Animal graves: dog, horse and bear

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Dog, Horse and Bear

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The author discusses the relationship between people and animals in a time perspective of millennia. The starting point is the pre-Christian, Scandinavian, animal graves of dogs and horses, the Saami bear-graves, as well as animal burials of modern time. The occurrence of animal graves in pre-Christian time and the wide range of ways to dispose of human and animal bodies complicate our understanding of the concept of a grave. The relationship between people and animals is complex. The animal burials reflect the existence of a longstanding and very close bond between people and animals, which is based on emotion, prestige and the ritualising of a dynamic nature. It seems that people position themselves in their surroundings with a kind of mentality that has a long time span. This gives unexpected views of the cultural inheritance, of the idea of people as the crown of creation, and of the way in which the main threads are interwoven in our cultural history.

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INTRODUCTION

Prehistoric graves and pre-Christian burial customs differ from our own traditions to care for and bury the dead. The treatment of deceased people and animals was important in earlier times just as it is today. Ritual practices in connection with the dead reflect the complex relations between people and animals; they are both different from and similar to present-day practices. Our own understanding of the meaning and character of graves is interwoven in our interpretations. In my opinion, the modern understanding of graves is too narrow to give us insight into all the different ways of treating the dead in pre-Christian time, regardless whether the dead are human or animal.

In the following I will discuss ritual practices in a time perspective of millennia, with animal graves as my point of departure. The purpose is to illuminate long-standing structures in the course of history; that is, how people have perceived themselves in relation to their environment, and how they have perceived certain animals as extra valuable.

ANIMAL GRAVES

Animal graves are not unique to prehistoric time. The burial of animals also occurred during the Middle Ages and modern time, and it occurs even today. In a global perspective, there is evidence of the burial of both domestic and wild animals during a long time span, from the Mesolithic to modern time (Behrens 1964).

In my view, an animal that is placed in a separate pit constitutes an animal grave. The animal is placed in such a way that it is clear that the people who buried the animal cared for it and had a special purpose in mind. In this context I exclude the animals that were deposited, for example, in building structures. The prehistoric animal graves that are known today probably represent only a small portion of the burials that occurred. Many animal graves found during excavations may have been documented and classified as recent finds and thus separated from the archaeological material. This makes it difficult to go back to archaeological reports to search for information. The following archaeological examples derive from Scandinavia and continental Europe, and they represent the graves of dogs, horses, cattle and bears.

Dogs

As far back as the Stone Age, dogs have been buried in separate graves. At the Late Mesolithic cemetery of Skateholm in southern Scania, eleven dogs were buried in individual graves. Seven other dogs were buried together with people. Grave-goods were also found in the dog-graves, deposited in a similar way as those in human graves. One dog (grave XXI) had been placed on its left side with its legs drawn up. A red-deer antler was placed by the dog's back; a hammer of antler, with an incised decoration, lay beside the dog's chest; and three knives lay at its thigh (Fig. 1). With regard to the dogs in human graves, Lars Larsson writes that at least two of these dogs had been killed in connection with the burial. Young dogs had their necks broken, while other dogs had been cut into pieces before burial (Larsson 1988:148f). This was not the case with the dogs in the separate graves, which contained both puppies and older dogs. In Lars Larsson's view, there are marked similarities between the burial rituals for humans and for dogs. The placement of the bodies, the use of red ochre, and the giving of grave-goods apply to both humans and animals (Larsson 1990).

In other find contexts dated to the Iron Age and the Middle Ages, greyhounds have received individual burials. One example is the dogs from the medieval fortress of Næsholm in Zealand, Denmark. Dogs as well as horses had been buried

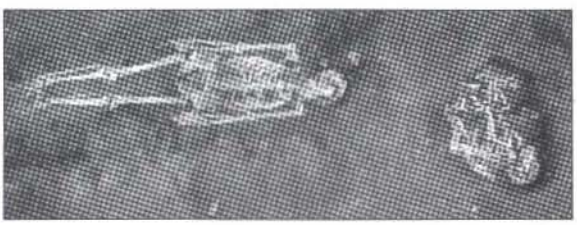

Fig. 1. The dog-grave with an antler hammer and three flint blades, grave XXI. Nearby is the burial of a woman in her late teens, grave XX. Skateholm II. Photo: Lars Larsson, Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Lunds University.

intact in the rampart of the fortress itself (la Coer 1961; Møhl 1961:377f). Dog-graves are not known from all the prehistoric periods. Dogs occur in numerous other archaeological contexts during pre-Christian time. During the Migration period in central Europe, it was not unusual to place one or two dogs together with a horse in a burial pit (Schmidt 1961:82f).

