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PERFECT DEATH: EXAMPLES OF PITTED WARE RITUALISATION OF THE DEAD

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Abstract

To handle death may be a difficult task for the living. The death of a person creates a turbulent situation that needs to be resolved. Ritual actions and burial practices performed within the framework of the prevailing social norms are a way to deal with conflicts and changed power relations. This paper deals with such issues exemplified by the Pitted Ware burial practices seen in the burial ground at Ajvide, Eksta Parish on Gotland. The burial expressions observed from this site indicate the use of different rituals in the treatment of the dead. These are visible by bodies buried in the supine position in single, or sometimes in double or triple graves, while some consist of individuals in a “package” where the body must have been in a state of decay when buried. Well over a thousand identified human bone fragments found in the cultural layers indicate bodies that may have been exposed above ground or used secondarily and ultimately dispersed in the area. Empty graves and graves with missing bones also indicate that bones of deceased ancestors may have been of importance in the death rituals that assured a “Perfect Death”.

Keywords: death; death and society; archaeology and burials; Stone Age; Pitted Ware; Ajvide

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Some background ideas on death and the ritualisation of the dead

This study deals with ritualised death practices as they are observed in the Pitted Ware Culture (PWC) sites on the Island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea (Figure 3.1).

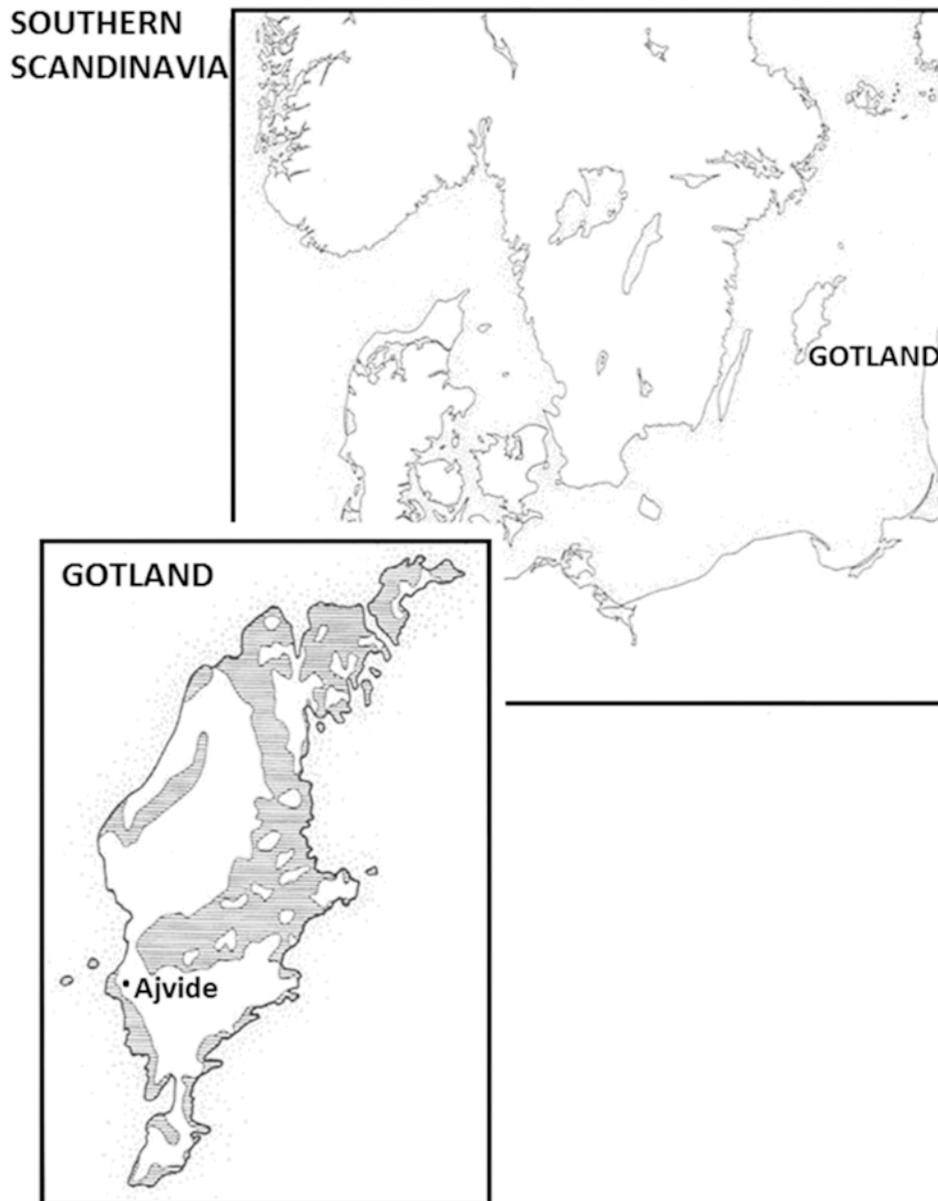


Figure 3.1. Map of the Baltic region and the location of the Ajvide site on Gotland (after Bägerfeldt 1992: 6).

The main site used in this case study is the well excavated burial ground at Ajvide (Burenhult 2002). I consider this site to be one of the best representatives of the Middle Neolithic era when it comes to the treatment of the dead within this tradition. Of course, one can never be certain if the buried individuals are representative of the PWC or if they represent a section of the society, or whether there were other burial practices as well. However, the site studied includes males and females, as well as all different age groups. Some individuals have been given more burial gifts and others less, and some have exotic items and others not. This suggests that the buried individuals may represent a cross section of the society. Pitted Ware burial norms have been discussed some years ago, and generally I agree with Andersson (2004) who suggests that we cannot simply argue that burials that are missing bone elements always have been accidentally destroyed (although this also may have happened) in prehistory or by more recent farmers; instead we need to see them as representing stages in the burial processes, where ancestral bones were part of ongoing treatment.

