

# Secondary Burial Practices in the Middle Neolithic

## Causes and Consequences

Åsa M. Larsson

The article discusses the increasing evidence that burial traditions in the Neolithic are more varied than is often acknowledged, and focuses especially on the evidence of cremations as a continuous practice throughout the period. This variation should not be seen primarily as a result of competing cosmologies, but rather as different ways of expressing a main body of thought, depending on the cultural context and the need of the community members. Rituals are seen as events where structure is not only displayed, but also created and negotiated in a dialogue with the participants. Rituals therefore have the potential to both hinder and facilitate the changes that take place internally or externally. Evidence of secondary burial practices is given special attention, in particular regarding the mortuary houses of eastern middle Sweden in the late Middle Neolithic, since rituals linked to this tradition have been shown to involve a wider community and to emphasize on group unity over individualism. They also grant the participants a feeling of control over death, and through this the structuration of society. By acknowledging mortuary variation, which has often been overlooked as exceptions and curiosities, we are given additional insights into prehistoric strategies and mentalities.

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Key words: Mortuary variability, rituals, cultural change, secondary burial practices, Neolithic, Middle Neolithic B, cremations, decarnation, mortuary houses

### INTRODUCTION

In archaeology, the remains of the dead and the way they were deposited have formed the basis of many early theories of prehistoric cultures. Later, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the particularistic view of cultures and the oversimplified approach to burial customs led many researchers of the processual school to try to formulate more specific theories regarding the link between the disposal of the dead and the structure of society (see Carr 1995:105f, 109f; Pearson 2000:246). While many interesting studies were undertaken, it was soon realized that there was no straightforward relationship of cause and effect between the social structure of the living and the spatial organization of the dead. Still, the processualists

illuminated the substantial anthropological literature dealing with a great variety of pre-state cultures, and its use to archaeologists. The great value of these studies does not lie in delivering blueprints for our own prehistoric societies, but rather gives us an insight into the complexity of human cultures and the creativeness of the human mind. At the same time it does display certain patterns, for instance the limited forms of kinship organization and its influence on both group and individual behaviour.

The need to broaden our concepts through the appreciation of other peoples and their cultures was also expressed by advocates of the post-processual school, though here the emphasis lay on individual strategies within the system, rather than on the system's influence over individual action. One of the most important questions raised by both the post-processualists and the structural-marxists was to what extent *ideology* is reflected in burial practices (Carr 1995:109ff). Rich graves, poor graves, individual burials or collective tombs – are we seeing a mirror image of society, or are we shown the image the culture projects of itself? And to what extent does this image mask the realities of the living? This new way of addressing the slightly discredited subject of mortuary analysis revitalized the issue after many processualists, by their own admission, had become disillusioned.

In the past decade a number of interesting articles on mortuary analysis have been written, from a structural, contextual or Marxist perspective. At the same time archaeologists in the field have also made progress; each year brings new finds and new ways to abstract information from them. This seems to confuse and complicate our picture of prehistory, as much as it sheds new light on it. The Neolithic of north-eastern Europe presents a complicated picture: there are several cultures, and regional variations of these cultures, identified during its 2000-year span. They are often mainly defined by burial practices, since settlements are quite difficult to discover. These mortuary traditions leave strong imprints on our minds and therefore on how we view the cultures in general: Some examples that illustrate this are the impressive megaliths of the late Funnel Beaker culture, the strictly regulated single graves of the Battle Axe culture, and the individuality of the burials of the Pitted Ware culture. All of them contain inhumations, which creates a clear contrast to the cremations of the Bronze Age. Yet things are not quite as simple.

As will be discussed in the following section, there is an ever increasing number of cremations dated to the Neolithic, and in several instances these burials seem to hint at more elaborate mortuary practices. Pits and features containing the remains of multiple individuals showing evidence of being subjected not only to fire but in some cases also to defleshing, have given the question of the occurrence of secondary mortuary rituals new priority. Identifying this practice in prehistoric communities would imply more than just highlighting an odd tradition. Mortuary ceremonies in general are notable events in the lives of individuals and central to the formulation of cosmology and the reproduction of social structure, and secondary mortuary rituals have been shown to elaborate this context to an

extraordinary degree. Therefore evidence supporting the hypothesis that many Neolithic cremations are linked to this practice will be presented, and the wider implications of the causes and consequences of the occurrence will be discussed.

## NEOLITHIC CREMATIONS

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, several Swedish archaeologists discussed the parallel practice of cremations during the Neolithic (see Hansen 1937; Lindqvist 1944). The number of known graves was much smaller back then of course, and the few examples of burnt human bones were therefore more obvious. As more graves were discovered and excavated, general patterns appeared, and since many researchers were aiming for clear definitions of prehistoric cultures the majority came to eclipse the minority, until the absence of cremations in Scandinavia before the Bronze Age became a truism (e.g. Hodder 1990:216). The definition of the Battle Axe culture is a case in point; Malmer's thesis has been the definitive guide to the Swedish Battle Axe culture since its publication in 1962, and has largely shaped our view of what that culture *should* look like. In it he applies rigid empirical criteria to the archaeological material in order to give his interpretations a more scientific foundation and to identify general traits with which to define prehistoric culture. Even though he discusses all burials known at the time, including the possibility of cremations, it is the general practice of crouched inhumations which is emphasized and which has made the strongest impression upon us. The picture thus displayed of a rigid and conservative society is not necessarily wrong, but variation is present in *all* societies. Ignoring it or delegating it to a shelf for curiosities is to lose important information. One danger of this attitude is to get stuck in a loop: culture A always buries its dead in fashion B, and therefore only fashion B is recorded as a burial belonging to culture A...

