



Two graves – three metaphors

Changing gender identities in the Migration Period illustrated by graves from Hardanger, western Norway

In this article I argue that there was a decisive change in metaphorical expression in mortuary practice in western Norway from AD 475-500, illustrated by two graves from Kvam municipality in Hardanger. In Migration Period southern Scandinavia a change of world-view has been emphasised in several facets, in which “the year 500 appears as a hinge in Scandinavian prehistory” (Näsman 1998:113). The changes are seen within a general framework of centralisation of power with a development from tribal society to state formation in northern Europe (Hedeager 1992). This also included new needs for leadership. Continental Europe historians believe that a shift took place from old sacred leaders to a new elite based on warlords, and the archaeological material from southern Scandinavia indicates a similar development here (Näsman 1998:112). The relevance of this process of change has also been illustrated for southern and western Norway (Myhre 1991; Kristoffersen 2000). The warlord and his retinue – the warband or *comitatus* structure – seem to have been a defining principle for a period of unsettled political and social environment. The *comitatus* was the body of armed men a king or chieftain could muster from his own, often tribal, local resources. But as this warrior class grew, many of the functions related to kinship appear to have been incorporated within a lord-retainer relationship (Evans 1997:2, 69).

With this background, among the facets of change in world-view some aspects are of particular relevance to an understanding of contemporary mortuary practices in western Norway. Specifically, I will focus on the *hall*

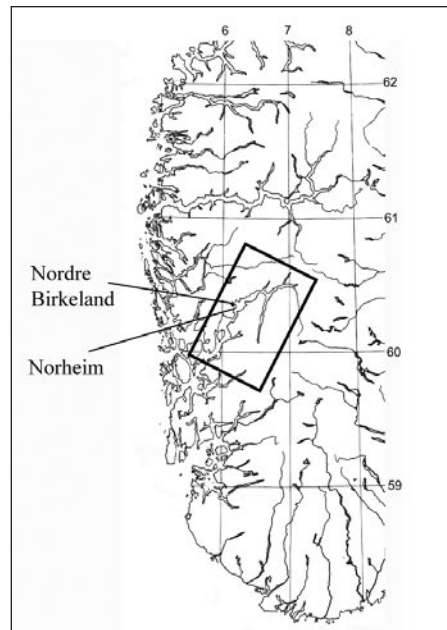


Figure 1. Map of western Norway showing the Hardanger area and locations of graves discussed

(Herschend 1993, 1997) which appeared as a room for leadership in the 5th century AD in southern Scandinavia, both economically and military. The hall constituted the room as a social space for the individual head of the family, and it is by “the fusion between the military power, which could be temporarily bestowed upon any gifted murderer, and the economic power, inherited by the sons from the best farms, that individuality becomes a public, social concept invested with a room, the embryonic hall” (Herschend 1993:195). Closely related to the emergent ideas of a new kind of aristocracy, Gry Wiker (2001) has argued that gender identities changed during the Migration Period, influenced by ideological and religious currents in an increasingly Christianised Europe, involving a conceptualisation of *decency* and an increased polarisation between the feminine and the masculine.

Although the interpretations in this article differ in important respects, I am indebted to Morten Hanisch’s analysis of Roman Iron Age and Migration Period burials from Hardanger (2001) where the assemblages are discussed in light of the concept of *honour*. Hanisch’s contribution also includes a catalogue of the burials and contextual dates based on Straume’s (1987) framework, which I have made use of here (table 1).

Period	Phase	Dating
Late Roman Iron Age	C3	AD 310/20-400
Migration Period	D1	AD 400-475
	D2a	AD 475-525
	D2b	AD 525-560/70

Table 1. Framework for the discussed Early Iron Age phases and dates

Two graves from Hardanger

The earliest grave, from the farm Nordheim, was a cremation burial found under a number of small stone slabs placed in several layers. It measured 1.5 x 1 m and consisted of charcoal, burnt human bones, and artefacts that seemed to have been scattered all over without any visible order. Among the objects were the secondary burnt shards of a bucket-shaped pot and two pots similar to the handled vessel R 361 (Rygh 1999 [1885]: Fig. 361). There were also two lumps of melted bronze, a lump of blue glass, an iron needle, a fire-steel, an iron pin for a spindle, an iron hook and a pin, an iron knife, an iron ferrule, and a comb and three needles made of bone. In addition, altogether nine bear claws were found. The burial is dated to D1. The human bones were analysed and found hard to determine. The person was possibly a male and was no more than 40 years old. However, Hanisch interprets the context as the burial of a woman (Hanisch 2001). This ambiguity with reference to gender interpretation illustrates a significant aspect which I will discuss in detail later.

