

Drinking and the Creation of Death

New perspectives on Roman Vessels in Scandinavian Death Rituals

BY FREDRIK EKENGREN

Abstract

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This paper is a critical analysis of the function and meaning of Roman drinking vessels found in Scandinavian burials from the Roman Iron Age. A proposal for the shift in theoretical perspectives is made, emphasizing the need for theories that acknowledge the transformation of material culture. A review of perspectives informed by practice theory as well as ritual theory is given, and their consequences for our understanding of burials and their grave goods (including Roman drinking vessels) are discussed. A case study of three female inhumation burials containing Roman vessels found in Skovgårde on Zealand (Denmark) is then analysed with these perspectives as a point of departure. The paper concludes that the Roman drinking vessels from Skovgårde were intentionally used in funerary contexts, together with other objects, to create a representation of the deceased persons transformation of identity into one appropriate in death. Thus, the usually reproduced interpretation, where the imported vessels are seen as markers of social hierarchy and signs of Roman ideology among the Germanic elite, must be revised.

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Challenging tradition

The aim of this paper¹ is to critically discuss the function and meaning of Roman drinking vessels deposited in Scandinavian burials during the Roman Iron Age. In particular the purpose is to review a number of theoretical perspectives which I believe can further our understanding of the presence of these vessels in the Scandinavian mortuary context, and give us alternatives to the traditional interpretations within Iron Age research. As my case study I have chosen three graves with Roman vessels from the small inhumation cemetery of Skovgårde on Zealand (Denmark) dated to the Late Roman Iron Age. The main question is how these vessels were used and given meaning in the framework of Scandinavian

mortuary practices.

My concern has its beginning in an interpretative problem. The presence of Roman drinking vessels of glass, bronze and silver in Scandinavian mortuary contexts is traditionally given great importance in Iron Age research. Ever since they first began to receive sizable scholarly attention during the 19th century, they have been central to the cultural-historical interpretations of the period (e.g. Worsaae 1854; Wiberg 1867). Today their presence is generally interpreted as the result of mainly economic and social, but also ideological, influences from the Roman Empire, and they are often instrumental in reconstructions of the social structure in

Roman Iron Age Scandinavia (e.g. Lund Hansen 1987; Hedeager 1990; Lund Hansen *et al.* 1995). These reconstructions are often firmly set in the prestige goods model, developed by Frankenstein and Rowlands (1978), which put emphasis on the social value of imports and their role in social and political organization within the local communities. In this model the acquisition and distribution of foreign objects are of vital importance for the political power in a society. The desirability of the drinking vessels is explained by their exotic origin within the major political power in Europe at that time: the Roman Empire. Consequently, scholars often speak of how a Roman way of banqueting was imported by the Germanic peoples in Northern Europe, and how their elite sought to elevate themselves by showing knowledge of civilized Roman customs.

Although we should not underestimate the importance of cultural interaction between the Roman Empire and its neighbouring peoples, I believe it is imperative to acknowledge some of the shortcomings of these traditional archaeological interpretations. First of all one should be careful not to interpret the presence of Roman pails, ladles, strainers, beakers etc. as a typically Roman composition of a *drinking-set* and consequently as evidence of a Roman way of drinking among the Germanic peoples. European Iron Age archaeologists often identify drinking-sets using classical archaeologists' interpretations of Roman material culture in its original setting as analogy. However, a closer look at the research history reveals that many classical archae-ologists in turn have chosen North European graves containing Roman vessels as an analogy for discerning the original Mediterranean function of the vessels. This choice is explained by the fact that these graves are one of the few instances where Roman vessels appear together in an identifiable context. But no heed is taken of the differences in geo-

graphical and cultural setting of this practice. The scholarly interpretations are therefore often the result of circular argument.

Furthermore, the prestige goods model used to explain the presence of Roman drinking vessels bears with it its own set of problems. The simplistic idea that the Germanic peoples consumed Roman vessels conspicuously because of their exotic and civilized origin is based on a very mechanical and functionalistic view of material culture and ideology (see e.g. Hodder 1995, pp. 23 ff. and pp. 63 ff. for a similar critique). This explanation is then applied to a vast geographical area and a period of almost 400 years. Failing to consider the contextual complexity and the dialectic nature of material culture, the question of how material patterns change historically as well as geographically is subsequently rarely addressed or explained.

Consumption as production

Since the Roman vessels were brought to Scandinavia from outside this area and then incorporated in Scandinavian society, it is in my opinion vital to study them using perspectives that acknowledge *interpretation* and *transformation* as important elements in cultural interaction. We need perspectives that help us understand what occurs when a category of foreign objects is appropriated by a society; what happens in the encounter between local traditions and new material culture, and what those encounters result in. Interpretations based on these age-old archaeological questions have in the last two decades been reached in studies using perspectives from the social sciences (especially in British, Swedish and Norwegian archaeology), focusing on human actions and their structuring powers; in other words, practice theory or structuration theory (e.g. Bourdieu 2000; Giddens 2001). From these perspectives, humans, through their social

practices, create, re-create and transform the social structures they live in. These structures are in turn the circumstances in which further social practice comes to pass. Actions never take place in a social vacuum. When persons step into social situations, they carry with them knowledge and experiences which function as the lens through which the situation is interpreted. The result of this interpretation then forms the basis for action. And as soon as a person has acted, he/she has contributed a new precedent and consequently created new knowledge and experiences. Human actions, thoughts, values etc. are in other words a result of the encounter between structure and the social circumstances into which they enter. The same practice may consequently have different meanings for different groups, which is important to consider when studying cultural interaction.