Cattle

Domestic animals dominate among the animal graves documented in central Europe. Here, in the Neolithic, cattle were buried in graves. These cattle have mainly been interpreted as economically important, but also as having a sacred status (Behrens 1964). There are several double graves containing cattle. They have been set in connection with the presence of wagons and other items, as well as with the existence of some type of sun symbolism in Neolithic Europe. The graves of cattle therefore are interpreted as religious phenomena in light of their connection with different archaeological source materials (Pollex 1999).

The European double graves with cattle direct our thoughts to the stone packing graves in Jutland. In these graves the bones are usually poorly preserved. Sporadic teeth of cattle have, however, been found in some graves (Fabricius & Becker 1996:234ff). To my knowledge there is no other evidence for special graves with cattle in Scandinavia. My aim here has been to mention the phenomenon of cattle-graves but not to discuss it in detail.

Horses

The horse is another animal that was given a special burial, even during modern time. Horse-graves in central and northern Europe have been dated to the Early and the Late Iron Age (Müller-Wille 1972). For instance, horses at the so-called Reihengräberfeldern were buried in pits with a west-east orientation, just like human graves. The artefacts in horse-graves consist often of snaffles and strap-end ornaments. The horse-graves here have been interpreted as grave-goods for the men in weapon-graves, which often lie next to the graves of horses (Schmidt 1961:82f).

Very few horse-graves have been documented in Scandinavia. Two graves from the Late Iron Age can serve to illustrate this phenomenon in Sweden. The oldest grave was found in Ölands Skogsby, Torslunda Parish, Öland. The horse lay in an oval pit, which had probably been edged with hewn limestone. The grave was marked with two unusually large stinkstones. The fill of the grave yielded undecorated shards of pottery. The young stallion lay on its stomach in the burial pit, with its head toward the south-west and its legs out to the sides (Fig. 2; Schulze 1987). The horse is ^{14}C dated to the Migration period (Ekström *et al.* 1989:17). The horse-grave lay at the edge of a cemetery, which was dated by means of pottery to an early phase of the Roman Iron Age (Rasch 1991:259). The other horse-grave is chronologically younger and was found on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälaren. Under the rampart of the fortress of Birka, a burial mound was

Fig. 2. The horse-grave from Ölands Skogsby, Torslunda Parish, Öland. A lower jaw is visible in the foreground. Photo: Hella Schultze 1987, ATA, Riksantikvarieämbetet.

discovered. The grave contained a man about fifty years in age, as well as a stallion that was three or four years old. The horse was placed next to the man's wooden chest, in a separate deposition. The horse lay on its side with its back toward the man's feet and its head in the south. Two ^{14}C dates from the horse's teeth gave a calibrated 1sigma value of AD 670-780 (Holmquist-Olausson and Götherström 1998:107; Fennö Muyingo 2000:9).

Two horse-graves, which are chronologically somewhat older than the above mentioned, can represent the phenomenon of such graves in southern Scandinavia. One of the graves was found at Slusegård cemetery on Bornholm. The cemetery is dated to the Roman Iron Age, and the horse-grave is stratigraphically tied to the late Roman Iron Age. The horse lay on its side with its head in the north-east, its forelegs raised and its hind legs extended (Klindt-Jensen 1978:207). Another horse-grave was discovered at Skovgårde cemetery in Zealand. In this case as well, the grave is dated stratigraphically to the late Roman Iron Age, even though a ^{14}C date indicates the Migration period. The horse was placed in a north-south direction, with its head in the southern part of the grave and its muzzle turned toward the west. The forelegs were bent in a natural way, but the hind legs were in an unnaturally bent position (Ethelberg 2000:35f; 252f). The stallion was large and powerful, much larger than other horses of the Roman Iron Age. The horse was about eight years old (Hatting 2000:408).