Death is generally explained as the end of life; however, the end of life may not be that evident, since it is widely thought that the body needs to be treated, as well as the spirit needing to leave the body so as not to disturb life for those left behind (Fraser 1933: 49). Treatment of the dead is usually deeply rooted in traditional ritualised actions, and such rituals usually make the situation easier to deal with since they follow a more or less predetermined pattern. One may ask if there is such a thing as a perfect death. It may be questionable; however, I consider that rituals tied to death make an effort in that direction in trying to deal with the situation. Rituals are needed in all transitions of life and are designed to take care of the critical transformation of personal changes in a way that is acceptable, as well as predictable to all in society, because they are founded in tradition, practised by the collective habitus of the society, and, if carried out in the right way, things should not go wrong. The concept of death is of course central in archaeology, since it is only in death, through dealing with burials, we are in close contact with the people who created the material remains that we usually find in cultural layers. Some may argue that the actions we observe in graves are ritual actions that are detached from ordinary life and therefore have nothing to do with the living society, and it is often mentioned (discussed by, for example, Richards and Thomas 1984; Bradley 2003) that what we cannot understand we put into the “ritual box”. This may sometimes be the case, but such arguments are probably used since today we usually divide “normal” from “ritual” activities. I see here ritual practice as something that

was deeply rooted in the structure of action, also seen in daily activities. The ritual activities were of course not activities strange to past society; it may in some cases look that way in our eyes (for example, when skulls are missing and human remains are spread around). I do not think prehistoric man made an effort to act in a “weird” fashion; why should they? Therefore the structure of ritual may also have been the structure of other actions in the living society. Victor Turner (1969) stated that it is in the liminal phases, performed in rituals, that the fundamental building blocks of the society are exposed. If one thinks in this way, the layout of a burial ground may be understood and seen as quite logical in its organisation. It may also be easier to understand why different individuals were treated in various ways. If they were behaving as they did in ordinary life, the ritualised actions of death may be understood, since they then in a sense followed ordinary thinking. Life is never lived exactly the same way; illness is not treated in exactly the same way, and to follow this line, death is not treated in exactly the same way. Different ways and strategies during life, for example, using different resources at different seasons, gave a good living, as different strategies for the dead gave a supposedly controlled departure for the dead, and a safe and useful situation for the living. Death of a person is of course a big change for the person that died, as well as for the family and other affected persons that survive. Death can be seen as a natural thing, as well as an unnatural thing, depending on how the person died. Death may also stir up conflicts and change power relations among the survivors. Ritual actions, undertaken in connection with the death of a person resolve such situations and stabilised the situation (Bell 1992: 171–173).