The perspectives on material culture that are born out of practice theory emphasize that society and its structures are as much dependent on the material surroundings in which human practice takes place, as on the human practices themselves. The material surroundings do not appear by themselves, but are social products that in turn have an effect on human practice. Through their materiality, the objects affect human thoughts and actions and are an intricate part of the creation, re-creation and transformation of society. And through the “duality of structure” (Giddens 2001, pp. 25 ff.), material culture itself is transformed in relation to previous knowledge and experiences.

Studies of the Roman Iron Age in Northern Europe often speak of the importation of foreign objects in terms of *consumption*. But from a perspective informed by practice theory, this consumption must also be seen as a form of *production*. As mentioned, the context in which practice takes place is created and structured through the practices themselves. The context is in other words not

pre-set but created, delimited and interpreted in connection with the actions. The material surroundings are consequently open to a large variety of interpretations depending on the person's previous knowledge and experiences. But at the same time as an object is interpreted (i.e. related to previous knowledge and experiences) the cultural lens through which the person sees the world is changed as a new precedent is created and the context in which the object is interpreted is modified (Hodder 1988, pp. 68 f.). Through this perspective, it is evident that the meaning of objects is neither constant nor free of context. The consumption of exotic goods in other words does not end with the “purchase”, but is instead the beginning of a long process where the object is redefined and recontextualized (e.g. Miller 1987; Thomas 1991). This makes it clear that the meaning of goods, imported goods in particular, must be understood from the position of the receiving society itself (Thomas 1992, p. 35). So, to say that something was given, exchanged or traded, does not indicate what was received. I believe this perspective on material culture and human practice can be most helpful when studying the Roman drinking vessels in Iron Age Scandinavia.

Mirror or mirage?

In order to grasp the function and meaning of Roman drinking vessels in Scandinavia, we consequently have to address the practices where these vessels appeared, and analyse the impact that their use had on these practices. Since the majority of Roman vessels in this area are found in graves, mortuary practices are the most prominent operational context for this suite of material culture. Although most Iron Age archaeologists would agree that a one-to-one correspondence between identity on the one hand and grave goods on the other

can *not* be presumed, a more diversified perspective has not yet permeated the research about objects of Roman origin in any substantial manner. As I mentioned, in many studies of Roman Iron Age, where the processual approach to mortuary remains still prevail, grave goods are seen as reflecting the identity and rank of the deceased and his/her kin, and hence used by the archaeologists as an instrument for calculating the complexity of the social structures outside the boundaries of the funerary context. Due to their exotic origin, Roman vessels are seen as an especially lavish form of grave goods. They are consequently employed as a blueprint for identifying the elite within Germanic society (e.g. Hedeager 1990; Lund Hansen *et al.* 1995). This attitude towards mortuary remains has been criticized in the archaeological theoretical debate for years, mainly because it often lacks an approach to the question why a set of objects or actions was used as a sign of identity and rank. It also often disregards the question of how intentionality may affect the archaeological record (e.g. Pader 1982; Barrett 1990, p. 182; Härke 1994; Hodder 1995).

I would argue that we have to focus on the ritualized framework in order to understand the function and meaning of Roman vessels in Scandinavian graves. Using a contextual approach where the mortuary ritual and the content (i.e. grave goods and their meaning) are dependent upon each other, the objects that were chosen to be put in the graves must have been an integral, prescribed part of the ritual where the deceased passed from this existence to the next. From the 1980s onwards there has been a growing emphasis on the ritual context of burial remains. But while other archaeologies have embraced perspectives informed by ritual theory developed within the social sciences (e.g. Brysting Damm 1998; Ravn 1998 and especially Nilsson Stutz 2003 as recent examples), studies of the Roman Iron Age

seldom take into account the ritual nature of mortuary practices. This is something that in my view has severely hampered many of their archaeological interpretations concerning graves and their objects.

Ever since Van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) thesis on *Le rites de passage*, many anthropological studies of both historical and contemporary societies have emphasized that a funeral is not just a transition but also a transformation. When a person dies, he or she leaves a tear in the social fabric behind them. And in order to mend society, the survivors use mortuary rituals to transform the status of the once living member of society into one suitable for the dead. So the transformation of the dead is in other words necessary in order to create and recreate the social order (Hertz 1960; Bloch 1982; Bloch & Parry 1982). This new identity of the dead person often interacts with the old one somehow. But the new identity is often not a mirror of the old. It may in fact have very little to do with the actual social circumstances of the deceased while living. Instead the old biography of the deceased becomes a canvas in death for the painting of a new social identity, often using stereotypes and drawing on long-established symbols. What is important here is that the survivors, through ritual practice, give the deceased a new position within their understanding in relation to themselves (cf. Mizoguchi 1993, p. 225), and by doing so they overcome the challenge that death has posed to society. However, we must not make the mistake of thinking that society only re-establishes itself through mortuary rituals. As Bloch (1982) has observed, it is also in these rituals that images of society are created and transformed. In the words of Metcalf & Huntington (1991, p. 83), "the society of the dead structures the society of the living." Images of society are created by transforming the deceased person's identity, and mortuary rituals are therefore to a large extent about

the *negotiation* of identities; of both the dead and the living (cf. Gillespie 2001). Consequently the perspectives on mortuary practices that acknowledge the generative focus of the “rites of passage” theory developed in anthropology are clearly consistent with practice theory outlined above.

