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# Governed by Grief, Fear and Reverence

## Dealing with the Dead and the Buried during the Middle Neolithic on Gotland

The Middle Neolithic sites on Gotland are characterized by variety in the handling of human remains. In addition to burials with complete and intact skeletons and package-burials, some contexts contain mutilated bodies, or they contain a few human bones or none. These practices have previously been interpreted as resulting from modern disturbances such as ploughing or pre-depositional treatment of dead bodies. Based on re-examination of the field documentation and C14-dates, I argue that the diverse ways of treating human skeletal remains represent post-depositional practices, and I propose that part of the mortuary practices was to reopen graves and exhume bones. During the Middle Neolithic, death might have been conceptualized as a process, and treatment of the dead and the buried could have been governed by a variety of emotions like grief, fear and reverence.

## Introduction

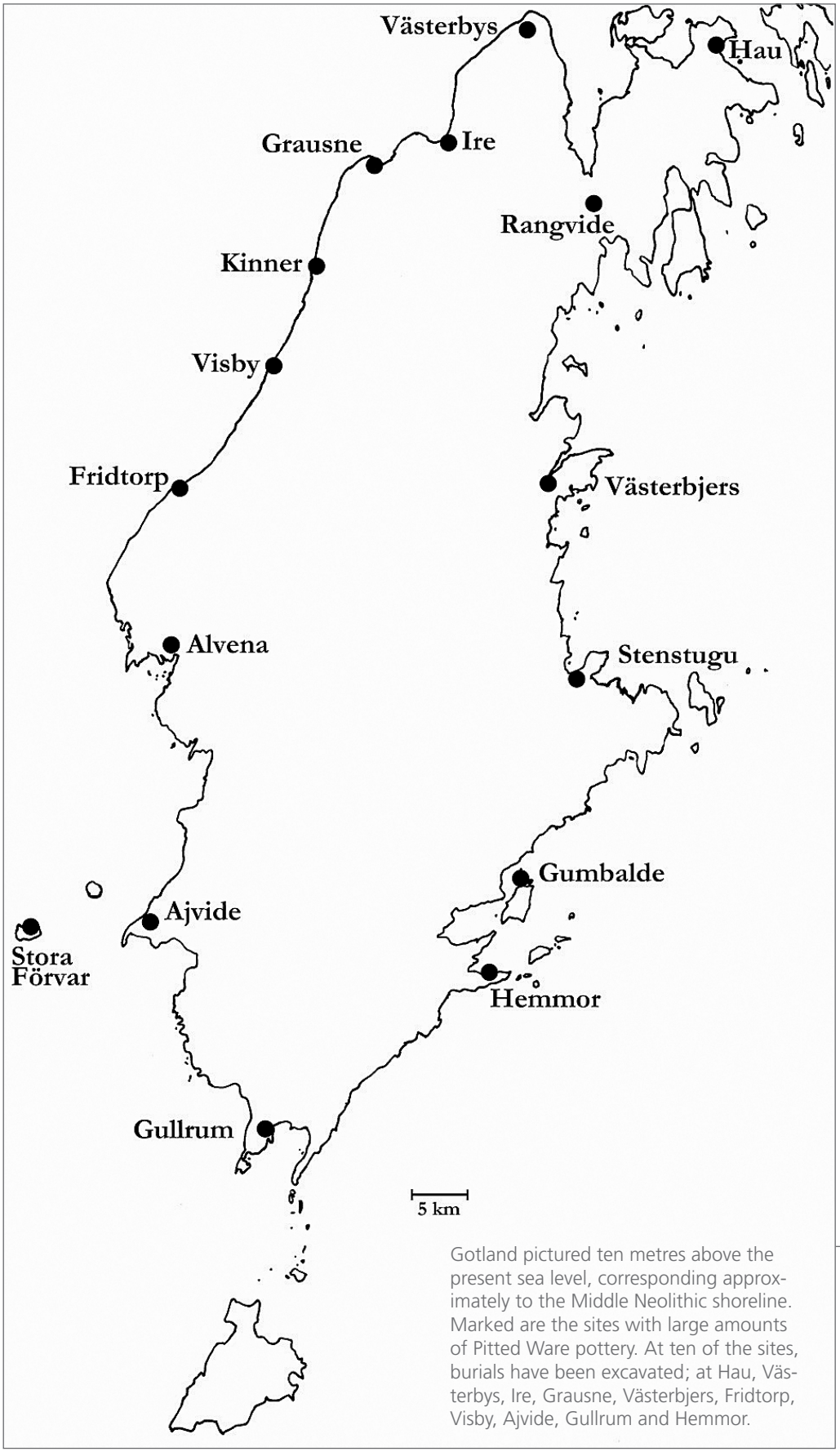
Studying the handling of human remains on Middle Neolithic Gotland one is faced with the most extreme. At one end of the scale, there are burials with complete and intact skeletons, at the other end there are empty graves, package-burials, mutilated bodies, carved-out teeth or scattered human bones. Being hard to grasp, this gap between complete and incomplete skeletons has led researchers to assume that one of them is correct and the other something rare, something exceptional like expressions of skull cult, or a result of later intrusions (e.g. Burenhult 1997, 2002, Janzon 1974, Larsson 2009a, Lindström 2020, I. Österholm 1989, 1997). Alternatively, this has been suggested to express changes in ritual over time (Fahlander 2009, 2010), or the extremes have been considered to represent completely different but contemporary burial practices (Knutsson 1995, Norderäng 2007a, 2010, Wallin 2015). It has been difficult to interpret this variety in the handling of human remains as different parts of a whole. But could they not be? Could a deeper understanding of the Middle Neolithic view of death help us to bridge this gap, and help us to reach a deeper understanding of their specific ways of dealing with the dead and the buried? The aim of this article is to re-examine the field documentation and C14-dates with the ambition to trace past ritual practices, and to separate different stages of rituals, as a foundation for interpreting the Middle Neolithic view of death and the dead.

## The Middle Neolithic on Gotland

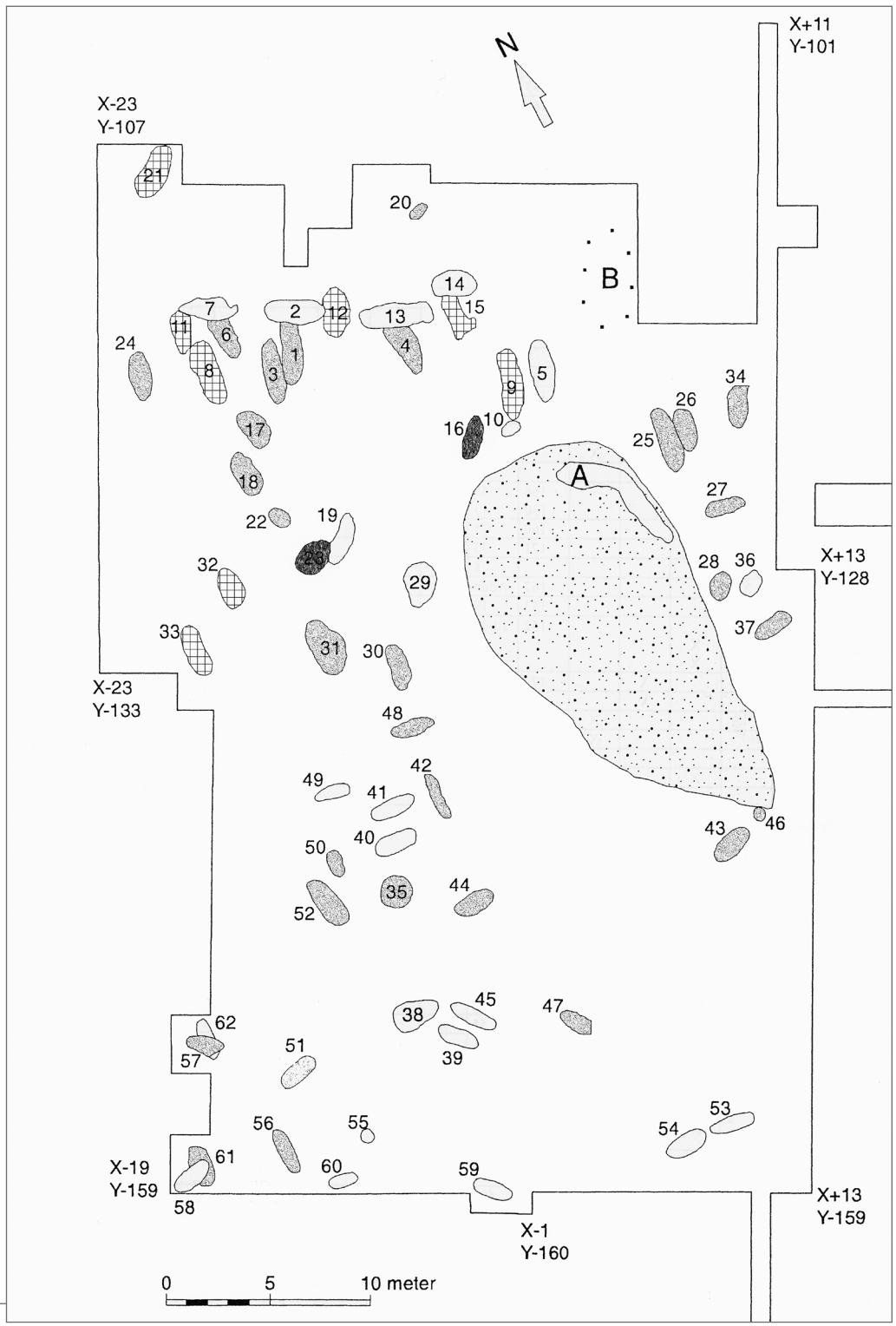
Gotland is a large island in the Baltic Sea belonging to present day Sweden. On Gotland, archaeological remains from the Middle Neolithic period, c. 3200–2300 BC, are commonly attributed to the Pitted Ware culture. Potsherds have been found in extremely large quantities at specific sites, all situated close to the past shoreline (figure 1).

These Pitted Ware sites are found in strategic locations, in several cases next to watercourses leading into the island (Andersson 2016). With thick layers, containing extremely large amounts of not only potsherds but also animal bones and other artifacts, they give the impression of being sites where many people gathered. The sites might have been places for meetings and feasting among the people living on the island (e.g. Carlsson 2015, Gill 2003, Malmer 2002:116). At the same time, it is at these sites that burials, as well as scattered human bones, have been detected. Consequently, these sites must have been places for interactions and dealings with the dead and the buried.

The first Middle Neolithic burial was discovered in Västerbjers at the end of the 19th century (Hildebrand 1887) on the Neolithic east coast of Gotland. Since then, a total of approximately 220 burials have been excavated at ten different sites (e.g. Andersson 2016, Burenhult 1997, 2002, Englund 1982, Janzon 1974,

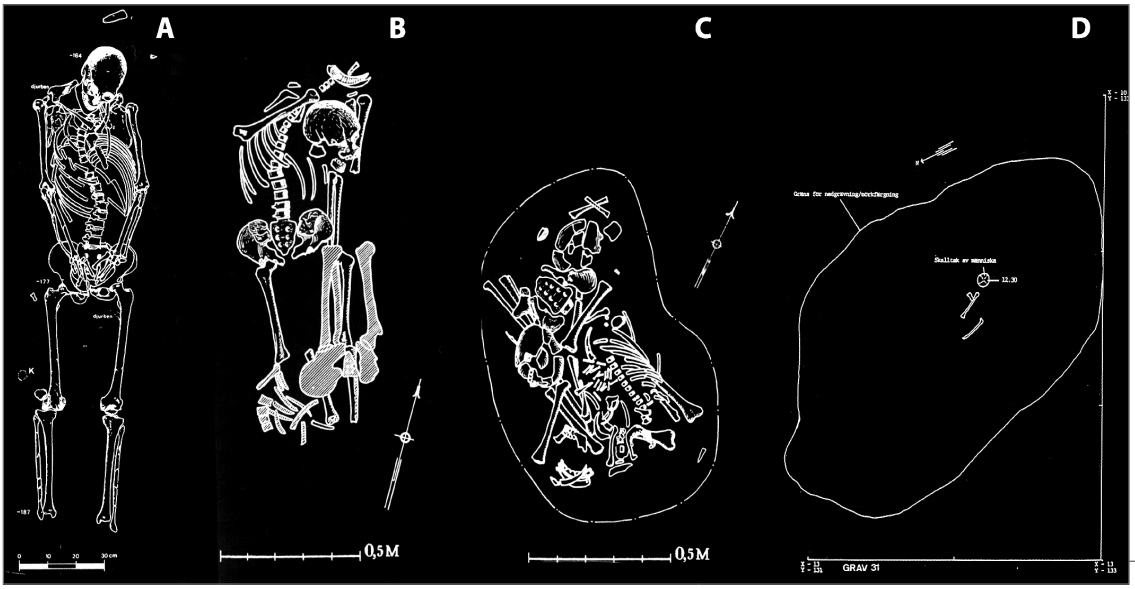



1. Gotland pictured ten metres above the present sea level, corresponding approximately to the Middle Neolithic shoreline. Marked are the sites with large amounts of Pitted Ware pottery. At ten of the sites, burials have been excavated; at Hau, Västerbys, Ire, Grausne, Västerbjers, Fridtorp, Visby, Ajvide, Gullrum and Hemmor.




