phenomena) as formulated by Jackson. The ordinary world is pushed aside in the quest for some infrastructure beneath the

lived world (what today is labelled “the matrix” in the film with the same name). Secondly, structures have a binary character. Thirdly, the structures are embodied in the very constitution of human minds and brains; and fourthly, the structures are totalistic, holistic and universal. The structures do not exist on the surface, and consequently the aim of analysis is to conceptualise these unconscious infrastructures. And this is where Obeyesekere makes the important turn when he says, “*I want to seek structure not in langue but in parole...by parole I refer not to the spoken word per se but to the worlds that exist out there in what ethnographers call “culture” – the worlds of meaning to which we as human beings orient ourselves... the phenomenal world does not exist outside of meaning-frames imposed on it by human beings*” (Obeyesekere 2002:351, our emphasis).

What, then, is the point of structural comparison in archaeology? Again, in line with Obeyesekere and his interpretation of Max Weber’s “ideal types” (Weber 1949): “Models of the sort I construct in this work are simplifications of the complex empirical data and are never exactly replicated in reality. They are... “ideal types”, constructs that re-present in topographical form the world of empirical reality” (Obeyesekere 2002:16). The ideal conditions postulated by the model can serve as an understanding which exemplifies the complex conditions that always occur in empirical reality (ibid:130). In archaeology, contemporary ethnography can work as an ideal type or model, which presents a kind of reality that may give insights into a distant past. The ethnographic model will be an analytical apparatus by which knowledge of the past is generated. It is a way of thinking while approaching the past. Thus, Nepal and Sweden are still different, but since we are all humans and since social sciences aim to study humanity in its broadest terms, one may put emphasis on the existing similarities.

Ethnographers have documented, particularly in early kinship studies, near-identical structures in completely different cultural areas without contact with each other, but the implications of this fact have hardly been elaborated or theoretically explored. The idea that life-forms are incommensurable is wrong: “quite the contrary, commensurability of forms of life is possible although those life-forms are enclosed in larger life-worlds that are different, even incommensurable” (Obeyesekere 2002:354). And this is probably what Hodder meant when he said that relational analogies “demonstrate that similarities between past and present situations are relevant to the “unknowns” that are being interpreted, whereas the *differences* that can be observed do not really matter; they are not relevant because there is little link between what is different and what is suggested as being the same” (Hodder 1982:19). Finally, there is another advantage when combining archaeology and anthropology. The post-processual emphasis on narratives implies that we write and present histories, and figuratively speaking we may put some flesh on dry bones when using ethnography as a model or mode of inquiry. It makes both the past and the present more fascinating.

English revised by Laura Wrang.

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