Iron Age building offerings: a contribution to the analysis of a die-hard phenomenon in Swedish preindustrial agrarian society
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Iron Age building offerings

A contribution to the analysis of a die-hard phenomenon in Swedish preindustrial agrarian society

By Tove Paulsson-Holmberg


This paper deals with the interpretation of prehistoric offerings in relation to houses and buildings. Records of such building offerings are, so far, few in Swedish archaeology. Presumably this is due to the contextuality of the offerings combined with the humble character of the offering gifts. Further knowledge of the structure of the idea behind the offerings is required to increase the understanding of their importance in the mental culture of Scandinavian prehistoric agrarian society. A similar phenomenon is described in folk belief records from Nordic preindustrial agrarian culture, offerings which sought to effect success and protection for the inhabitants of the farm buildings. An attempt is here made to interpret the existing Iron Age offerings in relation to those performed in historic times. The similarity between the archaeological and the historical records seems to support historic continuity, which confirms the importance of the phenomenon in Scandinavian agrarian culture in premodern times.

This investigation mainly concerns building offerings of an osteological nature. A number of Swedish Iron Age offerings are discussed in relation to the general building offering tradition. Some circumstances indicating offering are presented, intended as guidelines for future excavators.

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Archaeological remains by their nature convey a limited, incomplete picture of the past. Among the most important questions to be put to a material are therefore those concerning representativity. How and to what extent have a category of finds been favoured or disfavoured by the circumstances of their preservation and the methods used during excavation? The traces of the past are filtered through the senses of the archaeologist to the detriment of finds that are less significant and harder to interpret than others. In the end this leads to a situation where finds defined mainly by their context may “disappear” if they are investigated by an archaeologist unaware of the phenomenon in question.

I shall here discuss a category of finds which is both little known, heterogeneous and highly contextual. My view is that increased information on the subject may help considerably to increase the total number of finds.

The investigation concerns a material of “mental” character. I wish to stress the possibility, provided certain conditions prevail, of using ethnological-historical sources to interpret prehistoric phenomena. There are
reasons to believe that certain concepts belonging to the folk belief of Swedish preindustrial agrarian society originate from pre-Christian times. Old systems of belief may have survived centuries of transformations since they accounted for the everyday conditions in a relatively static culture.

Finds of animal bones from houses and settlements are usually interpreted as food refuse. But when single bones or collections of bones are recovered from inside a building or in connection with various elements of construction, they may be interpreted in a totally different and more complicated way. It is possible that they are traces of offerings to the building in question.

The building offering is a universal magico-religious phenomenon which has existed in many forms in various cultures (Talos 1987, pp. 395 f.). The theory behind the offering is the belief that buildings can be endowed with wealth and magic protection by placing gifts at significant positions in their structure.

Judging by the abundance of ethnological records (Hauge 1965; Paulsson 1993), the building offering tradition was widespread in Sweden during the period of dissolution of the preindustrial agrarian culture in the late nineteenth century. It possessed universality and importance through its connection with various central concepts related to the everyday economics of this old peasant society: concepts of good and evil, success, misfortune, health and ill-health. Presumably, the origin of these offerings is to be found in an older tradition which may be of prehistoric date. I shall below argue for this thesis of continuity, and describe a selection of known Iron Age building offerings from Swedish territory in relation to the late tradition.

Previous research

The North-European historical tradition concerning building offerings is fairly well known and has already been used by historians to interpret single archaeological finds. A selection of papers used for this summary is quoted below.

Iron Age building offerings in general were analyzed by Torsten Capelle in *Eisenzeitliche Bauopfer* (1987). Capelle describes a number of North-European offerings in relation to hillforts, buildings, roads, walls and wells. He includes some Scandinavian examples. The summary clearly shows the complex, ambiguous nature of the phenomenon and stresses the importance of further research on the subject.

In Denmark, the well-preserved Iron Age houses have produced a number of different building offerings, from the excavations of Gudmund Hatt in the 1930's (Hatt 1938, pp. 185, 195, 236, 257 f.) to the investigation of Hodde in 1985 (Hvass 1985, pp. 111 f.).