2.

One of the burial grounds on the island, Ajvide, with the first 62 excavated burials at the site marked. The unfilled white burials contain seemingly intact and complete skeletons, the burials with a checked pattern are empty without any human remains, the light grey burials contain more or less incomplete skeletons and the dark grey burials are package-burials. Since this plan was constructed, additional burials not yet fully published have been found further to the north (burial 74-78, 79A, 79B, 80–82, 85), like the earlier excavated burials 83 and 84, as well as further to the south (burial 63–73). Modified from Göran Burenhult 2002:41.




3.

The burials are characterized by great diversity, ranging from totally intact and complete skeletons to totally empty graves. The figure illustrates some of the differences noted. A: Burial 93 at Västerbjers, the feet of the deceased are missing (Janzon 1974:338). B: Seemingly mutilated skeletons, with potentially repositioned body parts, in burial 66 at Västerbjers (Stenberger et al. 1943:59). C: Package-burial 67:2 at Västerbjers (Stenberger et al. 1943:61). D: Burial 31 at Ajvide containing only one human bone, a skull fragment (Inger Österholm 1995:21).

Stenberger et al. 1943, I. Österholm 1989, 1997). The c14-dates clarify that the burials occurred throughout the Middle Neolithic (Andersson 2016, Norderäng 2008). This implies that burying the dead was included in the activities at the Pitted Ware sites on the island during the whole period.

The burials are located in small clusters forming burial grounds, and in between the clusters, stone structures, post-holes, hearths and/or areas with black soil have been identified (figure 2).

The burials are defined as flat earth burials, although the few cases of burials intersecting each other, in a way that even seems deliberate, indicate that the burials once were visible above ground (Andersson 2004, 2016). The dead have been placed in burial pits, in a few cases on, surrounded and/or covered by, a layer of flat limestones or single stones. Single burials are most common, but burials with remains of two, three or four persons are known. The dead have often been placed in a supine position, even though bodies placed on their side or in a flexed position also are present. Most, but not all, contain grave goods, which vary both regarding character and amount. Animal bones and teeth occur, as well as for instance beads, axes, arrowheads, fishhooks, spears, bone points, vessels and potsherds. Certain artifacts are made of exotic material, others are of local origin, and in some burials train oil and/or ochre have been detected. Concerning the skeletal material, everything from complete and intact skeletons to empty graves exist (Andersson 2004, 2016) (figure 2, 3).

## Excavations and interpretations

During the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century burials were found and excavated on the island due to land development. In Västerbjers, for instance, the excavations during the 1930s were conducted each year in relation to the ongoing quarrying of the gravel pit at the site. This was also the case in Visby, the largest town on the island since medieval times. New construction work resulted in archaeological finds, and archaeologists were required (Janzon 1974). The excavations and documentation were performed by skilled archaeologists, although struggling with limited time and bad conditions for their work. During this period, it was an established fact among the archaeologists that the Middle Neolithic skeletons sometimes were mutilated, and this was also noted during excavations and written in the field reports. In Västerbjers, for instance, the archaeologist in charge noted that an arm in one of the burials was severed from the hand and stuck into the buried person´s stomach region (figure 9) (Floderus 1933). And in one of the burials from Visby it was noted that all toe bones from a skeleton were missing, and that ashes were found at the spot of the missing bones, interpreted as a potential result of mutilation (Lundberg 1937). In his doctoral thesis from 1927, John Nihlén described this practice as skeletal mutilation and he considered it to be part of the burial traditions.

This view of skeletal mutilation as a part of the mortuary practices was later completely abandoned with the rise of processual archaeology. With a scientific and objective ideal, all incomplete skeletons were considered to be destroyed or badly preserved. In Gunborg O. Janzon´s important doctoral thesis from 1974, in which she analysed the burials from five of the burial grounds, only what she described as well-preserved burials were included. In the thesis there were no discussions about missing skulls or bones as part of ritual practices. Instead, skeletons with missing body parts became a signum of a destroyed burial. This became a dominating view during the second half of the 20th century. During this period, excavations occasioned by development work were fewer, and instead the number of known Middle Neolithic burials increased due to research digs in terms of seminar excavations. This was the case with the Ire excavations as well as the excavations at Ajvide. At Ajvide, a total of 84 burials were found during the periods of 1980–1987 and 1992–2009. These excavations were conducted under good conditions, with plenty of time and with skilled archaeologists in charge, but the persons excavating were students. Lack of experience and many persons involved may have influenced the results. The report of the first 62 excavated burials, published in 2002 and written by Göran Burenhult, might give a glimpse of the view that formed the excavations at that time. The recurrent notion of destroyed burial pits and skeletons gives the impression that past normality was considered to involve intact skeletons with all bones in place, and that exceptions were seen as something strange, disturbed or destroyed in more recent times.

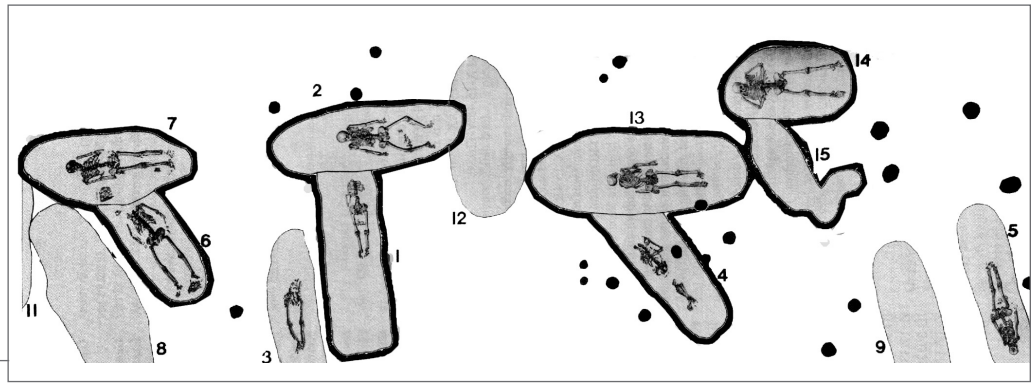
This does not mean that evidence of skeletal manipulation was missing or totally neglected. In fact, in one of the first excavated burials during the 1980s at Ajvide, burial 6, a skeleton that unmistakably had been mutilated was found. The buried person had no head, but his teeth were found next to the place of the missing skull. The teeth had been laid down in the right order, placed in two lines, with the exception of two missing teeth replaced by a phalanx of pig and a phalanx of seal. Marks on the teeth were interpreted as the results of them being knocked out with a sharp tool. With parallels drawn to Papua New Guinea and anthropological research, Burenhult (1986, 1997, 2002) argued for the presence of extraordinary events as well as the existence of a Middle Neolithic skull-cult. The dead were interpreted as buried without heads, described as a tradition of manipulating human bones including defleshing (Burenhult 2002:33). He also argued for the possibility that dead bodies were not always buried immediately, but instead exposed on, for instance, wooden platforms, referring to two Ajvide burials (burial 16 and 23) in which the bodies had been deposited like packages. During the excavations, it was concluded that these bodies, due to their package-like setting, must have been in an advanced state of decay when buried. When Helena Knutsson (1995) wrote her doctoral thesis, she argued, in line with Burenhult, that dead bodies might not only have been buried at the Pitted Ware sites, they could also have been left above ground, although her argument was based on the finds of scattered human bones in the layers. It was also in connection to the excavations at Ajvide that the presence of empty graves was acknowledged for the first time, interpreted as cenotaphs (e.g. Burenhult 2002:33).

In 2004, I questioned the, at that time, common idea that an incomplete skeleton represented a disturbed or damaged burial, often with reference to recent agricultural work (Andersson 2004). The conditions for preservation in the richly calcareous soils at the Pitted Ware sites of the island are extremely good (e.g. S. Österholm 1997). The skeletons are in very good condition and grave goods made of bone, as well as animal bones, are well preserved. In some cases, even wood, in the form of beach-bark, has been preserved as well as, for example, amber. When the cultural layers were removed, clearly visible dark colouring was often left in the burial pits, caused by the organic material with which the dead were buried and/or placed in/on, such as a boat, a fur or textile, or train oil. Even if burials at times, of course, have been disturbed or destroyed by recent construction or agricultural work, in these often well-documented cases, the majority of the identified burials seem to be undisturbed. In most cases, no plough-marks, or other intrusions, have been noted. Instead, the layers often seem intact. Göran Burenhult (2002:33) noted, when examining the burials in which the buried person´s head is missing, that most of these were placed well below any possible ploughing disturbance. This is not surprising, considering that the thickness of the plough layer at Ajvide is only 15 centimetres, at the most. But not only agricultural

work, also Middle Neolithic practice in terms of burials unintentionally intersecting each other, as well as the excavations of archaeologists, were referred to as the cause of incomplete skeletons (e.g. Burenhult 1997, Larje & Johansson 1997). When a buried infant was found to be almost complete (burial 20 in Ajvide), except the peculiarity that all bones from one of the child's feet were completely missing, this was thought to be the result of the excavators initially treating the burial as a post-hole (Larje & Johansson 1997).

Studying the intersecting burials on the island, I pointed out that they are very few and that only two different types of intersections exist, both seemingly deliberately performed (Andersson 2004). Either the burials superimposed each other (which I named dead-on-dead), or the later burial cut through a small part of the earlier burial, forming a T-shaped burial combination (which I named T-burials). Further, the way the burials cut each other was not the only aspect the T-shaped combinations on the island had in common. It was also apparent that the bodies in the later burials were complete and intact, while the bodies in the earlier burials all lacked heads. In the T-burial at Ire, burial 7, the skull was completely missing in the earlier burial, but the burial goods made of bone, which once lay next to the head, were still in place, totally intact. Also, the skull in the Grausne burial was gone (I. Österholm 1989:151). The other T-shaped burial combinations were found at Ajvide (figure 4).

Situated rather close to each other, four burials intersected with four other burials in a way that previously had been considered unintentional and that also had damaged the skeletons in several of the earlier burials (e.g. Burenhult 1997, Fahlander 2003, Knutsson 1995). But the fact that the skeletons in the earlier burials all lacked skulls, apart from one case which was an empty grave, made it hard for me to regard this as a coincidence. Especially as one of these burials was the exceptional burial 6, with the missing head and carved-out teeth. And in another case, the intersection of the two burials was too far away from the earlier body for the head to have been accidentally removed by the digging of the




4.

The T-shaped burial combinations at Ajvide represented by burial 6/7, 2/1, 4/13 and 14/15. Modified after Burenhult 1986:68–69.

new grave. Instead, I argued for the possibility that the heads from the persons in earlier burials had been intentionally removed when the new burials intersecting these burials were constructed, and that the burials had been deliberately placed in relation to each other (Andersson 2004). This idea that the corpses had not been buried without heads, but that the burials instead had been reopened to remove the skulls was important. I observed that the Middle Neolithic skeletons on the island commonly lacked other body parts as well, especially a foot or both feet. Once again calling to mind the observations made by archaeologist during the first half of the 20th century of missing or moved body parts, I concluded that it did not seem justified to routinely refer to agriculture, unintended past activities or archaeological methods to explain the incomplete bodies. With present-day ideas about what an inhumation burial should look like, it is not strange at all that when these mutilated and more or less half bodies were found, they were presumed to have been disturbed; and incomplete skeletons came to be seen as evidence of destroyed burials. But this is a perspective and idea that people during the Middle Neolithic probably completely lacked. Instead, I argued for the probability that the reopening of burials, and removal of bones, was a part of the mortuary practices during the Middle Neolithic on the island (Andersson 2004).

