Bears, boars and burials
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By Gad Rausing


Why are preserved inhumation graves from the Paleolithic and Mesolithic so extremely rare? The article presents the hypothesis that carrion-eating animals robbed the graves soon after the burial. The hypothesis was tested and verified in a practical experiment in a mixed forest of oak and beech where wild boars live. Here a number of graves were dug at different depths, with and without a covering of iron ochre over the bodies (parts of still-born calves and fresh fish). The only way to protect the bodies of the dead seems to have been to bury them within or very close to the houses in the settlement. Other modes of protection later introduced were the building of megalithic graves, the covering of the graves with cairns, and obviously also the custom of cremating the dead.

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We know less than 100 human fossils dating from the 2–3 million years before the time of Neanderthal man, none of them from burials. We know about 100 fossil humans dating from those 100,000 years when Neanderthal man ruled Europe and Asia, most of them from burials on settlement sites. Even the finds of late-paleolithic and mesolithic Homo sapiens sapiens are woefully rare, most of them being either food refuse from settlements or burials in or beneath the culture layers of settlements.

Why do we so rarely find paleolithic and mesolithic burials? And why do we mostly find them on settlement sites? Why did paleolithic and mesolithic man mostly bury their dead among the living? Can the reason, as so often suggested, be that the living wanted to remain in contact with their dead? To modern man this seems to be a very human trait and it may, of course, be part of the explanation, or even the entire explanation. To a certain extent, we see an expression of this sentiment in Christianity’s and Buddhism’s reverence for relics. Or have we not found stone-age man’s burial-grounds? Or have the old burials been destroyed?

I have always believed that boars, bears, badgers and wolverines, carrion-eaters with sharp noses and strong muscles, may have provided the main reason. Everyone who has ever hunted in regions where there are bears, boars or wolverines knows how difficult it is to protect supplies and venison from these predators. The late-paleolithic reindeer-hunters at Meidendorf sunk their prey in cold water, as did I when hunting reindeer in Norway. The meat is kept cold and does not give off any scent which might attract prowlers. In old-time Scandinavia, where the food stores had to remain available all through the winter, storehouses were often built on high posts to prevent wolverines and bears from breaking in and for the same reason many amerindian tribes buried their dead in trees.

Ancient man may have found it very difficult to protect the tombs of those recently buried from the ravages of bears and wild boars. May the adoption of megalithic tombs and, later, of cairns represent attempts at solving this problem? And was cremation a radical solution? But those who wanted to protect their dead without having recourse to any of these solutions may have found it necessary to bury them where the graves could be guarded for a time long enough to ensure that
the contents would no longer be of interest to predators, to bury them on the actual site of the settlement.

Where mesolithic man could not stay for several months at a time in one place, where he could not protect the graves during the critical first months, I suspect that the graves were desecrated within a short time after burial. It may be that this is one of the reasons why we have found so very few paleolithic and mesolithic burials outside the confined areas of settlement sites, as at Skatelöv.

In India, where bears, boars, jackals and hyenas abounded until the beginning of the last century, the Hindoos always burned their dead. The Moslems buried theirs unburned, in walled cemeteries close to the mosques. Only the thugs, "religious murderers by hereditary profession" (Sleeman), who had to be discreet about their affairs, habitually buried their victims. To prevent predators from exposing the remains, and thus the thuggee activities, they used to spread peppery fleawort seeds on the tombs. No jackal would dig where his nostrils had been stung by these.

Far from every paleolithic or mesolithic site has burials. Although most of the sites appear to have been seasonal ones they were, in many cases, occupied for a period of time every year for a long period of time, just as are present-day hunting and fishing camps, each individual cultural layer representing a number of such annual visits. According to all the rules of statistics some members of the bands should have died during these visits. Still, in most cases no burials have been found. Why? May Skateholm afford a clue? Here the dead were laid to rest, not beneath the hut floors or between the huts but immediately next to the settlement, well within sight and, perhaps, within reach of torchlight. Perhaps we should look for burials near all mesolithic camps found?

