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Contextualizing Grave Goods

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Abstract and Keywords

The material culture of mortuary practices is one of the central sources at our disposal in the archaeological interpretation of past societies. The purpose of this chapter is thus to present a number of theoretical considerations deemed relevant to the study of grave goods. A short review of previous and contemporary approaches to grave goods is given, with a focus on perspectives informed by practice theory as well as ritual theory. From this a number of theoretical key points are established, leading to a discussion of the methodological implications prompted by them. A case study of a Late Roman Iron Age inhumation found in Skovgårde on Zealand (Denmark) is then analysed, with theoretical and methodological considerations as the point of departure.

Keywords: grave goods, meaning, ritual, practice theory, transformation, methodology

Introduction

Graves have always held a special place in our experience of the past. The bones and artifacts found within them often evoke an emotional connection to the people of the past in a way few other archaeological remains do. However, the source value which scholars have ascribed to funerary remains has varied greatly in the history of archaeological thought. The early antiquarians of the 17th and 18th centuries gave priority to the written, historical sources when reconstructing past societies and events. Graves, although sometimes carefully excavated and recorded as in the Reverend Bryan Faussett's (1720–76) remarkably detailed *Inventorium Sepulchrale* of Anglo-Saxon burials in the county of Kent in southeast England (Faussett 1856), were more or less treated as mere repositories of objects whose aesthetic qualities were more important than their historical value. It was not until the advent of archaeology as an independent science in

Contextualizing Grave Goods:

the 19th century that this began to change. Danish scholar Jens Jakob Asmussen Worsaae, who is often considered the founder of scientific archaeology, was one of the first methodologically to conceptualize grave goods as a diagnostic feature of the archaeological record. In his book *Danmarks Oldtid oplyst ved Oldsager og Gravhøie* in 1843 (published in English in 1849 under the title *The Primeval Antiquities of Denmark*), he postulated that all artefacts found in a grave were most likely deposited at the same time and that this contemporaneity made them historically relevant (Worsaae 1849: 76). This contextual principle of linking together the spatial and temporal association of things, occasionally known as *Worsaae's Law*, prompted the central role of grave goods for cultural as well as typological and chronological studies. Oscar Montelius, the father of typological studies in Scandinavia, based his work on this assumption of graves as closed finds when he (p. 174) declared the importance of thorough documentation of their content, including the spatial distribution of artefacts within them (Montelius 1884: 21–3).

Throughout the history of archaeological study, grave goods have been used to discuss all aspects of human existence, ranging from economy, ethnic identity, social status, and gender roles, to religious ritual and cosmology. Furthermore, through the ethnographic and historical examples frequently cited by archaeologists, we are given glimpses into the vast range of objects that may come into play during a funeral, ranging from those used to handle the dead body, to the objects deposited with the deceased in the grave itself and those used by the bereaved in various activities on the grave site. This plethora of objects and practices presents a vast range of interpretive possibilities for us. The objects are variously interpreted as ritual paraphernalia, personal possessions, gifts, offerings, or leftovers from ceremonies performed at the grave. Most often, however, archaeologists simply divide this material culture into two broad categories; those objects that are directly associated with the dead body and its attire, like jewellery and brooches, and those accompanying the body, like pottery and weapons. Frequently these two categories overlap and are difficult to maintain, which illustrates the interpretive challenges with which archaeologists are faced. Using terms like grave wares, grave gifts, burial offerings, possessions, and equipment, the archaeologist intentionally or unintentionally endows the objects with meanings which inadvertently have wider, social implications than the mere mortuary context. Social relationships are implicated, as well as notions of social personas, ownership, religious beliefs, and ritual. Moreover, it is frequently unclear on what grounds these functional classifications are made. How do we know whether the objects deposited with the deceased were possessions, gifts, offerings, ritual paraphernalia, or ceremonial scrap? To answer questions like these, we need to fine-tune our approach to funerary remains, both theoretically and methodologically.

What do Graves Signify?

The approach to graves, grave goods, and their signification differs greatly between archaeological traditions. Yet it is possible to observe a number of interpretative themes. Processual archaeology spawned numerous studies where mortuary practices were regarded as *representing* the socio-political status or role of the deceased in a very direct way. Graves containing weapons were interpreted as warrior graves, richly furnished graves were interpreted as elite graves, and the dead buried with tools were interpreted as craftsmen. The graves and their content were thus employed as a blueprint for calculating both the composition and complexity of society beyond the mortuary context (e.g. Saxe 1970, Binford 1971, Tainter 1975, Chapman et al. 1981). What is more, the graves were seldom approached as the result of a sequence of actions, and archaeologists working within this perspective rarely discussed what effects the various archaeologically observable activities performed at the grave sites may have had on the function and meaning of the objects that were used. Instead the function of the objects was directly associated with the deceased individual and his or her identity, and the symbolic meaning of the grave goods was often downplayed. The graves were thus viewed as the prehistoric equivalent of a *black box* or (p. 175) *flight recorder*; the result of a single episode containing all the clues necessary to reconstruct social roles and structures in the past.

