DÖDA PERSONERS SÄLLSKAP
A RARE ANALOGY – CONTEMPORARY CREMATION PRACTICES

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This paper presents four different examples of how studies of contemporary cremation practices are an important aspect of archaeological research, both as a focus of archaeological research into the recent and contemporary past and as a source of analogy and/or anti-analogy in the interpretation of prehistoric mortuary practices. I show that archaeology contributed in a most direct way to the introduction of modern cremations in Sweden, that an archaeological analysis may be made of the architecture of death, and that the very cremation act of today may be fruitfully contrasted to that of Late Iron Age Scandinavia. Lastly, I discuss the significance of the concepts of the body, identity and person.

Introduction

This paper focuses on how archaeological studies of the cremation practices of today may be a successful means of exploring mortuary practices and identities in the past and in the present. Such research may also serve as a useful starting point for discussions in our present day society – within and outside academia – on a great variety of topics that are connected to identities.

I explore four themes in the archaeology of modern cremation. The first investigates and sheds light upon the history and social context of archaeology; Swedish archaeologists have actively contributed to the introduction and the continued practice of cremation in Swedish society since the nineteenth century.

In the second example it is demonstrated that contemporary cremation practices may be used to study the relationship between multi-staged funerary procedures and the architecture of death. In other words, how are crematoria modelled in the
present and how does this shed light on present attitudes to death and provide an analogy for the past?

The third example concerns the cremation act per se. Here it is maintained that the way in which the body is treated in modern crematoria provides a stark contrast to the fashion in which the body was consumed by fire in the past, for instance in Late Iron Age Scandinavia. The superficial similarity between the ubiquity of cremation in the Late Iron Age of Scandinavia and in the present day often creates a sense of comfortable familiarity when archaeologists uncover these remains. However, this detailed exploration of cremation in the past and present reveals how cremation can embody very different practices and beliefs. The actual way the body is or was consumed by fire differs substantially between these two periods of time. Whereas Iron Age bodies were exposed to a prolonged open-air performance involving a number of visible, audible and odoriferous transformations and probable audiences, modern corpses are consumed by fire rather quietly and efficiently, with no spectators to view, hear or smell the conflagration.

My fourth and last example expands on the topic of how the study of modern cremation practices significantly contributes to discussions on the body, identity and person not only of today, but also of prehistory. In combination these four examples are intended to show the breadth of ideas that can be covered through analyses of modern cremation practices and are consequently discussed only briefly.

Modern death and its lack of company

Several separate instances prompted me to this brief study of modern cremations. When writing my thesis on Scandinavian Iron Age burials and cremations I was in contact with a crematorium in Stockholm. One informant enlightened me about the fact that bones are ground after cremation, and that bones from different individuals may be mixed after cremation. For instance, this can occur if the crematorium has more than one incinerator. As a consequence an urn may contain ground bones from more than one person, and it is only an identity tag in metal following the urn that represents the single departed individual. During the Iron Age in Scandinavia burnt bones were also frequently ground, and at times grinding stones are even retrieved in connection with burials. It is also quite common that large portions of bones are seemingly missing in what archaeologists have termed ‘graves’ (Back Danielsson 2007 and cited references therein, cf. Goldhahn this volume, Kaliff this volume, Myrberg this vol-
In the summer of 2008 I met Rickard Carlsson who had been working at another crematorium in the Stockholm area. He told me about what he chose to call the ‘initiation rites’ he had gone through when he started his work, and he also pointed to the fact that the different chores at the crematorium were connected to different named occupations. For example, the person responsible for grinding the bones was called the miller, etc. It seems that verbal and material metaphors connecting cremation to farming, cultivation and crop processing can be found both today and during the Scandinavian Iron Age. Thus the investigation of cremation practices is most interesting to an archaeologist looking for fruitful analogies. However, when searching for material in libraries on present day cremation practices in Sweden the result was extremely meagre. Although a few works have discussed death and the treatment of dead bodies (e.g. Åhrén 1994; Söderpalm (ed.) 1994; Åkesson 1997; Dahlgren 2000, 2005; Åhrén Snickare 2002; Davidson Bremborg 2002) there was for instance a lack of ethnographic works discussing practices at crematoria.