Bears

Wild animals also belong to the category of animals buried in separate graves. About 40 bear-graves have been found along the coast of northern Norway, as well as in the mountain regions and in the forested interior of northern Sweden. The archaeological finds of Saami bear-graves show that the burial ritual existed already in the Roman Iron Age. Historical sources reveal that bear-burials took place as late as the nineteenth century (Mulk & Iregren 1995; Myrstad 1996; Schanche 2000:269f). Reindeer-graves may be a parallel to the bear-graves, but

Fig. 3. The bear-grave from Sörviken, Stensele Parish, Lappland. Photo: Björn Allard, ATA, Riksantikvarieämbetet.

they belong to a later time period, after the reindeer-based economy had begun and up to modern time (Iregren 1985; Zachrisson 1985; Schanche 2000:271f).

In all the excavated bear-graves the bones, apart from the skull and shoulder blades, had been cut up to get to the marrow. It was an important part of the ceremony to put all the bones back in the grave according to a specific pattern, however. The bones were arranged starting from the bear's skull, which had to be intact (Zachrisson & Iregren 1974:83f). One example of a bear-grave is the grave from Sörviken near Lake Storuman in the interior of northern Sweden. In front of the collection of bones lay the skull, and adjacent to the latter lay the bear's two shoulder blades. A sheet of birch-bark had been placed on top of the bone collection. The birch-bark was covered with two layers of logs that lay in a transverse position (Fig. 3; Zachrisson & Iregren 1974:20f).

Of interest is the archaeologist Audhild Schanche's statement that similarities exist between the bear-burials and Saami human graves regarding the terrain and the grave-forms. Bear-graves and human graves are parallel phenomena to a great extent, chronologically and geographically (Schanche 2000:269f; 288f). In contrast to the burials of dogs, cattle and horses, historical descriptions of bear-ceremonies give very different opportunities to understand the bear-graves as well as the relationship between people and bears. The rituals connected with the burial of bears were gender-structured socially and linked to prescribed rules. The bear had a special status in the Saami conceptual world. It was regarded as a sacred animal (Bäckman in Fjellström 1981[1755].

THE ANIMALS IN RITUAL PRACTICE IN CONNECTION WITH THE DEAD

There are not many animal graves from Scandinavia. But the fact that they occur at all gives us reason to contemplate the burial ritual and the relationship between people and animals. Graves are not exclusive for the disposal of dead people and animals during pre-Christian time. The deposition of bodies of animals and humans could occur in other ways besides graves.

During the Stone Age, the dead bodies of animals and people could be deposited where one lived, that is in the settlement milieu, and in special places such as wetlands. During the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, fragmentary as well as intact bodies of animals could be placed in human graves and in other places, for instance in building structures and wetlands. This further complicates our interpretation of graves, since the bodies of animals and humans have been deposited in similar ways in other contexts and other places as well (Jennbert 2002).

One can assume that the treatment of the body during pre-Christian time was part of intentional acts that were anchored in the conceptual world and the mentality of people of that time. The view of the human body and the treatment and care of human and animal bodies were influenced by people's desires, emotions, values and needs. Their world-view was determined by social interaction, social patterns and conventions – probably in the same way as today but expressed differently. For the archaeologist today, there are only remnants left of a former material world, which makes it hard to understand the intentions and meanings behind the material.

In prehistoric time people not only buried intact bodies; they also skeletised, burned, sorted, polished and packaged the bodies or parts of them. Depending on the social relations and the context of life, the ritual practices changed in the course of time. There were no long and stabile periods. The treatment of the body varied in time as well as in different geographical areas. In my opinion, however, a millennia-old mentality has existed whereby people and animals have a close relationship with each other. That is what the animal graves express, since the entire bodies of animals have been placed in the graves. They must have been special animals.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF A GRAVE

The grave as an archaeological concept is somewhat problematic in light of the special animal graves and the fact that human and animal bodies are deposited in other places as well. The grave is one of the most common archaeological categories, and graves have greatly influenced the archaeological analytical process. In other words, the archaeological concept of a grave is problematic in its interpretation. There is a risk that it will limit our possibilities to interpret pre-Christian ritual practices in connection with the dead. The attitudes of people toward death and their surrounding world is materialized in the graves, but also in a number of other archaeological contexts which yield finds of both human and animal bones and which consequently are even more difficult to interpret.