This attitude towards mortuary remains, although still present in some archaeological traditions, has been criticized within the postmodern theoretical debate for many years, mainly because it often lacks an approach to the question *why* a given set of objects or actions were used to represent identity and rank (e.g. Hodder 1986, Shanks and Tilley 1987, Härke 1994). Postmodern researchers acknowledged that the ways death was dealt with were historically situated and dependent on such factors as ideology and social relationships among the bereaved as well as the social intentions of individual actors. Therefore, according to this critique, grave goods were viewed as *constituting* social relationships, rather than representing them.

Ellen-Jane Pader, one of the earliest advocates of the so-called post-processual approach to mortuary remains, argued that the meaning of objects is not static but dependent on context, and the rituals through which the grave was created are not unchanging traditions but practices open to both innovation and change. She argued for a complex relationship between ideology, actions, and material culture, which are all continually reinterpreted and recreated in dialectic process. Therefore, the function and meaning of material culture are dependent on the cultural surroundings in which they occur, and are attributed the capacity to influence social action and ideology (Pader 1982). The motivation for this perspective was found in the theories of practice and structuration developed by anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and sociologist Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984), and indeed many post-processual theoreticians referred to these scholars.

Contextualizing Grave Goods:

In view of this contextual approach, the objects found in graves may never be taken as a direct reflection of a social system. Several scholars point to the fact that the dead do not bury themselves and as Heinrich Härke stated:

...burials would reflect *not* the realities of the lives of the people buried in them, but images of their lives and of their role in society in the minds of those arranging the burial and participating in the ritual. These images (or in other words: the ideal world) may coincide with the real world—but then again, they might not. (Härke 1994: 32)

This sentiment, which acknowledges both the *metaphorical* and *metonymic* possibilities (cf. Tilley 1999) of the meanings of grave goods, corresponded well with the results of numerous anthropological studies on mortuary practices which illustrate the discrepancies between social reality and the actions and material culture manifested within the funerary context (e.g. Izikowitz 1951, Leach 1979, Bloch and Parry 1982, Bonsu and Belk 2003, Hayden 2009; cf. Ucko 1969).

Early on in post-processual archaeology, the above-mentioned critique gave rise to a view of graves and their material culture as a form of *symbolic communication*, whose content might be elucidated by considering every relevant aspect which might influence the object of study (e.g. Parker Pearson 1982, Shanks and Tilley 1982, 1987, Hodder 1986, Barrett 1990). According to this perspective, people were active agents in the creation of social practice, not just passive receivers who adapted to their surroundings. Consequently, it was argued that the social meaning of the grave goods could not be disconnected from their *ritual* framework, to be analysed as an independent class of data. Rather, the entire complexity of the grave and its content was to be carefully analysed since it has bearing on the meanings that may be revealed.

(p. 176) In today's archaeology, many British and Scandinavian scholars dealing with mortuary material culture tend to view them in light of the post-processual paradigm, that is as a form of communication, or even agents in their own right which influence the people who experience them, rather than merely products of social categories and relationships (e.g. Carver 2000, Brück 2004, Artelius and Svanberg 2005, Jennbert 2006, Williams 2006, among many others. Cf. Robb 1998). It must be noted, however, that although these approaches may be aligned with theoretical research history, moving from processual to post-processual archaeology, we cannot view these perspectives as a mere chronological sequence. They are rarely autonomous and many of them can still be found in studies of mortuary practices today, depending on the country, archaeological tradition, and period of study.

Ritual as Transformation

Most archaeologists agree that, in the majority of cases, graves and their content are the results of intentional and structured actions. Our struggle to discern the function and meaning of the material culture that accompanied the dead, whether or not we acknowledge its mutability of meaning or regard it in a more straightforward manner as an actual testimony of the social reality of the living, therefore attributes some degree of symbolic power to it. The questions that stand in the foreground are thus how the meaning of the objects is formed and interpreted by the society that executes the mortuary practices. These intentional and structured actions are frequently conceptualized as *rituals*. However, the detailed definitions of ritual as a concept vary greatly. Likewise, the anthropological literature dealing with the variety of ways in which ritual may be delimited and defined is quite extensive (cf. Bell 1997). There are nevertheless a number of theoretical positions which many archaeological and social studies have argued to be especially significant when we are dealing with mortuary practices.

One of the most important factors to consider in an analysis of mortuary remains is that those interred are not just persons, but more specifically dead persons, and that the graves and their content are in some way related to the social and biological transitions brought about by death (cf. Tarlow 1999: 178). Many known societies consider death as a transformative process, and the purpose of their mortuary practices is therefore to manage the succeeding social transformations of both the deceased and the bereaved (e.g. Davies 2002). A funeral is thus never a question of a portrayal of a static identity of either the deceased or the bereaved, but rather a reconfiguration of their identities in order to cope with the physical, emotional, social, and ideological demands of death.

The idea of death as a social passage was first put forward by sociologist Robert Hertz (1960 [1907]) in an essay on the phenomenon of secondary burials on Borneo. He remarked that the process which the body underwent (with a temporary burial followed by decomposition and then finally a second interment) paralleled the mourning process of the living society as well as the believed journey of the soul to the afterlife. Only at the conclusion of the secondary burial was the soul thought to have arrived at its final destination, and the society of the living reordered itself. Thus, the rituals were conceived of as guiding the deceased and the living through analogous social transitions, simultaneously reorganizing and re-establishing the society disrupted by death.