The later grave from the farm Nordre Birkeland was, on the other hand, an inhumation placed in a 2.8 m long and east-west-oriented stone cist. Inside were two bucket-shaped pots, four bronze brooches, a lance head, an axe, a large knife or short sax, two small knives, a pair of scissors, a piece of a belt ring with remains of a key attached, a spindle whorl, an iron mounting, and textile remains attached to some of the brooches. The content of the grave is dated to the phase D2b. The distribution of objects in the stone cist reflects two separate burials, a woman buried with her head towards the east and a man with his head pointing west. Evidence of the displacement of grave goods belonging to the woman indicates that she

was buried first. The brooches, the belt ring with a key and the textile equipment are related to this primary burial while the weapons are associated with the man (Hanisch 2001).

Why go into detail about these particular graves? Both cremations and inhumations occur in southern and western Norway throughout the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period (Solberg 2000:76 pp, 135). The burials are evidence of two quite different ways of treating the dead body, and I will emphasise here that the differences illustrate a shift in key metaphors associated with death and burial.

Burials and rituals

Death is a boundary marking off and defining both ends of the human condition. It is a transgression of a boundary that ritual allows to be crossed, and rites de passage are ceremonies securing the individual's passage from one defined situation to another. Persons in a transitional phase are dangerous and contradictory in terms of social definition. They are in a liminal phase "betwixt and between" all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification" (Turner 1967:97). The interpretation of graves demands a clarification of what is meant by the ceremonial or ritual treatment of the deceased in burials: it is partly in order to separate the individual from the living and partly to secure the dead a continued existence. For we can neither understand burial practice exclusively as a reflection of the society's ideology nor exclusively as a manifestation of its comprehensions of death. There was an ever changing discourse between the living and the dead (Stylegar 1995:26). What kind of conceptualisations may be associated with the burial practices exemplified by the graves from Nordheim and Nordre Birkeland, and how were these related to a discourse between ideology and understandings of death?

Terje Oestigaard emphasises the deceased as a *sacrifice*, in which the ritual is a preparation of the corpse for the gods as raw, cooked or burnt, and the "sacrificial dimension in funerals is the mourner's project of incorporating the deceased in the resurrection of society. To achieve this desired state, the mourners or the participants need divine legitimacy from the gods" (Oestigaard 2000:42). The way in which the dead is sacrificed to the gods influences either the destiny of the deceased or that of the descendants. What is given to the gods is people's own deep motivation: whether the deceased is offered raw, cooked or burnt is determined by what the descendants believe to be the gods' wishes. The gods establish their superiority by giving more than they receive, and *reciprocity* may coexist with a hierarchy where the sacrificial exchange can represent the gods' superiority over man. Sacrifices of dead human beings are thus incorporated into the social structure, where social control by hierarchically ordered powers determines who are to be sacrificed and in what manner it is to be carried out (ibid:42 pp). By emphasising mortuary practices as reflections of food preparation practices this perspective provides means for understanding both cremations and inhumations as sacrifice and reciprocity between gods and humans. But how may we approach the changes in social status and identity, and how may cremation and inhumations differ in that respect?

Based on the argument that the act of cremation is sex and gender destroying while inhumation is preserving for identity, Tove Hjørungdal (1999) emphasises the importance of understanding burial material as illuminating the primary function of ritual in different phases of life: the social construction of individuals or groups as new social beings. Cremation burials are manifestations of a transformation process in which identity was *deconstructed* and

reconstructed. The destruction of the human body by cremation is the physical, mental and social destruction of identities in life. In the liminal phase ‘betwixt and between’ the person is a ‘common denominator’ (Brush 1988:83), and identity is subsequently reconstructed according to the needs of the living, as an ancestor and mediator between gods and humans. The cremation burials are thus manifestations of the destruction of the social identity as a living human being and a reconstruction of an identity for the afterlife, and artefacts are part of this mediating social construction between two worlds (Hjørungdal 1999:82 pp).

