

The way we bury our dead. Reflections on mortuary ritual, community and identity at the time of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition

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ABSTRACT – *This paper discusses how archaeologists can approach ways in which the ritual treatment of the dead body was a means of reproducing a sense of identity and community in the past. The approach combines a theoretical framework grounded in practice and body theory with a methodological approach based on taphonomic analysis. This framework is introduced to analyze the mortuary practices at the Mesolithic cemeteries of Skateholm I and II, Vedbæk, Bøgebakken and Zvejnieki. Beyond the immediate context, the study seeks to reflect on how similarities and differences noticeable over time and space may provide an insight into changing identity processes.*

IZVLEČEK – *V članku predstavljamo arheološki pristop k proučevanju ritualov, v katerih obravnava mrtvega telesa izkazuje način reprodukcije identitete in skupnosti v preteklosti. Pristop združuje teoretski del, ki temeljni na teoriji prakse in telesa, ter metodološki del s tafonomsko analizo. Z njegovo pomočjo smo analizirali mezolitska grobišča Skateholm I in II, Vedbæk, Bøgebakken in Zvejnieki. Z analizo smo poskušali tudi ugotoviti ali zabeležene razlike in podobnosti skozi čas in prostor omogočajo vpogled v proces spreminjanja identitete.*

KEY WORDS – *ritual practice; mortuary ritual; archaeoethanatology; Mesolithic*

Introduction

Traditionally, the archaeology of death and burial has focused on the loss of a social being. Mortuary practices have typically been viewed as strategies for reproducing religious faith, social structure and political power among the living, or more recently, as strategies to express and overcome grief and bereavement (*Tarlow 1999a*). However, death results not only in the loss of a social being, but also in the emergence of a cadaver – a dead body, which is in an irreversible state of change and disintegration. This material outcome of death has, until recently, gained surprisingly little attention in archaeology. I have argued elsewhere that this has been a lost opportunity, since the human cadaver plays a central role in mortuary rituals. Moreover, the many ways in which people deal with the dead body gives form to central concerns (regarding life and death,

the living and the dead, the body and the person it embodies, clean and unclean, *etc.*) of the society in which these acts take place (*Nilsson Stutz 2003*). Such culturally fundamental concerns are likely to play a central role also in identity production. In recent years, there has been an interesting turn toward the body in archaeological approaches to mortuary practices. This new focus can probably be related to a more the general interest in body theory that has become manifest in archaeology over the past two decades or so (see *Kus 1992; Meskell 1996; Rautman 2000; Hamilakis et al. 2002; Joyce 2005*, to only mention a few examples). While many of these approaches have contributed to putting a focus on the body and stressed the social and cultural dimensions of the body, they have tended to remain abstract (*Hamilakis 2002.22*; for a critique, see

also Nilsson Stutz 2008:19–21). Recently, however, the biological and material dimensions of death have gained increasing attention in mortuary archaeology, especially through an interest in the biological processes of death and the complex place of the dead body within society (e.g. Fahlander and Østgaard 2008; Fahlander 2009; Kus 1992; Nilsson Stutz 2003; Østgaard 2004; Tarlow 1999b; Weiss-Krejci 2001).

These new theoretical interests have only partially translated into new methods of excavation and analysis. One exceptional example of this can be seen in the French approach, anthropologie 'de terrain', recently renamed archaeoethanatology (Duday 2009), which combines knowledge of post-mortem biological processes with detailed archaeological observations in the field, in order to reconstruct in detail all the processes that affected human remains after death – natural as well as non-natural (i.e. processes that can be traced to human interaction with the remains during mortuary practices). While this approach has been integrated into French archaeology for decades (Duday et al. 1990), it has only recently been extensively published in English (Duday 2009). As a graduate student working with Duday as an advisor, I began work on applying archaeoethanatology to the study of northern European Mesolithic burial practices (Nilsson 1998), seeking to 'synchronize' the rigorous taphonomic approach with ritual theory, body theory, and practice theory (Nilsson Stutz 2003; 2004). As the taphonomically based methods, along with the defining case studies, have reached more researchers in English translation, this interesting methodology has begun to be used and refined in diverse archaeological settings. I have emphasized especially how the taphonomic focus on the body can complement and deepen the social theoretical understanding of the body (Nilsson Stutz 2003).