Another aspect that made me want to investigate modern cremation practices was that Scandinavian Iron Age archaeologists frequently use only a limited range of sources for analogies, thus narrowing the discussion and limiting their own thoughts. Medieval written sources are often used, as are the works of the ethnologist Louise Hagberg, in particular När döden gästar [When Death Pays a Visit] (Hagberg 1937). When analogies are sought they are not from Scandinavian contexts, but from either mining ethnographic accounts from other parts of the world, or conducting ethno-archaeological research as far away as India and Nepal (Kaliff 2007; Oestigaard 2007). So, why have so few archaeologists used modern cremation practices from Western societies as research material or as an analogy in their work (although there are exceptions, e.g. H. & E. Williams, pers. comm. 2008; also Sorensen & Bille 2008; Sorensen 2009)? I would argue that the reluctance to deal with the modern dead and death has to do with a desire to avoid thoughts on the mortality about your own body. As early as the 1930s Louise Hagberg (1937:12–13) exclaimed that when dealing with the topic of death, even among fellow researchers, you had to be careful when approaching someone on the matter. Eva Åhrén Snickare, when working on her thesis on death, body and modernity, received comments such as “what a lugubrious topic”, etc. (Åhrén Snickare 2002:9). Another reason why researchers avoid modern cremation practices might be that these are considered to be of little value for com-
parative analogies with far away prehistoric societies. As will be demonstrated in this paper, this is certainly not the case. Rather, modern practices of many kinds may be utilised in a variety of ways to illuminate and be contrasted with or likened to prehistoric practices. Subsequently, I will argue for the inclusion of research into contemporary cremation practices as a justifiable and valuable element of archaeological study.

Why cremations?
Modern cremations started in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century (e.g. Åhrén 1994). Early on cremation was advocated in Italy, the Netherlands, Germany and Great Britain (ibid.). The first modern cremation in Sweden took place in Hägalund, Stockholm, in 1887 without permission of the Swedish government (Ekström 2007). Cremation became legal only a year later, in 1888. Despite being legalized, in order for a cremation to take place, it was required that an autopsy be performed on the deceased. Moreover, the deceased had to express her or his wish to be cremated in writing. Finally, in each and every separate case, a permit had to be issued by the Swedish government (Ekström 2007:27–28). These requirements were abolished in 1917 (ibid.). Today c. 70 % of the Swedish dead are cremated; in larger cities where most crematoria are located, as many as 80–90 % of the population may choose cremation (ibid.:15). Important sources that have discussed the introduction and continued use of cremation practices in Sweden include Övdén (1932), Enström (1964), Åhrén (1994), and Åhrén Snickare (2002).

There are a number of reasons why cremation started to appeal to European societies in the nineteenth century. One was hygiene. For a long period of time people had been complaining about the poor condition of the churchyards, which contained too many corpses and had graves that were too shallow. There was simply not enough room for more dead bodies in churchyards, a situation exacerbated by rapid urban population growth. Equally, during the same century major medical discoveries were made, such as the discovery of microorganisms and bacteria that could harm living bodies. Inhumations came to be described from a sanitary point of view, including the polluting effect of shallow graves on water supplies. The hygiene factor was of paramount concern and therefore became a major consideration in the debate. The aesthetics of cremation also encouraged the practice. That is, it was considered aesthetically pleasing that the body became purified by fire, and that the end products of the cremation process were a clean, harmless and
whitish ash and, by extension, a purified soul (Johnsson 1964; Åhrén 1994; Åhrén Snickare 2002; Ekström 2007).

Technology also facilitated the rise in popularity of cremation: in the 1870s the technique was finally invented to cremate human bodies in a most effective way (Åhrén 1994:34–5). In fact, it was almost as if people of that time thought that the technique in itself was so remarkable that they were obliged to put it to use. Another incentive for the introduction of modern cremation practices is most pertinent for the purpose of this paper, namely what I call the archaeological reason. Not only were archaeologists actively engaged in the cremation movement, but prehistoric cremation practices described by archaeologists were also used as fundamental arguments for the introduction of modern cremation practices. I will proceed with a closer examination of the archaeological reason.