The view of inhumations as preserving social identity is essentially based on the practice as a negation of cremation in one particular respect: the deceased’s body is *not* deconstructed and reconstructed in a heat-mediated transformation. Understanding inhumation and its ties to conceptualisations of passage and liminality demands a focus on the relationship between the buried body and cultural perceptions of the individual. These perceptions change throughout the human life cycle, including death, and the transitions between different stages may be associated with particular rituals. The purpose of the ritual is the transformation into a new social identity. Thus, as in cremations the identities reflected in inhumations are cultural constructs that cannot be viewed separately from the reproduction of the living society (*ibid*). The central question is what cultural perceptions of individual social identity are relevant to understand Migration Period mortuary practice?

Social identities in the Migration Period

Social identities based on gender and sexuality are permeable categories created through culturally constructed models of physiology. They are classified and drawn upon through relative understandings such as the functions of the human body and the degree of difference between males and females, and thus creating apparently natural gender categories of masculine, feminine and specified others. Gender is “a cumulative ontology, acquired by individuals through processes of socialisation and through their own performances of repeated activities that naturalise their gender. The lived experience of gender shifts, changes and develops with stages in the lifecycle” (Gilchrist 1999:77). Symbols associated with gender relations appear to be multivocal and subject to a variety of readings, and the relations between the social identities are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated (Mandt 2001:293).

Hanisch (2001) has classified the burial assemblages from the Late Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period in Hardanger according to honour as a key principle, distinguishing between different ideals for agency related to social statuses as women and men, following the three variables class, gender and age. Hanisch discusses four principal ideals related to the material culture in the burials, based on Preben Meulengracht Sørensen’s (1995) division into four basic social positions; young man and young woman, mature man and mature woman. The transition from young to mature was the most important; this change in status was closely linked to marriage and generational changes. On the basis of these ideals artefacts in burial assemblages may be classified according to three separate spheres.

The masculine sphere

Weapons – swords and the associated artefacts spear, lance, and shield equipment – seem to belong to the male burial assemblage throughout the entire Early Iron Age in Scandinavia. Axes and girdle stones are also related to masculine burials. The Norse concept of honour presupposed that the male role model exercised courage and strategic skills; in the Norse

society weapons symbolised a man's ability to defend himself and his family, and to defend his integrity and status as a free person (Hanisch 2001:47 pp).

The feminine sphere

Relief brooches or other brooches, keys and tools associated with working and preparing textile and skin are related to feminine ideals for agency. Burials of women may be identified by the presence of brooches, dress pins, spindle hooks, weaving battens, keys, key rings, hair pins, skin scrapers, and berlocks (Hanisch 2001:49). It is interesting to note that relief brooches and weapons are never found associated with the same burial and are thus mutually excluding categories. In the instances they are found together in the same grave they seem to belong to two different individuals. By correlation with osteological analysis in areas where human bones are associated with the material culture, the two categories are related to different social identities – weapons for men and brooches for women (Kristoffersen 2000:101 pp).

Relief brooches are often combined with smaller brooches and spindle whorls, in addition to the occurrence of keys and iron weaving battens. These assemblages are related to the construction of the notion and role of *the lady of the house*. The keys are associated with the ideals for agency of the mature woman. Women's transition from young and unmarried to mature and married implied a change from an essentially passive to an active influence on the household (ibid; Hanisch 2001:70 p). The way keys were worn indicates a lack of functionality; it seems to have been the social significance of wearing the keys that were emphasised. The keys may thus represent the lady of the house and her responsibilities on the farm and in the household (Kristoffersen 2000:132). Domestic activities are also associated with equipment for producing textiles in the burial assemblages. Artefacts like spindle whorls, hook attachments for spindles and weaving battens adds the aspect of highly developed textile production to the role as lady of the house. Textile production may have constituted a significant part of the life of a lady of the house, both as manufacturer and as administrator. Particularly the iron weaving batten seems to represent an economically and socially important production, and in a northern European perspective the weaving batten is emphasised as a symbol for the lady of the house in the upper strata of society (ibid; Hanisch 2001:75 pp).