The material culture of death

Many social theorists have emphasized that it is through the material culture used in mortuary practices that the identity of the dead person is crafted and transformed. Hallam & Hockey (2001), for instance, have developed the concept of “the material culture of death” and called attention to how objects, and the way they are handled and the images they invoke, are used to achieve the transformation of the deceased. Each phase of this transformation (that is, each phase in the funerary ritual) is expressed through symbols of different kinds. The objects used in mortuary practices in relation to the dead body are in other words used because they bear meaning for the transformation whereby the deceased was given a new place and personhood in the world-view of the survivors. Indeed, the corpse itself should be seen as part of the material culture of death, since it is the object of action and not capable of intentional actions itself. Together with the surrounding artefacts it becomes a means of expression. This perspective has important implications for how we as archaeologists view grave goods. For instance, we must be mindful not to suggest that the objects deposited together with the corpse simply were “taken out of circulation”. Instead, according to the theories regarding the material culture of death, it was through their association with the transformation of the dead person that these objects acquired their signification.

When Durkheim (1995 [1915]) examined

the dynamics of ritual practice almost a century ago he emphasized that rituals not only performed ideas of society and its structure, but also embodied them. Rituals were thoughts come to life as action. Another important element in theories concerning the material culture of death is precisely that objects are not only used to transform the identity of the dead, but also actively used in the construction of society’s conception of death (Hallam & Hockey 2001, p. 2). Through mortuary rituals and their manipulation of material culture (including the corpse), society’s thoughts and images of death, the dead and the afterlife are (re)created, embodied and sustained. Hence the material culture of death is strongly bound by ideology and the *creation* of images and identities (memories, if one will) in the mortuary ritual, that may have very little to do with the actual social circumstances of the deceased while living. And consequently, by means of contrast, the world of the living is structured (see above).

As an archaeologist, my question then is this: If the dead body has been transformed through the funerary rituals, then is it not more likely that the grave goods related to the dead body reflect who the deceased has become rather than who he or she was in life? Based on the theoretical perspectives above, and the archaeological observations made in the following case study, I would argue that not only is material culture used to transform the identity of the dead, but that it also may be the other way around; that the symbolic meaning of material culture itself is crafted and transformed through its relations to the dead person (cf. Hallam & Hockey 2001, p. 15). And if the function and meaning is dependent on context, the change from the *context of life* to the *context of death* probably meant some sort of transformation of function and meaning. The objects found in mortuary contexts, for instance drinking vessels of Roman origin, must therefore be

separated analytically from similar objects found in other contexts.

Skovgårde

In the following sections, the implications of the theoretical perspectives above will be investigated. In order to fully understand the function and meaning of the Roman drinking vessels we need a careful analysis of the funerary contexts in which these vessels were a part. By focusing on how the corpses and grave goods were handled in connection with the interment, we will be able to reconstruct a sequence of ritual practices surrounding death and subsequently get a glimpse of the meaning behind the grave and its contents.

The object of my case study are the three female inhumations containing Roman vessels found at the Late Roman Iron Age cemetery of Skovgårde on Zealand, Denmark (Ethelberg 2000). It was excavated in 1998 in connection with the construction of the motorway between Rønnede and Udby. A total of 18 burials clustered in four groups were recovered, of which the majority were female. The cemetery has received a great deal of attention from the time when it was unearthed, since four of the female inhumations were of the well-provisioned kind often associated with the so-called *Haßleben-Leuna* group of “princely burials” on the continent. This study will focus on three of these female burials, nos. 8, 209 and 400. Due to the limited space of this paper I will concentrate on the contents of each individual grave and omit the relations between graves and grave groups on the cemetery as a whole.

All three inhumations were deposited in large and deeply dug cuts (Ethelberg 2000, pp. 236 ff.; pp. 287 ff.; pp. 301 ff.). With one exception (grave 209) this cut was made in two levels, creating a terrace-shaped ledge immediately above the cut for the coffin. In

grave 400 this ledge ran all the way around the coffin. Ethelberg (2000, p. 22) suggests that these ledges were used to facilitate the deposition of the corpses in the coffins and/or to support a cover. The coffins themselves were made of hollowed-out logs, and finds of charcoal in connection with them indicate that they had been scorched by fire. The graves were sealed, probably with wooden covers, and then filled with layers of stones of varying

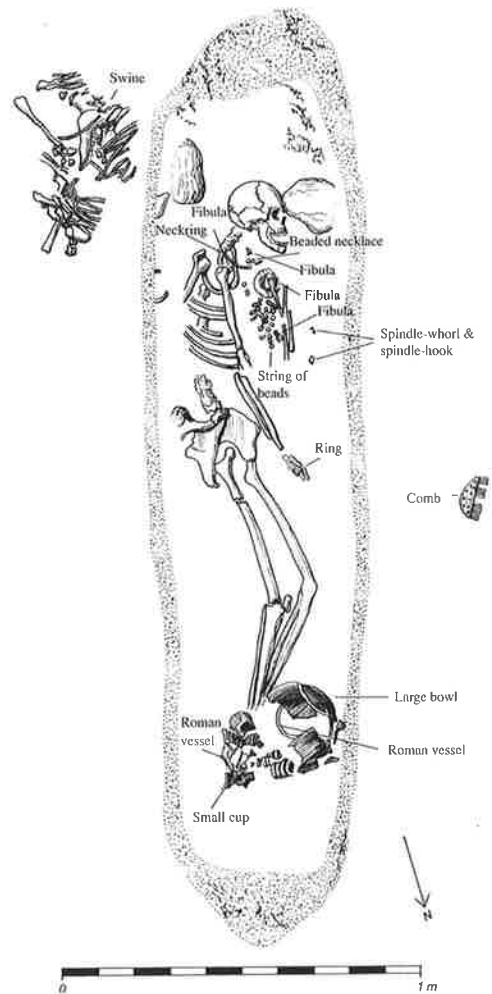


Fig. 1. Grave 8 in the cemetery from Skovgårde (adapted from Ethelberg 2000, p. 240).

size. All three burials were oriented with the head to the south.