As far as I am aware, no new Middle Neolithic burials have been excavated since the Ajvide project ended in 2009. This implies that since then new interpretations are based on data from older excavations conducted during different times and conditions, with the limitations this involves. The most preferable circumstance would have been if new interpretations had been examined through new excavations; this could have enabled studies of the human remains in situ with present-day knowledge of human anatomy and taphonomic processes within the field of archaeothanatology. Hopefully this may be possible in the future. Nonetheless, with only older data presently at hand, I believe it is still possible, when larger sets of data are studied cohesively, to identify tendencies and patterns that can contribute to a broader picture of the actions of past persons (cf. Klevnäs 2015). In fact, the discussions have continued, and the manipulation of the dead has once again rendered much more attention. Johan Norderäng published an article about the package-burials on the island in 2007. Fredrik Fahlander (2009, 2010) discussed the occurrence of post-depositional activities at Ajvide (according to him mostly missing skulls), describing them as a part of an early formation phase. The intersecting burials of later date, burial 57/62 and 58/61 (figure 2), superimposing each other (dead-on-dead), were according to Fahlander completely different than the T-shaped combinations. He explained the superimposed burials as a result of an aggressive action displaying rivalry between different groups. Furthermore, Åsa M. Larsson (2009a, 2009b) showed an interest in the idea of manipulated bodies on Gotland, concluding that the handling and dispersal of ancestral bones was at the core of the Pitted Ware culture and their dealings with the dead. She

even argued that the intact and untouched bodies were exceptions connected to the large islands in the Baltic Sea. Continuously working with the Middle Neolithic burials, I was inspired by the work of Liv Nilsson Stutz (2003) and other researchers concerning mortuary practices as passage rites, based on the traditional works of Arnold van Gennep (2004) and Victor Turner (1995). Through Nilsson Stutz, I also became aware of Hertz' (1960) work from the beginning of the 20th century. Remembering the Västerbjers skeleton with the mutilated arm bone stuck into the stomach region, and the common feature of missing feet, I started to wonder if the deceased had been considered to be able to move and interfere with the living during a liminal phase, in the way Hertz had noted. I presented my ideas at the workshop "Ancient Death Ways. Current Research on the Manipulation of the Dead in the Stone Age" in 2012. However, these ideas were not published until 2016, as a part of my doctoral thesis (Andersson 2016).

An alternative way of interpreting the burials was presented by Paul Wallin in 2015. Wallin is also of the opinion that we cannot just argue that skeletons with missing body elements have been accidentally destroyed (even if this of course also has happened), but instead must accept them as representing mortuary practices (Wallin 2015). He claims that different individuals might have been buried and treated in quite dissimilar ways, with changes and variations as a norm. He distinguishes between five different practices; 1: individual burials, sometimes with heads and/or other remains removed; 2: package burials/re-burials of body parts; 3: dispersed human remains; 4: cenotaphs/empty graves; 5: other potential burial places. To conclude, Wallin argues for the occurrence of post-depositional manipulations, with reopening of burials and removal of bones. At the same time, he holds on to the notion presented by Burenhult (1986, 1997, 2002) and Knutsson (1995) that some individuals were pre-treated in the open air before burial, while others were left in the open air, and that their bones were later dispersed. He is also, as far as I am aware, the first to argue for the practice of re-burying body parts and human bones as a part of secondary burial practices at Ajvide. This idea brings me to Tobias Lindström, who has presented the latest contribution to the discussion. In an article from 2020, Lindström also argues for the re-burying (deposition) of body parts and bones. However, he claims this to be a practice exclusively involving fragments from the head, and he does not agree with Wallin regarding these acts as part of secondary burial practices. Instead, he refers to the practice of re-burying bones as part of a wider concept of skull-cult, involving both animals and humans. Lindström claims that skulls were treated differently from other skeletal elements, referring to the deposition of skull fragments, scattered skull fragments and to the inhumation burials lacking crania. Consequently, he does not regard exhumation of skulls as a part of mortuary practices at all, but instead as acts with the purpose of collecting skulls. He even discusses burials containing half a body, noting that lower half skeletons are much more common

than upper half skeletons, suggesting that the lower halves may be a result of less accurate intrusions aiming at retrieving skulls.

## Ritual practice

During the last decades, studies of rituals within the field of archaeology have changed from aiming to understand rituals to trying to detect ritual practice (Berggren & Nilsson Stutz 2010). An important notion is that ritualised practices do not follow a given meaning or manual; the meaning and structures are created and re-created by the actions in themselves. However, when studying the material remains of ritual actions similarly repeated over centuries, insights might be gained into the norms, conditions and conceptions that the practises created and re-created. As a consequence, the practice theory perspective is an interesting method when aiming to reach knowledge and understanding of past norms and conceptions. Trying to detect ritual practice is crucial. So, what kind of practices can be identified as a part of Middle Neolithic mortuary rituals on Gotland? Through a re-examination of the field documentation, I will discuss potential ritual practices and examine if they occurred before, during and/or after deposition.

### *Pre-depositional practices*

Burenhult (1986, 1997, 2002) was the first to argue for the existence of pre-depositional manipulations of the dead. Stating that most skeletons with missing skulls were the result of deliberate actions, Burenhult (1986:80ff, 1997:59–60, 2002:33) argued that the dead had been buried without their heads. The dead were presumed to have been decapitated, and the heads defleshed. The package burials were regarded as evidence of bodies being pre-treated in the open air, for instance displayed on platforms before being buried. Referring to scattered human bones, Knutsson (1995) claimed that some dead were not buried at all, but left in the open air to decay, and later their bones were dispersed. The latest to argue for these kinds of pre-depositional treatments of the dead is Wallin (2015). But how strong is the evidence of the occurrence of pre-depositional practices? Arguing for pre-depositional practices, previous researchers refer to skeletons lacking crania, package-burials and scattered human bones. Based on a re-examination of the field documentation, I will argue that there might be other ways of explaining these phenomena.

### Skeletons lacking crania – buried without heads?

Concerning skeletons without crania, no report of cut-marks confirm any decapitation. Not even Ajvide burial 6 shows any evidence supporting the removal of the head prior to burial. Only the teeth had marks interpreted as a result of them being removed with force before the head had totally decayed (e.g. Burenhult 1997:59). The crania and the cervical vertebrae I–VI were missing, but the remaining well-preserved cervical vertebrae VII had no signs of decapitation (Burenhult 2002:33). On reasonably well-preserved skeletons, Alison Klevnäs (2015:198) states that signs like cut-marks should be present if a head was removed from a fleshed body. Without cut-marks the head must have been pulled away from the neck when soft tissue was at least partly decayed and when the head already had been separated from the spinal column due to natural decomposition. However, there is no other evidence or indication supporting the idea that these persons were buried in a partly decayed state. Instead, the missing skulls most probably are a result of post-burial interventions, not pre-depositional manipulations. If so, the burials were reopened and the crania or skull was taken out of the grave. The absence of cut marks is referred to by Lindström as well, who argued for the retrieving of skulls as a post-depositional manipulation. Within ethnographically studied skull venerating societies, it is a common course of action to remove crania after the decomposition of a body (Lindström 2020:155, with references).

### Package-burials – a result of pre-treatment of dead persons in the open air?

The package-burials then, are they a result of pre-depositional practices? These burials have been explained in a context of extended mortuary rituals over time, involving several different kinds of treatment of the dead body before burying them for their final rest (e.g. Burenhult 1986:80, 1997:59–60, 2002:33, Norderäng 2007a, Wallin 2015). Johan Norderäng (2007a) states that a few persons within society, who were different in some respect, for instance, due to higher social rank, might have been treated in this way. Another suggestion is that these persons had died far away and needed to be transported before they could be buried at the sites (Norderäng 2007a). However, if this was the case, why were these persons not buried like everyone else when they finally ended up in the ground? When re-examining the field documentation, it becomes evident that the state of the body was not the only aspect to set the package-burials apart.

In burial 83 at Ajvide, interpreted as a package-burial by Norderäng (2007a), the disarticulated bodies of two children, 10 and 12 years old, were found within a limited area of only 60×60 centimetres, even though the grave itself had the size of 1.4×1.4 metres. Additionally, a vertebrae bone of an adult and some cranial fragments of an infant were identified. The presence of these additional bones raises the question of whether this burial originally might have been constructed

5.

Package-burial 23 at Ajvide (Burenhult 2002:122).

for the adult and the infant, and not for the tightly packed older children? Another package-burial, burial 16 at Ajvide, contained the remains of an older woman, and her skeleton was so tightly contracted that the flesh must have decomposed prior to burial, according to the osteologists (S. Österholm 1997:164). Her body was found in the northern half of a burial, which was 2.2 metres long and 0.6 metres wide. The dimensions of the grave make it more suitable for an inhumation of an adult person in a supine position, than for the closely packed body that was found. This fact raises several questions. Was she buried in the grave immediately after death? Was the burial reopened for her body to be manipulated and moved (to the northern part of the pit)? Or was she re-buried in a grave initially intended, and used, for someone else? Interestingly, her body was special also in another respect; it was black in colour, badly preserved and presumed to have been soaked in train oil (S. Österholm 1997:164). A similar suggestion about reorganisation of a burial was presented by Burenhult regarding package burial 23 at Ajvide (figure 5).

Burial 23 represents an inhumation of a person in a supine position. The buried person was a boy, 12–13 years of age, and on top of his chest and his upper left-hand side, the severely dislocated and packaged remains of an adult man were placed. Burenhult suggested that the grave could have been constructed for the adult man, who was initially buried, but after a short period of time exhumed in connection to the burial of the boy. As a disproof of his own suggestion, Burenhult referred to the intact contour of the burial, indicating no kind of intervention (Burenhult 1997:66). However, if the burials were clearly visible above ground, as they seem to have been, I can see no need for the destruction of the contour of the grave. Instead, it must have been more appropriate to remove the filling in the burials when reopening them. Therefore, I regard Burenhult's idea as a reasonable explanation, even though the size of the burial is more suited for the boy, having a total length of only 160 centimetres. The boy had a body height of approximately 130 centimetres, compared with the adult man who was calculated to have been 166 centimetres long (see Burenhult 2002). It is possible that the grave was dug and constructed for the initial burial of the boy, and that the adult man was added later. However, this does not necessarily mean that the adult man was pre-treated in the open air, he could also have been exhumed from another burial and re-buried with the boy. To conclude, one aspect the packaged skeletons at Ajvide have in common is a strong connection to burials that might have been intended for others. This is also apparent concerning the identified package-burial in Västerbjers, burial 67:2 (figure 3c). The disordered skeletons of an adult man and a 9-year-old child were found in a burial pit measuring 0.9 × 0.6 metres (Norderäng 2007a). Some cohesive parts of one of the individuals indicate that at least this person's body was not completely decomposed when buried. The size of the burial pit appears to have been suited to the packaged bodies, indicating

that it was constructed for them. Notably, another burial was found immediately above the skeletons, and the excavating archaeologists assumed that the bones in burial 67:2 had been buried in relation to the construction of the upper burial, burial 67:1 (Stenberger 1935).

The packaged bodies seem to have been treated in a special way, deposited either in a new burial dug in immediate relation to another burial (dead-on-dead), or in a burial initially intended for someone else. It is of course not impossible that these bodies were pre-treated in the open air before deposition, but they can also have been exhumed from their original burials. If corpses were exhumed, this is a practice that could explain yet another feature, the empty graves. I will return to the empty graves later, but it is possible to regard them as evidence of buried corpses being moved from their initial burial. To conclude, I am not convinced that the existence of package-burials must indicate pre-depositional treatment. It is just as likely, or probable even, that the more or less disarticulated bodies in the package-burials have been exhumed from their initial burials and then manipulated and/or moved as a part of post-depositional practices.