Indeed, the broader interest in the body in mortuary archaeology, manifest in theory and methods of analysis, opens up a series of new questions and perspectives that have remained insufficiently explored in the past. In this paper, I apply the methodology of archaeoethanatology in combination with a theoretical framework that focuses on ritual as structured and structuring practice, building on the ritual theory proposed by Catherine Bell (1992), in order to explore the mortuary rituals in the Mesolithic cemeteries at Skateholm (Sweden), Vedbæk/Bøgebakken (Denmark) and Zvejnieki (Latvia). This study does not focus on what the rituals mean, but looks

instead at the reproduction of deep structures in Mesolithic societies revealed through practices that have left material traces that can be recovered archaeologically. What happens to these patterns over time and across space, and how can we understand change and continuity within this framework? To what extent do these practices reflect communities in the past – not necessarily through shared symbols and meaning, but through shared practices? I will address these questions by looking in detail at the role of the dead body in the mortuary ritual, and how the treatment of the dead body can be studied archaeologically with regards to social structure, identity and community.

The dead body as a locus for ritual practice

A human cadaver is not neutral. When the vital functions cease, the body undergoes a dramatic and irreversible transformation through processes of putrefaction and decomposition that give the body a new character. While there is great variability in the many ways human societies react to and deal with the emergence of a cadaver at the time of death, the cadaver is also subject to some biological constants that we can understand as universal characteristics. From the first subtle post-mortem processes, including relaxation in muscle tone in combination with the formation of cell debris and mucus on the cornea, through the stages of temporary rigor mortis and cadaveric hypostasis that contribute to the discoloration of the skin, and on to the processes of putrefaction and decomposition that include further discoloration, emission of gasses and fluids, swelling and so on, the cadaver goes through a cycle of complete transformation which eventually consumes most if not all of the soft tissues of the body (for more details see Knight 1991; Mant 1984; Polson 1955). These dramatic transformations must be handled by the survivors, often through some kind of ritual disposal of the remains.

But the ambiguous, changing character of the cadaver is not limited to the physical appearance. At a deeper level, the mourners have to deal with the fact that the body that once embodied a social person simply no longer does – it is now a corpse. This corpse still resembles the living person to some extent, but at the same time, it has changed forever. The human cadaver is thus liminal – it is located somewhere between subject and object, between culture and nature, and between life and death. In her book 'Le pouvoir de l'horreur', Julia Kristeva discusses the human cadaver as the ultimate abject,