In Norway, Bjørn Myhre recently developed Anders Hagen's research on the subject of Stone Age artefacts used as protection against thunder in Norwegian Iron Age houses (Myhre 1988).

Swedish archaeologists have also contributed to the knowledge of the prehistoric building offering tradition. Per Karsten has thoroughly (1994) described and analyzed the phenomenon in relation to South Scandinavian Neolithic houses. Among earlier works, Margareta Beskow-Sjöberg is particularly prominent in her analysis of house offerings from the Iron Age sites Sörby Tall and Bo on Öland (1977). Per Ramqvist uses a similar interpretation for the finds of equine teeth in a Migration period house in Genesmon, Ångermanland (1983). Post-hole offerings of vessels have been observed in Iron Age houses from Halland (Carlie 1992) and Skåne (Björhem & Sävestad 1993). At the Birka excavations, an entire collection of offering gifts of selected bones and pieces of metal was recovered from a house foundation from the tenth century (Ambrosiani & Erikson 1993).

This summary does not claim to cover all known Swedish prehistoric building offerings, and several documented examples could probably now be added to the list. Still, the number of prehistoric houses with recovered building offerings falls short of the expected, if the custom was as widespread in prehistoric times as in the last years of the preindustrial rural society. I am convinced that only a fraction of the offerings performed have come to light, and that
if knowledge of the phenomenon were widespread, the number of registered finds would sharply increase.

The reason for this conviction is the connection between the concept of building offering and a certain, characteristic mental universe belonging to the Nordic Iron Age agrarian culture. To understand this relationship we have to investigate the meaning of building offerings performed by Swedish peasants in historic times.

The building offering in preindustrial Swedish agrarian society

In chronicles from preindustrial Swedish agrarian culture a stränge custom is described: animals, dead or alive, single parts of their bodies, vessels, pieces of iron and coins were buried or hidden in relation to building constructions. The action was described by the informants as part of the eternal efforts to preserve the farm's luck: to ensure growth and to avoid misfortune (Hauge 1965, pp. 76 ff., 83 ff., 96 ff.; Paulsson 1993, pp. 13 ff.). Magical means and rituals were the common methods used to ensure prosperity and protection for the individual household.

This idea is connected to the very core of the mental universe of peasant societies: the concept that the sum of all economical growth is constant, while the division varies (Foster 1965, p. 296). According to this belief, as long as there are extremely rich individuals, there will be abjectly poor people to balance the system. Wealth and poverty must both exist as a way of things. And since the idea of the limited good excludes general economical growth, it implies that the success of your neighbours is always at your expense.

The foundation of this philosophy was the balance between the two concepts success and envy. Success represented the growth, wealth and health of the household; envy the force which threatened to rob the farm of these benefits. Envy was believed to work through envious thoughts which were materialized in various actions (evil thought, evil eye and evil hand), and as such it was an instrument with which unsuccessful people could seek vengeance on the successful (Hastrup 1992, p. 246). Envy somehow existed outside the individual—it was able to "attack" a person so that he or she, unconsciously or consciously, exercised its evil influence.

The theory of the power of envy was generally used to explain sudden, unexpected diseases, deaths and accidents (Hastrup 1992, pp. 248 ff.). The neutralization of the bad influence of envy had greatest priority, and a wide variety of precautions were taken to achieve and maintain magical protection. The building offering was only one of these preventive measures. All these precautions were rational actions performed by persons believing in the dangerous nature of envy and the power of harmful thoughts, and they are profoundly connected with the every-day economics in a cattle-breeding peasant society. The idea that a hard-working and successful person is somehow "stealing" from the common good is as alien to Christian belief, as is the theory of a limited good (Raudvere 1993, p. 51). Since these concepts obviously seem to be un-Christian in origin, we must seek their roots in earlier phases of Nordic peasant societies. Is it possible that the historic ideas belonged to a pre-historic mentality which survived the change of religion in the late Viking Age and was preserved in the mental culture of the Medieval and Postmedieval peasant societies?