#### Scattered human bones – evidence of dead bodies left in open air?

Another piece of evidence referred to as proof of pre-depositional treatment comprises the scattered human bones, regularly occurring in the layers of Pitted Ware sites. They have been considered evidence of the exposure of corpses to the open air, and later dispersal of the bones (e.g. Wallin 2015). Knutsson (1995) has argued, addressing the dispersed bones, that while some dead were buried, others were simply left in the open air to decay just before the sites were temporally abandoned. A more detailed analysis of the human bones in the layers has only been conducted at Ajvide. At present, at least 1 122 human bones, fragmentated and dispersed, have been identified (Wallin 2015:56, with references). Even though they were described as especially connected to the four black areas, human bone fragments have been found all over the site, at all different depths of the layers, and in principle originating from all parts of the human body (Norderäng 2009:14, 2010: 20–21, Wallin 2015). In one area at Ajvide, teeth, cranial bones, phalanges and larger bones of the lower body were most common (Norderäng 2003). In another area, cranial fragments occurred frequently, but also many tubular bones (Norderäng 2010:20–21). The presence of human bones all over the site in all different layers implies that they cannot be explained as solely deriving from destroyed burials. Wallin has argued that, in general, they are to be understood as remains of Middle Neolithic practices (e.g. Wallin 2015:56), which is emphasised by the presence of some burned and/or worked human bones (e.g. Hedemark et al. 2000, Norderäng 2002). However, I would like to set the number of human bones in perspective. There might of course be more human bones yet to be

identified. However, due to taphonomical processes, it is not easy to determine how many bones from a body left in the open air that could have ended up in the layers. A human skeleton consists of between 200 to slightly more than 300 bones, depending on the person's age. Further, the bones found in the layers are fragmentary. Cranial fragments are most common, and from only one crushed skull, I assume that the fragments would be many. In the season of 2008, 252 dispersed human fragments and body parts were identified and they were described as deriving from at least four individuals (Norderäng 2009:14). The number of identified human bones can also be related to the animal bones of the site. Already after the season of 1998, 3.5 tonnes of animal bones had been registered (Burenhult 2002:31–32). Despite the critical notions regarding identification and taphonomy, I have a hard time accepting the scattered human bones as evidence of a common practice of leaving dead bodies in the open air. The number of human bones seems far too few. Perhaps it only happened at really rare occasions, but still, these bones can have another explanation. Wallin (2015:57–58) has stated that about 42% of the Ajvide burials (c. 36 burials) contain skeletons with missing body parts, only some human bones or are completely empty. He even refers to skeletons with missing bones as a fact that may be interpreted as evidence of the scattered human bones being the result of conscious acts. In fact, it does not seem impossible that the dispersed bones in the layers could be the bones missing from the burials; especially since the bones described as most common in the layers, cranial bones, tubular bones and phalanges, are the same kinds of bones that are most commonly missing from the burials (see Burenhult 2002). I will discuss the missing bones in more detail later. For now, to conclude, I am not convinced that bodies were left in the open air to decay, an idea based on ethnographic and anthropological parallels in combination with the presence of dispersed bones. This is for me especially problematic considering the existence of archaeological evidence in the form of missing body parts in the burials; bones that probably have been exhumed and can explain the presence of scattered bones in the layers.

### *Burying the dead*

The arguments referred to when claiming that certain archaeological finds are evidence of pre-depositional practices are, to my mind, not convincing enough at the moment. The missing skulls, package-burials and the scattered bones are just as likely to be results of post-depositional practices. If accepting this statement for now, it also implies that probably all dead bodies treated within the Pitted Ware sites initially were buried. Furthermore, a re-examination of the field documentation offers a new understanding of the practices related to how the dead were buried. This new understanding affects the view of both empty graves and empty spaces within the burials, as I will discuss in the following.

### Inhumations

Change and variation does not seem to have been the norm associated with the handling of a newly deceased person (cf. Wallin 2015). Instead the norm appears to have been inhumations, if accepting that no pre-depositional treatment of dead bodies took place. Probably, a dead fleshed body was supposed to be buried. Based on a re-examination of the field documentation, it seems as if the people who prepared for the burial had a clear vision of the staging of the burial. No standard shape or size of a grave existed. Instead, the grave seems to have been constructed according to the deceased´s length, the number of persons buried and their planned position. Probably extra space was reserved for specific grave goods as well, which is particularly visible in the burials with large amounts of deposited animal jaws.

Burials constructed for single adults placed in a supine position commonly have a dimension of around 2×1 metres. Burial pits containing bodies placed in a flexed position are smaller. For instance, Ajvide burial 28, in which a 153 centimetre long sub-adult man was buried, the pit only had the dimensions of 1.05×0.7 metres. In the same way, the children´s burials are shorter and narrower. In Ajvide burial 50, a 3 to 5 year-old child had been buried in a burial pit sized 1.2×0.55 metres. Other examples are the two single graves constructed for infants, burial 10 and 20 at Ajvide. These children were found in circular burial pits with the dimensions of 0.4 metres and 0.45–0.55 metres, which were initially thought to be post-holes. Accordingly, graves containing more than one person are longer and/or wider. In some burials, like burial 6 at Ire containing three persons, the dead bodies were placed one after another in a row and more or less overlapping each other (figure 7). These burials, around 3–4 metres in length, are in some cases particularly narrow and dark, which has been interpreted as a possible result of the dead being buried in hollowed out logs, possibly boats. An example is burial 33 at Visby, which only had a width of 0.35–0.5 metres (figure 7) (Janzon 1974:15). In other burials two or three persons have been placed side-by-side, and these burials are instead somewhat wider.

The dead bodies have been placed, not in a formal or strict manner, but in a more casual way, often with legs and arms placed slightly differently from burial to burial. In burials with more than one person placed side-by-side, commonly in the combination of adults and children, the bodies have been placed close together with arms, hands and/or feet touching and/or crossing each other. In burial 7 at Ire, an adult man and a child were both buried in flexed positions, closely side-by-side, with their bodies turned towards each other and the man´s hand had been places on the child´s knees (figure 6). In burial 29 at Ajvide, an adult woman had been buried in a supine position holding her arms around two children placed closely on each side of her.

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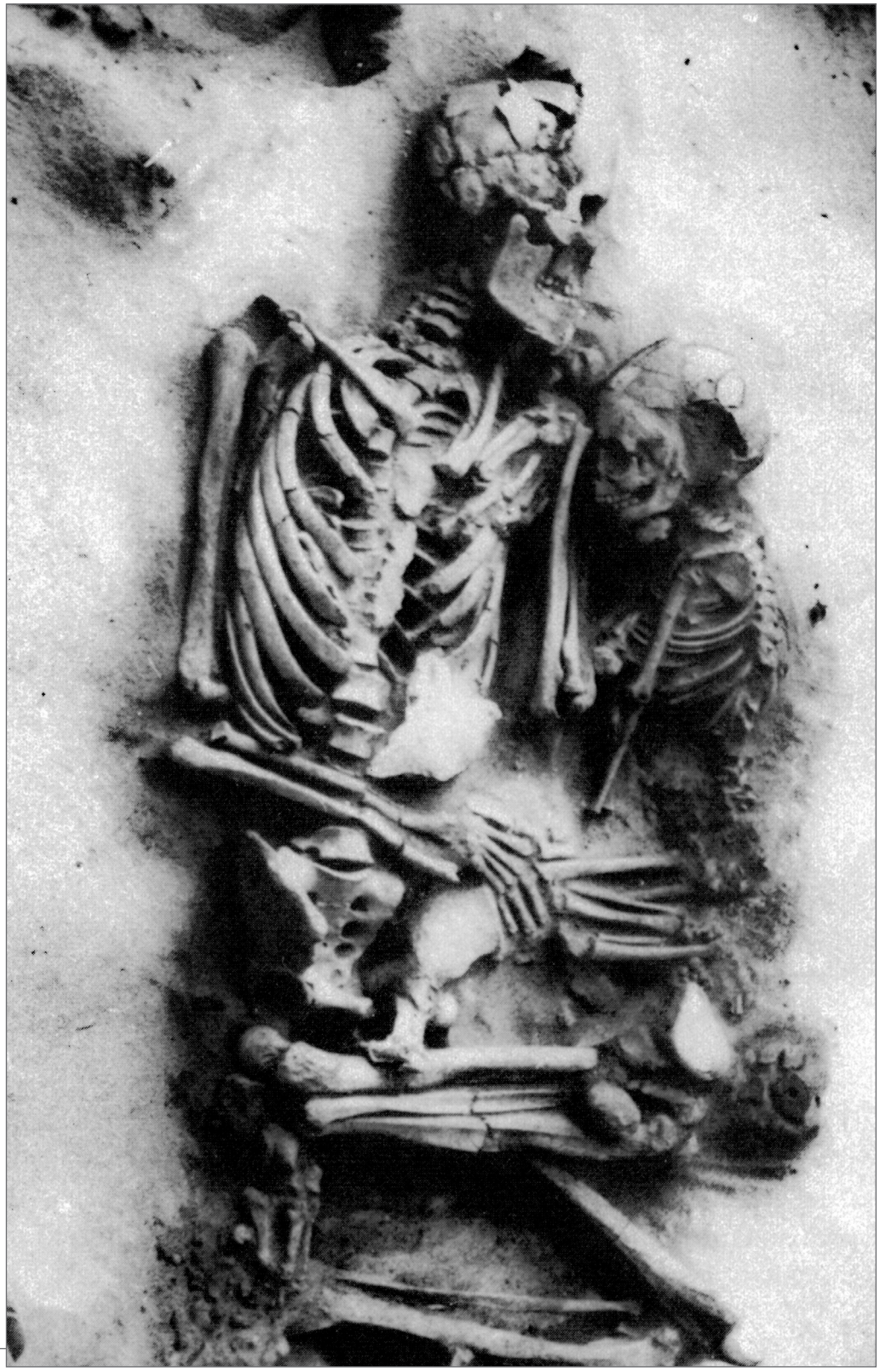


6. A part of the T-shaped burial combination, burial 7, at Ire with an adult man and a child buried closely together. Photo: Greta Arwidsson. ATA.

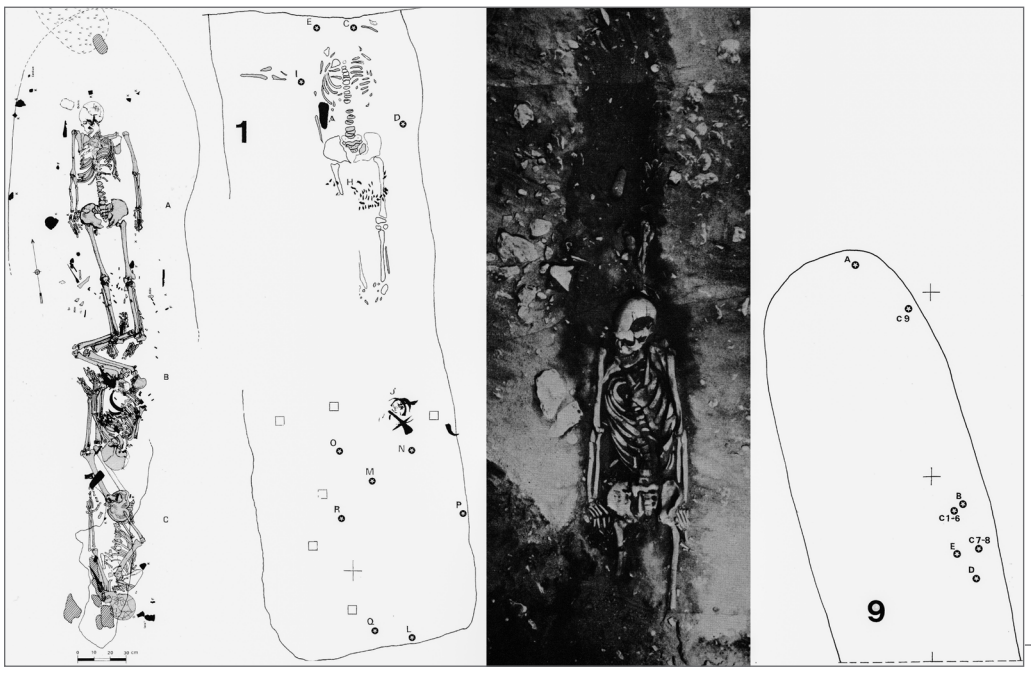
It does not seem as if the dead were placed directly on the ground. In a few burials a layer of stones was found under the skeletons and wood might have been used in a similar way. The presence of hooves from wild boar/pig in some burials have been interpreted as remnants of a skin on which the deceased was placed (Janzon 1974:22). Probably the dead were placed on and/or wrapped in other kinds of skins, furs or textiles as well. Finds of accessories once attached to the clothes, like large amounts of animal tooth pendants or tubular beads made of bird bones, implies that the buried were clothed. Personal adornments also occur, like beads of amber, animal bones or clay, as well as neck collars and/or chest decorations of wild boar/pig tusks, and for instance bone plates found as if they once were attached to a belt. Further, the dead were equipped with tools and weapons. For instance, tools have been found placed in the hands of the dead giving them an active impression. Considering that wooden handles were not preserved this might have been much more common. In many aspects the dead seem to have been treated in a respectful way almost as if they were still alive. At least, they seem to have been buried with the assumption of having the same needs of tenderness, comfort, clothes and equipment as they might have had when they were alive. As a final step, the bodies were covered and the burial pits were back-filled with soil. In some cases, stones have been found, either single or a few, placed on the head, chest, knees or feet, or as a complete layer covering parts of or the entire body (see Janzon 1974). It can be discussed whether this was done before the burial was back-filled or as a part of post-depositional practices.