The complementary sphere

A range of artefacts in the burial assemblages are neither predominantly associated with feminine nor masculine gender identity. Here I discuss the material categories related to this sphere found in the Nordheim and Nordre Birkeland graves. In particular bone gaming-pieces, bear claws and whetstones occur in burials of both women and men in Hardanger, in addition to vessels for food and drink. With the exception of pottery all categories are associated with the upper strata of society. Hanisch relates board game symbolism to the transition in social status from young to mature for both women and men, and therefore ritually associated with the establishment of marital alliances. The gaming-pieces are often found in relatively large burial mounds, often associated with Vestland cauldrons and glass beakers. Drinking vessels from the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period are without exception glass beakers or remains of such, and chronologically they are evenly distributed throughout the different phases (Hanisch 2001:87 pp).

Two main features of the complementary sphere must be emphasised (Fredriksen 2005:291). Firstly, there is a strong correlation between gaming-pieces and bear claws in cremation

assemblages, and a significant trait is the general early dating of the phenomenon to C3 and D1. Secondly, containers reflecting practices of food and drink, in the form of Vestland cauldrons, glass beakers, handled vessels and bucket-shaped pots, are a common characteristic in burials throughout the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period in Hardanger. However, the association between bucket-shaped pots and handled vessels belong to C3 and D1 in particular, and is less common in D2. These are points to which I will return in more detail below.

The distinction of class

In the wake of the emergence of an aristocracy with political relations based on personal alliances, the new leadership stratum became closely associated with the hall, both as a physical structure and as a concept. The hall, with its connotations to social identity, emerged as an ideal for agency. The leadership of society got a separate space, in the main house or in a separate building, withdrawn from the everyday life on the farm. The individual military, political and economic leader and head of the family entertained visitors and his retinue of warriors in the hall. Here activities included “feasting and drinking, boasting of deeds to be performed, and listening to the songs of the court poet. These activities – commonly referred to as hall-joys – were instrumental in strengthening the bonds between a lord and his retainers, and reflecting the proper functioning of the *comitatus* structure” (Evans 1997:68).

Feasts and commensality are institutionalizing for asymmetrical social relations and provides understanding of the differentiating aspects, of its function as naturalising and confirming for conceptions of differences in social rank and status. As Michael Dietler writes, differentiated consumption of food and drink may function “as a diacritical symbolic device in hierarchical societies, where commensal circles and marriage networks come to be restricted along class divisions” (Dietler 1996:112). The hall as an ideal expresses a notion of difference in social class. A social class is a set of agents who “are placed in homogeneous conditions of existence imposing homogeneous conditioning and producing homogeneous systems of dispositions capable of generating similar practices” (Bourdieu 1989:101). Thus, ideals for agency for the feminine and masculine were *idealised* identities generated by similar practices among members of an elite and expressed in upper levels of society, especially centred round the lady of the house and her husband.

‘Life style’ and ‘death style’

In addition to religious and military power, the centralised power of king and aristocracy in Migration period southern Scandinavia was based on their role as organisers of a redistributive exchange system that gave control over prestige goods (Myhre 1991:10 p), objects which are essential in order to maintain the social and political organisation of the community by means of political ‘gifts’, payments for certain religious or medical activities, rituals, fines, at funerals etc. Control over prestige goods thus also meant control over social reproduction. At the transition to the Migration Period there was less concern for the use of prestige goods in burials, and an increased exchange of gifts and services among the elite (Hedeager 1992:88 p).

In southern and western Norway imported glass and bronze is more common in the first half of the Migration Period, and becomes more infrequent in the latter half. The strongly personalised adornments and sword equipment, on the other hand, become increasingly frequent throughout the period. This change towards more emphasis on personalised material culture is related to a change in the type of exchange of goods and alliance partners. The

person-focused artefacts may be seen as reflections of the activities and ideals for agency of the comitatus structure, symbolizing political affiliation or loyalty (Kristoffersen 2000:43 pp). The increased emphasis on person-oriented bodily adornment opened for a higher degree of focus on the human body as a symbol for social identity in the burials, especially for symbolism of the masculine and the feminine. Such emphasis is closely connected to societal hegemonies, perhaps for masculinity in particular. Hegemonic masculinity includes those aspects of maleness that are viewed as particularly empowering within a society, and “often conflates physicality, learned behaviour and sexuality, and is culturally mystified to create a naturalised equation of maleness with power” (Gilchrist 1999:64).