thus capturing its liminal character between categories, and its consequent threat to order and society (Kristeva 1980). From a perspective that views the body as culturally produced (e.g. Asad 1997; Coakley 1997; Csordas 1994; Lock 1987; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987; Shilling 1993; Strathern 1996; Turner 1996; 1997; and others), the cadaver poses an additional problem, since it can no longer be controlled from within. Instead, cultural and social control now has to be imposed from the outside – which is exactly what the survivors do. Through the mortuary ritual, they correct the cadaver, manipulating the remains of the dead to conform to cultural and social conventions of what a ‘good death’ should be. Of course, the post mortem changes are given very varied places in different societies, which is reflected in the cross-culturally diverse strategies played out in mortuary rituals; decomposition and putrefaction may be denied and hidden (as in our own society), accelerated (for example, through incineration), partially stopped (as in mummification or embalment) or played out and publicly exposed (as described for example in Hertz 1960; Huntington and Metcalf 1979; Knauff 2009.39–51). But no matter how different the strategies may be, the important point made here is that a cadaver is never ignored, and is always taken care of and disposed of in a culturally structured way. Drawing on Arnold van Gennep (1909) and Victor Turner (1967), it is possible to see cross-culturally variable treatment of the body as part of a liminal phase that challenges social order through the abject character of the cadaver. The mortuary ritual re-defines the cadaver – from a subject that it used to embody, to an object of death from which the mourners can separate – and thus provides an exit from the liminality caused by the abject status of the cadaver. The ritual redefinition of the dead body, which often involves an idea of separation between the physical remains and the spirit, soul, or memory of the dead, allows the mourners to separate from the dead, and at the same time, structure an acceptance of death (Hertz 1960). By producing a ‘good death’, the ritual further reinstates order, and society as a whole can manifest its resistance and control over death. The mourners redefine their relationships – among themselves and with the dead – as they heal the rupture in the social fabric. Seen within a practice-focused framework, and following Catherine Bell’s work on ritualization (1992), the mortuary ritual becomes an event for the reconstruction of the social structure and the cosmology as a whole. Through the ritualized creation of an image of death which is culturally and socially acceptable, the death is given a place

within the general cosmology. From this perspective, it becomes clear how a mortuary ritual can be viewed as reproducing existing relationships and practices and reaffirming values held by the community.

Ritual, community and identity

How can we understand the role of mortuary rituals in reinforcing a sense of community? And, more importantly perhaps, how can we investigate this archaeologically? In order to respond to these questions, we need to take a closer look at how ritual works in society, how identity is produced, and how the two intersect.

In her book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992) Catherine Bell applies Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977; 1980) practice theory to the concept of ritual and sees them as part of a structuring process. In this framework, rituals are not viewed as expressing meaning, but rather, meaning is created through practice and experience, and it can vary between different individuals and over time. Instead of focusing on what rituals *mean*, Bell is interested in what they do. She introduces the concept *ritualization* to separate rituals from other actions. Ritualization is defined as a strategic way to act (Bell 1992.7) that creates a distinction from other actions, a distinction that defines the specific practice as ritual, and thus privileged, significant and powerful (Bell 1992.90). In this production of separation, a cosmology is created – a structured world of significance organized according to a hierarchy of binary oppositions linked by chains of associations in which everything has a place in what appears to be a logical system (Bell 1992.140–141, see also Bloch 1986; Kertzer 1988; Turner 1969). In this world created through ritual practice, each movement, sound and gesture becomes a part of the process of structuring, and the active participant thus becomes included in this hierarchy through the ritual practice. It is thus through practice, the bodily engagement in the ritual, that the structure is created. By being an active participant in the ritual, the participant would also embody the experience itself – through sensory experiences that would be carried as embodied memories acting to reinforce a sense of structure. The participant possesses practical knowledge, or an embodied sense of how to execute the ritual correctly – that is to say, in the moment, in a thoroughly socially relevant, competent way. If we return to the theme of burials and more particularly to the handling of the dead body, this means that everybody

in a society gains a shared sense of what to do with the body (and even if specialist knowledge may be required, the average person would still have a set of expectations of what should be done). Through past experience these strategies have been embodied in the participants throughout their lives, and people simply have a sense of what a 'decent' burial is. The ritual practices are learned, but are often so deeply rooted in culture that they are taken for granted and non-negotiable (see below). This framework also allows us to understand change in practices. Since every ritual event is an opportunity to reproduce past actions or change them, and incorporate these changes into the same practice-structure dialectic, change can occur at any time within the structured process.