(p. 177) Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960 [1909]) developed this idea further through his theory of *rites of passage*. He visualized society as a house with thresholds separating different social rooms. He argued that funerals were one of many ritual passages or transitions leading from one social room to another. He observed that these passage rites may be subdivided into three phases: rites of separation (pre-liminal phase), where the individual was detached from his or her previous state of being; rites of transition (liminal phase), where the individual existed in an ambiguous in-between state;

Contextualizing Grave Goods:

and lastly rites of incorporation (post-liminal phase), which conclude the ceremonial sequence by establishing the individual's new state. Therefore, while the old identity was disassembled through death, a new identity was negotiated and created through rituals. Death rituals constituted not just a transition but also a transformation. They revolved around the change of an individual into a new state of existence; that is, a new state in relation to the bereaved. The living society, through funerary rituals and rites of commemoration, gave the dead a new position in relation to themselves, and thus a new form of social relationship was created between the dead and the living. Several subsequent sociological and anthropological studies have sustained this transformative nature of death rituals, as well as developed its theoretical underpinnings further (e.g. Turner 1967, 1969, Leach 1976, Bloch and Parry 1982, Metcalf and Huntington 1991). Anthropologists Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey called attention to how objects, and the way they were handled and the images they invoked, were used to achieve this transformation of the deceased. Each phase of the transformation was expressed through symbols of different kinds. According to this perspective, the objects used in mortuary practices in relation to the dead body were employed because they gave meaning to the transformation whereby the deceased was given a new place and identity within the social reality of the survivors. Indeed the corpse itself should be seen as part of the material culture of death, since it is the object of action and not capable of intentional actions itself. Together with the surrounding artefacts, it becomes a means of expression (Hallam and Hockey 2001).

This view of the material culture employed in mortuary rituals, which combines the sense of the rituals as transformational with a contextual perspective on material culture, has fundamental consequences for our understanding of grave goods, since the grave goods also undergo the ritual or are introduced and associated with the dead body during various stages of the funerary sequence.

Ritual as Practice

The latter half of the 20th century saw a growing interest in ritual as performance and ritual as practice (e.g. Turner 1969, 1974, Bloch 1974, 1989). Both perspectives have shown themselves valuable for archaeologists, and indeed may be said to derive from the same basic understanding that underlay the post-processual shift in archaeological theory—that rituals are regarded not so much as the manifestation of pre-existing systems, but rather the arena where socio-cultural structures are (re)created (cf. Bell 1997: 73). The focus on performance and practice affected the way scholars viewed the symbols used in ritual, including material culture.

The ritual theories of practice which are most often referred to in archaeological studies are those developed by Bell (1992) and Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994), and they are in turn (p. 178) greatly inspired by Bourdieu and Giddens briefly referred to earlier. The theories of Bourdieu and Giddens were developed within social theory in order to bridge the gap between perspectives focusing on social structures as determining human behaviour on the one hand, and perspectives focusing on human practice and its creative and structuring powers on the other. Besides being influential in ritual studies, these discussions were greeted with much enthusiasm in archaeological theory and have greatly influenced the way archaeologists view both social and ritual practice. The main reason for this is that they gave equal weight to human practice and the structures, social as well as material, in relation to which these practices take place.

According to this theoretical complex, social structures, traditions, conventions, cultural categories, etc. are shaped through human action, and these structures are in turn the medium through which further action is generated. Embodied in individuals or groups through processes of socialization and learning, this structure takes the form of cultural and social knowledge and experience that impact on the way people think and act in relation to others. Human action and reaction are in other words not simply the result of external conditions, but rather brought into being through the interaction between embodied structures and social situations. Thus humans, through their social practices, create and transform the social structures they live in. These structures are in turn the circumstances within which further social practice is generated.

The further development of the theories of practice and structuration by Bell (1992) and Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) within the ritual discourse focused on rituals as dynamic processes, and criticized the traditional view of them as an inert category of action, separated from other social practices. Rather than striving for an all-inclusive definition of ritual, Bell therefore preferred to speak of practices that are marked off as significant or special through the process of *ritualization*.

Ritualization is fundamentally a way of doing things to trigger the perception that these practices are special ...Hence, ritual acts must be understood within a semantic framework whereby the significance of an action is dependent upon its place and relationship within a context of all other ways of acting: what it echoes, what it inverts, what it alludes to, what it denies. (Bell 1992: 220)