Theme 1: Archaeology and the origins of modern Swedish cremation practices

Archaeology + cremations = true

In his position as Director General (1879–1907) of The Swedish National Heritage Board and as a member of The Swedish Academy, Hans Hildebrand (1842–1913) was one of the initiators of the Swedish Association for Cremating Corpses, called ‘Svenska Likbrännings Föreningen’ in Swedish (Ekström 2007:19). This association was established in 1882, six years before cremation became legal in Sweden. The association is still active today, but the 125-year-old institution has now changed its name to ‘Sveriges Kyrkogårds- och Krematorieförening’ (The Swedish Federation of Cemeteries and Crematoria). The association that was initiated by Hans Hildebrand and six others attracted a number of prominent scholars, engineers, doctors, officers, factory owners, and scientists such as Gustaf Retzius and Alfred Nobel (Åhrén 1994:21, note 56). In fact, Alfred Nobel felt such a burning passion about cremation that in one early version of his will he made a most generous donation to the cremation movement (Ekström 2007:21). Nobel Prize winners probably do not lament the fact that Nobel later changed his will and bequeathed his fortune to the Nobel Foundation.

Between 1882 and 1887 the association helped members (presumably dead members) with cremation arrangements. For instance, dead bodies were transported to Germany for cremation (Ekström 2007:20). However, the principal aim of the association was the introduction of cremation into Sweden (Övdén 1932; Åhrén 1994; Ekström 2007). To this end, the association published its yearly news-
letter, *Meddelanden* [Announcements] (fig. 1), where detailed arguments for cremation were presented, members of the association were listed, and thorough bibliographies on the topic of cremation during the last 400-500 years were made available. Poems, hymns, and songs in praise of cremation were also printed.

In the *Meddelanden* archaeological sites are also used as arguments for the introduction of cremation. For instance, it is maintained that the Black Earth of Birka is nothing less than the cinders of thousands of funeral pyres (*Meddelanden* 1883:15). All together many references are made in these announcements to various ancient and classical ideals (e.g. Johnsson 1964).

Hans Hildebrand’s book *Folkens tro om sina döda* [Peoples’ Ideas about their Dead] published in 1874 was frequently used as an argument for the ancient precedent of cremation and the reintroduction of cremation practices in Sweden. In this book Hildebrand describes the variety of death rituals among a number of peoples all around the world. From this work it is clear that Hildebrand acknowledges the hygiene factor as the most significant reason for cremation in modern society (Hildebrand 1874:112). It is equally clear that he considers cremation to be a practice that belongs to more enlightened societies.

Societies employing cremation must have recognised the greater importance of the soul, rather than the body, which could be transformed or disposed of (Hildebrand 1874:114). In present Sweden during the Stone Age inhumation was preferred, whereas the presumably more developed Bronze Age people started to cremate their dead (*ibid*). He says: ‘…therefore it is evident that cremation is a practice that does not belong to primitive societies but rather more developed ones’ (Hildebrand 1874:114, my translation). It is thus implied that the more recent the practice, the more evolved the society. Hildebrand sup-
ports his argument by citing the thesis of Jacob Grimm (1849) who expressed similar thoughts on the superiority of peoples who practice cremation and more specifically the superiority of the Germanic people (Åhrén 1994). However, it must be said that Hildebrand likewise contends that there are exceptions to this rule, since what he regarded as primitive societies – such as those of the Aborigines – could cremate their dead (Hildebrand 1874:114). Their explanation for the use of cremation – to avoid the freezing of the departed – is however, for reasons unknown, deemed inadequate by Hildebrand (Hildebrand 1874:114–115).

Fire – one necessary component for cremation – is greatly praised by Hildebrand for a number of reasons. With support from Grimm, he ascertains the control of fire as significant for all human beings regardless the state of cultural evolution (Hildebrand 1874:115–116). Thus fire is of heavenly origin, and can also stand as a metaphor for the sun (ibid.). It is sacred, purifying and a symbol for the civilised human way of life (ibid.:117). He mentions the importance of fire among ancient Romans and Greeks, but goes even further when he argues that the well-known ancient Scandinavian word ‘blota’ is not connected to blood, but instead to a Greek verb meaning ‘to burn’ (ibid.:117). However, the most appealing reason for cremation according to Hildebrand can be found among the anthropogenic myths of the ancient Greeks and Romans as well as in Norse literature. These myths, explaining the origin of human beings, maintain that humans were created in connection with the birth of fire (ibid.:118). Fire and humans thus have the same origin ‘…and through cremation, when fire touches the body, a re-union is made possible; the soul and the visible fire are joined together and may rise to heaven, to their place of origin’ (Hildebrand 1874:118, my translation).