### Empty graves and empty spaces

Empty graves have been noted at Ajvide (figure 2), but might be present at other burial sites as well. However, if so, they were not interpreted as burials but for instance as sacrificial places, pits, hearths or post-holes. At Ajvide, the empty graves were found mixed with the rest of the burials and were impossible to distinguish from these before excavation. After removing the layers, both kinds of graves appeared as dark coloured areas seemingly suited in size to fit a burial. When excavating the pits, they were found to be of similar depth as the graves, and contained grave goods spread out in a similar way and of a similar character as in the graves. The only aspect setting them apart is the total absence of a human body. Since the empty graves were first acknowledged, they have been interpreted as cenotaphs constructed for persons whose bodies were lost, for instance out at sea (e.g. Burenhult 1997:61–62, 2002:33). Based on a re-examination of the field documentation, I would like to suggest a change in perspective and another alternative: the empty graves may originally in fact have contained bodies, which were later removed. I have already argued for the probability that the packaged

skeletons, re-buried in a more or less decomposed state, could have been moved from graves that are now empty. However, this is an alternative that has been questioned by Fredrik Fahlander (e.g. 2009:120–121). According to him, it is most reasonable to interpret the burials as cenotaphs. First, he is referring to the total lack of human remains with not even a single bone left. Fahlander states that if a body had been present at least some toe bones or finger bones would remain. Secondly, he claims that the empty graves lack personal adornments and that this fact proves that these pits never contained any human bodies. Fahlander certainly has a point, the presence of bone fragments and personal adornments would be strong arguments for the existence of an initially buried body. On the other hand, I am not convinced that the absence of these materials is the same as the absence of a body. For the record, personal adornments have been found in two of the eight empty graves at Ajvide. Of the seven seal teeth listed as grave goods in burial 9, I can confirm, after my own study of the material, that five of them are tooth pendants. Additionally, in burial 21, an amber bead and a bead of fowl bone are listed as grave goods (see Burenhult 2002:97). Furthermore, far from every Middle Neolithic burial on Gotland includes personal adornments. Nevertheless, another explanation is possible. Objects attached to the body and/or the clothes would probably have been moved along with the body. And if a body, even if it was in an advanced state of decomposition, was moved for instance by lifting and carrying the body on or wrapped in a skin or fur, I can see no reason why either bones or, for example, beads would necessarily have been left in the primary burial. If the bodies were moved wrapped in some kind of organic material, this might also explain their package like appearance when re-buried.

When re-examining the field documentation, another interesting aspect of the empty graves appears, and that is the dimensions. Only one, burial 32, is of the size normally constructed for a single supine adult. The others are longer. Five of the burials are within the span of 2.5–2.9 metres and the remaining two are 3.45 and 4 metres in length, respectively. Two of them are also somewhat wider. Obviously, it is much harder to interpret the smaller pits as empty graves. The infant burials, for instance, being circular and small, would certainly be classified as post-holes if human remains were lacking. However, based on the knowledge from burials containing bodies, the size of the identified empty graves might indicate that some of them initially were constructed for more than one person. And if so, could only one or two bodies have been moved from other double or triple burials as well, giving them the appearance of being single burials? In fact, a small number of burials do exist, which contradict the pattern of burial pits as adjusted to the buried persons´ sizes and positions. For instance, a few extremely long, sometimes narrow, burials exist with only one human body present. Not only the dimensions of these burials, but also the location of the grave goods might indicate that additional bodies once were buried (figure 7).




7.

Extra-long burials with three buried individuals at Ire (burial 6) to the left, followed by long burials with one body and empty spaces at Ajvide (burial 1) and Visby (burial 33). To the right, part of the empty grave 9 at Ajvide with identified grave goods marked. (Burenhult 2002:53, 70, Janzon 1974:276, 332).

In the narrow and more than 4 metre long burial 24 at Västerbjers, only one body was found placed in the middle of the grave (figure 9). Both beneath her feet and above her head, there was enough space, and also deposited grave goods, to indicate that the grave may initially have been constructed and intended for other persons besides the discovered woman. The narrow and extremely long burial 33 at Visby is another of these burials, in the middle of which a man had been buried (figure 7). The foot end of this burial had been destroyed by construction work, but there was still enough space at the head end of the burial for an additional body, and a stone axe was found in this space. A similar burial is number 1 at Ajvide (figure 7). At the foot end of this burial there was an empty space large enough to contain an additional body. In this part of the burial, with some distance to the extant skeleton, grave goods had been deposited; among several items, two amber beads and one animal tooth pendant (see Burenhult 2002:43–44, 53).

To sum up, the material discussed initially and referred to as arguments for long-term pre-depositional treatment of dead bodies, is as likely or more likely to represent post-depositional practices. Consequently, it is probable that all dead human bodies within the Pitted Ware sites on the island instead were buried, and that the burials took place as soon after death as possible. Furthermore, there is no evidence ruling out that bodies were once present in the graves that now appear to be empty. Instead, it is likely that the empty graves represent inhumations.

This is indicated by their varied dimensions, their similarity with and presence among burials containing bodies, as well as the amount and character of the deposited objects in the graves; especially since they can be related to the partly decomposed and packaged individuals that most probably have been moved from their primary burials. Furthermore, based on the observation that the graves normally were adjusted in size according to the buried, additional bodies might have been buried in the graves that today seem to be far too long and/or too wide, in relation to the body/bodies found. In fact, burials interpreted as single burials might have been double or triple burials initially. As a result, the number of inhumations carried out at the sites seem to have been higher than previously thought and burials containing not only one but two or three bodies might have been slightly more common.

### *Post-depositional practices*

If the package-burials, skeletons lacking crania, empty graves and empty spaces within certain burials, as well as the scattered human bones, are not to be understood as caused by pre-depositional events or practices, they are to be seen as a result of post-depositional practices. To describe the burials as a way of burying the dead for their final rest (cf. Norderäng 2007a), does not seem to be consistent with the way Middle Neolithic people handled them. The absence of cut-marks on remaining bones in burials with missing skulls, and the fact that partly decomposed bodies were re-buried in other burials, constitute clear evidence that burials were reopened. However, a notable point is that the excavating archaeologists were not able to detect any traces of these interventions. One can only speculate about the reasons for this; whether it depends on the way Middle Neolithic people re-opened burials, or conditions in the ground; the material at certain sites was coarse gravel with plenty of small stones. Other causes could be limited time, the method used, or lack of experience; maybe also a different pre-understanding of not considering differences in the layers within the burials, in the filling, as important. Hopefully, with a new pre-understanding other results might be gained during excavations in the future. Nevertheless, at present, the lack of identified traces of interventions in the filling of a burial, cannot be taken as evidence of an undisturbed burial. Instead, as it seems, the practice of re-opening burials was common.

However, burials exist that might not have been re-opened after the initial burial; these contain seemingly complete and undisturbed skeletons. I have already argued against the idea that these would have been the only burials not destroyed by recent construction or agricultural work. Furthermore, I am not convinced that they should represent a specific burial practice for some of the dead at the sites, while other bodies were treated differently in an ambition to meet various needs

of diverse individuals to reach the perfect death (cf. Wallin 2015). Rather, all dead bodies handled at these sites seem to have been treated alike regarding the aspect of them all being buried in a similar way, and it is only during the post-depositional manipulations that they start to differ. Why certain burials were re-opened, while others were left untouched is of course an important issue to discuss and try to understand. But first, one needs to understand why burials were re-opened, and for that a deeper examination of the practices of manipulating and maiming the dead is required. In the following I will, based on a re-examination of the field documentation, discuss the evidence of manipulation and/or mutilation of corpses or skeletons.

### Skull retrieving or exhumation of bones?

Tobias Lindström (2020) has argued that the missing skulls are not connected to the mortuary practices at all but are to be understood as a desire to retrieve skulls within a skull venerating society. But were burials re-opened for corpses and skeletons to be mutilated solely with the aim of gaining skulls? Lindström dismisses my earlier interpretation concerning the T-shaped burial combinations, and that the head of the skeleton in the earlier burials was removed at the time and in connection to the construction and burial in the grave intersecting it. As an argument against this idea he states the fact that one of the intersecting graves is an empty burial and that skulls also have been retrieved from burials that did not intersect with another burial. The carved out teeth in burial 6, he simply claims to be evidence of the exhumed skulls having been further worked and manipulated (Lindström 2020). But if the skulls were further worked and manipulated after exhumation and the skeletons in the burials were only important as an available source of skull retrieving, then why were the teeth arranged in the right order into two lines, why were two of them replaced by animal bones and why were they left in the grave? Why were the teeth carved out to be re-deposited in the grave, if the act of removing the skull had nothing to do with the buried person the skull belonged to? As I see it, it is difficult to comprehend these actions as separate. It seems that it was important to remove the head but unacceptable to take away the teeth. As a suggestion, they might have believed that the corpse still was in need of its teeth for one reason or another. Further, this is not the only burial with remaining teeth. In other intersecting burials within T-shaped burial combinations, number 4 at Ajvide, number 7 at Ire and in the burial at Grausne, teeth still attached to the mandible were left in the burials with missing crania (Andersson 2004). In Ajvide burial 4, a part of the maxillae was even found (Götherström et al. 1997), indicating that it was more important to leave teeth in the grave than to obtain an intact skull. However, teeth have not been found in all burials with missing skulls, indicating either two different kinds of

practices or a change related to time. Interpreting the Middle Neolithic burials, I am convinced that it is necessary to be aware of the fact that the burials were a part of ongoing processes. As in the case of the empty grave that was intersected by another burial, this grave might not have been empty when the other grave was dug, it might have contained a body and its head might have been removed in a similar way to the rest of the T-shaped burial combinations. The reason for it being empty today could instead be that the burial was re-opened again, as a part of further interventions. And even if the construction of T-shaped burial combinations was one kind of situation when skulls were exhumed, there must have been other situations to motivate this action too.

According to Lindström (2020), skulls were treated differently from other skeletal elements, and as an argument he refers to, for instance, inhumation burials lacking crania. The missing heads are undoubtedly a fascinating aspect that has intrigued many researchers (e.g. Burenhult 1986, 1997, 2002, Fahlander 2003, 2009, 2010). However, other body parts are missing too. For instance, skeletons without one foot, or both feet, repeatedly occur in the data. Skeletons missing one or several of their upper or lower limb bones exist, and also skeletons lacking all bones of one or both hands. For instance, in burial 4 at Ajvide, the skeleton was lacking both femur bones (figure 4) (see Burenhult 2002:45). In burial 84 the buried was missing its lower right leg, while the rest of the lower limb bones were intact (see Norderäng 2009:42). In package burial 83, the two packaged children´s skeletons were almost complete, with the exception of all bones from feet and hands of them both (see Norderäng 2010:27). As already mentioned, all bones from the infant´s left foot were missing in burial 20 (Larje & Johansson 1997:210). Even some of the burials with missing skulls at Ajvide, most of them undisturbed by modern intrusions according to Burenhult (Burenhult 2002:33), are lacking other body parts as well. In burial 17, a major part of the left foot seems to be gone; in burial 37, arm bones as well as the right foot are missing, and in burial 30 the skeleton is not only lacking its skull but also both feet as well as the left upper arm (see Burenhult 2002). Considering that most of the missing skulls are interpreted as intentionally removed, it seems reasonable to assume that in most of the cases when other body parts are absent this is caused by deliberate actions as well; especially as archaeological observations exist supporting this conclusion. For instance, in the Visby burial 14, it was noted that the skeleton lacked all toe bones of the right foot and ash was found at the spot of the missing bones (Lundberg 1937). In Visby burial 23, it was observed that the skeleton´s right foot was missing even though the layers seemed to be undisturbed (see Janzon 1974:316). To conclude, the exhumed skulls most certainly cannot be described as evidence of a selective treatment of skulls differing from the way other skeletal elements were treated. Other body parts, not only heads, were exhumed. Instead of connecting the missing skulls to a wide-spread skull cult, I consider it more

reasonable to tie the exhumed skulls to the other removed body parts, especially since it is sometimes even the very same individual that is missing, for example, both its skull and its feet. These kinds of action seem hard to completely separate. Instead, the action of digging up skulls as well as other skeletal elements was probably part of the same kind of post-depositional treatment of the dead.