More recently, the focus on ritual studies has changed from a perspective of understanding rituals to detecting ritual practices (Berggren & Nilsson Stutz 2010: 176). This view is based on Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas on practice theory, where practice is working through habitus expressing experiences stored among its inhabitants in the social body (Bourdieu 1977: 11–20). However, studying the actual results of practices of course also generates a new understanding of ritualised repeated behaviours. And being embodied knowledge these actions are highly structured and meaningful (Berggren & Nilsson Stutz 2010: 177). However, ritual actions carried out through habitus are socially learned behaviour that is only available if the society’s members are willing to practice it, i.e. as long as they want to preserve it in their memory. Memory based traditional societies are, according to the French historian Pierre Nora, open, spontaneous and subjective societies (2001: 366) and can thereby change depending on the needs of the group, or perhaps in this

case, the individual to be buried. Therefore, we can see general social expressions, as well as individual variations in burial rites. Burial rituals are a collective action driven by some general ideas on how it should be done, and are ongoing events carried out by individual actors or *agents*. By viewing the phenomena in this way one can depart from the general social structures that habitus offers, even if such structures are always present in the background, and instead view the actual execution of the act as central, and not focus on why it was performed (Giddens 1984: 5–9).

Other questions that sometimes appear in discussion concerning burial treatment and gifts is that we do not know if such acts/things given to the dead were tied to the dead person's status/actions in life or if they were expected to be useful for the dead in the afterlife, or if they indicate the preferences of the person (or group) who contributed the gift. These questions can of course never be fully answered; however, what we can detect is the habitus of the practice tied to burial acts/gifts. Therefore, studies of buried individuals and their treatment can uncover such practice driven actions and are therefore interesting in themselves. These practices construct each death according to habitual practices and uncover general, as well as individual expressions.

Some anthropological ideas on the ritualisation of the dead

The concept of ritualisation may be applied when discussing rituals used in social control or communication. According to Catherine Bell (1992: 89) the concept of ritualisation can be applied to distinguish ritualised practices from other practices, and display how such actions are carried out in different strategies. Since burials and their expressions are formalised they are expressions of socially defined actions used in a certain way by the group (Geertz 1980: 123–124), and therefore they indicate a ritualisation of the dead. Following the discussion by Bell (1992: 197–223) the death of a person is a case that concerns society in its social expression of control, particularly with social positions, and is therefore of great importance in the shaping of power relations and belonging within the group.

The treatment of the dead body can be a prolonged action since the body of a deceased person can be seen as something scary and dangerous, which needed different treatment to make the spirit leave the body in a peaceful way, to not disturb the living. A general goal is to prepare the body in dif-

ferent ways and ensure that the flesh is removed from the bones. If this goes well, the bones themselves can be used to give strength to individual actors and/or the society. In this usage, bones are mixed up into the ground or placed at ceremonial sites, etc. (Handy 1927; Henry 1928; Wallin & Solsvik 2010). When the bones become a part of the material culture, they give power to genealogies that may turn into legendary ancestral stories connected to the gods. However, such anthropological suggestions concerning death as a transformation or regulation of power relations, etc. are of course difficult to claim and tie to archaeological remains. A possible way is through the study of definite actions taken in connection with the dead as expressed by funerary practices. The valuable thing with these practices is that they in fact show us something through the observable remains that were left behind. Such traces are found at the Gotlandic PWC sites, seen for example in pig bone deposits that indicate feasting or sacrifices in relation to the burial of the dead, and there are differences among the buried individuals when it comes to burial practices, as well as how the body was placed in the grave, and which gifts were bestowed (Wallin 2010). It is through these practices we may understand something of the complex relations with the dead. Some of these relations I will describe in more detail below.

The Ajvide burial ground

The aim of this paper is to give examples of ritual practices that can be observed within the PWC sphere especially on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. This choice is due to a longstanding interest in the PWC sites on the island (Wallin 1984; Wallin & Eriksson 1985; Wallin & Martinsson-Wallin 1991, 1992a, 1992b, Wallin 1995a; Wallin & Martinsson-Wallin 1996 Wallin & Sten 2007; Wallin 2010). Another, more important reason, is that the PWC sites with burial grounds on Gotland are the best preserved in Sweden, due to the calcareous ground. There is nothing to compare them with on the mainland, and the Gotlandic case may therefore give some general insight into and suggestions for the entire PWC complex. In this paper I have focused on the well-known PWC site at Ajvide, Eksta Parish, since it is the most thoroughly investigated burial site on the island (Burenhult 2002; Österholm 2008). I also do this because the Department of Archaeology and Osteology at Gotland University, now Uppsala University, Campus Gotland, has been running the archaeological excavations at the site for many years (1999–2009) and we are about to carry out research on the

enormous amount of excavated material of which the burials are central to the understanding of the site.