Information on the occurrence of burned human remains in Neolithic settlements or in burials is often spread by word of mouth, but is largely ignored in published interpretations and discussions. For instance, scattered burned human bones are occasionally found in Pitted Ware settlements, but in the excavation reports they are mentioned only briefly and are often interpreted as destroyed Iron Age burials. The reason for this interpretation is seldom openly stated but presumably it is often based on the preconception that cremations do not occur during the Neolithic. The problem with dating burnt bones, which existed until recently, has of course made archaeologists hesitant to include the bones in their discussions. Thus the catch-22 scenario continues: cremations should only occur after the Stone Age, and therefore no cremations are interpreted as belonging to Stone Age cultures.

Only lately have we started to actively acknowledge that cremations do indeed occur as early as the Mesolithic, and appear repeatedly in all of the cultures of the Neolithic. At the Mesolithic burial ground in Skateholm, Skåne, there are three examples of cremations; two of them were found in pits, and one of these included a burnt flint axe (Larsson 1988a:118). The third collection of burnt human bones

was found in what was interpreted as a mortuary building. Some of the postholes in this building also contained remains from cremations (ibid:117). At the Early Neolithic site of Fågelbacken, Västmanland, several pits were identified containing cremated human bones from a number of individuals of both sexes, all of them adults with one exception (Fig. 1). The pits often included Funnel Beaker pottery and remains from more than one individual (Apel *et al.* 1995:81; Guinard 1998:29f). At Östra Vrå, Södermanland, two remarkable stone packings have been excavated. They included Funnel Beaker pottery, crushed grinding stones and, at the bottom, burned and unburned remains of young children. They were dated to the end of the Early Neolithic (Kihlstedt 1996:74f; Kihlstedt *et al.* 1997:118).

Malmer discusses six possible cremation burials belonging to the Battle Axe culture: Kvilla Södergård, Småland; Täby and Katrineholm, Södermanland; V. Hoby, Skåne; and Borgebund and Drange, Norway (1962:223ff; 1975:41f). He expressed some doubt as to the authenticity of several of the cremations, since they had not been excavated by archaeologists. However, the Borgebund burial at Råde parish, Norway, was indeed recognized as a cremation (Fig. 2). Measuring

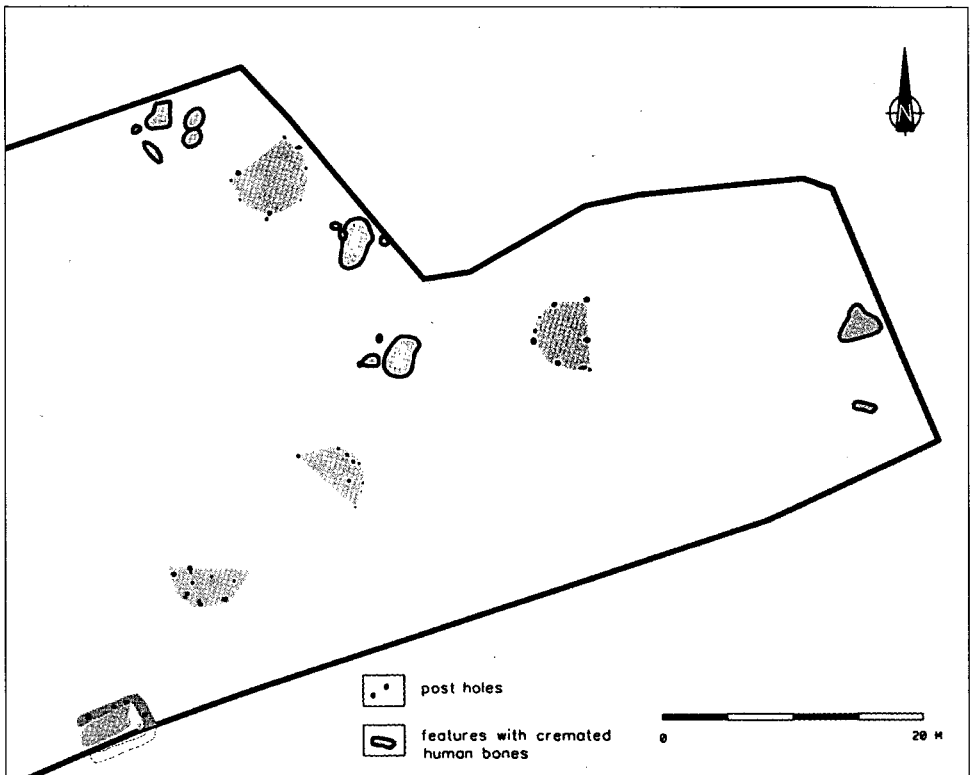


Fig. 1. The Funnel Beaker settlement at Fågelbacken, Västmanland, showing the features containing burned human bones; four of the possible hut remains; and in the lower left corner the feature interpreted as a cult/decarnation house (after Sundström in press).

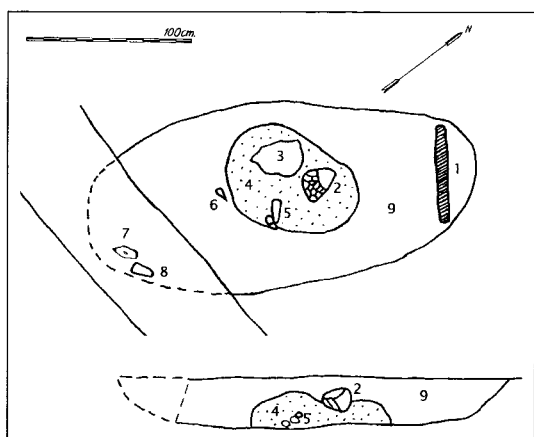


Fig. 2. The Battle Axe burial at Borgebund, Norway. 1: charred wood; 2: Battle Axe pot; 3: compact layer of ash; 4: layer of ash on top of birch-bark; 5: two burned thick-butted flint axes; 6: burned flint flake; 7: battle axe; 8: stone axe (after Gjessing 1942:218).

