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# Changing Customs

## Reflections on Grave Gifts, Burial Practices and Burial Rituals during Period III of the Bronze Age in Southeast Scania

By KRISTINA JENNBERT

### Abstract

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This study of graves dating from Period III of the Bronze Age in southeast Scania discusses a limited number of graves, and the problems associated with the various approaches are highlighted, followed by a series of more or less speculative thoughts relating to burial practices and the significance of grave gifts. The graves are interpreted as an expression for one life's "rites de passage", where the belief in death exhibits an interaction between religious belief, moral concepts and social conditions through burial practices and grave gifts. A form of religious syncretism is probably reflected in a variable burial practice, in which different elements in the grave are believed to have their own rhythm.

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*An old gipsy was buried in the summer of 1991.  
In his coffin he had a large knife,  
a bottle of whisky and a large wad of banknote.  
What is the true meaning of grave gifts?*

What do all the different artefacts placed in graves during prehistoric times tell us about people and society? Do the grave goods and the burial practices reflect social structures and welfare, or are they intended as representations of life and death, a religious and ideological reality? Were these special people who were buried during the Early Bronze Age and, if so, who were they?

The archaeological literature contains a number of different interpretations based on economic, cultural or religious and ideological approaches to burial practices and the meaning and symbolic value of grave gifts. Burial practices and grave gifts thus receive a number of different interpretations in today's multi-dimensional archaeology, with the expression of views based on different types of comprehensive theories.

The intention with this article, which is a preliminary study for a larger work on bu-

rial practices and cultural forms, is to highlight the problems relating to the interpretation and appreciation of grave gifts, burial practices and burial rituals, using examples taken from graves dated to Bronze Age Period III in southeast Scania, a period when both interment and cremation occur. Given that grave gifts are associated with burial practices and burial rituals as a whole, they are discussed here in combination with external and internal grave constructions and handling of the body. The complex burial practice with its great width of variation gives some idea of the changes in perspective within society which, over the longer term, served as the basis for changed burial practice.

### Graves as sources

Attitudes to life and death have a determining effect on how we, as westerners living in the 1990s, appreciate the archaeological remains from prehistoric burial rituals. The prehistoric graves, the procedures for dealing with the dead, the external and internal

execution of the graves, and the various types and number of the grave goods differ at different periods. The question which arises, therefore, is how different religious and ideological concepts during prehistoric times affected burial practices and burial rituals in the social and economic reality of the time.

This leads us to contemplate the views held on life and death, and whether death was perceived as a break or as a gradual process of life during the prehistoric period. The modern western punctual perception of death cannot be applied in order to permit us to understand the burial rituals of other periods and cultures (Bloch 1988, p. 15). Death may be regarded instead as a long transformative process, in which the belief that we are either alive or not alive is foremost in many cultures (Hertz (1905) 1960). Thoughts of life and death as long journeys can be found in many societies (Bloch 1988), probably also during prehistoric times.

Bachofen (1856) was one of the first, in the middle of the nineteenth century, to stress the symbolism of fertility and sexuality in burial practices. A similar approach can also be found in James Frazer's work, where death is interpreted as a symbolic rite of birth and rebirth (Frazer 1890). Another tradition points to a more pronounced social aspect to the dead body, the soul and mourning. Emphasis is placed on the relationship between the biological individual and the social collective, where burial rituals transfer the soul of the deceased from one social reality to another and serve to recreate society and the roles played by the deceased when alive. Robert Hertz sees parallels in the symbolism at death ceremonies and at initiation rites and marriages (Hertz 1960).

These partially opposing attitudes towards burial rituals are bound together during the later part of the twentieth century by a number of anthropologists, who combine symbolic analyses with sociological analyses (*inter alia* Bloch & Parry 1982).