Lindström (2020) also suggests that the lower-half-bodies found in certain burials might be a result of less accurate skull retrieving interventions. He refers to the observation that more lower-half-bodies than upper-half-bodies exist (cf. Wallin 2015). This is an interesting observation. Studying the upper-half-bodies, in particular, in burials at Ajvide containing skeletons with a range of missing body parts, from missing skulls to those with only the lower half of the body intact, it is notable that there is a sequence from only missing skulls to the absence of more and more of the upper body. For example, in principle only the skull is missing in burials like 6 and 25, with additional bones missing as for instance arm bones in burials 4, 30 and 37; approximately half the upper body is absent in burials 3, 26, 48 and 56, and finally only half a body is present as in burial 34 (figure 4, 8). I assume that this is what Lindström likes to regard as potentially less accurate interventions. But why would they dig up half a body if they were only interested in the skull? The burials containing skeletons with a selected bone or body part missing certainly clarifies that past people had no problem retrieving only the particular bone or body part that they wanted. Furthermore, an alternative approach is possible if studying the burials as a result of ongoing processes. If so, the variety among burials with affected upper-half-bodies could be the result of a practice in which bones were exhumed from the burials, starting with the head and continuing downwards along the skeletons. The circumstance that this process reached different stages in different burials could explain the discrepancies between them. This is also, as I see it, related to another issue, the question of re-buried bones.

### Re-buried bones or bones left behind?

Not only do burials with half a body or more exist in the material. Certain features contain even more fragmentary skeletons or just a few human bones. According to Wallin (2015), this has for instance been observed in 14% of the Ajvide burials. Wallin has suggested that these are to be understood as reburials of bone elements, or bones as a part of secondary burial practices comparable with the package burials. Lindström (2020) has also argued for the practice of reburying or deliberately depositing bones. However, he states that this was an act only including parts of the skull, unrelated to the mortuary practices and instead connected to the selective treatment of skulls from both humans and animals. Consequently, and contrary to Wallin, he does not interpret them as

burials at all. For instance, he categorises burial 22 at Ajvide as a deposition of skull fragments, in this case a cranial bone and a mandible, and not as a burial (Lindström 2020:161-162). After a re-examination of the field documentation, I agree with Lindström in this case, as well as in the case of the so-called burials 44 (a cranial bone) and 46 (a frontal bone). Regarding these three cases, the burial interpretation can be questioned. Neither pits nor grave goods were identified. Instead, the skull fragments are described as detected within an area or surface, and only in burial 22 was dark coloured soil mentioned (Burenhult 2002:97, 106–107, Molnar 2002:372, I. Österholm 1993:43, 1996:22). However, there is nothing to indicate that these bones were more deliberately deposited than other human bones scattered in the layers. For instance, the close relation between scattered bones and dark coloured areas is well documented (Norderäng 2010:20, Wallin 2015:56). Furthermore, at a time when scattered bones were only thought to emanate from destroyed burials, it is likely that bones easy to identify as human, such as skull fragments, were interpreted as burials during the excavations. At a later stage, finds of human bones within areas or surfaces were often immediately interpreted as scattered bones (e.g. Norderäng 2010:18).

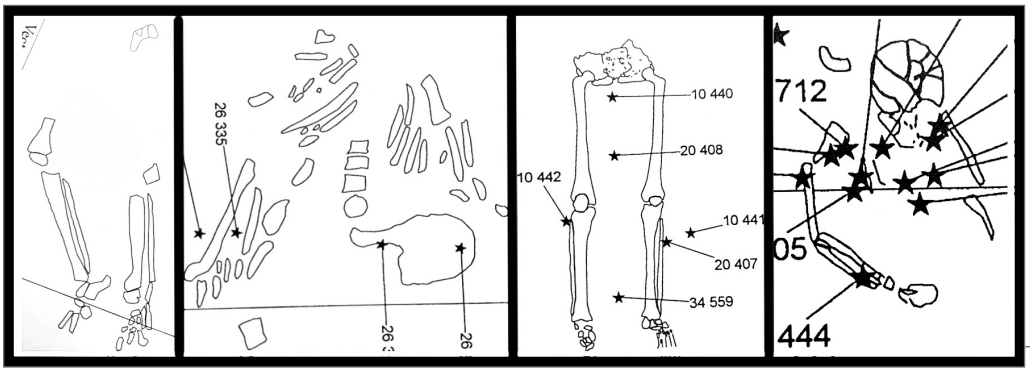
However, pits containing only one or a few human bones also exist, but these pits were not exclusively reserved for skull fragments. For instance, in burial 43 at Ajvide, the only human bone that was discovered was a complete fibula. A question to be asked is also if these pits had been solely intended for depositions of selected bones, why did they have dimensions large enough to contain inhumations. Rather, the dimensions of these pits located in the burial grounds, as well as the objects found in them, strongly suggest that they were initially inhumation burials. For instance, in burial 31 at Ajvide, a human skull bone was discovered together with animal jaws, a fishhook, a bone-harpoon, a bead and pottery in a pit with the dimensions of 2.8×1.6 metres (figure 3D). Moreover, burial 43 with a complete fibula as the only human bone, was a 2.15 metre long pit that also contained, for instance, an axe, pottery, shells and animal bones (Burenhult 2002:101, 106–107, I. Österholm 1995:16, 1996:22–23). Returning to Fahlander's argument against empty graves containing human bodies, we here have the material he requested, both the few human bones and the personal adornments. To conclude, as with the empty graves, it seems most probable that these features were burial pits initially constructed for and containing complete dead human bodies.

However, the human bones found in these burial pits might of course have been added later, comparable with some of the package burials, as Wallin (2015) has claimed. The question is if the fragmentary skeletons or few bones that were discovered are to be understood as reburied in older burials, in the same way as some of the packaged bodies? Importantly, re-examining the documentation of burials with few bones and fragmentary skeletons, it seems as if the bones still are positioned in situ, in a correct anatomic position. For instance, in Ajvide

burial 42, two cohesive remains of humans were found: cohesive parts of the lower half of a body, and somewhat dislocated from these remains a cohesive part of a spinal column. This, together with the dimensions of the pit, 2.75×0.6 metres, indicate that this burial initially might have contained two bodies. If these bones had been reburied, why then were they positioned like this? It certainly seems more reasonable that the bones have been left behind, and that the rest of the bones and body parts were exhumed. This is especially relevant since the presence of only one or a few human skeletal elements can be seen in relation to other skeletons as well, where not only the upper-half-body has been affected as previously discussed, but also the lower half. In Ajvide burial 27, a pit with the dimensions 2.2×1.0 metres, feet and lower legs of a body were found intact, but only fragments were found from the rest of the lower half of the body, and the upper half of the body was totally absent (figure 8).

Another example is burial 57 at Ajvide (figure 8). As in several other burials, the head and related parts were missing, while the lower part of the upper-half body remained intact. However, in this case the whole lower half of the body was missing too. To conclude, it seems as if the process of exhuming bones from the head and downwards sometimes continued further along the body and/or proceeded from the feet upwards as well, leaving in some cases very few, or no, bones left.

Supporting the idea of exhumation of bones, piece by piece, there is also a burial at Visby, number 17, interpreted as a burial that initially might have been constructed for two individuals. Beside the buried person in this burial, a whole collection of animal tooth pendants was identified, which would once have been fastened to a dress, most likely worn by a buried person. Nonetheless, no traces of a skeleton were found, with the exception of some probably human phalanges




8.

In some of the Ajvide burials, major parts of the skeletons seem to have been exhumed. From left to right: burial 27, burial 57, burial 34 and burial 35. The pictures show the remaining skeletal parts, which were found within burial pits of different sizes, 2.2x1 metres (burial 27), 1.85x0.9 metres (burial 57), 2.1x0.75 metres (burial 34) and of uncertain size (burial 35). Star-symbols with associated numbers included in the pictures represent in situ identified grave goods, that are listed in the report. From Burenhult 2002.

among the pendants (Janzon 1974:307). If this person was moved as a corpse the pendants attached to the dress would also have been moved, which indicates that the bones instead might have been removed piece by piece after the body had been fully decomposed. I also like to mention burial 30 at Ajvide, with a body in a supine position for whom the burial pit seems to have been intended. On top of the body, some fragmentary and dislocated parts of another individual were found, among which a small part of a spinal column could be identified (see Burenhult 2002). The position of these skeletal elements resembles that of the packaged skeleton in burial 23. Potentially, burial 30 contained a packaged body as well, at first deposited upon the person the burial was intended for, but over time the bones might have been taken out, and finally only fragments remained. If bones were removed from package burials as well, then Ajvide burial 61 might initially have been a package burial. In this dead-on-dead burial, the skeleton was discovered within a limited area of the burial pit, like in several of the package burials (as in for instance Ajvide burial 16), but only parts of the body were found to be present. Only the lower extremities and an upper arm were found (Molnar 2002:373), indicating that the rest of the skeleton might have been exhumed. Rather than being an expression of violence and rivalry between groups (e.g. Fahlander 2009, 2010), burial 61 might be seen as an expression of the practice of digging up bones.

To conclude, I am not convinced that strongly fragmentated skeletons or a few bones found in burial pits are to be understood as re-buried. Based on a re-examination of the field documentation, I would rather argue that complete bodies were not only moved in a partly decomposed state as in the case of the package burials, but that they were also exhumed as bones, piece by piece, to a greater or lesser extent.

### Manipulating the corpses?

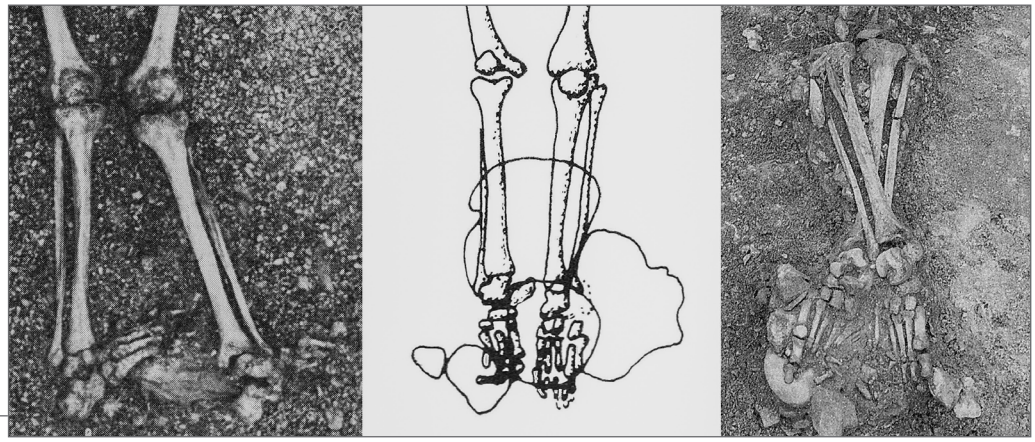
Re-examining the field documentation, yet another kind of post-depositional practice can be identified in the material: body parts seem to have been moved or might have been twisted within the burials. The most striking example of this is Västerbjers burial 24. This is the burial in which the buried person´s arm bone was found to have been severed from the hand and stuck into the person´s stomach region (Floderus 1933:6) (figure 9). A potential parallel might be Ajvide burial 72. Among the many scattered human bones that were interpreted as connected to burial 72, one tibia was found to have been cut off with a sharp tool while the bone was still relatively fresh, according to the osteologist Ebba During (Norderäng 2002).

Further, burials exist in which hands and/or feet were found in a strange, not anatomically correct, position. For instance, in Ajvide burial 82, all bones of the

9.