The woman in grave 8, dated to C1b2, approximately AD 230/240–260/270 (Ethelberg 2000, pp. 236 ff.), was around 20 years old when she died (Bennike & Alexandersen 2000, p. 395). She was placed in the coffin on her left side facing west, with her legs slightly bent (Fig. 1). Her right arm extended along the side of the body while her left arm was flexed with the hand positioned at her breast. She was dressed in a peplos-style dress indicated by two plain silver fibulae found in the shoulder area. A plain silver fibula found by her abdomen was probably used to clasp a mantle or scarf. In addition, a large disc-shaped silver fibula decorated with glass and gold foil was found at her breast. She was also adorned with elaborate strings of beads. One composed of amber beads hang around her neck. And fastened to the disc-shaped fibula she wore a string of beads made of amber, glass and bronze ending in a set of toilet implements (a pair of tweezers and an ear spoon). Furthermore she wore a neck ring of silver and spiral finger ring made of gold on her right hand.

The grave goods accompanying the woman consisted of artefacts associated with textile manufacturing and drinking. Along her

left forearm the excavators found a spindle whorl and spindle hook. Arranged at the feet were two pottery vessels, one large handled bowl and one small handled cup, and within each vessel stood a glass cup of Roman origin, more exactly of Eggers type 203 and 205 (Fig. 2) (Lund Hansen 2000, p. 320). A remarkable feature is that the two pottery vessels seem to have been placed on top of the dead woman's feet, indicated by the toe bones located underneath the vessels.

Several objects were also deposited outside the coffin and thus not associated with the grave goods arranged immediately surrounding the body. A comb of bone was situated on the western ledge and on top of it an iron needle (Ethelberg 1991, p. 559). In the south-western corner of the ledge lay the disarticulated skeleton of a swine, probably cut into pieces at the time of deposition (Hatting 2000, p. 405). Furthermore, scattered in the grave fill were 24 beads of glass, bronze and amber, which Ethelberg has interpreted as a funerary offering (Ethelberg 2000, p. 236).

Grave 209, dated to C1b1, approximately AD 200/210–230/240 (Ethelberg 2000, pp. 287), displays very much the same features as grave 8, although somewhat more well provisioned in its furnishings (Fig. 3). A

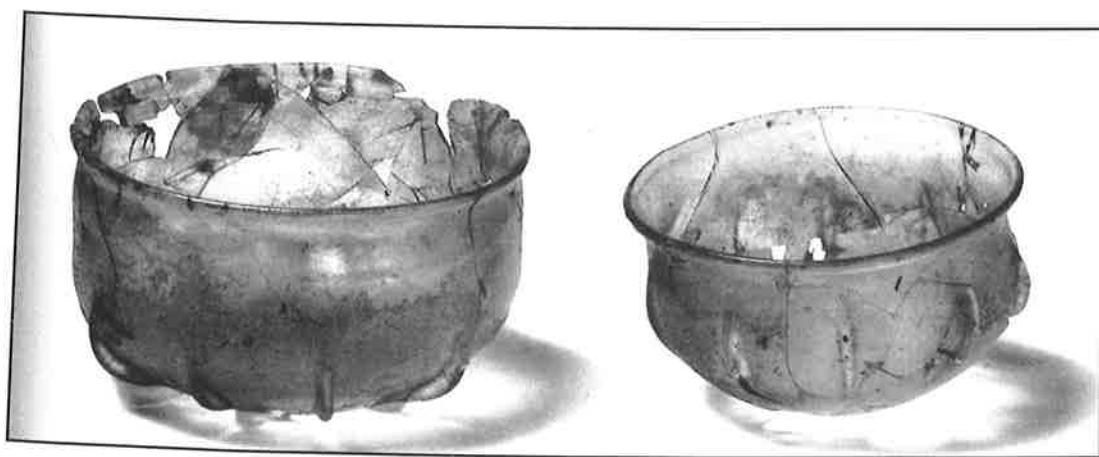


Fig. 2. The two glass vessels from grave 8 in the cemetery from Skovgårde (Ethelberg 2000, p. 123).

woman approximately 20 years of age (Bennike & Alexandersen 2000, pp. 402 f.) was interred on her left side facing west with legs greatly flexed. Her arms lay along the sides with forearms flexed at almost right angles out from the body. At the time of interment she wore a peplos-style dress like the one in grave 8, fastened with a plain silver fibula at each shoulder. Two fibulae were also found located at her breast: a plain silver fibula and a large silver rosette fibula with gilded sheet silver and decorated with a runic inscription reading “Lamo carved” (Ethelberg 2000, p. 52). Another plain silver fibula found in the area of her abdomen was probably used to clasp a mantle or scarf. Like the woman in grave 8 she was adorned with elaborate strings of beads made of glass, amber, silver, bronze and bone. At the skull the excavators found a small string of beads and a large silver hairpin decorated with gold foil. This was most likely part of an intricate hair dress. Around her neck she wore a beaded necklace and fastened to the rosette fibula were three beaded strings, one ending in a charm made out of a Roman denarius (Emperor Hadrian AD 117–38). In the area where her hands would have been placed (no skeletal remains of the hands were preserved) the excavators found a spiral finger ring of the snake head type which had probably decorated one of her fingers.