Through this contextual outlook, Bell managed to bridge the opposition between structure and action, in a similar way to Bourdieu and Giddens. Consequently, rituals cannot be regarded as static containers of meaning or as mere tools for the transmission of information. The meaning or effectiveness of a ritual and its elements is not predefined. Rather, ritual practice is viewed as generative, since it is in the act of doing that the ritual takes form and meaning is created (Bell 1992: 123 f., Bell 1997: 82 f., cf. Asad 1993, Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). But this is not to say that rituals are merely spontaneous improvisations devoid of intentions. Ritual practices are strategic and socially prescribed; they have identities and objectives that are often stipulated by tradition and occasionally maintained by officiants presiding over them (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 5, Rappaport 1999: 32–6). There is, in other words, a structure to which the practitioners relate. However, the reason for performing the ritual may shift from person to person, while the stipulated idea behind it, or its identity, remains. Each participant may have his or her own understanding, explanation, and interpretation of the ritual (cf. Bourdieu 1977: 37, 108, Rappaport 1999: 52–3). This is because the ritual is grounded in tradition (e.g. part of a religious and/or ritual (p. 179) system) and consequently perceived as external to the practitioners themselves. Therefore this structure restricts the actors at the same time as it enables individual variation. The persons partaking in a ritual may therefore combine the stipulated purpose of the ritual with their own intentions, without the former being compromised (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 5, 88 f., 128). On the other hand, the fact that there are overt intentions behind the rituals does not mean that the rituals are unchanging. Bell emphasized that the social *consequences* of the rituals are independent of their stipulated purposes and the individual intentions of their practitioners (Bell 1992: 108–10). And since the practice-oriented perspective conceptualizes rituals as generative, they have the power to influence and change the structures to which they are anchored. This is the process through which ritual and religious traditions change their form and identity over time.

Layers of Materiality and Meaning

The practice-theory approach has proven especially relevant to archaeological cases dealing with ritual, and has in particular strengthened the studies of funerary remains (e.g. Brysting Damm 1998, Nilsson Stutz 2003, Berggren 2010, Berggren and Nilsson Stutz 2010). Herein lies the key to contextualizing grave goods so as to come closer to an understanding of the function and meaning of the objects within the mortuary context.

Contextualizing Grave Goods:

If we view ritual as practice and mortuary ritual as a sequence of transformative acts, then the sometimes implicit idea of the grave as the result of a single event must be revised. While the relatively short time span involved in the deposition of a grave makes it important for chronological reasons, we must not let this mislead us when it comes to interpreting the material culture involved in the deposition. The grave is the outcome of a sequence of actions.

However, as archaeologists inspired by the practice-theory approach, we are faced with a challenge. This conceptualization of ritual focuses mainly on the experiences of the participating actors and rarely directs its theoretical apparatus to understanding the role of material culture in these practices. How then are we to consider objects in rituals; the interplay between the stipulated ideas behind their use, their practical function in the ritual actions, and their interpretation by the ritual participants? While most contemporary ritual theorists tend to overlook the material culture used in the rituals, some earlier works on the subject have dealt with this issue. Sometimes these scholars outspokenly mention *objects*; in other instances they use words like *symbols*, to denote the material culture utilized as part of the ritual practice. Two important scholars in this respect are anthropologists Maurice Bloch and Victor Turner.

Bloch showed, in an article dealing with formalization as a trait in ritual, that the meaning of ritual symbols, whether they be verbal or material, is shaped by the way in which they are presented (Bloch 1974: 72). According to his perspective, where the syntax of the ritual determines how meaning is created and understood, one cannot straightforwardly interpret ritual symbols based on meanings and explanations that derive from other, perhaps mundane, situations. Ritual expressions are, according to Bloch, often highly formalized, which reduces the propositional force of the communication (Bloch 1974: 56, 65). But just because ritual expressions may be highly formalized does not mean that they are devoid of meaning. (p. 180) Instead of being argumentative, they rather bear the characteristics of statements. Consequently, rituals are not always suitable instruments for exercising social control, which is an otherwise commonly held concept in archaeological research, especially in connection with the idea of graves as ideological tools. Since the formalized character of ritual does not only influence and constrain how things are said but also *what can* be said, the space for ideological manoeuvring and the possibilities for manipulation are limited (Bloch 1974: 64). Thus, the material symbols used in rituals have very limited argumentative strength. But, in return, the material symbols 'gain in ambiguity and hence their illocutionary and emotional force' as Bloch put it (1974: 75). In other words, since they are not restrictive in meaning, the ritual participants may fill them with their own content. In connection with this, he referred to Turner, who claimed that this ambiguity is a central characteristic of rituals (Turner 1967).

Turner's discussions of ritual symbols, among which he also included the material culture used in ritual, are an interesting theoretical starting point for archaeologists trying to understand material culture in ritual contexts, such as graves (Turner 1967, 1969). For example, he diverged from the more positivistic standpoint which characterized much of

Contextualizing Grave Goods:

the older anthropological research on symbols, where informants' statements on symbolic meaning to a large extent constrained the interpretations. Instead he took note of the multivocality of symbols and the fact that there are always different levels, or circumstances, where meaning is shaped and interpreted.

Furthermore, Turner emphasized that informants' interpretation of a symbol may sometimes be contradicted by the way people treat them (Turner 1967: 22). Thus he concluded that we must differentiate between three levels of meaning: the meanings attributed by the users or observers of the symbols (i.e. the exegetical meaning); the operational meaning of the symbols, i.e. how they were actually used; and the positional meaning of the symbols, i.e. their relationship to other symbols and cultural concepts (Turner 1967: 50 f.). By acknowledging these different levels or circumstances, the researcher may detect symbolic meanings of which the informants may not be aware. According to Turner, the positioning of the symbol in relation to other symbols and actions is decisive for its meaning. In other words, the symbols must be studied in their context in order to understand the meaning attributed to them (Turner 1967: 51). In addition, Turner reminds us that the same symbol may have different meanings in different phases of the ritual, and that the prevailing significance is dependent on the intention behind the ritual phase in which it takes place (Turner 1967: 52). This is an important observation to consider when studying the ritual use of material culture.