Chronology and spatial relations

A total number of 58 ^{14}C dates is now available from this site (Wallin & Martinsson-Wallin in press). Dated contexts include a “settlement” of cultural debris dated to ca. 3100–2900 BC, and the burial ground itself which, according to the ^{14}C dates, was established about 200 years later than the initial phase of the site. Furthermore, all burials are found in pits excavated through the cultural layer that contained animal bones and pottery shards. This means that the site selected for burials was used earlier as a fishing/hunting/feasting ground. The burial ground at the site can be divided into two phases, the first at ca. 2900–2600 BC, and the second from around ca. 2600–2300 BC. During the latter phase, larger ritual areas indicated by dark soil and high frequencies of bones and pottery shards were established among the old burials. New burials were also placed in relation to the earlier burials that in several cases were consciously manipulated by these ritual activities. This is indicated by the high amount of fragmentary human remains (Lundén 2012: 8, Fig.1) also found in these areas of dark soil (Österholm 1997: 163–164).

In summary, the burial ground at Ajvide consists of 85 burial pits (including 8 empty pits, sometimes interpreted as cenotaphs), containing 89 skeletons. Some of these burial pits contained just a few bones or dispersed human remains; however, the general manifestation is that of a single buried person. Some included two or three skeletons. These burial pits appear in clusters, as well as in smaller groups and pairs (Wallin & Martinsson-Wallin in press; Wallin in press). Other general observations are that females and males from all age groups are represented, as well as newborn to juvenile children. According to osteological determinations, males represent about 60% of the burials, and females about 40%, which may indicate a somewhat skewed representation. There are about 25% children/juveniles which also is a moderately low number; however, bones from children are fragile and may also be more difficult to detect in the field. The general view is that anybody could be buried, although the under representation of females and children/juveniles suggests that there might have been other alternatives. Detailed studies of the burial site display clusters of graves as mentioned above, initially suggested by Fahlander (2003). The ^{14}C dates give an interesting new platform for novel interpretations. Fahlander (2010) suggests a chronological trend of Ajvide running from north to south, but instead,

new dated samples and a re-evaluation of earlier dates, show that each cluster includes early as well as later dates. This means that the entire site was used as a burial ground from ca. 2900 BC. I suggest that the clusters show that family groups used different parts of the site, an interpretation also supported by the fact that the clusters include persons of different dates, age and sex (Wallin in press). To continue this reasoning, the term 'burial' needs to be discussed in relation to such practices at Ajvide. First of all, we need to define all rituals tied to the dead that can be traced at the site, and secondly, we need to define the variations within each ritual practice.

Archaeological descriptions of observed differentiations in the ritualisation of the dead at Ajvide

Several burial practices can be deduced by studying the existing remains. Andersson (2004: 10–16) described some of these practices concerning missing bones, cutting into graves, and positioning of new burials in relation to older ones. However, if such treatments should be seen as different initial expressions existing at the same time or if they are to be seen as practices that might have been necessary for some of the individuals and added on as a long burial process, is still not possible to determine without more detailed chronological analyses. What can be pointed out is the existence of different practices (body treatments) that can be detected, observed and described which I attempt to do here.

The first practice (individual burials, sometimes with heads removed and/or with other remains removed)

In the single grave practice (Figure 3.2), an individual (either female, male or juvenile) is buried in the supine position in a rounded, oval or squared pit dug into an old cultural layer. The prevailing orientation is with the head towards the northern sector, however, there are burials oriented in other directions. The skeleton may also be placed slightly on its side or, as in a few cases, in a flexed position. There are also several examples of individuals buried in double or triple graves, meaning that two or three individuals were buried in the same burial pit, sometimes side by side and sometimes two in a row. Usually the whole body is found in the pit (in 58% of the cases), but in several cases the skeleton is missing the skull as well as the upper part of the body, or in some cases other parts of the body (in *ca.* 19%), which indicates that the bones had been removed at some point, probably in connection with conscious actions which may be tied to new ritual ac-

tions that can be related to the establishment of the so called “dark areas” located within the burial ground area. However, the concept of “single” graves may be misleading since seven graves at Ajvide are double graves and two triple graves, and if looking at the dispersal pattern of all graves, 86% of all individuals are buried within approximately one metre from the neighbouring grave, sometimes side by side, or actually cut into another burial (Wallin in press).

