

*‘See the place where they laid him’***Reopened chamber graves in the Migration Period of central Sweden****Background: first millennium grave reopening**

Archaeologists excavating cemeteries in first millennium northern Europe frequently find that they are not the first to open some of the graves. It may be immediately clear that a grave has been opened, as in the famous case of the Oseberg ship-burial in Norway, where a large tunnel had been dug into the mound. More often it is suspected from lack of grave-goods, or disturbance to the structure or contents of a grave. All such pre-archaeological activity at cemeteries is usually labelled ‘grave-robbing’, immediately presupposing its motives. A conventional view of grave-robbing imagines a clandestine search for treasure, undertaken long after the original interment, unconnected with the people who created the monuments.

Across northern Europe there is a growing body of research showing that post-burial reopening of graves in fact covers a diverse range of practices. Deliberate grave disturbance occurs in a wide range of contexts and on a variety of timescales, including within living memory of burials. As at Oseberg, the scale often suggests that grave-opening was far from secret, but public and socially sanctioned. Sometimes the human remains themselves were removed or manipulated, with grave-goods left intact. In other contexts grave goods have been taken, but with a careful selection of artefact types that suggests a strong ritual element in their removal.

Careful recording and thorough investigation of disturbance can reveal a great deal about the ways in which it was carried out and even the motives of the reopeners. Notable here is Martin Carver’s (2005) work at Sutton Hoo, where several mounds showed signs of plundering. The excavators were able to build up a detailed picture of the robbers’ activities, including the paths they trod as they removed spoil from the mounds and the length of time robber pits remained exposed to the elements before back-filling. Likewise at Oseberg, where the reopening has given rise to considerable research and debate, new dendrochronology dates from spades abandoned by the robbers exactly pinpoint the timing of the reopening.

More usually, grave disturbance falls into the category of neglected evidence. Published excavation reports, including recent ones, often make only brief mention of disturbance. Research into grave reopening is often an exercise in piecing together fragments of evidence from archive material and less than satisfactory excavation records. This was the case for my doctoral research into grave robbery in Anglo-Saxon England, where evidence for reopening had been noted by numerous excavators, but rarely published and entirely overlooked in synthetic work. Carefully fitting the pieces of evidence back together, I was able to show that grave disturbance can be a route for new understandings of key questions in funerary archaeology. In particular, it proved to be a window onto contemporary understandings of the symbolism and values of the different artefact types that made up the early medieval burial display.

Grave disturbance which occurs after a longer interval from the original burial can also be a source for reconstructing the uses of ‘the past in the past’. In a forthcoming article on the heavily robbed boat-grave cemetery at Vendel, I present evidence that all but four of the graves were reopened and emptied during the construction of the 13th century church. A material motive is unlikely: although the grave goods must have been splendid at the time of burial, by the time of the robbing they were friable and disintegrating, leaving rust flecks and fragments strewn throughout the disturbed fill. Their value can only have lain in their antiquity or their association with these high status graves: much the same reasons for which the later finds are displayed today. Further, I show that the boat-grave openers did not attack any of the hundreds of pre-Christian burials elsewhere in the parish, even the several mounds in the immediate vicinity. Whatever the motivation for the reopening, it was focused on these specific graves. They were

evidently still sufficiently commanding monuments that they had to be either destroyed or perhaps emptied and reincorporated into the new Christian burial context. The choice of site for the church combined with the reopening of the old graves supports the long-standing perceptions that boat burials in particular carried explicit cultic symbolism, and that pre-Christian cult in Scandinavia was above all centred at burial places.

These examples highlight a key conviction behind my research proposal, that grave reopening is never just damage to the archaeological record. Disturbance is part of the history of graves and sites, and an object for study in itself, as well as potential route for new understandings of burial ritual. In many periods and places it appears frequently enough to give the lie to a conventional expectation of graves as 'closed contexts' for excavation. The research I propose to carry out in Stockholm focuses on one such period, with disturbance so pervasive that a reasonable starting hypothesis is that reopening was the original intention of those creating the monuments.

Topic: Migration Period chamber graves

The aim of the proposed research is to assemble and analyse the evidence for the early reopening of Migration period chamber graves in central Sweden. Elaborately built and furnished, these are considered burial places of the mid-first millennium elite. In recent years interest in chamber graves has been stimulated by new finds (e.g. Victor et al 2005, Nordberg & Wikell 2006, Grönwall 2008) and by the lately completed 'Death's Snug Chamber' project at Uppsala University.