These perspectives presented by Bloch and Turner are on the whole in line with the practice-theory approach, in which meaning, knowledge, and experience are created and shaped through the interplay between previous structures, the current circumstances, and the agency of individual actors. Anthropologist Edward L. Schieffelin suggested that the modes of ritual performance 'serve to impose ...meaning upon the social event by bringing symbols and contexts into relation with one another within the order of the performance' (Schieffelin 1985: 709). In other words, the performance creates meanings that influence the situation in which the performance takes place, by bringing symbols and contexts together and creating a relationship between them. One could characterize it as the converging of different horizons of meaning, creatively linking them together in a web of allusion. Thus the meaning of the material culture used in the rituals is shaped, experienced through, and regarded as a part of, the ritual itself. And it is thus open to a large variety of readings and interpretations depending on the person's disposition.

(p. 181) **Approaching the Context**

Theoretical perspectives, whether they are explicit or not, always have methodological consequences. The practice-theoretical view of ritual has compelled a growing number of archaeologists to embrace the idea that it is in the interaction between people and things that the meaning of objects is created (e.g. Berggren and Nilsson Stutz 2010: 176). The methodological challenge is thus to acknowledge the practical implications of the theoretical perspectives discussed above and to make them work on an operational level. In this endeavour there are a number of important aspects that are especially relevant for analysis in order to understand the function and meaning of grave goods (cf. Ekengren 2009: 45–7).

Intentionality

The first important point is that we must ascertain which structures and depositions are intentional and which are not through careful documentation during excavation as well as contextual comparisons with other graves from the time period and geographical area under study. Thus we may establish which ritual actions took place during the funeral. This is a key point, if we are to understand what impact the ritual and its material culture had on participants and spectators.

Ritual Sequences

Although scholars like Bell emphasized that formalization is not a universal characteristic of ritual (Bell 1992: 220), there are a number of recurring patterns in the material culture of graves which indicate that formalization may have been a central trait in many mortuary rituals. Bloch's observations of how the forms of ritual practice shape the meaning of the material culture are thus important to keep in mind when studying graves. Similarly, the idea that some rituals consist of different structural phases pertaining to the transformation of individuals emphasizes that a contextual approach to mortuary practices is essential. The methodological points made by Turner regarding the study of ritual symbols likewise argue for a comparable approach since, as he concluded, the meaning of a symbol may differ depending on the phase of the ritual performance (Turner 1967: 52). Since it is clear that the patterns in the material culture of the graves are the result of sequential actions, and since function and meaning are dependent on context, it is therefore necessary to be mindful of the sequential positioning of the objects in relation to each other, the dead body, and the mourners (cf. Hallam and Hockey 2001: 14 f., Gansum and Oestigaard 2004). In what parts of the ritual were the objects used? Were they visible in certain segments of the ritual and invisible in others?

Spatial Arrangement

Another point presented above states that meaning is created by bringing symbols and contexts together and creating a relationship between them. This idea corresponds well with the approach where the ritual context is regarded as constitutive in itself. Ritual actions are (p. 182) ordinary actions that are changed through the present circumstances and through the actors' relationship to them. Through ritualization, using different techniques (such as formalization), new contexts are created for the actions. So even if these rituals contain elements known from other contexts, the shift of discourse to the ritualized environment, with its own framework of reference and interpretation, requires that their function and meaning are not simply equated with similar elements used in other contexts. In other words, we cannot presume that the meaning of grave goods is directly related to the use of the objects outside the funerary context. This perspective also negates the compartmentalization of objects that is widespread in mortuary studies, where types or categories of objects (such as weapons, jewellery, vessels, etc.) are often grouped together and analysed independently of each other, irrespective of how they are arranged and combined. Part of our focus should therefore be a spatial analysis of the layout of the grave and the arrangements of objects; in other words, what people did with the objects in relation to other material culture, including the dead body. This is because even if the grave goods may have been part of the dead person's possessions in life, they were selected, deposited, and arranged by one or more persons at the time of the funeral. The grave is thus a product of action, and therefore the sensory setting of the grave is an important focus of analysis. If meaning in ritual is shaped by the way material culture is used and combined at the moment of performance, then we cannot be constrained by the traditional compartmentalizations of grave goods. It is important to explore other possibilities based on the distribution of objects in the graves. By doing so, we are able to form an understanding of the creation and interplay of different fields of meaning in the ritual.