An emphasis on the human body in burial rituals may be associated with a *life style* among an emerging warrior elite, marking the growth of a new understanding of personhood – male self-identity – rooted in social practices and cultural representations. This *life style*, and the male body’s role in it, must be understood in conjunction with an equally important *death style*, a socio-cultural prescribed way of dying (Treherne 1995:105 p). This approach places emphasis on to what extent notions of beauty and body aesthetics are culturally constructed. Thus, the ‘life style’ in the form of ideals of agency for the feminine and the masculine in Early Iron Age western Norway – hegemonic femininity and masculinity related to spheres of material culture – are cultural constructions. A ‘death style’ must be understood in relation to a ‘life style’ – symbolism of physical appearance and concepts of aesthetic death may be related to the change towards more person-oriented material assemblages in the graves towards the latter half of the Migration Period.

Journey and regeneration as key metaphors

Whereas a widely accepted notion of *symbol* is “a thing regarded by general consent as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought” (Turner 1967:19), the *metaphor* involves comprehending some entity from the perspective of another and serves as a binding element in providing an interpretative account of the world. Christopher Tilley has argued that by conveying complex figurations of ideas with very few words and very few symbols metaphors provide a basis by means of which communities create and understand their collective experience. They are thus fundamental to all belief systems, and the analysis of *key metaphors* involves conceptualising metaphors within an ontology of bodily experience and perception that is understood as being dialectically linked to cultural understandings. By grounding key metaphors in culturally mediated bodily experience they may provide means to understand culturally specific perception and may also operate within guiding principles for social action (Tilley 1999:31 pp, 260p; Hanisch 2001:14). Thus, metaphors refer to complex conceptualisations in societies, and are therefore ontologically grounded frames of reference binding cultural symbols together. I argue that the Migration Period hall with its associations to concepts of honour and ideals for agency is a key metaphor, a guiding principle for social action reflected in burial practice, in addition to the journey and regeneration as key metaphors to understand culturally specific perceptions of death and burial.

The journey metaphor is associated with boat and horse symbolism. The boat is commonly interpreted as having belonged within a mythological framework related to the journey as a transition between separate spheres, for instance between the living and the life hereafter (Fuglestad 1999: 88 pp). Boat-shaped grave mounds and stone settings and boat burials

are known throughout the Nordic region in the period AD 500-1100, and Gro Steinsland points out that their link to journey symbolism have some support in mythical narratives. A valid question is whether the journey by boat was a common conception for the time period (Steinsland 1991:425 p), a notion that Frands Herschend (1997) have extended to the relationship between boat burials and the hall. The idea of proximity between death and journey is supported by the two main motifs on the Gotlandic picture stones; a departure scene and an arrival scene (Steinsland 1991:423). The iconography is related to social changes around c. AD 500 in Scandinavia (Näsman 1998:113). Based on poetry accounts it is possible to interpret the arrival scene as a dead warrior arriving in Valhalla, since the horse and associated material culture in contexts of burial and sacrifice seem closely connected to the symbolic status of the horse as journeying across boundaries and as a mediator between spheres of existence (Oma 2001:46).

Journey and death were also closely tied to creative forces and fertility. Central aspects of the journey were the crossing of boundaries and the search for knowledge. Insight and wisdom were obtained by transcending the boundary between life and death and by facing the powers of death. Often the journey for knowledge as a mythical motif had erotic overtones in its quest to utilise the potential of opposing forces and transform it through one's own creative powers (Fuglestedt 1999:90 pp). In most cases what seems to be revitalised or regenerated in mortuary practices is the resource culturally conceived to be most essential for the reproduction of the social order (Bloch & Parry 1982:7). The key metaphors journey and regeneration refer to a link between death and eroticism; in the Norse written sources death is given fertile and regenerative qualities. Thus, in the Nordic Iron Age, humans were the culturally most important resource for the reproduction of social structure, and the dead maintained functions that were of vital importance for kinship ties and society (Steinsland 1991:42, 1992:322).

The recurrent themes wedding and death in the mythological complex formed the ideological basis for claims to power in the Nordic Late Iron Age. The concept of *hieros gamos* – the sacred wedding – was founded on an unsettled dichotomy in literary sources about the deceased's continued existence in the grave and in the afterlife respectively. On the one hand, the deceased lived on in the grave after burial, on the other the dead was incorporated into the afterlife. Thus, grave and afterlife were two separate localities (Steinsland 1991:431 p), and the deceased could travel back and forth between the two. Among written sources the heroic poetry of the Edda has made use of and problematises this dichotomy. For instance, the dead hero may meet his mourning wife in his grave, as in the example of Helge and Sigrun in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, in which death is not the final barrier for devotion and passion between man and woman (Steinsland 1992:327 p).