When looking into current research on identity, we see a similar focus on the subliminal taken-for-granted or 'natural' aspect of cultural practices, as opposed to more essentialist views of identity. Identity, it is argued, is constantly reproduced through interaction with others (*Barth 1969; Díaz-Andreu and Lucy 2005; Insoll 2007 etc.*), and practices play a central role in this process (*Jones 1997; 2007 [1996]*). In other words, the ways in which we do things create markers of difference and similarity between groups of people. The practices that seem so 'natural' that they are taken for granted appear to be the most powerful in this process. However, in encounters with 'the other' these taken-for-granted practices still have to be systematized and rationalized, and it is at this level, which tends to be discursive, that social boundaries, status differences, or ethnic categories are produced and reproduced (*Jones 2007*). The term practice is used to denote activities which are learned – something which distinguishes them from mere habits (*Turner 2001.120*) – and which are “*situated, corporeal, and shaped by habits without reflection*” (*Thévenot 2001.56*). They are thus to be seen as socially produced, and yet, at the same time, they are also fundamental in structuring society. Taking into consideration the relation between ritual practice and cosmology described above, ritual practice is likely to be particularly effective at reinforcing a sense of shared identity and community. In fact, Ann Swidler (*2001*) has argued that ritual practice might have a privileged role, at least under certain circumstances, as anchoring the social and cultural structure, by reinforcing constitutive rules – especially if they “*define socially central but informally structured social relationships*” (*Swidler 2001.91*). Here, it is possible to see the repeated ritualized actions of treating and bury-

ing bodies of the dead and the embodied knowledge of what a good death and proper burial should be as also central to the construction of self and other, especially in structured contrast with other social practices. Once we consider patterned traces of repeated rituals, we can then look at variation in burial features that may reflect discursive social negotiation, whether it is expressed within the context of the 'proper burial' or outside of it.

Archaeologically, the repeated ritualized practices involved in dealing with the dead body should translate into recognizable patterns in mortuary features. The theoretical foundation provided by a focus on practices as structured and structuring – with regards both to ritual and identity – is well suited to the nature of archaeological sources, which substantially consist of the materialized traces of past practices. This emphasis on practice requires that we adjust our methods to meet the demands of understanding what people in the past were doing with their dead. The methodology provided by archaeo- thanatology allows us to do this, as it provides the tools for reconstructing the sequence of practices that created the archaeological situation today. Beyond the need for new methodologies, this approach also requires that we rethink what we are really looking for. I have argued elsewhere that if we want to take the practice theory framework seriously in archaeology, we must re-evaluate our results (*Nilsson Stutz 2003; Berggren and Nilsson Stutz 2010*). To look for practice means looking for the repeated non-negotiable in the ways in which people were doing things. In other words, we need to re-evaluate the everyday at the expense of the extraordinary. When applying this theoretical model to the extraordinary Mesolithic cemeteries around the Baltic, we must highlight not only the variability, but also look for the structured, repeated and reproduced practices that are likely to reflect the non-negotiable and un-reflected response to death revealing deep structures. If we can identify some aspects of mortuary practices that are widely distributed among these cemeteries, then we may be able to argue for some shared response to the social and biological crisis of death. The basic idea here is that people from different communities in a region, in treating their dead in similar ways, would have had a sense of collective identity, which would have structured and been structured by their shared mortuary practices. Since the ritualized actions of burying the bodies of the dead are structured by fundamental aspects of what death is, but also embodied as knowledge about the 'good death' and a proper burial, it is possible to see

variations of these deeply structured practices as examples of social negotiations expressed within the context of the proper burial, or outside of it. Through variation, we may be able to reflect over culturally structured ways of creating boundaries between people within a group and between groups.