The grave goods surrounding the dead woman were similar to those in grave 8, but also displayed a number of differing features. In front of the woman’s body, right above her knees, there were two spindle whorls made of bronze together with a spindle-hook. Located right above the woman’s head were a comb of bone and a silver needle. And by her feet were two pottery vessels; one small handled cup and a large bowl. Deposited within the bowl was a single large shard of a Roman glass vessel of Eggers type 209 (a “Zirkusbecher”) (Lund Hansen 2000, p. 320). Below the pottery vessels, in the northernmost

part of the grave, were the remains of iron fittings that according to Ethelberg (2000, p. 114) were possibly the remnants of a small wooden jewellery box similar to those found in the burials of Haßleben-Leuna type on the Continent.

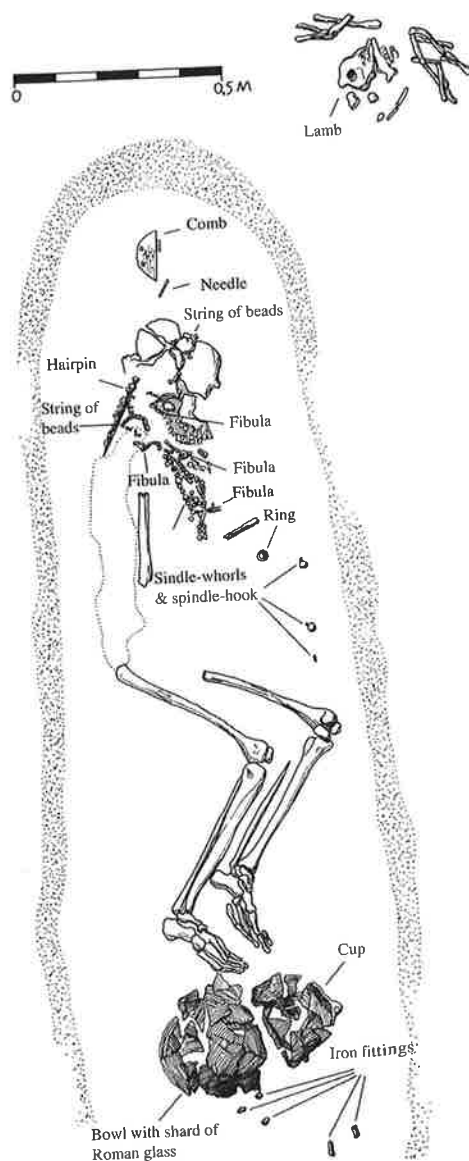


Fig. 3. Grave 209 in the cemetery from Skovgårde (adapted from Ethelberg 2000, p. 292).

In the same way as in grave 8, parts of the furnishing were deposited outside the coffin. In the grave fill just outside its south-western corner lay the complete skeleton of a lamb. The bones were found non-articulated which indicates that, like the swine in grave 8, it was probably cut into pieces before deposition when the grave was sealed (Harting 2000, p. 405).

Grave 400, dated to the beginning of the second century, approximately AD 260/270 (Ethelberg 2000, pp. 301 ff.), is the most well-furnished of the three inhumations considered here and the feature bears close similarities to grave 209 discussed above (Fig. 4). The deceased woman was in her early twenties when she died (Bennike & Alexandersen 2000, p. 403). Her body was placed on the back, somewhat slanted to the right with the head facing east. Her right arm was extended along her side, while the left arm was placed over her abdomen with the left hand clutching the right forearm. She wore the same style of dress as the women in graves 8 and 209, with two plain silver fibulae on the shoulders, one large silver tutulus fibula decorated with gold foil on the middle of the breast, above that a plain silver fibula, and finally a plain silver fibula found in the area of her abdomen indicating the fastening of a mantle or scarf. In the breast area of the body, underneath the large tutulus fibula, the excavators found a small shard of painted glass of Eggers type 209 (Lund Hansen 2000, p. 320), according to Ethelberg (2000, p. 125) possibly a form of amulet. On the left side of the woman's skull lay a large hairpin of silver decorated with gold foil, and above the skull were the remains of a small string of glass and amber beads, most likely the remnants of an elaborate headdress similar to that in grave 209. Besides

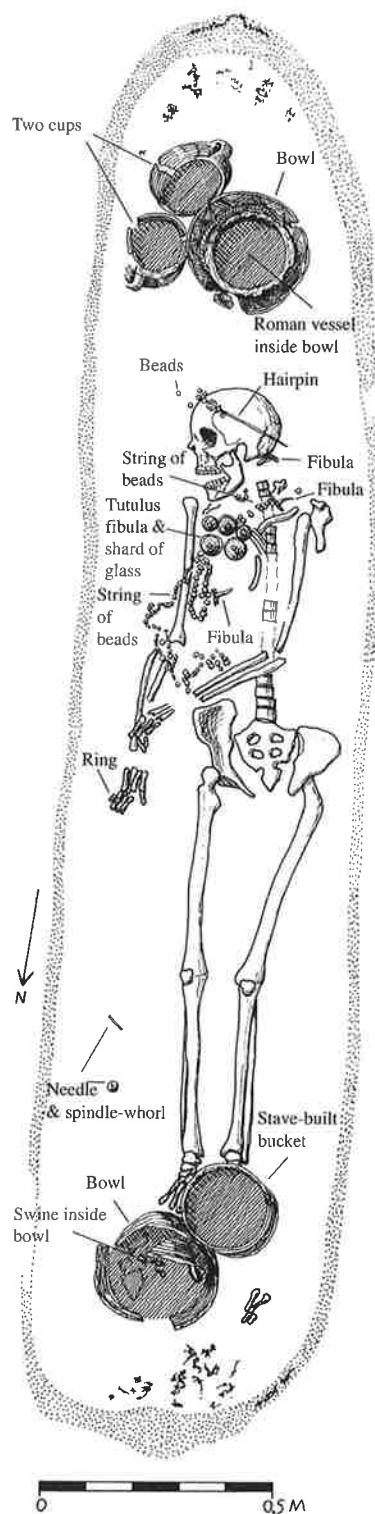


Fig. 4. Grave 400 in the cemetery from Skovgårde (adapted from Ethelberg 2000, p. 304).