Catharina Raudvere, who has studied folk belief conceptions of the mara (nightmare) in preindustrial Nordic agrarian culture, appears to prove continuity in her material from pre-Christian times to the end of the nineteenth century (Raudvere 1993, pp. 297 ff.). Interestingly enough, the essence of the ambiguous concept of mara (a supranatural female being who attacks and torments men and cattle by night) is in fact a belief in incarnate envy. The terror of the mara was a real fear of evil thoughts of envious neighbours and the harm which they could inflict on the health and wealth of the entire household.

The connection between this phenomenon and the world to which the building offering was related is obvious. Apart from Raudvere, other historians have succeeded in linking the
Fig. 1. Building offering obviously for protection: an owl nailed up above the entrance door to a stable at Måns Jofs, Österbotten in Finland, 1916. (From Raudvere 1993.) - Byggnadsoffer med skyddskaraktär: en uggla uppspikad över dörren till ett stall på Måns Jofs, Österbotten, Finland 1916.

mental universe of the last days of the preindustrial rural society with concepts from Medieval and prehistoric times. For instance, the ritualistic hospitality well-known from the Nordic Viking Period and the Middle Ages is considered by some historians as a way of placating poor and “unsuccessful” visitors to the farm, and thereby nullifying their envy (Sehmsdorff 1988, pp. 35 ff.).

The building offering might be understood as an attempt to bribe fortune, a way to frighten incarnate envy away from the vicinity of your household. The action aimed to endow the farm in general and the buildings in particular with benevolent resistance. Consequently, the gifts were placed at critical positions in the building: under the threshold, above the front door, inside or under the oven, or under the floor in the middle of the house (Fig. 1; Paulsson 1993, pp. 15 ff.). They were part of a rational economical calculation which was performed to protect the peasant’s most precious property—his domestic animals.

We might find it acceptable that the building offering, as it appears in the nineteenth century records, was firmly connected to the economy of a certain rural society, as it was related to central problems in its conception of the world: problems of good and evil, health and illness, richness and poverty. Moreover, if this mental universe is identified in documents from the Early Middle Ages, it may be possible to state that the nineteenth century customs are part of a long, important tradition, originally from pre-Christian times. The discovery and analysis of building offerings from the years 800 to 1900 may well help us to prove this possible continuity.

Construction offerings in prehistoric times
Rituals connected to the construction of buildings are universal and diverse, and it is difficult to establish limits in either space or time. Earlier I suggested that the building offering tradition from the late agrarian society in Scandinavia should be explained in coherence with a mental system known as the “economy of success” (Hastrup 1992). Early indications of phenomena related to this idea of the world in the Nordic countries occur in the Icelandic Sagas (Raudvere 1993, pp. 64 ff.). But building offerings are found in much older North European archaeological contexts. Sacrificial finds in houses date at least from the Mesolithic Age (Karsten 1994, p. 149). We are faced with a custom which may be of considerable age and significance.

Presumably, the idea of magic house protection has been so strongly associated with the important, continual construction of buildings that it has persisted without major changes through millennia of agrarian history. Since it was tied to everyday economics in a relatively static rural society, and magical rather than religious, it easily survived even official changes in religion. It may be interpreted in the same way as the long-lived idea of water-logged deposits of weapons (Bradley 1990): a lasting conception, ambiguous in form, content and importance throughout centuries of existence.
I believe however that some variations in the form and significance of the offering are connected to major or minor changes in the everyday economics of the society in question. So far, the traces of offerings from Neolithic and Bronze Age houses are relatively few. Obviously this may be due to our inability to find them. But it may also reflect a minor interest in the general performance of magical protection rites in the farm buildings. The number of offerings appears to increase at the beginning of the Iron Age (Capelle 1987, p. 183). Naturally this change may somehow reflect the multiplicity of well-preserved Iron Age houses. But since the North-European offerings from this age also alter their content, from mainly weapons and vessels to remains of animals, it is possible that the increase is due to a change in the everyday concepts of the world, a change which enlarged the significance of the traditional building offering. But why would such an interest emerge at this moment?