Despite this recent attention, one of their most intriguing aspects still awaits full critical investigation: almost all the known Migration Period chamber graves had already been disturbed before excavation, and there is compelling evidence that the disturbance occurred soon after the graves' construction. Reports of 'plundering' are seen from the earliest excavations onwards. I have undertaken some preliminary research at the Riksantikvarieämbetet archive in order to establish the viability of this proposed project, as part of which I investigated the records of 36 chamber burials. Of these 19 were recorded as disturbed, while only 3 were considered definitely intact.

Numerous explanations for the disturbance have been put forward over the years, from slave revolt to religious upheaval, political destruction of monuments to metal shortage, social change to honoured reburial (e.g. Arwidsson 1962, Lamm 1970, Lamm 1973, Svensson 1995, Groop 2000, Lamm 2007). The variety of interpretations is in refreshing contrast to discussions of later Scandinavian robbing episodes, which tend to be driven by the written sources. However, as in other contexts, systematic study is lacking.

Interpretations so far are largely conjectural, based on single sites or drawn from analogy with other times and places, without strong grounding in the archaeology of the period. As in my previous work on grave disturbance, I anticipate that the way forward will be to put the archaeological evidence back into the foreground. I will return to archive records and on-site documentation wherever possible. My initial research indicates that although the records are variable, sufficient evidence exists to build up a much more detailed picture of when, how and why the reopening took place.

The dating of the robbing is a key area for examination. In the current literature there are strong indications that reopening occurred within some decades of the burials. It has long been observed that the disturbance happened within the free space of intact chambers (e.g. Almgren 1916: 87, Tjernberg 1948). At Lovö, Greta Arwidsson (1962: 113-5) also demonstrates that the reopening must have been carried out before the ironwork in the grave goods had succumbed to rust. However, several questions remain. Was reopening always carried out early, or were older tombs also revisited? How closely timed are the robbing episodes? Was there a single phase of robbing within each site? Across the sites, could the robbing have happened within a short

period? Are there examples which must have been reopened in different phases? Last but not least, the dating needs to be seen in relation to other changes visible in the burial practice, settlement development and material culture of the period.

Many of the disturbed chamber graves are far from empty. Of the nineteen reopened examples I have so far collected, nine contain remains of gold, silver, or bronze artefacts, with two 'plundered' graves containing all three precious metals. The next step is to bring together much fuller evidence of what these remains constitute: are they fragments of removed artefacts? Whole objects? In situ? Deliberately moved or cast aside? How do they compare with the furnishings in intact graves?

One interesting line of argument recently put forward (Groop 2000) is that the main aim of the reopening was not to take grave goods, but to remove bodies. Groop proposes that the intention was to cremate the dead respectfully in line with changing beliefs, in which he goes further than the evidence allows. However, the quantity, position, and condition of skeletal material remaining in the disturbed graves are key points. These and related questions can only be answered through systematic examination.

A number of authors note that in at least some cases reopening appears to have been carried out from the side rather than from above: a route that seems inefficient and therefore presumably meaningful to the reopeners. This and other aspects of the reopeners' methods need further investigation. Here again, the details are crucial for understanding the process of reopening.

Analysis of the central Swedish chamber graves will also benefit from being put in a broader context by comparison with other reopened examples known from Norway, Anglo-Saxon England, and continental Europe (e.g. Hills 1977, Pieta 2008). Here it must be borne in mind that what constitutes a chamber grave, the different forms of construction, and the boundaries of the chamber grave custom, are rather fluid concepts. The construction methods in particular have implications for the process of reopening, as well as for interpretations.

The reopening of the chamber graves ties in to broader questions about the development of cemeteries, and then to the degree of social upheaval seen at the transition to the second half of the first millennium. At sites such as Tuna i Badelunda and Valsgärde, Migration Period graves serve as focal points or founders' graves for cemeteries used into the Vendel and Viking periods. At Lovö, graves were apparently being reopened while the cemetery was still in use, which suggests a significant degree of acceptance of the disturbance. Again at Valsgärde, the early chamber grave had been disturbed, but the site still proved acceptable for many later burials. Many of the subsequent graves there are boat-graves, a form of burial that was very frequently disturbed. Perhaps uniquely in the region, all the Valsgärde boat-graves were intact. It seems likely that in order to fully understand the patterns of reopening and their meanings, it will be necessary to take a longer view of burial customs, and to look beyond conventional divisions of burial types.

Grave disturbance can be seen as one element in the wider theme of post-funerary practices at cemeteries. Reopening may be one of many activities, such as feasting or remembrance rituals, which are peripheral to burial but happen within burial grounds. It can also be an aspect of the 'afterlife' of cemeteries: the uses of the space once burial has ceased. Non-burial activities in cemeteries are a neglected area, but have received some attention in prehistoric contexts (e.g. Bartelheim & Heyd 2001). For the historical period they have untapped potential for understanding of the roles of the dead in the lives of the living.

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