Ancient cremations – grand temples now and then

In this context I would like to mention another archaeological work that was also used to support the continued use of cremation as a normal practice in Sweden. Well-known archaeologist Sune Lindqvist published an article in a book entitled Hälsingborgs Eldbegängelseanläggning [Hälsingborg’s Crematorium] in 1937. The English translation fails to reflect the evolution of the concept which occurred in Sweden from the 1880s to the 1930s: from likbränning (burning of corpses) to eldbegängelse (dissolution by fire, from German Feuerbestattung) and finally to cremation (Karlsmo 2006:61–62). The book Hälsingsborgs Eldbegängelseanläggning was a tribute to what was described as the most ideal...
of all hitherto constructed cremation buildings (fig. 2). Ragnar Östberg was its renowned architect, but the ideas on how the building should be designed came from Gustav Schlyter, a person who was closely engaged with the cremation movement (Johnsson 1964). The building where bodies were quietly consumed by flames was named the Temple of Serenity (Sw. Fridens tempel), and although the main building was completed in 1929 the whole structure was not complete until the 1960s.

Sune Lindqvist’s contribution carried the grandiose title De svenska fornkungarnas bränningsskick [The Cremation Practice of the Swedish Ancient Kings] (fig. 3). The famous Uppsala mounds – considered to be the finest of all ancient monuments in Sweden – were treated in his work (Lindqvist 1937:70). By making what was in his view (and that of the editor Gustav Schlyter) most appropriate references to the heathen temple of Uppsala mentioned by medieval Adam of Bremen, as well as by renaming the present parish church the ‘temple-church’, the past and the present were interwoven. Lindqvist advances the idea that the practice of cremation in Scandinavia must have come early on from the Romans, probably as early as the third or fourth century AD (Lindqvist 1937:80). He describes the pyres of the ancient kings in Uppsala in detail; the pyre contained beneath the middle mound must have been perceived, ascertains Lindqvist (1937:74), as a kind of fire spitting mountain. He also makes reference to Medieval Iceland’s Snorre Sturlasson, and uses Eddaic Ynglingatal, OE Beowulf and the story of the cremation of Balder etc. when describing cremations (e.g. 1937:74, 81, and 86). On the whole, the article is rhetorically linking the past and present, through the connection of grand notions such as temples and ancient kings with the concepts ‘cremation’ and ‘pyre’.
Theme 2: Death and architecture

Hiding architecture

In my second example of how modern cremation practices may be useful in archaeological research I will touch upon the question of the architecture of death, or rather how crematoria are/were designed and constructed (see also e.g. Johnsson 1964; Karlsmo 2006). Architectonically, crematoria constructed in the 1870s and onwards were inspired by classical ideals, one exception being the first modern more practically-built crematorium in Milan, Italy, in 1876 (Enström 1964: 44; Johnsson 1964:118). The crematorium in Gotha, Germany, on the other hand, had a clear classical design and was built as early as 1878 (Johnsson 1964:118). Many corpses were sent there from Sweden to be burnt (ibid.).

The Gotha crematorium was Palladian in style, that is, it had been inspired by classical temple architecture of the Romans and Ancient Greeks (fig. 4a, b). Importantly, it was characterised by the desire to create an architecture that would efficiently hide the building’s main functions and at the same time avoid creating strong emotions for the visitors. In accordance with these considerations a crematorium was preferably built on a slope so that the bottom floor, containing the incinerator, would be invisible from up front.

In fact the Gotha temple was to be seen only from one side (Johnsson 1964:118). The architecture of the Gotha crematorium was a source of inspiration for other crematoria to come, such as the ‘Baltic temple’ model presented at the Baltic Exhibition in Malmö in 1914 (fig. 5). Here, Gustav Schlyter in particular, later township ombudsman in Helsingborg, had his Gotha-influenced visions realised through architect Ferdinand Boberg (Johnsson 1964:122).