Shamanism and the floating signifier

The key metaphors journey and regeneration are also reflected in *seid*, the particular form of Nordic pagan magic. The process of *seid* was a state of ecstasy where the body lay lifeless while the spirit travelled freely in time and space. The free spirit could 'bewilder' or damage or it could travel to the afterlife or distant places in order to acquire insight and knowledge about the past or future. According to written sources *seid* and ecstasy were inextricably linked to the belief in *hamskifte* – the belief in the spirit's emancipation from the human body in a zoomorphic shape. A clear relationship between *seid*, ecstasy and *hamskifte* is identical to the religious complex known as shamanism. A shaman acted as a personal mediator between

the society of the living and ‘the other side’. The role was powerful in being the only person with the necessary transcendental abilities to communicate with ancestral spirits, and the most important function was to bring the spirit of the sick back from the world of the dead (Magnus 1988; Hedeager 1997). The magic-religious domain of the shamans was originally a female domain, and male practitioners, *seidmenn*, were not considered to be real men. They had feminine characteristics and were accused of being *argr*; to either act as belonging to the feminine gender, to resemble a woman, or to have been transformed into a woman (Solli 1999:413).

The philosopher José Gil (1998:99 pp) emphasises the symbolical significance of the human body in shamanistic transitions. We arrange signs and symbols according to the divisions we use in our ‘real’ world, identifying living things and objects and establishing precise relations between ‘signifiers’ and ‘signifieds’. But not everything we know has a meaning that can be identified. Some signs remain ‘free-floating’. There is some meaning, but it is impossible to assign a precise meaning. These floating signifiers are always found on the boundaries of the social order, and imply some form of magic. They are involved in all passages from one state to another – birth, marriage, death, initiations, and journeys. This is a dangerous situation. Symbols would lose the power to function, since there is no way to separate the known from the unknown. The shaman has the particular role of bringing the individual or group from one state to another and makes the participants of rituals understand the symbolic language where unexpressed mental states are made explicit. Transition is made meaningful through one particular factor – the human body. The body carries the symbolism in which ‘sickness’ and ‘death’ disorganises the symbolic order, and the shamanistic cure re-establishes this order. On the one hand shamanistic transition is about decoding the body as ‘sick’ or ‘lifeless’, on the other hand, about recoding or recreating the body as ‘healthy’ or ‘living’. To decode is to set loose from signification. This is obtained by pushing meaning to the point of extreme confusion in ritual actions, in which the group “relives the origin of meaning as the origin of normality – an origin that coincides with the production of a new body, newly coded and diffusing meaning. Thus is the order of symbolic codes re-established, at the price of a perilous journey to the regions of the “uncodable” (Gil 1998:99).

In western Norway bear hides and bear claws occur in burials from the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period, and they are interpreted as having belonged to a particular magical-religious group, possibly associated with an Odin cult (Hvoslev Krüger 1988). Bear remains are represented independently of economic status, age and gender, and a dominant part of the burials are cremations. Bear claws and animal hides in graves, in addition to Vestland cauldrons, combs, gaming-pieces, and spindle-whorls, are related to transformations of social identity (Hjørungdal 1999:90), and may be interpreted as shamanistic characteristics in the graves, symbolising *hamskifte* within a complementary sphere and a metaphorical complex expressing meanings associated with journey and regeneration.

The impact of the third key metaphor

In returning to the graves from Kvam I will draw attention to the two main features emphasised earlier for the complementary sphere: the correlation between gaming-pieces and bear-claws and the association between bucket-shaped pots and handled vessels. These belong for the most part to the Late Roman Iron Age and the first half of the Migration Period.