Typology and Physical Properties

Acknowledging that not all objects used and deposited during the funeral will be visible archaeologically, either because of the ritual itself (e.g. in the case of cremation) or because of the formation processes in the ground, we must pay attention to the physical properties of the objects that do survive. Typological features in the objects may reveal that they are considerably older than the grave itself, or that they are imported from distant areas. Together with technical features like the size of the objects, the material of manufacture as well as their colour and texture may give us further clues as to how ritual participants may have perceived them. For the same reason we must also try to establish in what physical *condition* the objects were included. Some objects may have been in circulation for a long time, and may have held great significance in the living society, before they were deposited worn in the grave. Others may have been newly made, perhaps for the sole purpose of the funeral, and thus unused at the time of deposition. Some objects may have been deposited in a complete, unscathed state. Others may have been affected by various actions, such as the burning and subsequent selection of fragments, as is often the case when we are dealing with cremations. Yet, other objects may have been intentionally broken before or around the time of the funeral, and the fragments deposited in a meaningful way among the rest of the grave goods. The possibilities are numerous. Therefore, what are frequently classified by archaeologists as incomplete, broken objects, or waste, may not be socially dead but highly significant in their partial state (cf. Chapman 2000, Chapman and Gaydarska 2007). A clear understanding of the physical condition of the objects in the graves is consequently as important as the rest of the analytical grounding mentioned above.

(p. 183) Fields of Meaning

As mentioned previously, we cannot assume that objects had the same function and meaning regardless of context. But neither can we assume that the perceived meaning which was formed through participation in the ritual actions corresponded to the intentions and meanings formulated by tradition. Thus, our analyses must acknowledge the multidimensional character of material culture, and the idea that there existed many different levels of interpretations side by side, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in conflict with each other. We must therefore try to consider the functions and meanings stipulated by tradition, the functions and meanings formed and embodied by the practitioners handling the objects and the bystanders observing them, as well as the functions and meanings recalled and/or recreated after the performance (e.g. memories).

The Grave of a Roman Iron Age Woman in Denmark

I will conclude this chapter with a case study in order to further exemplify some aspects of the practical application of the considerations stated above. We will visit one of the inhumation graves from the small cemetery at Skovgårde in the southern part of Zealand, Denmark, dated to the Late Roman Iron Age (published in Ethelberg 2000). It was excavated in 1998 in connection with the construction of the motorway between Rønnede and Udby. A total of 18 graves clustered in four groups were recovered, of which the majority were female. This case study will focus on one of them, grave 400 dated to approximately 260–270 AD (Fig. 10.1). The cemetery has received a great deal of attention from the time when it was unearthed, since four of the female inhumations (grave 400 being one of them) were of the well-provisioned kind often associated with the so called *princely graves* (German *Fürstengräber*) on the Continent (cf. Gebühr 1997, 1998). Such inhumation graves, characterized by the inclusion of imported Roman vessels of metal and glass, together with objects of silver and gold, have been found in significant numbers on Zealand, particularly on the eastern part of the island. The dead, who are buried in either a wooden chamber or in a coffin of stone or wood, are thought to belong to the upper strata of the Late Roman Iron Age society (for the latest treatment of richly furnished graves on Zealand, see Boye and Lund Hansen 2009). The inhumation practice, which was the dominant mode of burial on Zealand in the Late Roman period, was reintroduced in southern Scandinavia during the late pre-Roman Iron Age (c. 500–0 BC), having been out of use since the Early Bronze Age. The majority of the rest of the population in Denmark, however, were cremated, their bones buried in an urn or a simple pit together with a small number of objects (such as pottery vessels, jewellery, and fibulae).

Grave 400 at Skovgårde was dug in two levels, creating a terrace-like ledge surrounding the coffin, which in turn was made of a hollowed-out log. Finds of charcoal in connection with the coffin indicate that it had been scorched by fire. The ledge around the coffin was probably used to facilitate the deposition of the coffin, corpse, and grave goods, as well as to support a wooden cover. After the coffin had been sealed, the grave was filled with layers of stones of varying sizes.



fig. 10.1 Grave 400 from Skovgårde on Zealand in Denmark

Source: Adapted from Ethelberg (2000: 304).

(p. 184) (p. 185) The deceased was a woman who had died at approximately 25–30 years old. Her body was oriented with the head to the south. She was placed on her back, somewhat slanted to the right with her head facing east. Her right arm was extended along her side, while the left arm was placed over her abdomen, with the left hand clutching the right forearm. She wore a peplos-style dress with two plain silver fibulae (brooches) on the

shoulders, one large silver tutulus fibula decorated with gold foil on the middle of the breast, above that a plain silver fibula, and finally a plain silver fibula found in the area of her abdomen, indicating the fastening of a mantle or scarf. In the breast area, underneath the large tutulus fibula, the excavators found a small shard of painted Roman glass. On the left side of the woman's skull lay a large hair pin of silver decorated with gold foil and above the skull were the remains of a small string of glass and amber beads, most likely the remnants of a headdress. Besides the string of beads in her hair she also wore a small necklace with amber beads. And fastened to the tutulus fibula was one large and two small strings of beads made of glass, amber, silver, and bronze. Furthermore she wore a golden ring of the so-called 'snakehead' type on the ring finger of her right hand.

Besides a spindle whorl and a needle, both made of bronze and deposited next to the lower part of her right leg, the rest of the grave goods were dominated by different kinds of vessels. In the area above the woman's head stood three pottery vessels arranged in a triangle. Two of them were handled cups, while the third was a large bowl. Deposited inside the bowl were two glass vessels of Roman manufacture, one cup and one beaker. The glass beaker was found placed within the glass cup. At the foot end of the coffin stood two more vessels. One was a large bowl containing the complete skeleton of a small swine. It could not, however, be determined if the animal was deposited intact or cut into pieces. The other vessel was a large stave-built and bronze-bound wooden bucket. Both vessels were located directly on top of the woman's feet.