Visitors to the exhibition included architects Erik-Gunnar Asplund and Sigurd Lewerentz; then and there they made an agreement to participate in the competition aiming at presenting a new crematorium in Southern Stockholm which when completed was called Skogskyrkogården (The Woodland Cemetery) (ibid.). They won this competition, and from
Fig 4a. The Gotha temple. Source: Johnsson 1964.

Fig 4b. The chapel of the Gotha temple. Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/
their description of the proposal it is apparent that they were influenced by the ideas of Gustav Schlyter (Johnsson 1964:122). The Skogskyrkogården crematorium and burial grounds are regarded by some to be among their finest works, and they are today listed as a World Heritage Site.

The ‘Temple of Serenity’ mentioned above was built in accordance with Schlyter’s views on crematoria and on cremation as a new kind of salvaging religion (Johnsson 1964:122, 124). As a result, allusions to the purifying fire are manifold. Visible for instance through the top of the cupola are spikes in the form of flames. However, as peculiar as it may seem, the very parts of the crematorium that generated real fire were hidden. The chimney, by technical necessity rather high, was shaped as a column crowned with a gilded sculpture (Johnsson 1964:124). Equally, the very name ‘Temple of Serenity’ seems a euphemism designed to hide the drastic transformations the body goes through in the cremation process.

Eva Åhrén Snickare has rightly pointed out that the architecture of crematoria is in no way self-evident and points by way of example to the incinerators of Auschwitz, where the chimneys were not hidden and where the incinerators were built in such a way that two or three parallel chambers could be used at the same time (Åhrén Snickare 2002:206–208). En passant it can be noted that two places with crematoria have been listed as World Heritage Sites, albeit for very different reasons, namely the above mentioned Skogskyrkogården, Sweden, and Auschwitz Birkenau, Germany.

In conclusion, it generally seems that the crematoria need to be designed with allusions to something light and pure that is complementary to a view of a purified soul as well as to the qualities of the residues of cremated human bodies (e.g. Johnsson 1964; Karlsmo 2005, 2006). At the
same time key technical and practical aspects of the crematorium, such as the autopsy room, morgue, coffin reception and incinerator were – and continue to be – cleverly hidden architectonically (Åhrén-Snickare 2002: 206).

In our multi-cultural society of today qualities of neutrality must be factored in when a crematorium and adjoining chapel are built and designed (Karlsmo 2006:70–74). In fact, the very existence of chapels in close proximity to crematoria may be problematic in some churches or faiths. Equally, the very word chapel may be outdated. At Karolinska University Hospital a new showroom was built in 2002 which was named ‘Room for Farewell’ (ibid.). The room is quadratic and spacious with white-plastered walls and a marble floor. In this room the floor drain in the middle is neither hidden nor marked in any special way; it appears natural. Here bodies may be ritually washed, a custom of importance to Muslim funeral rituals (ibid).

**Theme 3: The cremation act**

*Fire works*

My third example will delve deeper into the cremation act per se and make comparisons between present-day cremations (fig. 6) and those of the Scandinavian Late Iron Age (fig. 7), highlighting similarities and differences. When comparing modern cremations and Scandinavian Iron Age cremations it is clear that the practices are both analogous and nonanalogous, or what I would like to term ‘anti-analogous’. An anti-analogy describes instances when societies engage in practices that are similar in some aspects, but when studied from other angles are complete opposites.

This concept complements Julian Thomas’s (1990) suggestion of how to write the past (as same, other or analogue). During both the Iron Age and today dead bodies are consumed by fire. However, the way in which this is accomplished differs substantially between the two periods of time. In today’s custom it is imperative that our senses should not be stimulated, almost as if we are attempting to prevent the brain from recei-
vying information pertaining to the fact that a corpse is indeed burning.

_Hell's kitchen and other venues for menus_

With a word of warning let me now spell out what happens to a human body when exposed to fire. I use the presentation made by Howard Williams in his excellent paper from 2004, where he thoroughly describes the transformations the body goes through during cremation acts. To start with, when the pyre was lit, it is possible to conceive that insects and maggots abandoned the body and the pyre (Williams 2004:271).