Firstly, handled vessels are generally seen as tableware, and together with bucket-shaped pots they are viewed as a 'standard assemblage' of containers for serving. Both types of pottery were most probably part of a symbolism of cooking and serving food and drink (Fredriksen 2005:283). Secondly, bear claws are interpreted as symbolical expressions of *hamskifte*, of shamanistic characteristics that can be related to an Odin cult (Hvoslev-Kruger 1988). In shamanistic transformations the focus was on the human body as a 'floating signified' in the liminal transition between human conditions. By cremation the body is deconstructed and decoded, and the physical anatomy and social identity of the individual erased. In the cremation burial from Nordheim a bone comb, bear claws and a spindle occur with certainty. This may be related to Hjørungdal's argument that these objects represent transformations of human conditions and social identity (1999:90). All artefacts in the Nordheim grave were burnt with the deceased; they have thus been part of the deconstruction of social identity and of the dangerous liminal phase between deconstruction and reconstruction as ancestor. The grave is dated to D1 and interpreted as a woman's burial. The material assemblage belongs to both the feminine and the complementary spheres; only the needles and the remains of the whorl are clearly associated with the feminine. The burial may thus be related to a deconstruction of a human being's identities in life and a reconstruction in the form of an identity as ancestor. The ambiguity of gender identity is a prominent feature of Nordic shamanistic symbolism (Solli 1999; Mandt 2001:302 pp), and contrasts the increased gender polarisation in later burials. This interpretation of the grave – as displaying shamanistic characteristics and symbolically representing food practice within a relationship of sacrifice and reciprocity between humans and gods – refers to the key metaphors journey and regeneration.

The Nordre Birkeland stone cist grave is associated with the ideals for agency for the mature man and mature woman – as the male head of the family and the lady of the house. The man is buried with weapons and the woman with bronze brooches, key in her belt and textile equipment. The grave thus illustrates the main difference between the graves discussed here; the concept of the hall and its increased polarisation between femininity and masculinity is a third key metaphor entering the burials in western Norway around AD 475-500. The late Migration Period date relates to the changes in world-view; the burials are expressions of an idealised 'death style' associated with an equally idealised 'life style' in the last half of the Migration Period. This is viewed in light of an increasing individualism in Early Iron Age society in western Norway, in particular within the upper social strata, a change that was closely linked to perceptions of human identity. The grave also relates to journey and regeneration, the two recurring key metaphors in burials throughout the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period. As it contains a vessel for cooking or serving for each buried individual, the grave reflects a ritual consumption of food and drink. The vessels may have been valuable symbols of life and death in the eternal reciprocal gift-giving between the living and the dead. In addition, graves with a man and a woman buried in the same cist may also be related to the themes wedding and death in which the grave is not necessarily the final barrier for passion between woman and man, as for example Sigrun and Helge in *Helgakviða Hundlingsbana II*. The meeting between the lady of the house and her husband is not limited by death, a dichotomy between grave and afterlife problematised by the hieros gamos myth. Thus, in addition to the hall and regeneration, the grave expresses journey as a key metaphor.

The impact of the third metaphor is represented in the post-AD 475 grave from Nordre Birkeland by its emphasis on a polarisation of idealised gender identities. This may be closely related to the emerging culturally constructed identities and models for the human body influenced by Christian ideology and the new conceptualisation of decency these new religious currents involved, as discussed by Wiker (2001). In this article I have argued for a perspective which focuses on changes in metaphorical expressions, and in defining key metaphors and symbols differently. The importance of the definitional boundary as a way of approaching burial assemblages at different levels of cultural conceptualisation is acknowledged. To approach meanings associated with material culture at multiple levels is in my view highly significant in order to understand Late Roman Iron Age and Migration Period mortuary practices in an area where both cremations and inhumations are found to occur concurrently throughout the period in question.

Summary

This article underlines a shift in emphasis in mortuary practice in western Norway during the Migration Period, between the key metaphors journey, regeneration and the hall, a shift which was closely related to changing conceptualisations of the human body and societal ideals for agency related to gender identities. Illustrated by two graves from Hardanger, the main argument is that change in burial practice and symbolism is marked by the introduction of the hall as a key metaphor from AD 475-500. Within a general framework of social changes in perceptions of individual identity the burial assemblages from the first half of the Migration period seem to reflect a relatively higher degree of gender complementarity, including practices of deconstruction/reconstruction of social identity and shamanistic characteristics, compared to burials from the latter half. Graves from the latter half seem to reflect an emerging emphasis on polarisation of gender identities, of idealised hegemonic masculinities and femininities associated with the activities of the emerging comitatus structure and aristocratic feasting in the hall.

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