Part of burial 24, Västerbjers, in which one of the deceased´s arms had been severed from the hand and stabbed into the stomach region. Photo: Erik Floderus. Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet (ATA) dnr 3150/1933, photo 1690:22).

left hand of the buried were twisted in an odd position. It has been suggested that the person once held an object made of organic material in the hand, which ended up in this odd position when the object decomposed (Norderäng 2007b:14). However, this case has a parallel in Fridtorp burial 27, in which the left hand was found in a similar position. While the left arm lay straight along the side of the body, the hand was turned inwards and placed over the pelvic area. In this burial, the left foot also seemed twisted. While the knees were turned against each other, both feet were oddly enough pointing in the same direction. A spot of lighter sand can be noticed where it would have been more anatomically correct to have found the left foot, but instead it was twisted the other way around (see Englund 1982:69) (figure 10). Furthermore, this is a skeleton which the osteologists, and a dentist, claimed that the body and the mandible were from one person, and the crania from someone else (Persson & Persson 1982). Of course, the twisted hands and feet could be a result of taphonomical processes; but still, with reference to Fridtorp burial 27, it seems as if this could also be the result of deliberate acts. Especially as other kinds of actions, that appear to aim at manipulating the dead, rather than digging up body parts/bones, occur in the material. Besides the obvious Västerbjers burial 24 with the arm bone found stabbed in the stomach region, Ajvide burial 4 can be mentioned (see figure 10). In this burial, the lower leg bones, the ankles, were crossing each other, and the excavating archaeologists assumed that the legs might have been bound together (Burenhult 1986, 1997, 2002). I also would like to mention the burials in which stones have been placed on top of the bodies (cf. Hedemark et al. 2000:18). For instance, in Ire burial 9, the stones found on top of the skeleton were so heavy that they had pressed the feet down (Janzon 1974:289) (figure 10).



10. Identified actions that might have been attempts at manipulating the dead. To the left: The twisted foot in burial 27, Fridtorp. Englund 1982:69. In the middle: Legs and feet in burial 9, Ire, covered and weighed down by stones. Janzon 1974:289. To the right: the crossed ankles in burial 4, Ajvide, that might have been bound together. Burenhult 2002:66.

To conclude, post-depositional practices were common and many burials appear to have been reopened. However, based on a re-examination of the field documentation, I am not convinced that the reopening of burials was done solely for the purpose of retrieving skulls. Rather, I would put the missing skulls in the context of an overall desire to dig up body parts and retrieve human bones, resulting in the absence of different skeletal elements from the burials. Furthermore, the evidence of human bones or very fragmentary skeletons occasionally being deposited or reburied in pits or older burials is, as I see it, not convincing enough at the moment. It is just as likely, or perhaps even more probable, that the features containing only one or a few bones initially were constructed and used for inhumation burials, and that the bones found in them were left behind while the rest of the bodies were exhumed. The dimensions of the pits, the objects found in them and the cohesive body parts often found seemingly in situ supports this explanation.

To sum up, based on my re-examination of the field documentation, my conclusion is that it is possible to distinguish between two different kinds of post-depositional practices. First, dead bodies have been moved, manipulated or maimed in a way that seems to have aimed at affecting the corpses. These actions appear to have been performed while the body was still perceived as a cohesive whole. Entire body parts, even if they consist of several bones like a foot or a hand, have been removed or maybe twisted, and even entire bodies have been moved. Ankles have been bound together, bodies stabbed and heavy stones placed in the burial pits on top of the dead. Secondly, practices can be identified which express that no respect at all has been directed to the integrity of the body. For instance, fragments from a foot or a skull, as well as smaller or more substantial parts of skeletons, were removed from the burials without any consideration of body parts as units. Bones were taken out of the grave piece by piece, leaving more or less incomplete skeletons, or no skeleton at all.

## Death as a process and mortuary practices as passage rites

So far, I have discussed the practices that might have been performed and the way they were performed; now I would like to discuss why. Why were the dead not left for their eternal rest once buried and why were the post-depositional interventions carried out in such a way? In previous research the conclusions differ. Based on Ajvide, Fahlander (e.g. 2009, 2010) has argued that manipulated burials (according to him mostly exhumed skulls), empty graves, extended burial pits and an inclination for establishing relations with the previously buried (the T-shaped burial combinations), are characteristics of an early formation phase in the northern part of Ajvide, when rituals were important and emphasised. This was followed by a phase of a less traumatic relationship with dead bodies and a lesser interest in rituals, and later by a phase of consolidation in the southern

part of Ajvide, with similar burials and vague, less organised rituals. The two dead-on-dead burial combinations in the south, were described by Fahlander as a destruction of earlier burials in an aggressive manner when constructing new burials. He does not associate these with mortuary rituals at all, but relates them to conflicts occurring when the Battle Axe culture appeared during the final parts of activities at the site. However, in one of the dead-on-dead burial combinations, the intact body was found in the lower of the burials (burial 62), and the construction of this burial could not be the direct cause of the incomplete skeleton in the upper burial (burial 57). Regarding the other dead-on-dead burial combination in Ajvide, I have discussed the possibility that the earlier burial (burial 61), in this case described as containing an incomplete and disturbed skeleton (Molnar 2002:373), might be the remains of a package burial and/or a body from which bones have been exhumed. The understanding that incomplete skeletons in dead-on-dead burial combinations are not necessarily a result of, or related to, the burials they intersect with, is supported by the dead-on-dead burial combination at Fridtorp where both the lower and the upper burial contained complete and intact skeletons (Englund 1982). Also, in burial 79 in the northernmost part of Ajvide, containing a complete and intact skeleton of a child (79A) closely associated with the packaged remains of an adult woman (79B), the packaged remains are not a result of the burial of the child. Instead, this burial combination has been interpreted as a result of two chronologically separate events, of which the burial of the packaged woman is considered to be the latest (Norderäng 2007a). Instead of regarding the dead-on-dead burial combinations as an expression of a change in ritual and new rivalry between groups, they appear to be a result of the same kind of practices as can be seen in other burials. They are, as it would seem, a result of the desire to relate burials to each other, the practice of moving bodies in a disarticulated state to other/older burials and/or the practice of digging up bones. Furthermore, Fahlander´s argument that the manipulation of the dead only occurred during an early phase at Ajvide does not seem correct, based on a re-examination of the C14-dates. Burial 57, with an incomplete skeleton, has for instance been dated to approximately 2860–2622 BC (4125±40 BP). Also, one of the latest of the C14-dated burials at Ajvide, dated to approximately 2572–2512 BC (4005±45 BP) (Norderäng 2010:25) (figure 11), is package burial 83, in which the two buried children´s hands and feet were absent.

The premises of Fahlander´s study, his chronological division of the site into three clusters from north to south, is also problematic. Due to shoreline displacement, there would be no burials dated to the earliest period in the low-lying areas in the southwest; even so, there is nothing to indicate that higher levels were not continuously used over time. For instance, the only burial at Ajvide containing an artefact solely associated with the Battle Axe culture that has been identified so far, burial 19, is found in the northern part of the site, in direct relation to

| Grave | BP | cal BC 1-sigma | cal BC 2-sigma | C13 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 4230±60 | 2910-2746 | 2932-2620 | -16,07 |
| 2 | 4235±75 | 2916-2737 | 3018-2618 | -16,5 |
| 6 | 4135±60 | 2763-2624 | 2885-2571 | -16,01 |
| 13 | 4385±65 | 3093-2912 | 3028-2892 | -16,25 |
| 19 | 4015±95 | 2679-2455 | 2795-2293 | -16,2 |
| 28 | 4350±85 | 3097-2887 | 3198-2864 | -16,3 |
| 29 | 4235±65 | 2915-2696 | 2943-2621 | -15,3 |
| 30 | 4095±65 | 2858-2571 | 2874-2549 | -14,9 |
| 36 | 4215±75 | 2813-2678 | 2939-2576 | -15,42 |
| 41 | 4360±80 | 3095-2894 | 3339-2874 | |
| 53 | 4200±80 | 2896-2670 | 2933-2568 | -15,88 |
| 57 | 4125±40 | 2860-2622 | 2872-2579 | -16,6 |
| 60 | 4027±41 | 2579-2481 | 2639-2467 | -20,1 |
| 62 | 4085±40 | 2678-2570 | 2864-2558 | -18,2 |
| 73 | 4005±40 | 2570-2515 | 2632-2458 | -18,3 |
| 79 A | 4275±40 | 2918-2878 | 3012-2864 | -13,9 |
| 79 B | 4155±40 | 2780-2673 | 2881-2620 | -16,5 |
| 83 | 4005±45 | 2572-2512 | 2637-2452 | |
| 84 | 4070±40 | 2666-2566 | 2858-2485 | -17,1 |

11.

C14-dated burials at Ajvide. The dates are presented both as uncalibrated BP and as calibrated BC. The calibrations are not adjusted for potential reservoir effect, due to marine diet. The impact of the marine reservoir effect on the dates is uncertain, although it is generally believed that this leads to dates that are around 70 BP-years too early. At the same time, it is obvious that the amount of marine protein in the diet has varied largely from individual to individual, judging by the variety among the C13-values. From Norderäng 2008:297, 2010:25.

package burial 23, and not far from the T-shaped burial combinations (figure 2). Burial 19, which Fahlander connects to his second phase in the middle of the burial ground, is also C14-dated to approximately 2679–2455 BC (4015±95 BP) (figure 11) (Norderäng 2008:297). In comparison, the much earlier burial 41, also connected by Fahlander to the second middle phase, is C14-dated to approximately 3095–2894 BC (4360±80 BP) and is situated further to the south than burial 19 (figure 2). Burial 41 confirms that the earliest burials were not

restricted to the northern cluster. The later burial 83 (2572–2512 BC, 4005±45 BP), which was excavated as early as in 1958 (Norderäng 2010:26), is furthermore situated to the north of the part of the burial ground mapped in figure 2, in an area where Fahlander suggests that the earliest burials might have been situated. Burial 83 confirms, yet again, that burials with later dates are not exclusive to the southern parts of the burial ground. Even if later burials exist in the southern part of the burial ground, (e.g. burial 60 and 73), they are also represented both in the middle (e.g. burial 19) and in the north (e.g. burial 83 and 84) (figure 2, 11). Examining only one of Fahlander's clusters, representing his northern and supposedly earliest phase, it is also apparent that the C14-dates vary significantly between the burials; for example, between burial 13, 1, and 6, which moreover contain skeletons with similar C13 values (figure 11). To conclude, a re-examination of the C14-dates and artefacts indicates that the different clusters to a large extent were used simultaneously, which also Wallin has acknowledged (figure 2, 11) (Andersson 2016, Wallin 2015:53f).

Wallin (2015:53), on the other hand, distinguishes two phases of burials and he considers that the second phase represents the last three hundred years of the Middle Neolithic. He argues that the black areas were established during this second phase, and that the activities connected to the black areas might be a result of the development of a new ritual, visible in the skeletons missing their skulls, the upper part and/or other parts of their bodies (Wallin 2015:54f). Thus, the same kind of mutilation of the dead, assumed by Fahlander to belong to an early formation phase of the Middle Neolithic, has been associated by Wallin with its final part. The arguments for and against are problematic. There are difficulties in Wallin´s idea; in most cases, to determine the exact time when parts from a particular body were removed. It does not seem to have happened prior to the burial, but it could hypothetically have happened a long time after. However, re-examining the C14-dates and field documentation, there are several aspects worth noting. For instance, if my idea about the T-shaped burial combinations is correct, if the skull from the earlier burial was removed in relation to the inhumation in the grave intersecting it, it is apparent that Ajvide burial 13 is one of the earliest of the C14-dated burials at the site, dated to approximately 3093–2912 BC (4385±65 BP) (Norderäng 2008:297). Furthermore, burial 4, with a missing skull, femur bones and presumably bound ankles, is intersected by burial 13 which is thereby of later date. Interestingly, the intersecting burials 1 and 2 at Ajvide have both been dated to roughly the same period, approximately 2910–2746 BC (4230±60 BP) and 2916–2737 BC (4235±75 BP), respectively. This indicates that the burials forming T-shaped combinations were not only close in space but also in time. Furthermore, Ajvide burial 6, dated to approximately 2763–2624 BC (4135±60 BP), in which the teeth were carved out while the head was only partly decomposed, is evidence of a case when the exhumation of a skull in a T-shaped burial

combination was performed closely after death. It is also significant that burials containing intact skeletons, as well as burials containing incomplete skeletons, have been dated to quite different periods of the Middle Neolithic; the dates ranging from early burials (like Ajvide burial 4 and 13) to late burials (e.g. Ajvide burial 60 and 83) (see figure 2, 11) (Norderäng 2008:297). An important point is also that the scattered human bones at Ajvide, even if they have been described as closely connected to the black areas, in fact have been found all over the site in all levels of the layers (Norderäng 2009:14, 2010: 20–21). Due to these different aspects, I cannot be convinced that all practices of mutilation and maiming the dead were conducted only during a final and shorter period of time. My interpretation is that the practice of mutilating and maiming the dead was an ongoing treatment, which is to be connected to the Middle Neolithic period as a whole.