This might have been interpreted by the onlookers as if these came from the dead person. During the cremation act the body could be perceived as participating in, or being the very source of cascading fireworks. Imagine an animated performance with heat, steam, smoke, burned meat, eventually visible bones, odour, sounds, and light in a variety of colours (Williams 2004:271–276). First, the top layer caught fire, for instance the outer layer of the deceased’s clothes, or a coffin. Thereafter additional clothes were burned, followed by hair, skin, and fat after which muscles, organs and bones were exposed. Further, due to the gradual heating up of the body, bodily fluids turned into vapour (_ibid_). If this stage of the transformation was rapid, jetting steam may have sprayed from the body. Further, muscles may contract during intense heat, and sounds may also emanate from the body when gases expand in the chest due to quick heating.

The odour from burning corpses is known to be distinct and acrid, something modern crematoria still struggle to cope with (Åhrén Snickare 2002:214). Apart from the human body participating in an animated performance, it must also be mentioned that the choice of specific pieces of wood or other materials on the pyre may have contributed to certain desirable qualities as regards odour,
sounds, smoke, and colours. For instance, it is known that juniper twigs generate thick white smoke (Svensson 2006). Non-desirable effects of cremations today are the explosions of human prostheses in metal, such as pace makers. These are known to make smaller blasts in the incinerators, thus being hazardous for crematorium personnel if opened in the moment of explosion (Lindeberg, pers. comm. 2008).

In this context I would like to propose that the very exposure of the living to the cremation of a relative or friend during the Iron Age was essential for the successful transformation of the departed to an ancestor. Perhaps the way the pyre was constructed – with certain pieces of wood, grave/pyre goods, possible animals, and the way the departed had been dressed up for the occasion – not only were ways to communicate aspects of the once living person, but equally were means to orchestrate a certain desirable performance. This performance could have ensured that the deceased was transformed into an ancestor through the stimuli of the bodily senses of those present at the cremation. The spectacle may thus have been essential for creating a certain kind of embodied empirical knowledge. Equally, the scene would also have been memorable to the audience or onlookers (Williams 2004:274). A similar line of thought is evident for the ways in which the Amazonian people, the Wari’, create their ancestors. Smell, and taste, of the carcass during the cremation act were necessary ingredients for the determination of a successful transformation of the deceased into an ancestor (Conklin 2001). It must be noted that for the Wari’ ancestors reappear as peccary (a kind of pig). When relatives die it is thus of utmost importance that they are helped to become first ancestors and then peccary. Consequently, the human body may be butchered into pieces as if it was hunted prey prepared to be cooked (ibid.:80). Further, the cooked/cremated flesh and meat is tasted in order to ascertain that it is transformed correctly. The flesh should taste and smell bad, which means that the bodily senses acted as keys to recognising the change in status of the deceased (ibid.).

Connections between food and death have been noted for (Late) Iron Age Scandinavian contexts too. They involve amongst other things the preparation and consumption of food/bodies in both human and celestial spheres. For starters, anatomist Per Holck (1997) has demonstrated that human bones were burnt in varying degrees of heat from his analyses of Iron Age materials from Norway and Denmark. Bones show varieties of only being briefly exposed to heat up to being very strongly burnt – in fact in temperatures exceeding those
of modern incinerators (ibid.:90–91). Terje Oestigaard (2007) in an interesting work discusses the roles of smiths and cremators, and argues convincingly that there existed a ritual specialist during the Iron Age in Norway, who in the role of transformer both cremated people and melted iron. This ritual specialist would also have been accompanied by inexperienced cremators, such as single family members (Oestigaard 2007:54). Oestigaard suggests that only an experienced cremator would have been able to reach the very highest temperatures, thus implying that poorly burnt bones may be connected to cremators with little experience of pyres. However, he admits that poorly burnt bones may have been the intended result of the pyre, as Terje Gansum has demonstrated the probable use of bone coal in the process of transforming iron to steel (Gansum 2004a, b; Oestigaard 2007:54).