Preserving the body's integrity in Southern Scandinavia

In a series of studies, I have analyzed the mortuary practices in three Mesolithic cemeteries, at Skateholm (Southern Sweden), Vedbæk/Bøgebakken (Eastern Denmark) and Zvejnieki (Northern Latvia). I have used the approach of anthropologie 'de terrain'/archaeoethanatology to reconstruct in detail how human bodies were handled after death (*Nilsson 1998; 2003; 2006*, and I refer to these publications for details). The analysis led me to ask new questions that have not been posed in the usual discussions regarding these sites. The mortuary practices in Northern Europe during the late Mesolithic are often described as complex and varying. The significance of the differences in the treatment of the dead has been debated at length. Some see horizontal differentiation, while others see a vertical differentiation in the treatment of the dead, reflecting social ranking in society. Instead of looking at what the graves could tell us about the social organization of the living, I have been interested in exploring what they can tell us about treatments of the dead body as ritualized practices. Based on the practice-theory-focused ritual theory described above, I have further argued that the repeated, reproduced practices constitute unreflected or non-negotiable responses to death that can be traced within the so often mentioned variability. In Skateholm and Vedbæk in particular, it is the significant lack of variation in the treatment of the dead body that suggests a core of practices that appears to have been almost non-negotiable in the community's response to death – that is, a set of practices that seems to have produced a good death repeatedly succeeding in defining a social separation from the dead body and a redefinition of the identity of the dead. What is striking from the taphonomic/archaeoethanatomical analysis is that the vast majority of burials involve primary burials in simple filled-in grave pits. The body would usually have been placed in the grave, supine or on its side, or sometimes seated, and then buried by filling in the pit with sediment. Thus, as staged by the mortuary practices, the dead individual would have maintained its integrity, still resembling the living, with the processes of decomposition remain-

ing mostly hidden, buried underground. The last image created of the body before the final separation was ritually staged as life-like. To summarize:

- The bodies were interred as primary burials (with very few exceptions).
- The burial pit was immediately filled.
- The bodies were placed on the back or on the side with limbs flexed. At Skateholm several individuals were buried in a sitting position. The positions can be described as life-like.
- Occasionally, bodies were wrapped or placed on platforms.
- Artefacts and ochre were placed in the burial with the dead.

Respect for the integrity of the body is also indicated by the fact that earlier graves were rarely disturbed by later graves; the mortuary ritual would have been a focus for the production of memories of the dead, and the location of the grave appears to have been remembered and respected. In those very few cases of later disturbance, however, the dry bones were simply left scattered, and this suggests that at least after some time, the integrity of the individual in death was not associated with the integrity of the dry skeletal remains. In one grave in Skateholm (grave 13) taphonomic analysis reveals that an incomplete body had been placed within some kind of container, possibly a sack. This burial constitutes a stark contrast to the prevalent mortuary practices, and I have suggested that it could be either the remains of an individual who had been deliberately treated in a different way at death, perhaps as a sanction for some kind of transgression, or, conversely, that the containment of the remains inside the sack actually shielded the onlookers from the state of the incomplete body and thus provided a burial as close to the norm as possible, by denying the actual state of the body. This interpretation allows us to understand the variability of practices within the mortuary programme as strategic choices made in exceptional cases, exceptions that only would strengthen the overall structure. In Skateholm, it has been possible to trace a change in some of the mortuary practices over time. In particular, the older burials show greater variation in the artifacts deposited in the grave, while the younger burials show more variation in the position of the body (*Larsson 1988*). It thus seems that, while some things were negotiable over time, other elements remained the same – in particular, respect for the integrity of the body.

But my analysis also highlighted a different kind of inner tension within the ritual system that, while de-