Burial rituals and perceptions of life and death are analyzed and interpreted in the comprehensive anthropological literature. This portrays a sense of humility and a tendency also to appreciate and interpret grave gifts, burial rites and burial rituals as religious expressions, and not just as expressions of social structures of various kinds, which have dominated archaeological grave research over the last 30 years.

Burial practices are discussed in a number of anthropological works (e.g. Huntington & Metcalf 1979; Bloch & Parry 1982; Bloch 1986). Unfortunately, the questions asked are often of a different kind from those in archaeological studies, which is why it is rare to find anthropologists giving explicit interpretations of grave gifts, the source material of the archaeologist. In addition, ethnographical descriptions of variations in burial rituals show that analogies relating to grave goods, burial practices and burial rituals are beset with problems (Ucko 1969).

However, archaeology offers a number of ways of studying graves and burial practices. The studies of grave materials made by processual archaeology have adopted a certain stereotyped form throughout the world, since grave gifts are used for the purpose of demonstrating social structures (*inter alia* Binford 1971; Saxe 1970); ethnographical investigations are included here as an important link, which is connected to the observations of the archaeological source material. Qualitative and quantitative analyses of the social structure of society have often served as the starting point for studies of graves in the Nordic region, too (Randsborg 1973; Strömberg 1974b, 1975b; Håkansson 1985; Larsson 1986).

In spite of the fact that existential questions and religious problems have not always occupied the central ground in archaeological research, quite a large proportion of the more recent archaeological literature deals with religion and religious expressions in conjunction with burial practices during the prehistoric period (*inter alia* Furingsten

1985), a cosmological basic structure (Bennett 1987) or a discussion of the departure of the soul from this life based on finds of bears' claws (Petré 1980; Ström 1980). The so-called Cambridge school introduced an innovative structuralistic view of burial practices (Shanks & Tilley 1982). Semiotic and structuralistic approaches (Pader 1982) can also be found in works from Scandinavia (*inter alia* Lillehammer 1987; Burström 1990; Hjørungdal 1991).

My own view is that the grave goods, burial practices and burial rituals mainly reflect an ideology and a religion; a mentality. Death, which is one of life's "*rites de passage*", and its associated social factors, together with other ritual customs, provide a picture of thinking norms in prehistoric society. Graves provide insight into fundamental approaches to life. Graves are accordingly an important archaeological source material (amongst many others) for use in analyses of ideological and religious concepts. These are the consequences of so-called "*rites de passage*" (van Gennep 1960), and provide insight into religious concepts, which, remarkably enough, have not been drawn upon to any particularly great extent by religious historians. Burial practices have changed over the periods of prehistory and history. The method of burying the dead can thus be considered to reflect cultural forms which were subject to change and linked together individuals, and which set the tone for social intercourse. Very considerable theoretical and methodological problems are associated with *inter alia* the source-critical aspects, problems of representativeness and the choice of analogies and, not least, in respect of which elements in the archaeological source material are able to tell us anything about religious expressions during the prehistoric period.

### Bronze Age burial practices

The Bronze Age was a dynamic period during which, over ca. 13 centuries, burial prac-

tices underwent significant changes in external and internal grave construction, approaches to handling the body and grave goods. The burial practices of the Bronze Age are thus able to shed light on sluggish and rapid changes in human perceptions of the world.

The external grave construction (mounds, flat-earth graves and stone settings of various kinds) undergoes successive changes throughout the Bronze Age. Mounds built during the Late Neolithic continue in use during the Bronze Age. New mounds are also built during the Bronze Age and are used alongside flat-earth graves during the Middle and Late Bronze Age. The continuity of burials within small areas and in mounds points to the burial places having been of great importance to people and society. The mounds can be interpreted as memorials, in which the memory of the families is demonstrated *inter alia* by the monumentality. Flat-earth graves occur both during the Early Bronze Age and during the Late Bronze Age, when various kinds of stone settings also mark the positions of the graves.