2.5x1.3 m, the feature contained soot and a compact layer of ashes with burned human bones, two fire cracked thick-butted flint axes, a pot identified as Malmer's type B:2, as well as a stone axe and a battle axe (Gjessing 1942; Hinsch 1954:178f, 211). Although it was

partly damaged, it seems likely that the V. Hoby find is also genuine, since apart from the burned human bones it contained Battle Axe pottery and a burned flint axe (Hansen 1917:76f; 1937:206f). Other interesting examples include the Battle Axe burial no. 78 at Löderup 15: outside a wooden cist, but inside the feature itself, was a hearth containing burned human and animal bones, as well as pottery sherds with comb ornamentation (ATA).

The Pitted Ware settlement of Jettböle, Åland, presents a complex picture of Neolithic burial rituals. Here were found, apart from one "regular" inhumation, scattered bones in the cultural layer and a concentration containing at least seven individuals and some animal bones. All in all 14 individuals were identified at Jettböle: nine adults (men and women), one youth and four young children (Götherström *et al.* 2001:8). On several bones, especially on those from the concentration, cut marks were discovered. These form a pattern consistent with the separation of the extremities at the joints (*ibid*:10). Most of the bones also showed evidence of having been subjected to fire, ranging from blackened to completely calcinated bones (Nuñez 1995:62).

Steineke (1997:7) mentions several settlement sites where burned and unburned human bones have been found in the layers. Settlements with cremated bones include Nymölla III and Istaby, Skåne; Siretorp, Blekinge; and Alby, Öland. However, they are seldom discussed in depth, and the presence of Iron Age graves at the latter site complicates the issue. Steineke also lists several Danish Neolithic sites with cremations (*ibid*).

The practice of cremation might even be more widespread than previously thought. Several passage graves have included cremations that are tentatively dated to the Middle Neolithic on the basis of the grave goods found with them. Examples include Ramshög, Skåne, where the bones were found by the entrance together with a thin-bladed flint axe and pottery belonging to the Middle Neolithic B. Trollasten and Hindby, Skåne, and Hagebrogård and Jordhøj, Denmark, all have cremations associated with finds from the Middle Neolithic (Burenhult 1973;

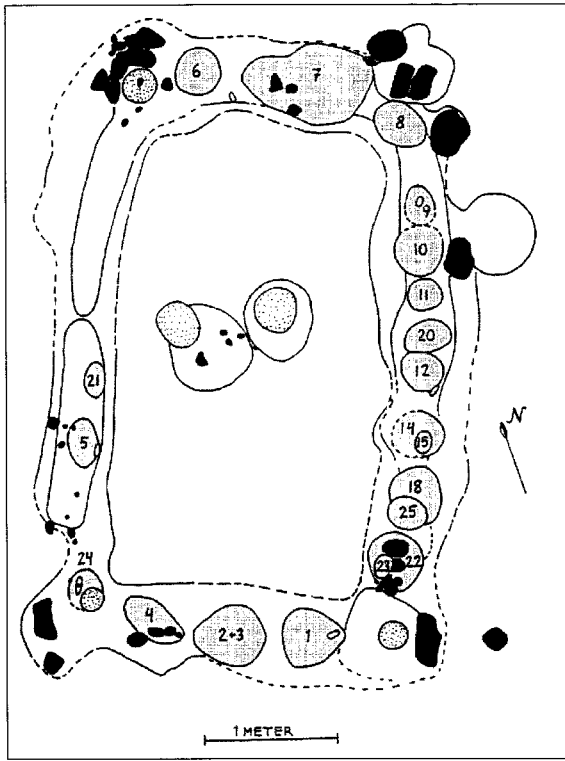


Fig. 3. The mortuary house of Turinge, Södermanland. The pits containing cremated human bones are marked with numbers, postholes are dotted, stones are black. The burial pits are concentrated in the eastern part of the house, the battle axe was found in pit 24, in the SW corner (after Lindström 2000:19).

Kaul 1994). Add to that the burned human bones found at the Sarup enclosures (Andersen 1997) and we have indeed a very complex picture of Neolithic burial practices.

Cremated human bones at settlement sites and in megaliths have always posed a problem to interpretation: Are they truly remains from the Neolithic, or were they deposited during later times? As previously mentioned, up until recently we have not been able to directly date the

contentious bones, but with the latest breakthrough in the radiocarbon method of dating (Lanting & Brindley 1998), we are on our way to solving that problem. Even so, we already have much evidence for variation in burial practices throughout the Neolithic.

#### THE MORTUARY HOUSES OF TURINGE AND BOLLBACKEN.

In 1993, during an excavation in Turinge parish, Södermanland, a rectangular trench was discovered, 4.6x2.8m, with postholes at the corners (Fig. 3). In the trench some 15 pits were found, mostly in the eastern part, filled with charcoal, pottery, stone tools and cremated bones. On closer inspection the majority of the bones were determined as human, and at least seven individuals have been identified: men, women and children. The few animal bones belonged to sheep/goat. Of the six axes recovered, one was a battle axe typologically dated to the late Middle Neolithic B and one was a thick-butted flint axe. At least 20 pots have been identified. Some of them were well preserved and all belonged to the Battle Axe culture, mainly to group J, with one exception: one pot belonged to the poorly defined "3<sup>rd</sup> Group", which constitutes a blend of the pottery techniques, shapes and ornamentations of the Battle Axe culture and the Pitted Ware culture (Lindström 2000:fig. 12). Apart from one flint scraper found within the house, no objects had been subjected to fire. The interior of the house was comparatively

free of materials, apart from the above mentioned flint scraper and some sherds of pottery (Lindström 2000).