Thus people and animals occur together in a number of different archaeological contexts, which archaeologists classify as graves or offering finds. But the boundaries between the archaeological categories are not clear-cut. The different contexts that are archaeologically distinguishable indicate rather the existence of a multitude of pre-Christian ritual practices for the disposal of dead people and animals. From the perspective of pre-Christian people, it is thus not self-evident that all people were buried in what archaeologists classify as graves. Clearly the deceased were dealt with in many different ways, perhaps with the kinds of rituals that are known from various parts of the world and that are described by anthropologists (e.g., Huntington & Metcalf 1979).

The occurrence of animal graves further complicates the archaeologists' interpretations of the concept of a grave. What, then, is the difference between what archaeologists call a "grave" and what they call a "ritual deposition"? What is the difference between the placement of people and animals in graves, and depositions in special places? Animals and artefacts in human graves are usually interpreted as grave-goods. There are many points of contact between the various archaeological find contexts. The presence of animal graves with dogs, horses and bears gives us a different perspective of animals in human graves; that is, it gives insight into the attitudes toward animals. Do the animals have different meanings in the different contexts? Regardless of what people did in connection with a burial in a grave or a deposition of a so-called offering find, it is clear that they gave animals and humans the same kinds of rituals.

In view of the pre-Christian conceptual world, the presence of animal graves implies that the concept of grave and other find contexts are much more complex than previously thought. Similarly, the relation between people and animals may have been complex, which in turn was perhaps the reason that dead bodies were treated in different ways in pre-Christian time.

THE ATTITUDES OF PEOPLE TOWARD ANIMALS

People's relation to animals is complicated and not entirely easy to describe in our society. Animals are positioned somewhere between practical use and symbolic meaning. Animals stir our emotions, whether because of their role in the food industry, in rearing and breeding, or as pets.

The ethical issues of animal rights and that people are prioritized over animals are actively expressed by both eco-feminists and militant vegans (Merchant 1992:61ff; 157ff). In the environmental-ecological debate, the argument is for animal rights but also that it is right to give people priority over animals. An important issue is the responsibility of people to animals and nature (Ferry 1997; Coetzee 1999). The intensive debate on animal rights has led to political decisions. In recent years new legislation has been passed concerning, for example, the transport of animals and the use of animals in medical research. In different scientific fields and different political contexts, and not least in the mass media, the sight of animals awakens deep feelings regardless whether it concerns animal

Fig. 4. The animal burial place at Pålsjö in Helsingborg. The picture was taken on All Saints' Day, and several graves are decorated with grave-lights. Photo: Kristina Jennbert.

breeding, animal experiments, or the transplanting of animal organs in humans. Thus there is reason to discuss the attitudes of people toward animals, and to examine the relation between people and animals in a longer time perspective.

Modern animal graves

Animals and people are given similar burials even in our own time. Today animal burials are regulated in Swedish law. In general it is forbidden to bury dead animals except at specified places. Animals have to be cremated in special crematoriums, often at municipal or regional incinerators. In each municipality there are special burial or memorial places for dogs, cats, birds, snakes, monkeys and other kinds of pets (Fig. 4). The animal burial places often have the character of a cemetery. Each grave is decorated. They have stone markers or metal plaques with inscriptions. Flowers are planted at the grave or placed in vases beside them. An animal burial plot can be leased, usually for five years, and the contract can be renewed. It is not uncommon, however, that animals are also buried at other sites than specified burial places. Animal graves are found in forest groves or in private gardens, often decorated in various ways just like "normal" graves.

The horse-graves at the Flyinge stud farm in Scania, southern Sweden, are of a special character. Seventeen stallions were buried here between 1904 and 1984. The burials surround an oak, which was probably planted in 1904. At the base of the tree there was once a granite stone commemorating *Warren Hastings*, whose grave also lies here. Near the oak are additional graves of stallions from the

Fig. 5. Stone marker for "Phenix, died 1816", Flyinge stud farm, Scania. Photo: Kristina Jennbert.

nineteenth century. Today there are only three stones left of the original sixteen stones with the name and year of death of the buried stallions (Fig. 5). The tradition to bury stud horses in Flyinge can be traced back to the early nineteenth century (oral comm. Jana Zupanc och Elisabeth Iregren).