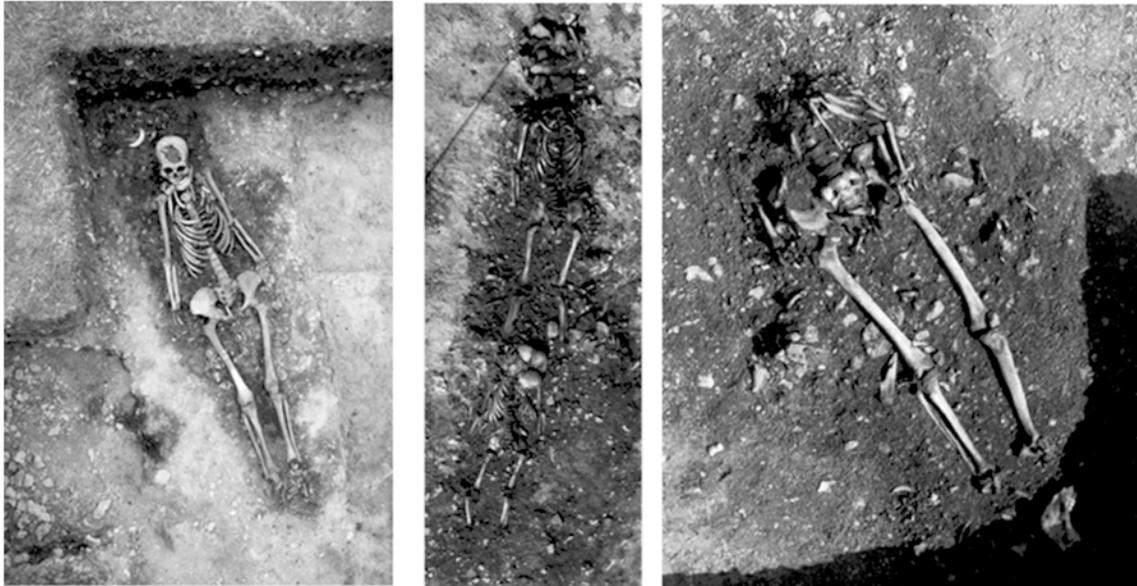


Figure 3.2. The first practice: individuals buried in supine position in single, double or triple graves. Some skulls and upper parts of the body, or in some cases, other bone elements are missing (Photo: Göran Burenbult).

The second practice (package burials or re-burials of body parts)

Three of the burials were so called “package graves”, which means that the dead were probably not placed in the grave before reaching a state of decomposition. This means that the pretreatment must have been carried out in the open air, or the corpse must have gone through a preliminary burial, with a secondary burial carried out later in the process. Both males and females, as well as juveniles, are found in these graves. They are closely connected to another individual, or, as in one case, include four individuals in one package (Norderäng 2007: 16). However, this treatment is not commonly observed, since less than 5% of the burials were treated in this way. Other phenomena are burial pits that include fragmentary skeletons or just a few human bones. These cases, numbering about 14%, may indicate re-burial of bone elements as a secondary burial practice. Together package

burials and possible reburials of bone elements make up almost 20% of the cases (Figure 3.3).