nying the processes of decay, clearly exploited and controlled these very processes that the dominating rituals were intended to hide. For example, compared to the over one hundred primary burials at Skateholm and Vedbæk/Bøgebakken, we find three cremations, all at Skateholm (there are some additional cremations at sites in the immediate vicinity of Vedbæk/Bøgebakken, but none were encountered at Vedbæk/Bøgebakken proper). While rare, the ritual practice of cremation followed by the interment of the dry, charred and calcined, fragmented bones were intentional manipulations of the process of skeletonization. Against the backdrop of repeated primary burial over centuries of structured and structuring ritual practice, I suggest that the examples of cremation may point to situations where ritually staging death was no longer unreflected, and the apparently unusual practice of handling and separating from the body through cremation may have been part of a social process of tension, conflict, negotiation, or change. The taphonomic analysis revealed a more striking, albeit singular case – that of grave 28 in Skateholm, where several bones, including the right radius and ulna, the right os coxae and the right femur had been carefully removed from the burial, only after even the more resistant articulations had decomposed; the removals had been done without disturbing the surrounding remains. I have argued that this is only possible with a precise knowledge of the processes of decomposition and the location of the grave, in combination with a preparation of the burial feature at the time of the initial deposition of the body that would allow for the grave to be reopened at a later stage. The intentional and planned removal of isolated bones from this burial within a tradition that emphasizes the integrity of the body at the time of burial is interesting. When considered, along with cremation, as a rare break with the repeated staging of death as involving separation from the dead those who still resembles the living, the partial and deliberate fragmentation of the individual in grave 28 may, in fact, have been more common in the late Mesolithic than we understand today. Human remains have been encountered in many different kinds of context, including residential deposits. Perhaps we see a precursor here of the extensive manipulation of human remains that we have come to expect during the practices of periods to follow in the region, including the Neolithic Funnel Beaker culture. The focus on what people were actually *doing* when burying their dead allows us to reflect on some of the boundaries that the archaeological discipline has created when deciphering the record. The manipulation of human remains

within the tradition of primary burial in South Scandinavian Mesolithic may indicate that the transition to collective burial may not have been as dramatic as we have tended to see it.

The significance of place in Zvejnieki

When I started working on the burials at Zvejnieki, a large cemetery with 329 burials (and counting) ranging primarily from the Early Mesolithic to the Late Neolithic (*Zagorskis 1987; 2004*), the similarities to the South Scandinavian cemeteries struck me at first as significant. Again, we could see the dominant pattern of primary burials, with bodies placed in positions similar to those found at Skateholm. Again, the natural processes of decomposition were hidden and the dead buried in a way that respected the integrity of the body, at least at the time of deposition. But after a while, and especially after starting the new excavations there, I began to observe a rather different picture, translating into very different concerns that these Mesolithic and Neolithic communities had concerning death and the dead. It soon became apparent that the concern for the integrity of the body after deposition was not as systematically observed as it appears to have been in Southern Scandinavia at approximately the same time (Late Mesolithic in Southern Scandinavia corresponds to what in Latvia is called Middle Neolithic, a ceramic hunter-gatherer culture). Many burials were disturbed when stratigraphically younger burials were dug into the ground. It is common for isolated human bones to be included in the filling of later burials. A dramatic example of this can be seen in the double grave 316–317 (*Nilsson Stutz et al. 2008*). This deep and very rich double grave was located in a very densely used part of the cemetery, and it cut through at least five older burials. Large, disarticulated human bones, including a femur, several vertebrae and a sacrum were found throughout the filling. Their position indicates that they were either thrown in with the sediment as part of the filling, or possibly initially belonged to a third individual deposited in the grave with the others, which at a later stage had been significantly disturbed (the analysis of grave 316–317 is ongoing). It appears as if the focus on the integrity of body was linked more to a concern over the place of burial in general, possibly relating to a preoccupation with being part of ‘holy ground’ mixed with the remains of one’s predecessors. As the number of interments on the slopes of Zvejnieki increased, the most central concern became, perhaps, simply being a part of that place, a process which might even have been facilitated

by a fragmentation caused by many generations' reuse of the place. However, just as in Scandinavia, it is possible to see some inner tension and potential contradiction in the practice. The significant depth of some of the later burial pits (up to 60cm in the case of grave 316–317) might indicate that precautions were being taken to prevent a similar destruction by later generations.