The internal grave construction, stone cists and wooden coffins with or without a stone frame or stone packing are characteristic of the Early Bronze Age. The inner burial chamber reduces in size as cremation begins to appear towards the end of the Early Bronze Age. The inner burial chambers of the Late Bronze Age are characterized by urn graves and cremation graves with different types of stone or wooden constructions and cremation layers (e.g. Strömberg 1975a).

Interment is superseded by cremation. Cremation dominates during Period IV of the Late Bronze Age, after having occurred sporadically during the Stone Age (Kunwald 1954) and to a greater extent during the third period of the Early Bronze Age. It took a relatively long time, ca. 8-10 generations, before the basic idea of cremation was to make any serious breakthrough, and then



Fig. 1. The Scanian cultural landscape with the ploughed mounds at St. Köpinge 36:8 in the parish of St. Köpinge. Photograph: Anders Wihlborg.

only during the Late Bronze Age. The burnt bones were cleaned initially, and at the end of the Bronze Age the cremated bones were buried without being cleaned (Stjernquist 1961). A change in the burial ritual took place during Period V; this involved placing the pyre debris and accessory vessels in the grave (Stjernquist 1961, p. 143), which provides us with a further insight into change in the burial ritual and fundamental concepts about life and death.

### Graves in southeast Scania

The Scanian Bronze Age material includes ca. 380 investigated graves from the Early Bronze Age (Håkansson 1985) and an estimated 1500 investigated graves from the

Late Bronze Age (*inter alia* Vifot 1937; Strömberg 1975a, p. 211). Changes in the various elements of the burial practice occurred in stages. It may be assumed that there was a certain "stability" in certain elements for brief periods, and it is in this light that the following study of a limited number of graves dating from Period III in southeast Scania should be regarded.

Tab. I. Handling of the body and external grave construction.

	inter- ment	crema- tion	not available	sum
flat-earth grave	1	16	1	18
mound	18	19	8	45
not available	1	2	3	6
sum	20	37	12	69

Tab. II. Handling of the body and internal grave construction.

	inter- ment	crema- tion	not available	sum
stone cist	3	9	2	14
wodden coffin	12	19	—	31
stone frame	2	—	—	2
not available	3	9	10	22
sum	20	37	12	69

The 69 graves in southeast Scania have been dated by various archaeologists to Period III (see Appendix). Graves dated to transitional periods, i.e. between Periods II and III or Periods III and IV, are not included in order to provide the most limited period possible for investigation. During the period in question, interred and cremated individuals were buried in mound graves or so-called flat-earth graves (Table I) with an internal grave construction of the stone cist or the wooden coffin type respectively (Table II).

The question is whether any chronological change occurs in the external grave construction during Period III. The designation "flat-earth graves" is open to question, however. The cultivated landscape of southeast Scania, like the rest of Scania, contains a number of examples of cultivation over mounds dating from the Middle and Late Bronze Age (Fig. 1). It is thus problematical from a source-critical point of view to distinguish flat-earth graves, which may instead be the remains of mounds. In spite of this, flat-earth graves probably date from a later part of Period III, bearing in mind the occurrence of the many flat-earth-gravefields during the Late Bronze Age.

There is no correlation between interment and cremation and various types on inner burial chambers (Table II, Fig. 2). As noted in other contexts (*inter alia* Strömberg 1975a), the inner burial chamber exhibits considerable variations in size in conjunction with cremation.