That same year a settlement,  $^{14}\text{C}$ -dated to the Middle Neolithic B, was excavated at Bollbacken, Tortuna parish, Västmanland. At the time of its existence it lay on an island in the inner archipelago, and the ceramics and artefacts found on the site were typical of the Pitted Ware culture. Six small houses were identified; all of them were outlined by postholes except for one, which consisted of a rectangular trench filled with ashes, charcoal, pottery sherds and some cremated bones belonging to both animals and humans (Fig. 4). In addition, several pits of varying sizes were found to the west and south of the house, containing pottery, stone tools and burnt human and animal bones, such as dog and seal. This whole area was separated from the rest of the settlement by a semicircular row of posts (Fig. 5).  $^{14}\text{C}$ -datings from the trench and the pits all fall within the Middle Neolithic B. As with the rest of the settlement, the artefacts are typical of the Pitted Ware culture. At the northern part of the site less than 0.5 kg of Battle Axe pottery was recovered, but not from the mortuary house, and this should be compared to the 21 kg of decorated Pitted Ware pottery found altogether. Interestingly enough, Bollbacken also yielded some sherds belonging to the hybrid 3<sup>rd</sup> Group, a few of which were found in one of the pits containing human bones (Artursson 1996).

There are some additional thought-provoking similarities and differences between the two sites. First, as previously stated the Bollbacken house was situated by the Neolithic shoreline, and so in fact was Turinge. This is somewhat odd since settlements, burials and stray finds belonging to the Battle Axe culture generally are found in the interior (Welinder 1974; Hallgren 1996). The Bollbacken mortuary house was found in connection with a settlement, but there are no indications that there existed a contemporaneous settlement in close vicinity to the Turinge house, in fact it was constructed in isolation on the edge of a small peninsula. However, this demarcation might be symbolically mirrored in the semicircular row of postholes that separates the Bollbacken mortuary house from the proper settlement.

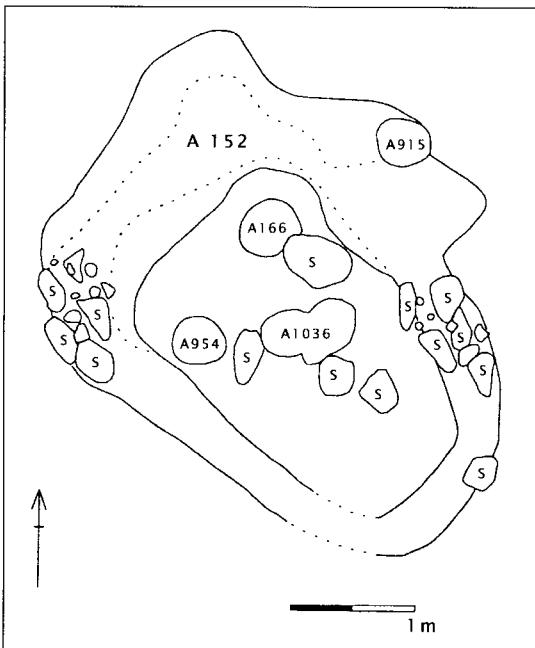


Fig. 4. The mortuary house at Bollbacken, Västmanland. Features A152, A166 and A954 contained burned human and animal bones (Artursson 1996:131).

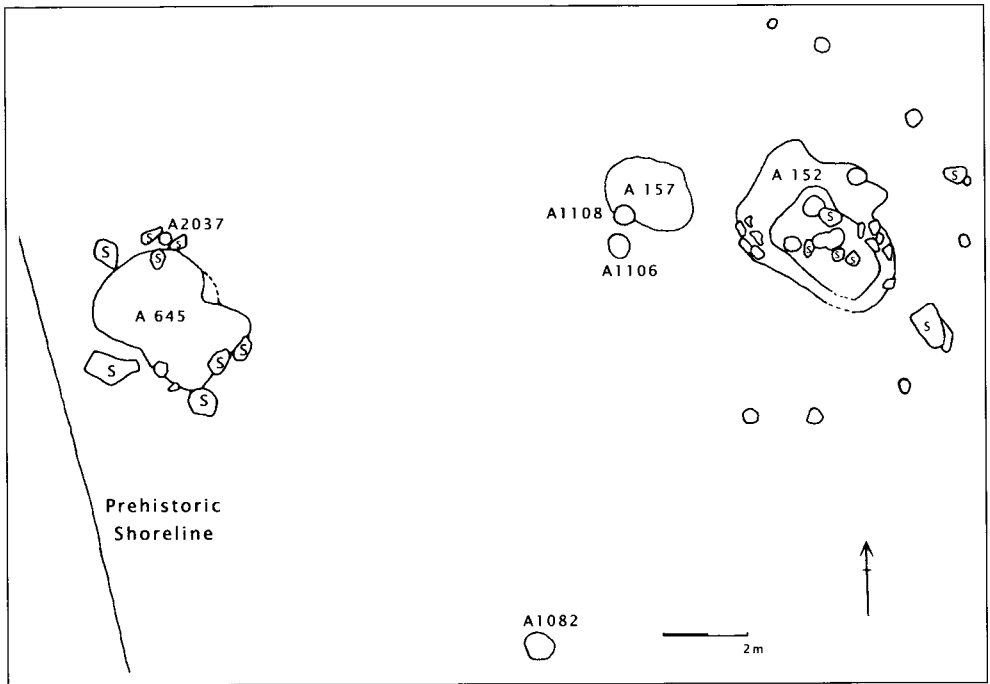


Fig. 5. The mortuary area at Bollbacken, with postholes forming a semi-circular border against the rest of the settlement which is situated to the north and east of the mortuary house. Features containing cremated human bones are shown, as is the approximate position of the shoreline during the Middle Neolithic B (after Artursson 1996:62).