The occurrence of modern animal graves does not necessarily mean that animals are buried for the same reasons today as in the past. However, I want to emphasise that the phenomenon of animal graves in pre-Christian time also has similarities to our own time. Or does it?

Pre-Christian animal graves

Why were animals buried in a similar way as people, and what is the meaning of the burial context in this respect? The special graves for only animals in pre-Christian time give rise to questions about the importance of animals, which I believe lies somewhere between their practical use and their metaphorical meaning. It is interesting to note that animals that are herded are not buried in special graves. This applies, for example, to pigs, sheep and goats, yet these were animals that had important practical and economical roles. The absence of these animals sets the dog, horse and bear in a special interpretative context. People had a special relation to these animals, and in particular to the individual animals that are buried in the animal graves.

There are significant differences among the burial rituals for dogs, horses and bears, respectively. Bears were consumed before the burial, which is not the case for dogs and horses. The skeletal parts of the bear, aside from the skull and shoulder blades, are split to the marrow. In addition to these split bones, there are numerous small bones and fragments in the graves indicating that the bear was eaten, and that all the bones were then placed in the grave (Zachrisson & Iregren 1974:83f). With regard to dogs and horses, other archaeological contexts indicate that these animals were part of a social practice linked to food consumption. For instance, the osteological analyses from several Mesolithic and Neolithic settlements in Denmark show that dogs were butchered and cut up, or were skinned for the purpose of their coat (Noe-Nygaard 1995:223). At the Mesolithic site of Segebro in southern Sweden, however, the dog bones were untouched (Lepiksaar 1982:112f). The dog bones at the Bronze Age site of Apalle in central Sweden do not seem to

have butcher marks either (Ullén 1996:175f), whereas the analysis of dog bones from Hedeby does not exclude the possibility that dogs were eaten (Wendt 1978:21). At all the Bronze Age settlements in Denmark, marrow-split and cut-marked bones show that people have eaten horses (Nyegaard 1996:153). This was also true at Apalle during the early phase of this Bronze Age settlement, but not during the later phase (Ullén 1996:176f). Horse bones dated to the Migration period, found in the water-hole outside the Eketorp ring-fort on Öland, point to meals that included horsemeat (Backe *et al.* 1993). The presence of horse skulls and foot bones in Iron Age milieus (Klindt-Jensen 1967) might indicate that the bodies of horses were consumed. It is not easy to determine, on the basis of the bone analyses, whether horsemeat actually was part of the Iron Age food culture and in what way. This is a research question that deserves closer attention.

Animals graves are associated with specific, individual animals. I assume that the dog has been buried in special graves ever since the Stone Age. In my view, the dog is one of the animals that have a very strong link to the individual person. The dog accompanies its owner on hunts. The dog is a faithful companion, which creates a close bond between the dog and the owner. The dogs that were buried must have been very special in character, and presumably only the highest valued animals were buried in separate graves. The graves of cattle belong to the Stone Age and Bronze Age. They are found above all in continental Europe, though there are some indications from Neolithic Denmark. I believe the continental cattle are linked to prosperity, and that the animals had great practical value and were good to eat. The graves of horses are linked to the Iron Age and wealthy cemetery milieus – an aristocratic world in which horses represent wealth and prestige (cf. Götherström 2001) but also an emotional bond with the rider.

It is characteristic of animal graves to contain only one animal. In several graves from the Late Iron Age, more than one dog, horse or another animal was found in a grave together with a person (Sten & Vretemark 1988). Most likely the animals had significance for the owner's identity, status, and emotions. They had different roles for their owner: Perhaps they were important for hunting or guarding, for work or transport, for their character or qualities, or as faithful companions. In particular a buried dog or horse may once have been an owner's beloved animal; or perhaps the horse or dog was valuable for breeding. The individual animals in the separate graves probably had even stronger ties to people than the animals placed together with others in a human grave, although the connection between dog and human was not always easy to determine at the Mesolithic Skateholm (Larsson 1990), and a contemporaneous link between horse-graves and cemeteries is in many cases difficult to prove (Ethelberg 2000:35).