I believe that the importance and development of the building offering in the Early Iron Age may be connected with a contemporaneous, major change in animal breeding—the introduction of cowsheds. Stabling arose for climatological reasons (Lepiksaar 1986, p. 65), but soon showed distinct economic advantages. Increased control over the life and breeding of the animals gave secondary products such as milk, cheese and wool a greater role in household economics (Myrdal 1988, p. 195). The possibility of collecting and using manure promoted the transformation of the cultural landscape initiated by the introduction of iron (tools) 400–300 B.C. (Myrdal 1988, p. 196). Fields and farms became more permanent and were surrounded by meadows and pasture-land producing food for the stabled animals.

This increased economic stress upon cattle-breeding must have been reflected in the lifestyle. The change made the animals live close to man, often in the same house; the inhabitants of the farm had daily contact with them, and they were probably considered as “family members”. The well-being and comfort of the animals was the foundation upon which the success of the household rested. An offering intended to bribe fortune to increase the success of the farm by conferring magical protection on the buildings in which the livestock were kept seems like a logical conclusion of a culture which believed that envious and harmful thoughts constitute dangerous powers which may work at a distance, and that common animal diseases are the visible result of neighbour’s male and envy.

The “new” agrarian economy and cultural landscape of the Iron Age explain the increased importance of building offerings. A similar pattern is visible in the late Neolithic Age where an increase of offerings directly connected to the farm buildings seems to coincide with a more static habitation structure (Karsten 1994, p. 165). The nineteenth century chronicles reveal a close connection between the idea of building offerings and the concern for livestock. It was mainly the domestic animals, not the inhabitants of the farm, which were protected by different magical precautions. It is likely that this concern was the reason for the building offering in prehistoric times as well.

The socio-economic structures of this agrarian society that supported an interest in magic house protection were—from the beginning in the Early Iron Age until the decline at the end of last century—the relatively permanent habitation structure, the emphasis on the unity of the farm and the household, the strong connection between everyday work and the individual farm and the new status of the domestic animals as family members.

Identification

If we assume that the mental culture to which the concept of building offerings belongs dates at least from the earliest days of the Iron Age, its survival indicates that it must have reflected important, constant values accepted in the North European agrarian society. Judging by the general character of the phenomenon and its die-hard, ambiguous nature, it must have been fairly common in both prehistoric and Medieval times. Yet few finds of offerings are registered from Swedish archaeological and historical contexts. I believe this is mainly due to the fact that most house offering gifts are
plain and therefore difficult to identify in the field. This is particularly true of offerings of animals, i.e. skeletal material which represents parts of a sacrificed body. Offerings of vessels, Stone Age artefacts and coins are more easily recognized as they stand out more distinctly in house contexts than single animal bones. In all cases however, an offering is distinguished through its position in the building structure. This means that a suspected offering must in some way be directly connected to a building structure.

If a relationship cannot be proved archaeologically, we have to question the offering context. As Capelle points out, an animal burial found outside a house foundation should not necessarily be interpreted as a sacrifice to the building (Capelle 1987, p. 189). There is also a large group of offerings which could never be traced in archaeological contexts: all sacrificial gifts which may have been hung in different ways in the roof or over front doors, e.g. birds of prey, animal heads and different artefacts (cf. Fig. 1).

The position in the building structure is the principal criterion which indicates a building offering. The offerings may be found inside or under wall constructions, in or under hearths and ovens, in post-holes or under floors and interior pavings. All positions have one thing in
common: they are sealed at a given moment in the construction.

The choice of position seems to be determined by the intention of the offering in question. The nature of building offerings is floating, diverse and complicated. Capelle, who has studied some sixty building offerings from North-European Iron Age avoids general solutions and requests further research (Capelle 1987, p. 204). The quantity of concepts linked with the phenomenon severely hinders the classification of subgroups. The historical material shows a great heterogeneity in form and content of the offerings, and a similar variety is reflected in the archaeological finds. Regarding the osteological offering gifts, the wide variation in the selected parts of the sacrificed bodies shows us that the offerings can be interpreted either as pure animal sacrifices, ordinary food offerings or something in between.