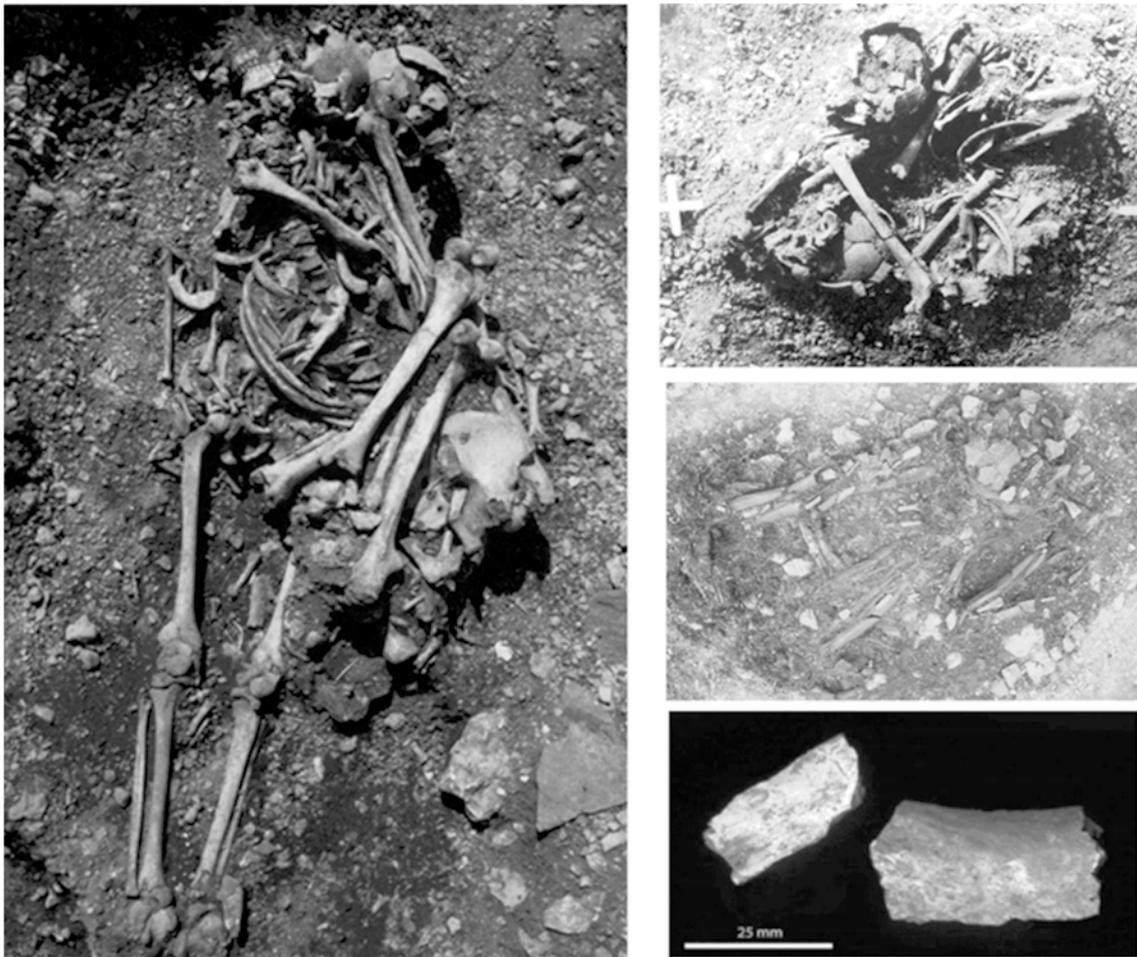


Figure 3.3. The second burial practice: package burials, buried fragments and burned human long bone fragments found in the cultural debris (Photos: Göran Burenbult, left and middle right; Erik Nylén upper right and Johan Norderäng lower right).

The third practice (dispersed human remains)

In total at least 1122 dispersed fragmented human remains have been found from all over the site at Ajvide (Figure 3.4), and at all different depths of the cultural layers (Lundén 2012: 6; Kristiansson 2006). This indicates that these fragments generally do not derive from graves destroyed in recent times. If that were the case, then all graves would have been more or less disturbed, since human fragments are found close to complete skeletons, perhaps especially in the so called “dark areas” which occur within the burial ground. This suggests that some of the dead were exposed to the open air and that

the bones were spread around, or that some individuals were dug up and the ancestral bones were used and/or manipulated in different ways.



Figure 3.4. The third burial practice: the burial ground at Ajvide with graves and dispersed human remains indicated by black dots. Dark soil areas indicated in gray.

Ritual cannibalism has also been mentioned when it comes to dispersed human remains (Grönroos 1913; Welinder 2009), however, this may be difficult to ascertain. One human tibia from the nearby PWC site at Hemmor (that also includes dispersed human remains) was possibly cut into two pieces that are partly burnt (Wallin 1995b; Hedemark *et al.* 2000). Burnt and partly burnt human remains have also been reported from some areas at Ajvide, especially from the uppermost dark area (Norderäng 2009: 7–8). About 42% of all burials at the Ajvide site are missing parts of the skeleton,

or include just some human remains or are empty graves (Table 3.1). This fact may indicate that dispersed human remains have been the result of a conscious act.