This area was obviously seen as a part of the mortuary house, since additional pits with human bones were found within it. Also, both the trenches seem to have been dug outside the house; since the internal border was nearly vertical, the excavators suggested a construction reminiscent of Danish mortuary houses, whose walls were built of planks (Artursson 1996:360f; Lindström 2000:28). Regardless of the similarity in construction, the “gifts” found in connection with the human bones reflected the respective cultures; there were no Battle Axe culture artefacts in the Bollbacken mortuary area, and no Pitted Ware culture artefacts at Turinge. The animal bones strengthen this picture; at the former dogs and seals were included, at the latter sheep/goat.

A similar trench had been discovered in 1970 beneath a Bronze Age mound in Veddige parish, Halland, on the west coast of Sweden (Fig. 6). It contained ashes, burnt flint, some poorly preserved cremated human bones, as well as sherds of Battle Axe pottery. It was situated 12.5 m.a.p.s.l. which puts it right by the shoreline at the very end of the Middle Neolithic B (Särilvik 1975). No one working on the site or on the report was particularly interested in evidence of Neolithic cremations, so the whole thing went unnoticed until the discovery of the more wellpreserved mortuary houses, at a time when interest in such structures was



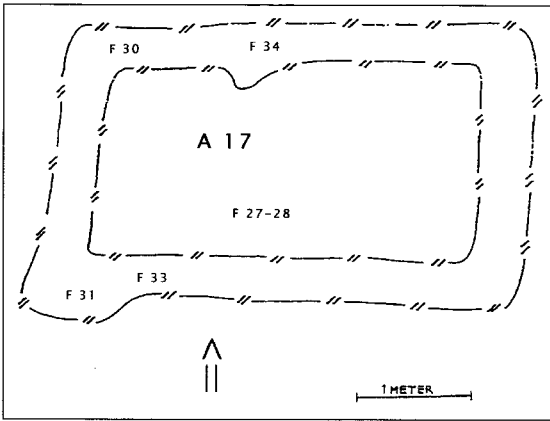


Fig. 6. The trench house of Veddige, Hal-land, found beneath a Bronze Age mound. F28, F30 and F31 are concentrations of cremated bones, some of which are identified as human (after Särilvik 1975:13).

more pronounced. Also, during an excavation in the 1980s of the Neolithic settlements at Häggsta, Botkyrka parish, Södermanland, a large “pit” (A67) was discovered which on closer inspection proved to be confined by a rectangular trench (Fig. 7) (Olsson

1996:112, 206). While cremated bones were found within the trench, these proved to be only from animals, both wild and domesticated. However, a small concentration of cremated human bones belonging to one adult was found to the NW of the house, and Olsson seems inclined to connect these remains to the Neolithic phase (1996:70, 166; 1999:57). The structure and area were <sup>14</sup>C- and TL-dated to the Middle Neolithic A, which is consistent with the stone tools and the Pitted Ware pottery in the Fagervik III and IV styles found there (1996:127). Olsson notes the absence of proper settlement material in the area surrounding the structure and points out that it was situated close to the prehistoric shoreline. She suggests that the building could have had a ritual function (1999).

### SECONDARY BURIAL PRACTICES

Apart from being rather irrefutable evidence of cremation during the Neolithic, the mortuary houses of Bollbacken and Turinge have been interpreted by both Artursson and Lindström as decarnation houses, where the bodies were stored before the bones were burned. This would make them a part of *secondary burial rituals*. This is a well-known form of mortuary tradition which

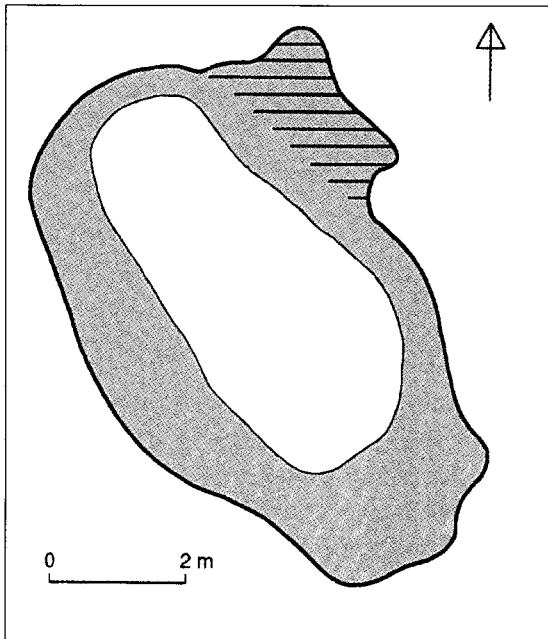


Fig. 7. The trench at Häggsta, Södermanland. Note that it is almost twice as large as the other trench houses discussed in this article (after Olsson 1999:56).

is present all over the world and with numerous variations, but which nevertheless has a few common hallmarks. It should not be confused with the archaeological concept of secondary burials in, for instance, Bronze Age burial mounds. Instead, this is a tradition whose most important aspect is that the deceased is not considered properly buried until a second ceremony is held, when there is sorting, cleansing and/or reburial of the bones.