Among the various prehistoric offering gifts we may discern the features of both the purposes of the offerings in historic times, i.e. to increase the success and to scare away evil. Between those two groups a rich variety of combinations is found.

The first group can be defined as a kind of fertility offerings. It consists of vessels with or without contents and limbs of important domestic animals, often found inside hearth constructions or in post-holes holding load-bearing posts (Fig. 2; Capelle 1987, p. 204).

The threshold plays a significant role for the second group of offerings which were primarily intended to confer magical protection on the building. They often consist of entire bodies or parts of bodies buried under, or in the vicinity of, the entrance (Capelle 1987, p. 204).

The two groups represent the extremes of the diversified nature of the building offering, and are to be understood as models of thought rather than two actual sorts of offering. The individual offering at any given point must have been performed with respect to the entire content of the concept. The limits between fertility and protection offerings in the nineteenth century chronicles are vague, and it is likely that this vagueness existed in prehistoric times as well. I argue that the ambiguous, complex character of the building offering concept is its most important quality and one of the major reasons for believing in a long historical continuity.

Despite the objection regarding the possibility of classification of building offerings, some features are still visible which may assist the archaeologist’s interpretation. The choice of gift is one. Even though it may vary widely, it seems that the selection of the gift is somehow linked to certain locations. Offerings of vessels seem to be connected mainly with fertility. They are usually chosen from everyday ceramics and tend to be small and plain. They may be found walled into hearths and ovens as in Østerbølle, Jylland (Hatt 1938, pp. 185 f., 195) or under walls and in post-holes as in various Danish Iron Age houses. Among the vessels found in post-holes are specifically manufactured miniatures, which particularly show the dimension of symbolism in this choice of gift, i.e. the vessel as metaphor for wealth and plenty (Jacobsen & Lorentzen 1986, pp. 8 f.).

Sacrificed bones are more difficult to interpret than vessels, Stone Age artefacts and other objects. One way of discerning them is by their state of preservation. When entire unburned skeletons and when single elements are found, the bones should be “untouched”. This is due to the logic and meaning of the offering gift. The bodies were presumably sacrificed with a view to their “magical survival” as guardians of the building in question.

Single bones, especially crania or cannon bones, may be hidden for the same purpose. Collections of bones may be remains of limbs sacrificed in accordance with the logic of the vessels, fertility offerings of meat which were intended to create wealth for the household.

Species-criteria are probably less useful of interpretation of skeletal building offerings. In historic chronicles as well as in the archaeological finds domestic animals of all kinds occur. Nevertheless a predomination of edible animals may be expected in the gift-offering category and, perhaps, of non-edible in the guardian category. I also find it likely that some single human bones recovered fromhabitation contexts could belong to the latter category.
The identification of building offerings of bones naturally depends on careful excavation techniques and sensible treatment of osteological material in general. Remains of offerings may not differ at first sight from the ordinary household refuse in habitation layers. It is therefore crucial that the archaeologist be aware of the circumstances indicative of offering.

Large, well-preserved bones of unexpected species—cat, bird of prey, man—in short all bones which are incongruous or differ from the expected should be observed and described carefully. Even more important is the close investigation of all bones recovered from inside or under sealed elements of construction.

I shall exemplify the discussion by describing a number of possible building offerings from Swedish Iron Age contexts with stress on the circumstances which supported a ritual interpretation.

Swedish Iron Age building offerings
The following examples concern only building offerings of osteological material. As argued earlier, this group reflects only one aspect of the rich and diverse concepts related to the building offering. I have so far only briefly studied finds of Stone Age artefacts and coins in building offering contexts even though these gifts at first may seem as more obvious protection and fertility offerings than any body part or vessel. But it is my wish to widen the content of the building offering beyond the clear cases towards its multiplicity of forms.