The fact that one and the same piece of bone may show traces of different degrees of burning, from low to high, suggests to me that burning in low temperatures can by no means be attributed only to inexperienced cremators. Rather this indicates different intended effects on the body. Perhaps bones burnt in low temperatures suggest that the body, or parts of it, were cooked or grilled as if it were prepared as a meal. Holek (1997:126) also found evidence of the fact that human and animal bodies had been butchered prior to the cremation act, as they display cut marks (cf. the practice of the Wari’ above). In the investigated Norwegian material c. 6.7 % of the graves (or 72 in number) were found with cut marks, compared to 1.1 % (or 20 in number) of the Danish graves (ibid.). He declares that ‘[t]hese numbers are certainly too small, as a considerable part of the marks may have been overlooked’ (Holck 1987:126). He maintains that the practice of butchering bodies (both humans and animals) prior to cremation could have been done for economical reasons in order to save wood, which would result in only small pyres (ibid.). This suggestion is not likely, in my view. Instead it is worth considering that the butchering could have been done intentionally in regard to the dead person – not in regard to a thought of saving wood. Perhaps a chopped-up body was necessary in certain cases for a person to be successfully transformed into an ancestor, or perhaps reflecting perceived qualities of the dead person’s character in life and/or afterlife. Or, the chopping of the body could have been a practice consistent with the fragmentation of other parts of the burial objects and/or animals, to mention but a few possibilities.

Terje Oestigaard (2000) recently interpreted bodies in burial contexts from Late Iron Age Norway as gifts
served in different ways such as raw, cooked or burnt. The ‘gifts’ were then subsequently put in appropriate wrappings, for instance in cauldrons or in urns. He considers these ‘composites’ to have been edible meals and gifts to gods, who, by accepting the holy meals, legitimized the social order, thus imbuing the preparation and giving of divine food great cosmological significance (ibid.:41). From the point of view of the deceased a safe journey to the land of the dead is promised by this holy consumption, and the spirit thus becomes benevolent (ibid.). In this context it is also worth pointing out that there are indications that meals including meat were more common at cemeteries than at settlements (Isaksson 2000). That is, not only gods were treated to special ‘meaty’ dishes, but human beings as well. Anders Kaliff (e.g. 2007) has suggested that the ritual consumption of burnt bones (endocannibalism) existed in Iron Age Scandinavian communities, and argues that this could have been an essential part of an all-embracing ancestor cult.

Returning to the celestial spheres of the Late Iron Age, we are familiar with the death realms called Valhalla and Hell. Both places have a reputation for the preparation and consumption of food. They served different menus to be consumed by different Iron Age people. Valhalla is well known for its remarkable pig Särimner, which after being eaten reappeared every morning, ready to be consumed once again by the heroic, but fallen, warriors of Odin (Baeksted 1988:61; Nordberg 2003:180–183). A main course of action to make Särimner reappear was to collect all the bones of the pig (cf. Conklin above on the appearance of ancestors as pec- cary). Hell’s kitchen, Hel, on the other hand, mainly served those other than the heroic warriors. Here a knife was referred to as ‘Starvation’ and the serving plate was called ‘Hunger’ (Baeksted 1988:161; Nordberg 2003: 70–73).

Post-cremation practices

Whereas there are clear differences between the cremation act of today and that of Iron Age Scandinavia, there are equally clear similarities as regards the post-cremation practices. Today as well as during the Iron Age burnt bones are/were ground into smaller fragments or into ash. Furthermore, bones could also be put to use in other material or societal spheres. Regarding the Scandinavian Iron Age, Terje Gansum (2004a, b) has suggested – and to some extent proved – that burnt bones were used in processes where iron was hardened to steel (cf. Burström 1993; Appelgren and Broberg 1996 on the possible connections between burials and iron production). Ole Stilborg has further demonstrated that fragmentary burnt
bones were, at least in a few examples, used as temper in ceramic vessels (Stilborg 2001:400–1). It has likewise been observed that human and/or animal bones have been unearthed at border points (see e.g. Ambrosiani and Erikson 1993:15–17, Larsson and Lenntorp 2004), and in post holes of roof supporting posts in buildings (e.g. Artelius 1999; 2000:176). Sode (1996) has argued that the adding of bone in the bead-making process is possible, rendering the beads a whitish colour. Burnt bones may also have served as fuel in some contexts (Wilén 2005).