Secondary burial practices in the Neolithic have been a subject for discussion among archaeologists before. It was first suggested in relation to the Funnel Beaker culture, since the passage graves show evidence of reburial and sorting of the bones after decarnation. There has been some controversy over this, where some archaeologists suggest that the megaliths are really *ossuaries*, bone houses, and that the dead were initially buried or laid out elsewhere and only brought to the tomb after decarnation (see Gräslund 1994 for discussion). Some have pointed out that only parts of the skeleton are found and that the ribs and smaller bones from the hands and feet are missing (e.g. Thorsen 1981). However, as Bennike makes clear, these parts are also the most susceptible to decay and the main target of rodents and other scavengers, the teeth marks of which have been found on several bones in Danish megalithic tombs (1985:470, 1990:73). Indeed, it is a well-known forensic fact that mice and rats quickly destroy these parts of corpses. Also in some tombs excavators have noted a dark, greasy layer and it is quite possible that this is the product of decayed body fat (Kaul 1994:8f).

Still, whether the dead were initially laid out in the passage graves themselves or somewhere else, is *not* relevant to the question of whether secondary burial rituals were practiced or not. The fact that some kind of treatment of the bodies occurred when they were at least partly defleshed is enough to indicate that it was indeed practiced. And this does indeed seem to be the case since the sorting of human bones is evident in several megalithic tombs (Shanks & Tilley 1982; Damm 1991:45; Ahlström 2001:301ff). It is not a prerequisite of secondary burial practices that the decarnation and the reburial should take place at different locations. This brings us to the question of what exactly is a secondary burial?

As stated above, in some cultures the mortuary ritual is not considered completed until a second ceremony is held, which generally includes reburial and/or some kind of treatment of the body. The latter can include cleaning the body of decaying flesh, beautifying it, sorting the bones and/or removing one or more parts of the body. The reburial itself may not include the whole body, but only parts of it such as the skull. Secondary burial is not as uncommon as one might think, in fact it appears in every part of the world and in all kinds of cultures: this includes hierarchic fisher-gatherers in Northwest America (Tlingit, Haida); hunting horticulturalists in South America (Bororo-Canella) and on Borneo (Berawan); hunter-gatherers in Australia (Tiwi); farmers in Spain (Basque) and on Madagascar (Bara, Merina); and monarchies in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Bali), to name but a few. The liminal period between the first and second burial may last a few months or several decades, depending on the cultural norm. A common denominator is

that the flesh should at least be sufficiently decayed so that the bones can be cleaned.

In 1907 (Eng. transl. 1960) Robert Hertz published an in-depth analysis of secondary mortuary rituals in Indonesia. Being a disciple of Durkheim, Hertz wished to show that human conduct based on supposedly very strong, private emotions, such as those surrounding a death, were structured by culture. He stipulated that burials are important events in a society, not because of the loss of the *biological* individual but rather the *social* one. Society has lost a link in the chain, and therefore society must recover what it has granted to the individual and reinstate someone else in his/her place. This is why, Hertz argued, adults and important people are given more elaborate funerals than children and low ranking members. Societies that practice secondary burial simply make use of the concepts inherent in *rites of passage*, as described by van Gennep: first a period of disaggregation in a temporary grave during which the soul of the dead is perceived to be in a state of liminality; then a reinstallation as ancestor where the obligations and privileges of the deceased are handed over to living members of the community. Through this society recreates itself.

Hertz's analysis was later discussed by Metcalf & Huntington (1991 [1979]), who concentrated on the correlation he had found between the treatment of the corpse and the conceived state of the soul. The defleshing of the body, leaving only the bones, was in some Asian cultures seen as a direct parallel to the journey of the soul to the land of the dead. During this time the primary mourners were also in a state of liminality, to be reinstated in society when the deceased had joined the ancestral community. These two analyses were criticized in turn by Bloch & Parry (1982). They prefer to see the members of the community as more active in the social process and not just programmed by the prevailing structure or cosmology.

If we can speak of a reassertion of the social order at the time of death, this social order is a *product* of rituals of the kind we consider rather than their cause. In other words, it is not so much a question of Hertz's reified 'society' responding to the 'sacrilege' of death, as of the mortuary rituals themselves being an occasion for *creating* that 'society' as an apparently external force. (Bloch & Parry 1982:6) (orig. italics)

Mortuary rituals in general are potentially very powerful occasions, since the basic questions of life and death take centre stage. Among people practising secondary burial rites, the initial ceremony which follows the death of an individual is often very emotional. The grief is new and immediate, and the persona of the dead still fresh in the minds of the living. But the *secondary* ritual gives the living a feeling of control, as well as a possibility to organize the whole affair to an extent not otherwise feasible by letting it take place after a certain amount of time or in a specific season. In contrast to the first, the second ceremony is often portrayed as a joyous occasion, a time for celebration not grief (Bloch 1982:214,

216; Kan 1989:192, 296; Wiessner & Tumu 1998:211f). This is when death is negated by the symbolic rebirth into the eternal collectivity of the ancestors. Death as a disruption, rather than being a problem for the social order, is in fact an opportunity for dramatically *creating* it, which is why mortuary rituals often hold such a unique position in many societies (Bloch 1982:218f). And the most effective way of defining a concept is by elaborating what it is *not*. By symbolically associating individuality with flesh, and focusing on the horror and pollution of its decomposition, an anti-thesis to the purity, unity and continuation of society as personified by the ancestors is set up (Bloch 1982:218; Bloch & Parry 1982:11).