Bear-graves in the Saami lands of northern Scandinavia appear during the Iron Age, and their presence is linked to religious conceptions of the bear's power. Naturally the bear did not have the same close relation to people as the dog or horse. On the other hand, thanks to its strength and individuality the bear played an important role in the Saami religion and was part of many different kinds of

rituals. Finds of skulls, single bones, teeth and claws show that the bear had potential power in various forms (Zachrisson & Iregren 1974:11ff; Schanche 2000:290).

The relationship between people and animals

Animals are represented in many different forms in the archaeological contexts. There are domestic animals, wild animals, exotic animals and imaginary animals; animals that had once existed or animals that are depicted are found in farm environments, graves, and deposition finds from the Neolithic to the Iron Age. It is also interesting to note that, in the creation myths in the west Scandinavian literature, the boundary between nature and people, gods, giants, animals and other beings is fluid, not fixed. The world and the people are similar to each other; they are born out of each other. The giant Ymer's body, which is humanlike, gave life to the world, and the first people, Ask and Embla, were created from tree trunks. The people live in the boundaries between different natural elements of the landscape and between different structured worlds, which also consist of gods, giants and other beings. People in pre-Christian time had in fact positioned and categorised themselves. In my opinion, the various ways of dealing with human and animal bodies are an expression of this. I believe that the separate graves of animals express the special value of these animals, which was apparently comparable to that of people. The animals were important with respect to their practical use and symbolic meaning.

There is a rich source material available that shows the attitudes toward animals. An interesting field of research would be to combine molecular analyses, dietary analyses and osteological analyses of bone treatment/disposal. This would enable more detailed studies of the archaeological contexts involving food culture and food taboos in relation to different animal species in different parts of people's environments.

Care was invested and rules were followed when dealing with the bodies of animals; this shows that the treatment was intentional. My conclusion is that the relationship between animals and people is complex. I believe, however, that the graves of dogs foremost reflect personal and emotional relations. I view horses in relation to prestige and status. The Saami bears, on the other hand, are in my opinion an expression of the ritualising of the wild and the powerful, and of nature.

THE LONG TIME SPAN

When death and the rituals surrounding it are studied in a long time perspective that includes the pre-Christian era, the boundaries between nature and culture start to fade. It cannot be assumed that graves have had the same meaning during the entire time span, especially if they are viewed with Christian overtones. It seems as if people and certain animals were dealt with in similar ways. The animals appear to have been transformed into cultural categories, and like people, they

were able to participate in the collective. Was there no difference between people and animals, then? The ethical values that lay behind the equal treatment of people and animals during pre-Christian time were probably different from the later Christian conception, namely the view of people as the crown of creation.

The treatment of people and animals represents the atmosphere of a time, and it is therefore an important source in studies of long time periods. The language of the grave and the archaeology of bodies are linked through many generations. In light of the fact that graves represent memories already during prehistoric time, and that changes in the treatment of the body occurred continually, a generational perspective gives opportunities to concretize the transference of and changes in ritual practices. The ritual practices for dealing with dead people and animals were influenced and created by, for example, changes in kinship relations, new contact networks, other types of links, migrations, etc., in other words influences from many different directions.

Contemporary life is in a sense also contemporaneous with the recent past, just as it is with the immediate future (Merleau-Ponty 1997:16). This double horizon must, then as now, have implied a kind of positioning in the surroundings, and it must have been important to the surrounding world which people immediately perceived with their senses. There is a historicity in the experiencing of the world and in how one communicates with other people. A study of the treatment of animals in this long time perspective is naturally difficult. The nuances and details disappear; there are empirical gaps, and there are no longstanding, stable or unchanging traditions. There is constant change through the social and cultural encounters between people.

In a time perspective of millennia, history can be seen as a series of changes within different aspects of life: people "live in the world" and "exist in the world". As archaeologists, we look far back into the past. How much, then, are we influenced by contemporary life in our research on ritual practices? Death is gone and in some respects tabooed; the deceased has passed away, journeyed onward (left the premises, or thrown in the towel), and the deceased do not always belong to the family but more often to institutions. Urbanisation and modern production perspectives of animals stand in contrast to people's need for a bond with their pets. I think it is strange and remarkable that the treatment of dead people and animals during pre-Christian time was both different and similar to our own time. It seems that people position themselves in their surroundings with a kind of mentality that has a long time span. This gives unexpected views of the cultural inheritance, of the idea of people as the crown of creation, and of the way in which the main threads are interwoven in our cultural history.

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