Today burnt bones may be used to create gems that decorate rings, and portions of ash may also be launched into space – an alternative to the usual way of depositing ashes in for example memory groves or in urns in columbaria. Although these ways of using ashes may to some extent seem similar or analogous, when the analysis is broadened to include concepts such as the body, identity and person, they reveal significant differences which lead to my fourth and last example in this paper.

Theme 4: The body, identity, and person

Individual and dividual ways of being a person

My fourth example revolves around the concepts of the body, identity, and person. Today we regard ourselves as *individuals*, as persons that are independent and indivisible. However, several researchers have pointed out that the concept of the individual is historically contingent. The notion of the individual is allied with the rise of capitalist notions of property, and with a jural definition of the person held to be responsible by law. These definitions emerged with the Enlightenment, and the rise of a capitalist ‘enterprise’ culture (Douglas 1992).

A number of authors have noted that the concept of the Western individual whose boundaries are defined by the limits of their bodies needs to be reconsidered in other cultural contexts (Strathern 1988; Douglas 1992; Wagner 2001). For instance, a person in Melanesia is made up of the totality of his/her social relations. Since this is the case the boundaries of the human body do not define the boundaries of the person. The intentionality and agency of such persons are extended, often through the medium of material culture (Battaglia 1991; Gell 1998), to the extent that objects may be considered to be external components of the person (e.g. Munn 1986; Gell 1998). This relational model of personhood has been characterized as *dividual* to distinguish it from the Western in-dividual.

‘Dividuality’ refers to the partible and dividable aspects of a person’s agency, whereby one’s identity
may be strategically attached, detached or permeated by someone or something else (cf. Strathern 1988; Strassburg 2000:26–7; Fowler 2004:8–9). Accordingly, the boundaries of a body do not necessarily equate to the individual or person (Jones 2002:161). What is more, a person need not be a human being, but may refer to anything that is handled and conceptualized as a person (Fowler 2004:7). I have argued (2007, 2008) that it is plausible that certain Iron Age persons during one of the biggest rites of passage in life – the transformation from living to dead – may be perceived of as individuals. In fact the purpose of the Iron Age burial may not have been to illustrate or represent an individual with an exact sex, something we as Western people often so eagerly search for, since being an individual of either of the sexes is our primary way of being a person. It could even be suggested that Iron Age people in every possible way eradicated the individual, and by the spreading of bones in the other spheres and contexts noted above instead emphasized the dividuality of persons (cf. Ericsson and Runcis 1995).

Returning to the nineteenth century, it was considered extreme to choose cremation, indeed an individualistic choice, bearing witness of a critical attitude towards old religious perceptions and traditions (Åhrén Snickare 2002:219). I would like to argue that today, in the twenty-first century, the individual choice in death is even greater. For example, it is discernable through the increasing array of symbols in death advertisements (Dahlgren 2000, 2005) and through the large increase of the number of people who choose to spread their ashes in places other than memorial groves or in urns (Gelin 2009; Lenvander 2009).

How a person is perceived and created, for instance as an individual or a dividual, have enormous consequences for the interpretations that may be made of societies and equally the relations among, for example, people, animals, and things. In turn, this has relevance for how the world and/or the cosmos and its parts are interrelated, and regeneration is achieved (Fowler 2004:108). Summing up, as similar as the custom of spreading bones in non-cremation spheres today and during the Scandinavian Iron Age may seem, they are significantly different due to the ways in which the body, person, and identity are/were constructed.

Conclusions
In this paper I have argued that modern cremation practices may be used as analogies and/or anti-analogies for prehistoric practices. Further, I have claimed that they work as well, or as
poorly, as any other analogy. Also, studies of modern cremations may be utilised as research topics in themselves, where archaeology may bring theories and methods to understand the choices and practices of the present. They serve as a useful entrance for discussions in our present day society on a great variety of topics that are connected to identities and to the view of ourselves as persons and individuals, thus not only having scientific values within the academic discourse, but also within other contexts outside the academic sphere.

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Keywords: cremation practices, analogy, anti-analogy, body, identity, person

References


**Personal communication**


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