However, contrasting the decomposing individual with the ancestral collectivity is not the only important feature of secondary burial rites. By postponing the final ceremony, the intermediate period can be used to gather enough provisions to provide a generous feast for invited guests, particularly affines (Kan 1989; Kuijt 1996:317f). The gathering of a wider community serves many functions. It gives the hosts an opportunity to display internal unity and strength, it puts old obligations and alliances to the test, and it creates opportunities for individuals to reaffirm and renegotiate social roles (Chesson 1999:142f, 154). While personal agendas may be at work beneath the surface, ideally a feeling of solidarity and harmony permeates the hosting community. Common origins and common goals are stressed, sharing and generosity encouraged, and everyone is included regardless of age, gender and status (Kan 1989:193; Wiessner & Tumu 1998:180, 211f). Weiner refers to these events as “*moments of spectacular visual communication*” (1976:61).

A few archaeologists have made serious attempts to implement theories about secondary mortuary ritual on prehistoric materials, discussing the implications of this practice and how it could have influenced the societies in question over time (e.g. Barrett 1996; Chesson 1999; Kuijt 1996). They stress that the practice could have been instrumental in suppressing individual strategies and tensions and strengthening group unity, as well as setting up the concept of an ancestral community as a source of prosperity and moral guidance.

To sum up, three major aspects are repeatedly mentioned as hallmarks of secondary burial practice:

1. The portrayal of the dead as a collective rather than as individuals.
2. The participation of a wider community and the strengthening of group identity among the living.
3. A social arena for the living.

#### IDENTIFYING DECARNATION FROM CREMATED BONES

The question still remains whether the mortuary houses of Bollbacken, Turinge and Veddige were used as decarnation houses before cremation – if the bodies were defleshed before being placed on the funeral pyre. This is a complicated issue, but not an impossible one. In fact, it has been noted that the degree of

decarnation can be ascertained by studying the cracks on bones exposed to fire. It is not a straightforward or uncomplicated method, and so far only a few studies and experiments have been published, but they all agree on the general traits. In my seminar paper in archaeo-osteology at Stockholm University I compiled all the information I could find regarding this matter, and then used the findings when analyzing the bones from the mortuary area at Bollbacken (Å. Larsson 1997).

In short, the bones crack when they are dehydrated during incineration, and the fresher they are the greater the tension and the more marked the cracks. Dry bones which have lost their organic material gradually over time will crack the least, while fresh bones will have many, deep and often elliptical cracks. There is also a difference between bones still surrounded by flesh and those that have been defleshed. The latter, often referred to as “green”, still retain most of their organic material and often become deformed or peeled. Defleshing of the body can occur quite rapidly, especially if the individual died during the summer when the temperature is high and rodents and insects (e.g. flies, ants) are most active. In those instances, no more than a couple of weeks would be enough to remove most of the flesh from a dead body left unburied. Since secondary burial practice has no minimum time limit other than what is culturally prescribed, defleshing often being its only criterion, bodies might have been kept for less than a month in the mortuary house. It is also quite common to wait until enough people have died to be able to throw an impressive feast. This means that bodies cremated during the final ceremony may be at varying stages of decarnation, from the recently deceased to the completely skeletonized. At both Turlinge and Bollbacken several pits contained more than one individual, which is partly why the excavators suspected this particular mortuary practice. None of this makes the analysis any simpler, of course.

I will not describe the entire procedure of the analysis, or the complete evaluation of the method, but will only state that the results were cautiously positive in the respect that some of the human bones at Bollbacken were probably cremated defleshed or dry. In support of this is the fact that the animal bones found in the same pits were far more often interpreted as having been put on the pyre in fleshed condition, indicating that they were some sort of offering. Future research, and especially future experiments, will help refine the method and give us new insights into prehistoric mortuary practice. For now, it may be enough to say that so far nothing contradicts the theory that the mortuary house at Bollbacken was used as a decarnation house, quite the contrary.

## CONSEQUENCES FOR CULTURAL ANALYSIS

How should we view these variations in mortuary practice? As exceptions that probe the rule, curiosities with only a fleeting impact on society, or as integral and important clues to prehistoric cosmology and strategies? It is my opinion that we must begin to acknowledge all the “oddities” unearthed at excavations, since

the habit of omitting them from our interpretations has led to an oversimplified view of prehistoric cultures. Mortuary variation is not uncommon; on the contrary it is the rule in most societies, including our own. Neither does it necessarily imply competing world-views. Pawnee and Arikara in North America, Kharias and Gonds in India, and Jukagiris in Siberia all have in common that they practice both inhumation and cremation, but under different circumstances. For some cultures cremation is the rule and inhumation the exception, for others the opposite is true. Some only cremate deviants or the poor, while others do the opposite. In cultures practising secondary burial rituals, the second part may include either a mere cleaning of the bones, or a proper cremation. They can easily be seen as complimentary practices, since the end result is the same: a purification of the bones and a collectivisation of the individual.

This raises the question of whether secondary burial rituals have surfaced more than once during the Neolithic. As mentioned above, the Early Neolithic settlement site of Fågelbacken had several pits with cremated human remains and often more than one individual in each pit. It also had a structure interpreted as a possible mortuary house, containing large quantities of well-preserved pottery and an increased phosphate level, indicating that it may have served as a decarnation house like those at Bollbacken and Turinge (Apel *et al.* 1995:82f). From the Middle Neolithic A we have the extensive use of passage graves which may indicate an elaboration of this burial tradition, and in central Sweden we find the Häggsta feature, the Alvastra Pile Dwelling (Browall 1986) and other traces of Pitted Ware culture cremations and scattered human bones at settlements. It is also important to note that the passage graves continue to be used in the Middle Neolithic B (Damm 1991), and that some cremation burials may actually have been placed there during this period. Further analyses and datings of these burned bones will clarify the picture in the future.