The mesolithic burial at Barum, in Scania, was found by accident when a road was built and it was already partly destroyed when excavated. It has always been taken to be a solitary burial, but the absence of additional burials and culture layers does not signify, since the excavator, Folke Hansen, investigated the grave only and did not clear any surrounding area. A new study of the site might perhaps be called for! (Gejwall, N.-G. The fisherman from Barum—the mother of six children. FV 1970. Rydbeck, O. Skelettraven i Bäckaskog och dess ålder. Medd. LUHM, 1945. Hansen, F. Fiskaren från Barum. Handlingar ang. Vildlands Härads. Kristianstad 1941.)

So very great a percentage of all iron-age inhumations excavated having been plundered in Antiquity and, mostly, apparently having been plundered within a very short time after the interment, one cannot help wondering whether the grave-robbers were not sometimes preceded by quadruped scavengers.

To test the thoughts outlined above I have arranged some burials in Scania, Sweden, in an area where wild boars abound. This is a country of oak and beech, where the boars find abundant vegetable food and where they have no access to meat of any kind except rabbits and fieldmice, which they are adept at catching. It should be stressed that these are true wild boars (Sus scrofa ferus), not feral domestic pigs.

In the Middle Ages standard burial depth was one ell, 60 cm (24 inches), and also in prehistoric times graves appear to have been quite shallow. To see whether the depth of the grave was significant I prepared six graves, two 60 cm deep, two 80 cm and two 100 cm deep. Each grave was about 100x60 cm. The soil is sandy, supporting a vegetation of beech and oak. It was once cultivated, but certainly not in the last fifty years and probably not in the last hundred.

Both in paleolithic and in mesolithic times the dead were often sprayed or rubbed with ochre, red iron oxide, before the grave was filled in. The red colour of the ochre has been taken to symbolize the colour of blood, the colour of life, the ochre representing an attempt to prolong the life of the deceased. It struck me that ochre might also discourage predators, as did the seeds of flea-worth, and that ochre in the tombs might have not only a religious purpose but also a practical one. For this reason I decided to include a number of burials where the remains had been liberally
sprinkled with ochre in my experiment. Also, even though medieval custom (and law?) stated that graves should be one ell (60 cm) deep, I decided to test also 80 cm and 100 cm.

No member of the archaeological seminar volunteering I had to use animal matter in the graves, some 7 kilos of veal (one sixth of a stillborn calf) and 2 kilos of fish (bream) in each grave, with a handful of red iron oxide sprinkled over the contents in one of each pair of graves. (Finding real red iron oxide is not too easy since it is apparently no longer used in the manufacture of paint!) Both meat and fish were absolutely fresh, having been kept under refrigeration (but not frozen) for less than 24 hours.

The graves are about two meters apart, placed as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>100R</th>
<th>80</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80R</td>
<td>60R</td>
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<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>100</td>
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The graves were filled in, and the filling trodden down, at 11.30, on March 29th, 1989. Great care had been taken that neither meat nor fish had been in contact with the ground surface and that nothing had been dropped.

If the boars were to find the graves they would do so by the smell from their contents only, not from any olfactory traces on the surface.

As it turned out, I had almost underestimated the boars' sense of smell. Already on the second day (1/4), one had rooted the surface...
of grave 60, i.e. the shallowest one without iron oxide. No really serious effort to get at the contents were made until the night between 16/4 and 17/4, when grave 60 was opened and completely emptied, everything being eaten, including skin and bones, a few hairs being the only evidence of part of a calf having once been interred here. Throughout the experiment temperatures were rather low. After the mildest winter ever recorded, late March and all April were "normal", with night temperatures just around freezing and day temperatures 5–15 centigrades. The temperature of the soil between 60 and 100 cm was around 5 centigrades.

By 24/4, long before decomposition had set in and long before there was any smell of putrefaction which the human nose could perceive, all the graves had been opened and plundered, nothing being left except hair. An archaeologist in the distant future will have a hard time to prove these disturbances to have been graves!

My conclusion is thus that no inhumation was safe against the inroads of wild (or domestic!) boars, or against those of bears, badgers and wolverines, that prehistoric man lost his
ancestors unless they were buried either under, or next to, an occupied site, in a megalithic tomb (be it of stone or wood) or under a reasonably large cairn. Iron oxide meant nothing in this connection and, as far as I know, there are no seeds in Europe pungent enough to protect the bodies, as did fleaworth seeds in India.

Björnar, vildsvin och markgravar


Jan Peder Lamm