The increased number of building offerings of skeletal material during the North-European Iron Age may, as shown earlier, not be coincidental, but mirrors how the introduction of a new agrarian economy altered the current everyday concepts of magic house protection. I find it likely that the key to this renewed interest was the innovation of stabling the animals: a practice which came to stress a firmer connection between the farm buildings and the household members (animals). If this belief is true the offering may theoretically have been performed in all buildings that housed men or animals.

First I consider three cases where the unusual position of certain skeletal elements supported their interpretation as deliberate de-
posits. All three were interpreted as sacrificial by the excavators and are primarily related to the fertility aspect of the building offering.

A trench in the outer wall construction of a Migration Period house in Genesmon, Ångermanland, brought to light a collection of equine teeth. The teeth lay untouched in situ, without any connection to the remaining bone refuse of the foundation.

Per Ramqvist interpreted the find as a building offering in accordance with the common North-European historic tradition of equine skulls hidden in house foundations. He suggested that the phenomenon reflected a “more or less general North-European custom in early Iron Age” (Ramqvist 1983, p. 89).

In house foundations at Sörby Tall (Gärdslösa parish) and Bo (Bredsätra parish) Iron Age sites on Öland, strange collections of bones were recovered from post-holes and pits below floorlevel. In the oldest phase of house II in Sörby Tall several bones of sheep emerged in three post-holes, together “framing” the house limits (Beskow-Sjöberg 1977, p. 20). The pattern resembles the placing of miniature vessels in selected post-holes in Danish Iron Age houses (Jacobsen & Lorentzen 1986, p. 9). Identical finds of sheep bones came to light in a house in Bo, as well as a deep pit under the central hearth filled with sheep and cattle bones, vertically placed in the dark soil (Fig. 3; Beskow-Sjöberg 1977, p. 118).

The bone collections differed radically from the ordinary mass of animal bone-refuse which was recovered from the sites. According to the osteologist “the meat had not been removed from the bones before they were deposited” (Beskow-Sjöberg 1977, p. 121). Entire limbs of sheep and cattle had actually been forced into the post-holes. No other interpretation than offering was feasible. Beskow-Sjöberg believed that the bones were remains of some kind of fertility offering, rather than pure animal sacrifices. She suggested that a sort of “initiation offering has taken place to confirm a successful life in the new house” (Beskow-Sjöberg 1977, p. 121).

A very similar find came to light in a pit-house at the Viking Age settlement in Lödöpinge in Skåne. Large bones from the extremities of sheep appeared in one of the post-holes, placed in a way which was difficult to explain in practical terms. In this case too, the bones seem to have been deposited with the meat still left on them. The excavator interpreted the find as “a sort of building offering” (Ohlsson 1976, p. 81).

Single human bones in house foundations are normally assumed to represent an unexpected species. Yet they may appear in certain prehistoric house foundations, far from burial grounds and grave contexts. I believe that some of these bones were deliberately deposited, and are presumably to be interpreted as a sort of protection offering. The following two examples are related to this tradition.

In one house at the Migration Period site Vallhagar, Gotland, human bones were found inside and under floor level. Eighteen pieces of a femur were placed next to the central hearth, and next to one of the post-holes of the entrance, a tibia (Nylén & Nylén 1955, p. 164). No explanation was given for their presence in the house foundation.

It is hardly likely that human bones constituted a normal feature in the floor-filling of a house, nor could they be ordinary food refuse. When there are no traces of earlier graves in the habitation area, and the bones appear at typical building offering positions, we may suspect that they were deliberately deposited in accordance with the wish to confer a powerful protection on the building. In the case of the Vallhagar building, this explanation seems valid.

There are other examples which support the connection between single human bones in house contexts and the concept of the building offering. A central foundation trench between two houses in Birka yielded an entire collection of offering gifts. Among these gifts was an unusually large human scapula (Ambrosiani & Erikson 1993, p. 15). The general selection of objects—a bovine skull with preserved horncores, several so-called amulet rings and bones from the wings of an eider—as well as their position in the building structure, strongly sup-
ported a magical interpretation (Ambrosiani & Erikson 1993, pp. 15 f.).