Another researcher who has interpreted the mutilation and maiming of the dead as a part of Middle Neolithic practices, associated not with a particular time phase but rather with the Pitted Ware culture, is Tobias Lindström. However, the selective treatment of skulls, which he argues for, seems rather to be a specific treatment of human bones. As I have already stated, skulls are far from the only body parts that have been removed from the burials. Additionally, his argument about deposited skull fragments is contradicted by the fact that single human bones remaining in burial pits are not only skull fragments, but other bones occur too. Moreover, all parts of the human body have been identified among the scattered bones, and even if skull fragments are most common, phalanges and tubular bones are numerous as well. Lindström also argues for the special treatment of skulls with references to, for instance, the finding of a burnt cranial fragment in a burnt layer on top of a burial at Visby (Lindström 2020:161). But other examples that do not exclusively include skull fragments are known. For instance, in connection to a hearth at Hemmor, human tubular bones (tibia) were discovered to have been burned, split and fragmentated (Hedemark et al. 2000). The ample finds of animal tooth pendants are another aspect Lindström refers to as evidence of the importance of skulls, but the finds of beads made of tubular bones from birds are also plentiful. The significance of the facts mentioned by Lindström about skull bones is evident, but by including other bone elements the skulls no longer appear as selectively treated. All kinds of human bones seem to have been special and important in rituals of different kinds within the Pitted Ware sites. Therefore, instead of considering the handling and use of human bones as a result of skull veneration, I would rather argue for the treatment of bones to be related to Middle Neolithic perceptions of the dead; perceptions that most probably were created and re-created by the mortuary practices.

In general, as part of mortuary practices, different kinds of pre-treatments of the dead body are common (e.g. Burenhult 1986, 1997, 2002, Larsson 2009b, Wallin 2015), and sometimes there is a desire to avoid the decay of the body through

for instance mumification, or to quicken it by the use of fire (e.g. Nilsson Stutz 2003). If so, the act of burying the remains is often the final part of the rituals, bringing the dead to their final rest. Within the mortuary practices of the Middle Neolithic on Gotland, burial of the dead seems, on the contrary, to be the first part of the rituals. Even if some of the dead were left untouched after the initial funeral, this was hardly the case for all of them. Even when the corpse was in a more or less decomposed state, the living started to interfere with the dead, for instance by moving them from their initial burial. Of course, this could have been done for social reasons, wanting to make re-arrangements within the burial ground. One of the things that packaged and moved bodies have in common is a close relation to other/earlier burials. However, there is a difference in where these corpses were re-buried in their package-like state; sometimes in earlier more or less emptied graves, in other persons' graves (new or old) or in a new grave dug at the same spot as an earlier inhumation. Presumably, the other aspect they have in common might have been more important; their condition of being in a state of decomposition. Moving these bodies might have been acts directed towards the corpses themselves. It might be that these particular corpses were believed to be in need of help, of assistance. Based on both the package burials and the intersecting burials, one way of helping corpses might have been to connect them to other buried persons and/or their burials. If so, this indicates that the corpses were not believed to be resting in their graves. More likely, they might have been perceived as being in a process of, or on a journey towards, becoming dead. The burial might have been perceived not as a resting place, but as a transport between worlds.

Notably, there are societies in which the decay of the body is not avoided or quickened (e.g. Hertz 1960, Nilsson Stutz 2003:102). In the beginning of the 20th century, the French sociologist Robert Hertz conducted important research about the concept of death and the handling of the dead body. Hertz (1960) noted how common it is to believe that the body, for the sake of the soul, must be treated in the right way, at the same time as the notion about what is right differs. He pointed out the existence of societies where the decay of the body is seen as an important part of the death process, resulting in long funeral rituals involving several different stages. In these societies, Hertz noted that it was common that the dead, during decay, were supposed to be in a liminal zone not fully alive nor fully dead. This liminal stage was associated with a period when the deceased was believed to be restless and able to walk among the living, and the revenant dead was commonly thought to be both pitiful and potentially dangerous (Hertz 1960). While discussing archaeological data and expressing ideas of revenant dead, specific actions like re-killing corpses and trying to demobilise them in different ways have been noted. Decapitated skeletons with missing or repositioned skulls, skeletons with missing feet as well as for instance missing, repositioned,

reversed or even broken limbs, the binding of ankles and placing stones on the burials, have been taken as evidence for actions like this (e.g. Klevnäs 2015, with references). Similarities with the Middle Neolithic Gotlandic material are striking. Actions expressed in the Middle Neolithic burials on Gotland, like an arm bone stabbed into the stomach region, removed or twisted body parts associated with movement (hands, feet, arms, and legs), bound ankles and heavy stones placed on the bodies, might all have had the purpose of demobilising the corpses. Further, many skeletons display broken limb bones and for instance crushed skulls (I. Österholm 1989:151). Investigation is still needed into what might be the result of deliberate actions in these cases, ruling out possible issues related to taphonomy. Nonetheless, many burials contain traces of actions that might have served to stop the revenant dead from walking and interfering with the living and to keep them in their graves. At the same time, certain burials seem to have been left unopened and untouched. One possible explanation for this could be that certain individuals amongst the dead might have been considered to be more dangerous as a revenant than others, because of for instance their life history or how they died (cf. Klevnäs 2015). However, in the Middle Neolithic burials on Gotland, I can see nothing in the initial burial that could distinguish the revenant dead from the untouched skeletons. The supposed revenant dead have not been denied a proper funeral, neither were they initially buried differently. Instead, they have been buried together with and in the same way as everyone else. On the other hand, the reopening of burials with the purpose of preventing a corpse from acting, does not necessarily have to be related to the buried persons at all. In fact, it could have been incidents in the society, such as lack of food, an accident or a disease starting to spread, which the revenant dead were blamed for, forcing the living to intervene (e.g. Klevnäs 2015, with references). The initial burial, and other efforts to keep the dead in their burials, as for instance fragmentation of objects (cf. Knutsson 1995), might have been considered unsuccessful. When this failed the dead required even more help from the living, possibly in an improvised manner (Williams 2007:118f). If so, interventions of different kinds, like stabbing, binding, twisting, mutilating or moving a corpse, were done after the primary burial, if needed, and while the corpses were believed to be in this condition of neither alive nor fully dead. The circumstance that this was performed while the bodies were more or less decomposed is indicated by the package burials. Further, entire body parts having been bound, twisted or removed, despite consisting of several bones, might indicate interference in a fairly early stage of decay, while for instance the mutilated arm stabbed into the stomach indicates interference in a later stage. The length of time after death when actions like this were executed and motivated is difficult to clarify. The decay of the body could be one important factor (e.g. Hertz 1960), forcing the deceased to remain in their body until it had

completely turned into bones, although other factors might have been important as well. Potentially a certain ritual marked and enabled the deceased´s last step of becoming fully dead. It might have taken time before a deceased no longer was perceived as a revenant dead, but probably not hundreds of years. Once again returning to the c14-dating of the burials, I can observe that actions which seem to have been performed with an aim of demobilising the dead have been found within both earlier and later burials. The early burial 4 with the bound ankles (intersected by the dated burial 13), and the late package burial 83, are two examples from Ajvide (figure 11). Consequently, actions like this do not seem to belong to either an early or late phase of the period, but probably occurred during most of the Middle Neolithic.

However, it is obvious that the skeletons were continuously mutilated. Digging up larger parts of the skeletons, without any respect for the integrity of the body, can hardly be explained as acts aimed at helping, re-killing or demobilising a revenant dead. Rather, the purpose of these actions seems to have been to obtain human bones, for further use in rituals and other situations among the living. In many studies the importance of human bones has been emphasised (e.g. Gill 2003, Larsson 2009a, 2009b, Wallin 2015). As Åsa M. Larsson (2009a, 2009b) has stated, they were the essence of the Pitted Ware culture and their dealings with the dead. The treatment of ancestral bones within the Pitted Ware sites, the fragmentating, handling, spreading and sometimes burning of them, were probably acts in which the living could make the dead a part of their lives and rituals. The inclusion of human bones might have been a method of making the dead a vital part of important occasions, such as burials, but also other kinds of rituals and activities. As Larsson has stated, the bones might have been used when the ancestors needed to be entreated and the bonds with the past needed to be renewed (Larsson 2009b:125). With the aim of gaining human bones, there was probably no time limit, as long as the buried no longer was believed to be connected to and/or dependent of the body in the burial. To understand how the dead were perceived, Julia Kristeva´s concept of the abject is relevant (cf. Nilsson Stutz 2003). Kristeva described the human cadaver as the ultimate abject, bewixt and between the subject and the object, evoking repulsion or horror, being a temporary phenomenon in a state of liminality (Nilsson Stutz 2003:82, 96). One can imagine the dead going through a process from subject via abject to becoming objects. Also, the traditional works regarding passage rites, originally presented by Arnold van Gennep (2004) and Victor Turner (1995) are of relevance, with the ritual stages of separation, transformation and incorporation. With the knowledge of rituals not following any given manual, and instead being formed and re-formed when performed, it is not strange that traces from these rituals vary. In regard to the events and situations, the persons involved and time, the rituals were most probably adjusted to the possibilities and needs at hand. The

Middle Neolithic burial material might display burial rituals without any pattern (Norderäng 2007a:20), but they do seem to have originated from a common concept of death and the dead.

## Governed by emotions

Emotions can be an important force in mortuary practices (Klevnäs 2015:204). As Howard Williams (2007) has declared, we cannot dig up emotions, but we can detect emotive forces of practical actions. The practical actions of Middle Neolithic mortuary rituals on Gotland are to be seen as a process. At the same time, it is possible to notice how differently the dead were treated during this process. For the initial burial, the dead bodies were dressed, adorned, equipped and laid down seemingly in comfort. A lot of care was emphasized, as for instance when children were laid down close to adults. The burials might have been orchestrated to create shared social identities and memories (Williams 2007), but if death was seen as a process, the dead person was at this stage presumably still assumed to be embedded in the corpse, and the initial treatment of the body would be acts associated with a way to take a last farewell. It is easy to become normative, projecting emotions on past people, but it does seem reasonable that emotional responses to bereavement, such as sorrow, were strong emotive forces behind these acts. Subsequently, the emotive forces behind the post-depositional acts seem to have been quite different. Emotions were presumably a strong force behind these practices as well, but the treatment of the dead indicates a distance to the person once embedded in the body. At this stage, the dead seems more to have been conceptualised as an abject (as being ambiguous, mixed and in-between, and a real threat disturbing the order without respect of limits and rules), as a corpse or cadaver (e.g. Nilsson Stutz 2003:96), based on the fact that it now seems to have been possible to be bind, stab or even mutilate the corpse if needed. The emotion described in relation to dealings with revenant dead is usually fear (e.g. Klevnäs 2015, Williams 2007). It could be fear of the revenant dead per se, or fear of the death processes failing. The actions of placing heavy stones on the dead, of twisting their body parts, of stabbing them or even maiming them, all indicate that the body still was conceived as something cohesive. However, over time this view appears to have changed. Bones were removed without any respect for the integrity of the body. This indicates that the dead person, once embedded in the body and sometimes feared as a revenant, now was believed to have left. Consequently, the body as a whole might no longer have been seen as an entity that could be destroyed. Bones have been interpreted as symbolising the immortality of the community and the oneness of all members of the society, any human bone being as much an aspect of this unity as another (Larsson 2009b). The skeletons might have been regarded as a source of some form of communicative matter enabling

contact between worlds. Other emotions could now have been in force, such as expressions of adoration and veneration, which for instance have been associated with exhumation of relics from saints (Williams 2007:110, with references). To conclude, I would like to argue that death during the Middle Neolithic on Gotland could have been regarded as a process, and that the treatment of the dead might have been governed by a variety of emotions, like grief, fear, and reverence.

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