Fig. 5. The two glass vessels from grave 400 in the cemetery from Skovgårde (Ethelberg 2000, p. 124).

the string of beads in her hair she also wore a small necklace with amber beads. And fastened to the tutulus fibula were two small and one large string of beads made of glass, amber, silver and bronze. Furthermore she wore a golden ring of the snakehead type on the ring finger of her right hand.

Besides a spindle whorl and a needle made of bronze deposited next to the lower part of her right leg, the grave goods were dominated by different kinds of vessels. In the area above the woman's head stood three pottery vessels arranged in a triangle. Two of them were handled cups, while the third was a large bowl. Deposited inside the bowl were two Roman glass vessels, one cup and one beaker (Fig. 5). The glass beaker was found placed within the glass cup. Both these vessels are unique and cannot be securely assigned to any of the known types. However, the cup is similar to Ising's type 30 and the beaker resembles Eggers type 212, Ising's type 96 and Goethert-Polaschek type 49a (Lund Hansen 2000, p. 320). In the other end of the coffin, located by the dead woman's feet, stood two more vessels. One was a large bowl containing

the complete skeleton of a small swine. It could not, however, be determined whether the animal was deposited intact or cut into pieces (Hatting 2000, pp. 405 f.). The other vessel was a large stave-built and bronze-bound wooden bucket, placed directly on top of the dead woman's feet in the same fashion as in grave 8.

On the terrace-shaped ledge surrounding the coffin the excavators found a bronze fitting in a layer of organic material interpreted as wood. This was later interpreted as the remains of a repaired wooden plate or tray similar to those found in some of the burials of Haßleben-Leuna type on the continent. Deposited approximately 5 cm below this layer was a comb made of bone.

Reconstructing the mortuary practices

Considering the theoretical perspectives discussed above, we must acknowledge that what we find during excavation are the remains of the last stages of the funeral. According

to the afore mentioned ritual theories this means the stage when the deceased has passed through his/her social transformation and the dead body is arranged in order to establish an identity relevant to the person's new existence. This perspective has a number of interpretative consequences for our analyses.

A number of ritual sequences can be observed in the three inhumations from Skovgårde. The first one is the preparation of the burial site. During this phase the ground was dug and in the case of burials 8 and 400, a ledge was fashioned around the cut made for the coffin. Then a hollowed-out log, whose outside had been intentionally scorched with fire, was deposited in the centre of the grave. According to Ethelberg (2000, p. 22), this was probably done before the body was placed inside. It was most likely also during this phase that the grave goods were arranged (objects collected, animals slaughtered etc.). Parallel to these preparations, one can imagine, the body of the deceased woman was made ready for interment. Although we have no solid archaeological evidence to support this assumption, we may very well envisage that the corpse was washed and groomed before it was clothed and ornamented. Funerary practices in many historical and contemporary societies prescribe the ritual washing and preparation of the corpse before interment. We do not know the length of time for this preparation phase. It may be a matter of days, but also much longer. We do know however, that the women from Skovgårde were dressed in elaborate costumes and their bodies intentionally arranged inside the coffins (e.g. the positioning of the arms in grave 400). This kind of peplos-style dress and especially the use of long and elaborately beaded strings and necklaces are known from several other graves containing Roman vessels as well, e.g. grave 1949:2 from Himlingøje (Zealand, Denmark), grave 152B from Kristineberg and the female grave from Järrestad (both from Scandia in

Sweden), just to mention a few – all of them dated to the Late Roman Iron Age. And even if there are regional differences, this may be regarded as a standard funerary costume for certain women in Late Roman Iron Age Scandinavia (cf. Stjernquist 2002, p. 252).

Around the corpses the grave goods was displayed. It is important here to acknowledge the fact that the grave goods in the coffins were arranged close to the body, compared to the objects deposited outside on the ledge or in the grave fill. The arranged corpse was in other word at the centre of the grave goods' operational context. That is why, for instance, I believe that the set of toilet implements in grave 8, and the comb and possibly also the needle in grave 400 (combs are often found in combination with needles in Scandinavian graves from this period), should be analysed in relation to the transformation of the dead body. Instead of viewing them as the personal belongings of the deceased, which is the commonly held interpretation, I argue that the presence of implements used in the management as well as change of physical appearance was intentionally a metaphorical representation of the dead person's social transformation. Of a certainty, these objects, like most of the grave goods, had a defined function in the society of the living, but their recontextualization in connection with the mortuary practices probably placed them closer to the world of the dead than that of the living. Considering the generative nature of funerary rituals discussed above, this seems like a logical assumption.