**Bones and bodyparts in houses—some reflections**

The offerings of human and animal remains in relation to buildings may consequently have a very long history in Swedish preindustrial agrarian society. The explanations given in the nineteenth century chronicles are rational in relation to their context; the offerings were intended to prevent the materializations of envious thoughts. The sacrificed being was in some way believed to become a guardian for the house in question (Hauge 1965, pp. 11, 99f). It is important to note that this transformation was possible for single bones as well as for entire skeletons; i.e., a single bone might be sufficient to “house” the spirit of a dead creature. Scandinavian folk belief shows many examples of this concept. The most noteworthy is perhaps the strong belief in the power of the bones of dead humans in both medicine and magic. Interestingly enough, this power was extended also to animal remains. People with extraordinary gifts could create “living” creatures from a single well-preserved bone. In a note on how to create guardians for hidden treasures the procedure is described:

förr i världen kunde de med den ledes makt ta ett ben utav vad djur som helst och lägga ner det vid sådana medel och säga till det: Vakta nu här, till jag kommer igen! Och kom det någon och ville ta medlen, så blev det av benet ett såddet djur, som benet var av, och skrämde eller fördärvade den. (Hauge 1965, p. 103.)

The logic of such a story is based on the belief that the soul is somehow tied to the body, even after death. This leads naturally to a strong concern for the place where the body is buried. By burying a body, or part of a body, in the vicinity of a place which needed a guardian, the living could exploit the extraordinary powers of the dead for their own purposes.

The connection between houses and graves in prehistoric Scandinavia is an enormous topic, which I have no intention of discussing here. I believe however that the concept of building offerings and sacrifices is somehow related to the idea of the grave symbol, and that this connection in many ways confirms the importance of the phenomenon in both prehistoric and historic times. Capelle describes several examples of human graves found in North-European Iron Age building offering contexts (Capelle 1987, pp. 185 ff., 191, 197, 204 f.). Many of these are connected to major fortifications, and a good few are graves of small children. Yet the division between ordinary grave and offering is ambiguous and hard to determine, and presumably, we need more knowledge before it is possible to draw any general conclusions.

The sacrifice of domestic animals in order to create magical guardians for buildings is presumably the most obvious example of general building offerings. We have today no certain finds of animal burials related to Swedish Iron Age house contexts. On the continent, graves of domestic animals have been found in houses from the Early Iron Age and beyond (Capelle 1987, pp. 189, 194 f.). There are indications in the historic chronicles that animals which normally served as guardians, dogs or cats, have been more common in this category of offerings than edible domestic animals (Hauge 1965, p. 100). The archaeological records support this theory. Dogs are in majority among the entire bodies buried in offering contexts inside houses in prehistoric times. In Denmark as well as on the Continent, buried dogs have been found in pits by the entrance of Iron Age houses. They are generally interpreted as protection offerings (Albrechtsen 1946, pp. 9 ff.; Capelle 1987, pp. 194, 204; Kjaer 1928, p. 19).

**Conclusions**

The use of human or animal remains to serve magic purposes was most likely of considerable age and importance in the preindustrial agrarian society. As building offering gifts they show the sacrificial aspect of magical house protection in a clear and fascinating way.

The possibility of tracing a phenomenon with the qualities of the building offering in archaeological contexts opens up wide perspectives for the understanding of ancient mental concepts. The custom in itself was not an isolated belief, but part of a mental universe.
which was characterized by the belief in limited wealth and the fear of the power of evil thoughts. The idea of the building offering was closely tied to central concepts in this idea of the world: the nature of evil, division of means and resources and the origins of diseases. We may assume that the presence of building offerings in prehistoric times indicates the prevalence of an idea of the world based on the complex of success and envy concepts.

It is my belief that this mental complex dates at least from the Early Iron Age, and that it may be closely related to the typical Iron Age agrarian economy. Finds of building offerings from the years 800–1900 are nevertheless necessary to confirm the historical continuity. More analyses of finds will also enable us to understand and describe regional and chronological variations.

What can be done to increase the number of registered prehistoric and Medieval building offerings of an osteological nature and thereby our knowledge of the phenomenon?