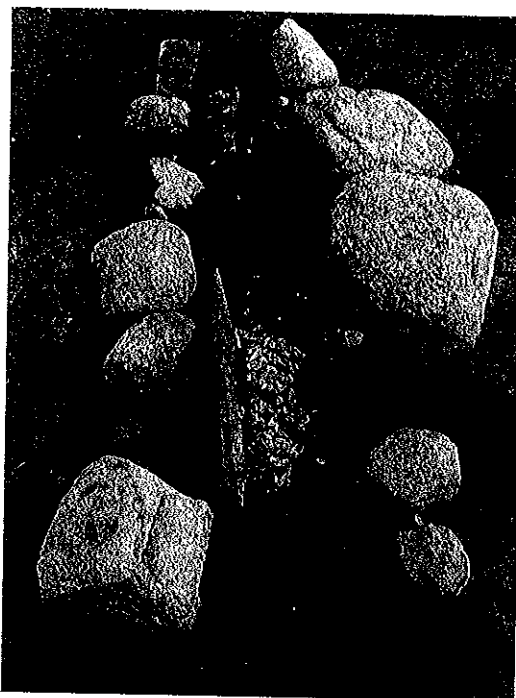


Fig. 2. St. Köpinge 36:8 in the parish of St. Köpinge; central grave. Photograph: Anders Wihlborg.

### Grave gifts

Sophus Müller writes that, "the most important factor is for something to have been given in the grave, and not what it was" (Müller 1897, p. 573). To judge from the different types of artefacts placed in the graves, there are probably well-founded reasons to explain why these particular artefacts found their way into the graves, either for the deceased male or female person, or for the family of the deceased.

As has already been mentioned, the anthropological and religious historical discussions of life and death provide a background to reflections over burial practices and the changes which took place. The meaning of grave gifts has been discussed by archaeologists, and the view is that they may be an expression of social status, the right of inheritance and the right to property (Steuer 1982, p. 74 ff.), although they may also depend on sex, age and personal attrib-

utes, or they may give an indication of "occupation". Artefacts can be suitable for life after death, or they may be a part of the personal attire. Artefacts may point to social status, or to the social status of some other person. Personal attributes can be found in the grave, as can gifts from other persons (Sørensen 1979, p. 152 ff.). Grave gifts do not represent an absolute whole, and are accordingly not capable of general evaluation.

Tab. III. Number of types of artefact.

types	inter-ment	crema-tion	not available	sum	central grave
1	6	6	1	13	3
2	4	10	3	17	4
3	2	9	5	16	2
4	2	7	—	9	1
5	3	3	3	9	4
6	2	2	—	4	2
7	1	—	—	1	1

In all 26 different types of artefacts made of metal are found placed in the graves. Other types of artefacts in the graves vary, although it is usual for 1-3 types of artefact made of metal to occur in the graves (Table III). The types and number of grave gifts do not exhibit any correlation with interment or cremation. Nor do they indicate whether the burials took place in mounds or under so-called flat-earth. In spite of the introduction of cremation, there is no evidence of fire-damaged artefacts in the graves, which occurs in rare instances during the Late Bronze Age (Stjernquist 1961).

A comparison with Danish oak coffin finds (Boye 1896) reveals that the grave goods in the investigated grave material from southeast Scania are likely not to be representative. Organic material of different types (e.g. textiles and wood, bone or leather objects) is absent from the southeast Scanian graves. Grave gifts, and the absence of certain grave gifts, together make this a problematical area to evaluate.

Another significant aspect is whether the grave gifts symbolize attributes which are

rare in everyday life, or whether they represent a specific selection from the "ordinary" material culture? One characteristic feature of the grave gifts is that they are primarily bronze artefacts, but with six gold artefacts. The gold artefacts, a sword and a double button covered with gold and various kinds of rings, were found in both female and male mound graves. Ceramic items and flint objects and, in rare cases, bronzes were found in the course of a number of small settlement investigations in parts of south-east Scania (Strömberg 1974a, p. 138 ff.). Metal tools are rarely found in the graves, and an axe and a sickle, for example, have been interpreted as tools (Baudou 1960); other types of artefact, for example razors and swords (Kristiansen 1983), exhibit traces of constant use. The metal artefacts are found mainly in the context of finds which can be linked with rituals in conjunction with death and burials and sacrifices, where the distribution between the depositing of female and male artefacts changes during the Bronze Age (Levy 1982; Kristiansen 1984; Bodilsen 1986; Larsson 1986). The metal artefacts are believed to have been attractive and to have served an important purpose in their use above the ground (Thrane 1975, p. 248), and the frequency of metal artefacts during different periods is associated with the variation in the availability of metal; for example, there was a slight decline during Period III (Kristiansen 1984). It is conceivable, therefore, that these artefacts themselves satisfied the wish of society or of individual members for power and prosperity in their religious association, and that the grave gifts were placed in the graves for special people and for special purposes.