In the analysis of documentation from the older excavations, I was also able to demonstrate that wrapping of the body at the time of burial was more commonly practiced at Zvejnieki, when compared to the Southern Scandinavian sites (*Nilsson Stutz 2006*). Wrapping may be viewed as a strategy to reinforce the protection of the body, and I initially viewed this practice as being part of a concern over the integrity of the body, something similar to what I had observed in Southern Scandinavia. However, the frequent wrappings can also be viewed as reflecting something else. Through the wrapping of the body before burial, the dead body is transformed in a way that sets it apart from the living, a practice which contrasts with the 'life-like' arrangements of the bodies in Southern Scandinavia (*Nilsson Stutz 2006*). For the wrapped individual in the double grave described here, the transformation did not end with the shielding of the body, but also involved a covering of the face with a layer or mask of red clay. This practice has been described for other burials at Zvejnieki, sometimes in combination with the placing of amber rings at the level of the eyes of the dead (*Edgren 2006; Zagorskis 1987; 2004*).

This impression of an altered state or transformation at the time of burial would have been an example of the powerful production of a good and controlled death, one that constitutes a stark contrast to what appears to have been the practice in Southern Scandinavia. The body appears to be radically transformed at the time of separation from the living.

It thus seems as if what initially appeared to be a similar mortuary practice is, in fact, a complex web of practices that show both differences and similarities that we can try to trace across time and space in the archaeological record.

Them and us: decoding difference and shared identity

When extending these observations over longer time spans and greater geographic scales – as archaeologists are in the habit of doing – an interesting possi-

bility appears. Perhaps the Mesolithic groups around the Baltic initially shared a sense of affinity and identity, which was expressed in the mortuary practices that contrasted with those of surrounding Neolithic groups, thus reinforcing a sense of shared identity among these hunters and gatherers. But the strategies for the production of social similarity and difference through highly ritualized mortuary practices would eventually change. In southern Scandinavia, contacts with continental Western Europe resulted in a gradual adoption of domesticated animals and plants – and eventually, collective mortuary practices were adopted, which show some similarity to the megalithic practices in Western Europe. While, on the one hand, this is radical, in the sense that the burial in individual pits in the ground is replaced by a deposition of decomposed skeletal remains in a collective grave; the experience of the survivors, on the other hand, may not have been as radical as we may think today, when we consider the archaeological traces of the practices. In fact, we know little about who in the community actually interacted with the remains of the dead and participated in their fragmentation. These practices also seem to have a precursor in the Mesolithic, as bones were deliberately removed from burials in at least one case in Skateholm. In Southern Scandinavian Neolithic rituals, new concerns could have been articulated with the old, which were simply given a new form. This complex relationship between the old and the new allows us to understand how such a transition may have been possible. As the mortuary practices shifted, so did the sense of community, belonging, identity and identification thereby reinforcing a notion of shared experience in Southern Scandinavia and Western Europe.

Along the Eastern shores of the Baltic, in the Comb Ware and Pitted Ware Cultures, and in places like Zvejnieki, mortuary practises showed greater continuity with the previous, widespread Mesolithic core of practices of primary burial. However, new practices and structures, including the covering of the face with clay, the wrapped body and the strong emphasis on place (to the point of overriding other concerns) may suggest transformations shaped by social interactions originating from Neolithic cultural and population expansion from the Near East and South-eastern Europe. Maybe the strongest cultural influences at this time occurred along a route from the Southeast, rather than via North-western Europe.

While some of the points made in this paper are explicitly speculative, the argument made here is that

by being flexible and ambiguous, the ritual production of death holds the capacity for different outcomes at moments of change, like the transition to the Neolithic. Here we can see how cultural change occurs over the long term and takes different directions in different places. In Southern Scandinavia, the primary burials give way to fragmentation and depositions in multiple episodes in collective burials. In Zvejnieki, primary burial continues, but takes on a new shape as the body is transformed at the time of burial. At the same time, the focus on place

intensifies, which results in a redirection of concern away from the body itself. Despite the very preliminary character of this paper as a work in progress, I want to emphasize that by looking at the treatment of the dead body as a central ritual practice, we can start to understand ritual as a process in the past. It provided a structured and structuring tool for mourners to deal with the dead body, and at the same time reconstruct society and community, producing identity and difference.

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