The intentionality of deposition can also be discerned when observing the different kinds of vessels placed within the burials at Skovgårde, either at the head or by the feet of the corpse. These vessels were not haphazardly deposited. They were carefully arranged around the body, and in relation to each other. This is for instance indicated by the large bowl in grave 8 and the bronze-

bound wooden bucket in grave 400, which were both intentionally placed on top of the dead women's feet. Likewise, the placement of the complete Roman glass vessels inside the pottery vessels, as well as inside each other as the case was in grave 400, shows a thought-out pattern. Similar patterns are known from other burials in Scandinavia. The complete Roman vessels are clearly associated with the locally produced vessels, which indicates both a functional and metaphorical connection within the mortuary practices. The symbolic meaning conveyed by the associating of the complete Roman vessels with locally produced vessels was most likely one relating to the act of drinking.

The placement of the drinking vessels in one end of grave 400 and the swine deposited in the large bowl in the other, might in turn be interpreted as a ritual distinction made between the act of eating and that of drinking. However, I believe this is not the case since the bowl with the swine is placed next to the bronze-bound wooden bucket. Although the bucket in grave 400 was not deposited in connection with any of the Roman drinking vessels, they may nevertheless be associated with each other. As evident from the male inhumation from Brøndsager in Høje-Taastrup on Zealand for example, where a Roman glass vessel was found inside a bronze-bound wooden bucket, these two forms are sometimes coupled (Fonnesbech-Sandberg & Boye 1999; Fonnesbech-Sandberg 2002, p. 211). Ethelberg (2000, p. 126), in connection with the bucket found in Skovgårde, has emphasized an association between these vessels and Roman *situlae* of the so-called Hemmoor type, originally used as a container for wine in the Roman Empire. According to him the two forms of vessels are seldom found together in the same burial, yet display the same function. It is then likely that they may have had the same function and meaning in the funerary rituals. Then the arrangement

of vessels at the feet of the woman in grave 400 consequently shows a metaphorical association between food (represented by the large bowl containing a swine) and drink (represented by the wooden bucket). That the placement of the swine in the grave was not the leftovers from a funeral meal eaten by the survivors, but rather "food for the dead", is indicated by the fact that all the parts of the animal were deposited. Therefore I argue that the animal remains, together with the Roman and local vessels, should be seen as parts of the symbolic representation of eating and drinking pertaining to the dead woman's changing identity.

The analysis of graves 209 and 400 at Skovgårde also shows a distinct fragmentation practice in relation to the Roman glass vessels. In grave 209 a shard of glass from a cup of Eggers type 209 was found inside one of the pottery vessels. And in grave 400 a shard of glass, also of Eggers type 209, was found deposited under the large *tutulus fibula* on the dead woman's breast. These two forms of practices differ as much from each other as from the use of complete Roman vessels in the graves. One is physically joined to the corpse itself, while the other is associated with the eating and drinking vessels arranged around the dead body. From this fact, it is evident that we cannot interpret the function and meaning of all Roman vessels in Scandinavian graves in the same way. According to both Ethelberg (2000, p. 125) and Lund Hansen (2000, p. 338), the shard deposited in the pottery vessel in grave 209 probably symbolized a complete vessel like the once placed inside the pots in grave 8 or 400. To me, this is a plausible explanation, since the depositional context for the complete and the fragmented vessels is identical. Whether the breaking of the vessel was deliberate or not, the deposition of the shard in the vessels shows intentionality. This symbolic use of a fragmented Roman vessel is in my view

another confirmation of the metaphorical function of the grave goods with reference to the transformation of the deceased.

The shard of glass attached to the corpse in grave 400, however, is given another explanation by Ethelberg and Lund Hansen. Ethelberg (2000, p. 125) interprets it as an amulet, while Lund Hansen (2000, p. 339) sees it as an identity marker, a sign of the woman's family or origin. Usually, the most common interpretation of glass shards attached to the dead body is that it functioned as a "Charon's coin" in the classical manner, i.e. as payment to the ferryman for the crossing to the land of the dead. This interpretation is for instance emphasized by Boye (2002, p. 208), who compares it to the practice of placing pieces of gold or actual coins within the mouth of the deceased. Citing several finds of glass shards in or close to the mouth of the corpse, she argues that the shard from grave 400 in Skovgårde probably had dropped from the mouth and landed on the woman's breast. Usually this practice is interpreted within the Greek and Roman context referring to the myth of Charon, and consequently seen as evidence of Mediterranean influences on the North European peoples. However, we must not forget that the tradition of placing objects in the mouth of the dead as "payment" has an extremely wide historical and geographical distribution and is found as far away from Iron Age Denmark as China (cf. Van Gennep 1960 [1909], p. 154). Both Lund Hansen's interpretation and the perspective represented by Boye have their merits, since they together show a connection to personhood on the one hand, and the afterlife on the other. Whether or not the shard in grave 400 from Skovgårde was considered a payment for the ferryman or not is impossible to say. However, an explanation relating to both personhood and death seems plausible considering the ritual treatment of the deceased.

The deposition of objects outside the

coffin, on a ledge or in the filling (for instance pottery and glass), is a practice that is known from other graves at Skovgårde (i.e. graves 3, 4 and 204) as well as in other areas of Scandinavia and on the continent (Ethelberg 2000, pp. 32 f.). In my opinion, this practice shows a conscious detachment from the dead body. In other words, I do not believe that we should interpret them in relation to the dead person. Instead we have to look to the survivors, those who performed the funerary practices, for explanations of this ritual pattern. I argue that the objects located on the ledges or in the filling were part of rituals performed by the survivors in connection with the funeral but not directly associated with the deceased and her newly established identity (cf. Ethelberg 2000, pp. 33, 236). While the animal remains in the coffin in my view must be seen as props for the staging of the dead person, I believe that the skeletons placed outside most likely were parts of an offering. The same interpretation may also be valid for the beads in filling of grave 8 (cf. Ethelberg 2000, pp. 32 ff.; Hatting 2000, pp. 405 f.). The comb and needle found on the ledge of grave 8, and the comb and possible wooden plate or tray on the ledge in grave 400, may instead be connected to the actual physical preparation of the corpse before deposition in the coffin, manifesting the woman's transformation of identity. Perhaps they were then considered polluted through their association with the corpse, and therefore deposited prior to the sealing of the grave.