Attempts have been made for centuries to identify the sex of the different graves. In fact, most researchers have found the archaeological analysis of sex to be a complicated matter (*inter alia* Bennett 1987; Hjørungdal 1991), and find that their own prejudices as to what constitutes male and female are uncertain. Osteological analyses

of the deceased are also being questioned by archaeologists (Gebühr & Kunow 1976; Welinder 1989).

Of the 69 graves, 16 have undergone osteological analysis. These analyses, in conjunction with the combinations of the various types of artefacts found, have led to 40 graves being identified as male graves, 12 as female graves, with the sex analysis of 17 of the graves proving doubtful (see Tables IV, V and VI). The starting point for the sex analysis was the assumption that swords, razors and tweezers are male grave gifts. Combinations of these artefacts are common throughout the whole of the Late Bronze Age. Female artefacts are represented by neck collars, belt plates, belt boxes, bronze tubes and Bornholm fibulae. Knives, daggers, fibulae, double buttons, arm rings (or ankle rings), finger rings, rings and flint artefacts of various kinds can occur in conjunction with both sexes.

The sex analysis of some graves is not possible due to source-critical factors and uncertain find details, for example the grave from Järrestad No. 9, where a sword and a Bornholm fibula were discovered as a combined grave find in 1873. Daggers occur in those graves which have been interpreted as male. In spite of this, seven graves containing daggers have been found amongst the indeterminable graves, yet these also contain other types of finds which may just as easily belong to female or male individuals. Daggers are interpreted by a number of archaeologists as being both a male and a female artefact (*inter alia* Boye 1896, Broholm 1944, p. 164).

What types of artefacts are found in combination? Male graves are characterized primarily by combinations of swords, daggers, knives, razors, tweezers, awls, fibulae and double buttons (see Table IV). Female graves contain combinations of *inter alia* knives, double buttons, various types of rings, fibulae, neck collars, belt plates, belt boxes and bronze tubes (see Table V).

The male graves generally contain one

example of each type of artefact. The female graves, on the other hand, are characterized by the presence of two or more examples of several types of artefacts, which has to do with the fact that these objects often occurred in combination, for example bronze tubes for a skirt.

Because graves are interpreted as material expressions for one of life's "rites de passage", the grave trappings are also likely to be dependent on the age of the deceased. In those cases in which grouping by age took place (16 graves), this limited material exhibits no correlation between the age groups, the number of grave gifts or any particularly characteristic grave gifts.

However, a comparison of the individuals in central graves from southern Sweden, on whom osteological analysis has been performed, reveals that the interred individuals were comparatively young people, both men and women (Jennbert, in press). Four of the graves are in southeast Scania. Of the three male graves, two contain five types of artefact (Nos. 15 and 25), and one grave contains two types of artefact (No. 43). The female grave contains only a bronze fibula (No. 55). Two of the three female graves amongst the other central graves in southeast Scania have yielded abundant finds. Of the 12 male graves, only swords or swords in combination with other artefacts have been found in 8 graves. Swords, both long and so-called short swords, are otherwise found only in mounds, predominantly in central graves. Mounds, which required a lot of labour to build, and whose construction was without doubt associated with deep traditions, may well conceal especially revered individuals, whose status is not confirmed by the grave gifts in these cases, notwithstanding the absence of organic artefacts.

It is assumed that only a small proportion of the population during the Bronze Age was buried in a way that enables their remains to be discovered at the present time. We have been aware for some considerable time of the male predominance in burial

