Table 3.1. The number and percentages of different burial practices and features.

| Burial practices | Number | % |
|---------------------------------|---------------|----------|
| Complete skeletons | 55 | 58 |
| Missing heads/upper part | 17 | 19 |
| Fragmentary/fragments | 13 | 14 |
| Empty grave | 8 | 9 |

The fourth practice (cenotaphs or empty burial pits)

Eight of the burial pits were empty (Figure 3.5). They generally have the same oval shape and dark colouring as ordinary burials and also include some customary burial gifts, however, there are no human remains.

These burial pits have been called cenotaphs, with the interpretation that they represent individuals that have died or disappeared, perhaps on the sea or abroad on voyages, etc. (Burenhult 2002: 33). Another possibility is that these individuals have been dug up (Ulaya 2011: 47) and may in fact have formed some of the “package” individuals or represent the dispersed bone fragments.



Figure 3.5. The fourth burial practice: burial pits as indicated at the site. The irregular pit to the left was an empty pit as well as that in the profile at the end of the trench. The other two included complete burials (Photo: Göran Burenbult).

The fifth practice (other burial places?)

It may also be the case that not all individuals were buried at the burial ground. This is probably not possible to ascertain. However, it may be suggested based on the fact that the proportion of females and juveniles are somewhat underrepresented at Ajvide. It has also been observed that there are no old women at the PWC site located in Visby (Wallin 2010). Alternative burial grounds may be, for example, the sea itself or other exposed locations. However, it is relevant to discuss these circumstances since only a total of *ca.* 220 graves from the PWC period have been found on all known Gotlandic burial grounds. These sites generally have a time depth that represents about 900 years of human history. The actual number found seems in this perspective to be quite low. Of course many more graves may be detected if more burial grounds were uncovered and the number also increases if the dispersed human remains are taken into consideration.

A conclusion of death practices at Ajvide

Only by studying the authentic burial act can we claim that there was not just one way to inter the body during the PWC time. The most common burial position seen in single graves is when the person was placed in the

supine position. This may be an initial burial phase, which in some cases needed further treatment. The burial process may have led to some individuals being removed, completely or partially, from the grave. In some cases the human remains have been re-buried as a package; in others, the bones have been used and finally spread or left on the ground, or re-buried in a pit. Such secondary treatments are common in different social structures from hunters to stratified societies (Hertz 1960; Larsson 2009: 376–392). In some cases the individual might not have been buried in the ground at all, and instead left in the open air and then spread on the ground during ritual activities and usages of the ancestor's bones. It is therefore possible that the remains of most individuals therefore just disintegrated and slowly disappeared into an ultimate perfect death. The bones connected to the ancestral ground and mixed into the accumulated material debris can also easily be tied to genealogies and in this way become the mythological forefathers that have been protecting the ground since time immemorial.

General Discussion

The following definition of habitus offers a final foundation in the concluding discussion of this paper:

The habitus, the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus. (Bourdieu 1977: 78)

When documenting the different practices seen in the Ajvide burial ground one may claim that different individuals in that society were treated individually, and that the framework of how normative behaviour was performed had such regulated improvisations as stated in the citation above by Bourdieu. It is possible though, to recognise the PWC norms and their variations through archaeological detection and survey, but only if we treat the differences as expected variations and not as later “disturbances” to the single norm implemented by our western society that expects such rational norms. So, when accepting the variations (not uncritically, but only if they can be seen as repeated actions), as they are described in this paper, their meanings may be understood as a complex of actions undertaken in relation to the dead. When associating this knowledge with ideas on how memory societies

are described (Norá 2001) it may be understood that changes and variations are habitually used as a norm since change performed by its actants are performed to keep stability (Sahlins 1997: 250). Such actions, which by us can be called inventions, are seen as part of the old traditions since they are carried out by its inhabitants, and thereby in the situation seen as normal (Giddens 1979: 200; Sahlins 1985: 144). These variances can be detected only with distance from the outside. This phenomenon can be compared with Bourdieu's concept of *méconnaissance* or a kind of *false consciousness*, which may be seen as an assumption as to how symbolic actions are accepted as valid expression within a system of social conventions (Broady 1988: 3).

From the specific perspective of the Gotlandic Middle Neolithic society, their burial rituals and the ritualisation of the dead body, it is clear that death was not a simple act in this society. It is evident that the body was buried and treated in different ways and that the bones were used and spread on the ground by different actions. How then can death be defined? Perhaps the observed practices can indicate that death of a person need not be seen as a definitive end point; instead the different practices indicate prolonged actions that in this way may define the Pitted Ware Death as a continuous action which suggests that the deceased committed the surviving perhaps for generations.

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