During the excavation of a building foundation, attention should be given to all osteological finds which stand out from their context by unusual state of preservation, unusual composition or unusual species-possession.

Every such find should be carefully investigated in order to determine whether the find site was or had been an inaccessible location in the original building construction.

Parts of a building structure which are preserved in a sealed state—a walled hearth or oven, a paved floor or the lower regions of a post-hole—should always be exposed and investigated with respect to this “insignificant” category of finds. If the archaeologist fails to see the context in the field, it may be impossible to reconstruct it afterwards. The building offerings are mainly contextual finds. Outside their contexts, the small and plain, ordinary offering gifts are hard to interpret. The most important work is always done in the field.

It is to be hoped that future research will provide us with a number of new finds, which will help us to understand in greater detail the rich variety of concepts linked to this phenomenon.

References
Sammanfattning – Byggnadsoffer från järnåldern

I denna artikel görs ett försök att belysa och tolka fenomenet byggnadsoffer i svenska järnålderskontexten. Förekomsten av offer i relation till förhistoriska hus och byggnader har länge varit sparsam i svensk arkeologi, sannolikt beroende på svårigheten att tolka de aktuella bebyggelselämnningarna kombinerat med de typiska byggnadsoffergåvornas enkla och vardagliga karaktär. Ökad kunskap om idén bakom dessa offer är av central vikt för att man skall förstå deras betydelse i det förindustriella skandinaviska agrarsamhället.


Ett försök görs här att följa denna tankestruktur ner i det förkristna skandinaviska agrarsamhället. Inom religionshistorien har framgångsrika studier spårat besläktade folkskroten som maran och ideer om skeppadsskifte ner i förkristen tid. Likheten mellan de arkeologiska byggnadsofferfynden från svensk järnålder och de sentida upptäcktingarna i valet av offergåvor och placeringen i byggnadsstrukturen tycks stödja kontinuitetstanken även här.

Fenomenet byggnadsoffer präglas som helhet av stor heterogenitet, även om mönster i traditionen är klart skönjbara. I denna artikel fokuseras framför allt på offer av osteologisk natur. Huvuddelen av de förhistoriska byggnadsoffer som består av skelettdelar härrör från järnåldern, då den totala mängden byggnadsoffer också ökar. Det är trots att detta förhållande speglar en förrydd önskan i tiden att betona det magiska husskyddet. Motivering till dessa intresse för magiskt husskydd har do-

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kumenterats under senneolitikum, i en period som strävade mot en mer permanent bebyggelsestruktur. Intresset i järnålderns agrarsamhälle bör ha samband med en liknande konsolidering. Det har sannolikt också orsakats av en viktig förändring av socioekonomisk art – introducerandet av stallningen. Offren i de sentida uppteckningarna har en stark anknytning till de byggnader där djuren huserade, och det är troligt att skyddet främst gällde djurens tillväxt och lycka.


Bakom valet av offerplats döljer sig sannolikt en önskan att betona föreställningens tillväxt- och fruktbarhetsaspekt (härden, takbärade stolphål) eller skyddsaspekt (runt ingången). Att dessa båda aspekter i verkligheten knappast uteslöt varandra framstår dock som troligt.

Fenomenet byggnadsoffer utgör, genom sin koppling till långlivade mentala strukturer i det förindustriella svenska agrarsamhället, en mycket intressant arkeologisk fyndkategori. Genom spridningen av kunskap om dess form och innehåll kan förhoppningsvis antalet fynd framgent öka, vilket i sin tur möjliggör ökad förståelse för fenomenets tidsmässiga och regionala variation.

För att detta skall kunna ske måste arkeologer i fältsituationen uppmärksamma skelettdele som återfinns i tänkbara offersammanhang. Det kan röra sig om enstaka hela, välbevarade ben av vanliga husdjur eller människor; särskilda samlingar av ben; hela lemmar; krainner och fotben eller hela begravda skelett. Bevaringsomständigheterna skall tyda på att fynget gömts inuti eller under byggnadskonstruktionselement i det aktuella huset.