On the ledge surrounding the coffin the excavators found a bronze fitting in connection with a layer of organic material interpreted as wood. This was later interpreted as the

remains of a repaired wooden plate. Deposited approximately 5 cm below this layer was a comb made of bone.

Setting Theories at Work

A number of stages in the ritual may be observed in the grave from Skovgårde. The first is the preparation of the burial site. During this phase the ground was dug and a ledge was created around the cut made for the coffin. Parallel to this, a log was fashioned into a coffin. It was scorched with fire, which is a known traditional technique for making wood resistant to rot. Then the log coffin was deposited in the centre of the grave and, according to the excavators, this was probably done before the body was placed inside. It was most likely also during this phase that the grave goods were arranged (objects collected, the animal slaughtered etc.). Alongside these preparations, one may imagine, the body of the deceased was made ready for interment. Although we have no solid archaeological evidence to support this assumption, we may suppose that the corpse was washed and groomed before it was dressed. We do not know the length of time of this phase of the ritual. It may have been a matter of days, or much longer. We do know, however, that the woman from Skovgårde was dressed in an elaborate costume and her body intentionally placed inside the coffin (as seen in the positioning (p. 186) of the arms), indicating that an emphasis on bodily aesthetics formed part of the mortuary language. The peplos-style dress and especially the use of long and elaborately beaded strings and necklaces are known from several other contemporary Scandinavian graves. And even if there are regional differences, this may be regarded as a standard funerary costume for certain women in Late Roman Iron Age Scandinavia (cf. Stjernquist 2002: 252).

Around the corpse the rest of the grave goods were arranged and the intentionality of the deposition may be discerned when observing the different kinds of vessels placed in the grave. These vessels were not haphazardly deposited. They were carefully arranged around the body, and in relation to each other. This is for instance indicated by the bowl and the bucket placed on top of the dead women's feet. Likewise, the placement of vessels inside each other shows a considered pattern. Furthermore, the coffin was not a uniform surface for deposition. The space of the grave was disrupted and divided into sections through different placements of the arrangements. In other words, objects were clustered together in different ways within the ritual space of the grave. It may be suggested that this was to some extent done for practical reasons because of the limited space in the coffin. However, similar practices may be observed in other parts of Scandinavia and Northern Europe, where objects are distinctly clustered and arranged around the body and sometimes integrated into the posture of the corpse. Possibly, this was done as a means of highlighting them and thus making them more noticeable (cf. Ekengren 2009).

Contextualizing Grave Goods:

In the type of graves to which this one belongs, finds of imported vessels are common and often the focus of extensive debates on social status and international influences. Because of their prominent status within research on this period, they are most often analysed in isolation from the rest of the grave goods. While studying the arrangements at Skovgårde, however, it becomes clear that the imported vessels were in general not made more prominent than other vessels of local manufacture. Both Roman and local vessels were clearly associated with each other, indicating both a functional and metaphorical connection between the two categories. So while the imported vessels in some part may have signalled far off places, and perhaps even diplomatic contacts with the Romans themselves, they were simultaneously integrated in local conceptions of eating and drinking.

But who were the vessels and their content intended for: the deceased or the bereaved? That the swine placed in the grave was not the remains of a funeral meal eaten by the ritual participants is indicated by the fact that all the parts of the animal were deposited. It is also important to acknowledge here that the two vessel assemblages within the coffin were arranged in close association with the body, compared with the objects deposited outside on the ledge. The arranged corpse was in other word at the centre of those vessels' operational context. The same goes for the textile implements found by the woman's right leg. Spindle whorls and needles are a quite common inclusion in female graves of the period, in Scandinavia as well as in other parts of Northern Europe. Their presence forms an almost stereotyped or emblematic statement, but not necessarily one of domestic utility or gendered divisions of labour in the land of the living.

The way of arranging objects and the corpse within the primary burial space of grave 400 from Skovgårde thus gives us an idea of which stage of the ritual passage we are dealing with. I would argue that it represents the stages of the funeral where the deceased's new social status and role were visualized before she passed into memory. Instead of viewing the vessels or the tools as the personal belongings of the deceased, it is my opinion that they, as well as the animal deposited with the body inside the coffin, must be seen as parts of the (p. 187) symbolic representation of eating, drinking, and the spinning of thread, used to embody this new personhood in the dead woman. These activities were in other words central to the identity which was bestowed on the woman in this phase of the ritual, and ritual participants could have regarded the objects as both the equipment of the deceased and as a statement of her new role and position in society. Eating and drinking are common themes associated with death and the afterlife in numerous cultures around the world (cf. Davies 2002: 40–2). In the Scandinavian setting, this association is most famously expressed in the mythological concept of the banqueting hall Valhalla in the Early Medieval sources (e.g. Davidson 1968, Simek 2007). Similarly, the spinning of thread is associated with death, most notably illustrated by the Norns, a group of female deities who spun the fate of gods and men in later Scandinavian mythology (e.g. Simek 2007). Although these examples belong to a much later period of Scandinavian history, it may be suggested that, through the material culture of the ritual, and the metaphorical connection it created between the elaborately dressed body, eating, drinking, and the spinning of thread, a mental picture of the deceased and their afterlife

Contextualizing Grave Goods:

was created and re-created. Furthermore, based on the dialectic perspective of ritual action and material culture argued above, the metaphorical association displayed in later literary sources may well have had its material roots in Roman Iron Age mortuary practices and their creation of death.