I wish to emphasize that I in no way consider this to be evidence of an unchanged burial ritual all through the Neolithic, irrespective of culture. On the contrary, I am convinced that many traits changed according to context, and that some parts were stressed at the expense of others. I believe this may be a good example of how rituals have been used to deal with and steer changes taking place both within and outside of a society, and how the relationship between people and their rituals is a very dynamic one. There are numerous examples of change and innovation being negotiated mainly in ritual circumstances, because this is when structure is defined and redefined (Kan 1989:195f; Wiessner 2002:243). Keeping this in mind, there are general characteristics of secondary burial practices that stay the same in different cultures with different social structures, and which might explain their “popularity”. Mainly they allow a measure of control over a potentially disruptive event, creating a strong link between the ideal view of reality and the authorities that be. Funerary practices are central ideological events in that they appropriate biological and psychological phenomena in order to *represent* them so that they appear homogenous with

legitimate authority, which is often linked to continuity and fertility. Authority is verified by appearing as the natural order because it incorporates the obvious processes of biology and corresponds to deeply felt emotions (Bloch 1982:227). Authorities legitimise their claims to power and influence by appearing as the caretakers of a well-organised world, which is poignantly expressed in secondary mortuary rituals. By focusing on a collective of ancestors, a powerful force of moral and ethical guardians with the responsibility of assuring group prosperity and fertility is created (Bloch & Parry 1982:11; Chesson 1999:163). To challenge the values brought forth in the ceremony is to endanger the whole group, indeed to question the cosmology of society itself.

As a counterbalance to the growing literature on aggrandizers and entrepreneurs, several researchers have begun to acknowledge the strong opposing forces of egalitarianism in societies. Community-centred rituals and cults play a strong part in these strategies (Kuijt 1996; Wiessner & Tumu 1998; Wiessner 2002). They involve a wider range of the community since affines and allies are given an opportunity to meet and show internal and external strength and unity. The ideal image put forward is of the dead as a community, lacking the individual rivalries and interests they had when alive. This may be in complete opposition to the realities of everyday life, but by elevating it to the realm of the cosmological order, it might curtail competition and guide the actions of both groups and individuals to a certain extent. To follow the culturally prescribed norms put forward in the ceremony is to ensure the continued existence and prosperity of the community. Through the ancestors the ritual experts have a method of controlling change, or indeed preventing it.

“[T]he cults provided a counterpoint of opposing ideals – ones of equality, sharing, and cooperation within and across boundaries that limited or structured the growing competition. They reweave the fabric of society when it was torn by competition, in order to re-establish continuity and balance in relation to the past, for the present, and to lead into the future.” (Wiessner & Tumu 1998:213)

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

When we look at eastern central Sweden in the Middle Neolithic B, we see an apparent cultural dichotomy which lasted for almost half a millennium, with little or no evidence of assimilation on either part. The Battle Axe culture was a regional version of the continental Corded Ware complex, and when this complex was transformed into the Late Neolithic culture around 2300 B.C. the Battle Axe culture disappears. This continental change also affected the Pitted Ware culture, whose settlements and burials largely vanish at the same time and with them the cultural dichotomy, so that eastern central Sweden in the Late Neolithic presents a more homogenous picture of material culture. However, such a transformation had *not* taken place 500 years earlier when the Corded Ware complex replaced the Funnel

Beaker culture in southern Sweden. So what connection had developed between the Pitted Ware culture and the Battle Axe culture that had not existed between the former and the Middle Neolithic Funnel Beaker culture of southern Sweden? The Pitted Ware culture had resisted continental influence for over a millennium in eastern central Sweden; the disappearance of their material culture and way of life can not be explained as resulting only from changes in climate or the introduction of “superior” farmers.

How can an increased knowledge of rituals in general, and secondary mortuary rituals in particular, give us new insights into prehistoric strategies and events? If we return to the mortuary houses of Bollbacken and Turinge, and accept that they might indeed be the remains of secondary burial practices, a whole range of new implications follows. The houses are of such a specific construction, the circumstances so similar and the dates more or less contemporaneous, that we must assume the Battle Axe culture and the Pitted Ware culture practiced more or less the same ritual. This ritual would include reaching out to a wider community, including affines, allies and exchange partners. The hosts would have been able to control the timing and manner of the ceremony, and therefore have enough time to organize a feast for their guests. During the cremation and reburial, the individuality of the dead would be suppressed and the collective force of the ancestors stressed, and through them the unity of the living community. Affines and allies would play their part as the structure of society was redefined, and all participants would be assigned their place in the cosmological order. Even though individual agendas and interests would later resurface, during the ceremony a strong sense of togetherness and connection with more transcending values would certainly hold sway.

The questions then present themselves: did the Battle Axe culture and the Pitted Ware culture, two groups with otherwise quite dissimilar burial practices and ways of life, make use of this ritual to formulate a cosmology in which both groups had their place and meaning? Did the emphasis on group unity over individual ambition facilitate co-existence in a time of potential conflict and change? And did this joining at the emotional moment of burial, when the very structure of society was defined and redefined, lead to the coding of their co-existence as a cosmological symbiosis?

My belief is that we can not look solely at the *general* patterns in material culture in order to understand the choices made and the changes that took place within and between prehistoric groups. We must also become aware of the variation that is present in all societies, and which is put to use by both individuals and communities as strategies for guiding or preventing change. Variations and exceptions are never a coincidence, nor are they meaningless; to acknowledge them is to acknowledge the complexity and dynamics of prehistoric societies and peoples.

*English revised by Laura Wrang.*



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## ABBREVIATION

ATA Antikvariskt Topografiskt Arkiv (Statens Historiska Museum)