Staging death

The three burials from Skovgårde considered here should be seen in relation to the inhumation practices developed during the Roman Iron Age, where the corpses are often displayed and surrounded with artefacts. Considering how common the deposition of vessels for eating and drinking combined with

combs, spindles and needles and elaborate costumes is in the group of female burials represented by Skovgårde in this study, I suggest that these were more than just personal possessions. Rather, they should be regarded as a stock of objects invested with a distinctive meaning in the mortuary practices. The staging of the dead body clothed in this costume together with the grave goods provided a rich opportunity for a visual statement directed towards the onlookers. But the image created in the burials discussed above made this a highly formalized or stereotyped statement. What we see is in my view the creation of a visual representation pertaining to the transformation into a personhood appropriate for certain women in death. This visual representation was used in the reintegrating phase of the mortuary ritual to fix a formalized image of the deceased person's new position and existence in the minds of the observers. Since the mortuary practices not only were the result of people's knowledge and experiences, but also through their materiality in turn affected people's thoughts and actions, these practices became a medium through which conceptions of death and the afterlife were created. The burial site became equal to a theatre stage in the creation of visual statements about death, and the body and grave goods were parts of the set design. And after the graves were sealed the objects literally became part of the world of the dead, and from their place buried with the corpses they continued to evoke images and feelings of the dead and the afterlife through the memories created in the survivors and through the material presence of the cemetery in the landscape. People knew what the cemetery contained, and consequently the grave goods still had a social impact after the funerary rituals were completed.

From this viewpoint, the drinking vessels of Roman origin found in Skovgårde may be seen as props in the creation of death. These

mortuary practices were the main operational context in which these vessels were not only consumed but also *produced* – that is, handled, interpreted and subsequently appropriated in Scandinavian society. Through the metaphorical connection displayed in the burials, between drinking and the transformation of the deceased, a mental picture of the dead and their afterlife was created and re-created. Similar metaphorical connections between drinking and death can be seen for instance in the skaldic poetry from later periods. One of the main literary sources, often used as inspiration in studies of Roman Iron Age burials, is *Beowulf*. This Anglo-Saxon poem, claiming to retell events taking place in the 6th century AD, was written down sometime between the 8th and the 11th century. Although the text is of much later date than the archaeological record considered in this paper, a few appreciable relationships between drinking and death can be noted. One of the most cited passages from *Beowulf* in relation to Germanic drinking ceremonies is the scene with the drink-bearing queen Wealhtheow (e.g. Enright 1996). By offering the cup to the warriors in the hall, she incites their loyalty towards the king, a loyalty that in the poetical context often was equivalent to a heroic death on the battlefield. This connection between drinking, loyalty, warfare and even death has been emphasized by Damico (1984) in her study where, owing to this malevolent aspect associated with the dispensing of drink in *Beowulf*, she equates the character of the queen with the drink-bearing warrior-maids of the Old Norse heroic literature, the valkyries. In addition to this, further passages in *Beowulf* show the association between drinking and death. For instance, when the warriors are killed by Grendel in the mead hall, the event is paraphrased as the warriors being “offered bitter drink” (*Beowulf*, lines 765–770, translated into Swedish by Björn Collinder). This is most likely a reference to the oath of

loyalty until death made over the drinking cup presented by the queen. It might even be argued that these literary associations between drink-bearing women and death can be observed in materialized form in the so-called valkyrie motifs on the picture stones found in funerary contexts on Gotland in Sweden, dated to the Merovingian period. Beowulf is after all generally thought to display expressive themes formed in a Germanic oral tradition with origins in the Migration Period, and continually developed and transformed onwards until they were written down in medieval times. However, I find it too speculative to suggest that we can see the representation of these drink-bearing women in the burials like those from Skovgårde, which is a fairly common assumption in Roman Iron Age research. I merely would like to point out that the metaphorical similarities displayed in this genetic analogy provide a set of possibilities that may inform our explanations. From a theory of practice, however, with its dialectic view of material culture, the metaphorical association between drinking and death present in later literary sources may well have had its material roots in Roman Iron Age mortuary practices and their creation of death.

The conclusion drawn from this paper is that the Roman drinking vessels from Skovgårde were intentionally used in funerary contexts together with other objects to create the image of the person in death and his or her transformation of personhood. Thus, the usually reproduced interpretation, where the imported vessels deposited in the burials are seen as markers of social hierarchy and signs of Roman customs among the Germanic elite, must be revised. These vessels may have represented a certain *lifestyle* in other contexts, but what we see in the mortuary context may rather be characterized as a *maner of death*. However, the theory that the vessels were used to symbolize the dead and the afterlife, rather

than situations in the living society, does mean that this image did not have an impact on the society of the living. By contrasting the world of the living against images of the dead and the afterlife, the survivors could shape themselves and their personhood. Nevertheless, this perspective, informed by theories of practice and ritual, generates a more dynamic picture of the function and meaning of Roman drinking vessels in Scandinavian mortuary practices.

Notes

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