But not all objects were as visible in the coffin as one might presume. The single shard of glass found under the large fibula on the woman's chest is evidence of this. This find also displays a distinct fragmentation practice. The shard must have been positioned on the body at the time it was dressed or when it was arranged in the coffin. From this feature, which shows a completely different treatment from the two glass vessels arranged in the head end of the grave, it is evident that objects belonging to the same category or type may be part of different spatial arrangements and different stages in the ritual. Naturally, this has a bearing on the interpretation. This circumstance would probably have been overlooked in a summary analysis based on a total inventory of objects in the grave, which would merely have counted it as 'Roman glass', not functionally set apart from other glass vessels in the grave. Usually this use of glass fragments is interpreted as payment, in the Greco-Roman manner, to the ferryman for the crossing to Hades (Boye 2002). But it may also have been part of a complex notion of enchainment (cf. Chapman 2000), where fragments distributed along social networks and deposited in various contexts (including graves, settlements, or encased in ceramic vessels, as is evident from contemporary Scandinavian finds) may have functioned as symbolic reminders of both the whole objects and the whole social fellowship to which the deceased and the bereaved belonged. As part of the social transformation of the deceased, it has been suggested that the deposition and dispersal of fragments tied together the various social relationships in focus at the funeral (cf. Ekengren 2009).

Even though we can argue that the body and the grave goods were on display in the coffin, they were rendered invisible when the coffin was sealed with a wooden cover. This further reminds us that we cannot assume that all objects were equally visible and thus able to make an impression on the bystanders. But although the body and some of the objects were taken out of view, the ritual actions continued. The deposition of objects on a ledge outside the coffin is a practice known from the period in other areas of Scandinavia and on the Continent. This practice shows that not all ritual actions were directly associated with the dead body but rather belonged to sequences where the deceased was separated (at least visually) from the participants. As already mentioned, this might dispute (p. 188) the often-presumed notion that all objects in a grave were directly related to the deceased's social persona. The deposition of objects outside the coffin was rather part of the activities after the ritual participants had established the deceased's new identity and passed her out of view. They were objects used by the living, and not by the dead, so to speak. There can be many meanings behind such graveside rituals, depending on what kinds of objects we may observe. The comb and tray in the grave from Skovgårde may be interpreted as equipment used in connection with washing and grooming, perhaps the actual physical preparation of the dead body or the cleansing of

Contextualizing Grave Goods:

the participants. They may then have been offered or discarded prior to back-filling the grave because they were deemed unsuitable for further use by the living.

Through the rituals and their material culture (including the body), society's thoughts, and images of death, the dead woman and the afterlife were (re)created, embodied, and sustained. And accordingly, the participants at the funeral reshaped their own identity. After the grave was closed, the objects literally became part of the world of the dead and, from their place buried with the corpse, they would continue to evoke social identities and images of death through memories and through the materiality of the cemetery itself.

Looking at the grave in this manner, informed by the theoretical and methodological considerations discussed above, we may reach a dynamic picture of how the grave goods were used during the ritual; how objects were displayed, arranged, and concealed in different parts of the funeral, and how the same category of objects could very well have different functions within the same phase of the ritual. All of this enabled and restricted the participants' access to the grave goods in various ways, especially the possible sensory impact of the objects. Several further aspects could have been explored more deeply than those discussed here; such as the form and materiality of the jewellery and pottery, functional aspects of the objects outside the mortuary context, as well as their age and provenance—all important in order to fully understand how different horizons of function and meaning may have interacted in the funerary context. However, the examples above have shown how the range of objects, ritual sequences, and spatial arrangements formed separate, but interconnected, spheres of meaning production, which must be considered as such if we are to understand the multiple functions and meanings of the grave goods.

Suggested Further Reading

Suggested Further Reading

Bell, C. 1992. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

One of the greatest influences on the archaeology of ritual in recent years.

Bell, C. 1997. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

By many considered the best and most systematic introduction to ritual studies available.

Berggren, Å., and Nilsson Stutz, L. 2010. From Spectator to Critic and Participant: A New Role for Archaeology in Ritual Studies. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 10(2): 171–97.

A well-argued and inspiring application of practice-theoretical perspectives on the archaeological remains of ritual.

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One of the few English introductions to the French taphonomy-based discipline of archaeothanatology (also known as anthropologie de terrain) which aims at reconstructing mortuary practices via detailed documentation of its human remains.

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A summary review of the history of archaeological theories about ritual and religion.

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Together with Bell (1992), this book has greatly inspired the practice-theoretical approach to ritual within archaeology.

Robb, J. E. 1998. The Archaeology of Symbols. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27: 329–46.

An excellent summary analysis of the archaeological approaches to material culture in general, and symbols in particular.

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Contextualizing Grave Goods:

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