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Signs, symbols and mortuary rituals in the period 200-550/70 AD in Norway

Although mortuary data reflect one of the most important ritual behaviours in which a group or an individual might participate, most mortuary studies from the Iron Age in Norway tend to focus on questions of social organization, wealth distribution, or hierarchical/status differentiation. However, an explicit orientation of this study is that mortuary data from c. 200-550/570 AD will be used to answer questions regarding mortuary rituals and their inherent signs and symbols.

When studying cultural practices, semioticians treat any objects or actions which have meaning to members of the cultural group as signs, seeking to identify the rules or conventions of the codes which underlies the production of meanings within that culture. Each culture has multiple themes which are expressed, and within each theme there exists multiple ritual symbols. Morris E. Opler defines a theme as “dynamic affirmations that can be identified in every culture.” He goes on to explain that by understanding the theme of a culture, you can understand that particular culture’s character, structure, and direction (Dolgin *et al.* 1977:185). The theme promotes a concept or activity within a given culture, and the ritual symbol expresses the theme. Understanding such themes, their relationships and the contexts in which they are appropriate is part of what it means to be a member of a particular culture. Marcel Danesi has suggested that ‘a culture can be defined as a kind of “macro-code”, consisting of the numerous codes which a group of individuals habitually use to interpret reality’ (Danesi 1994:18).

In the present study, rituals – and particularly mortuary rituals – are regarded as storehouses of signs and symbols that refer to crucial values of the community (Turner 1968).

Society and the concept of honour

Norwegian society in the late Roman and Migration periods consisted of several chiefdoms or petty kingdoms with a differentiated social structure (Myhre 1987; Solberg 2000). Secular and religious leadership was one and the same kind, depending upon ownership and control of land and the support of other, less powerful men, and upon the exertion of religious cult functions. The authority of the leaders relied on cultivating ties of personal loyalty and expanding one’s power base through frequent and elaborate gift-giving and ceremonialism. Failure to dispense lavishly would cause a leader to lack followers. Alliances were created

and maintained outside local groups through “prestational events” (Blanton *et al.* 1996:4), involving exchanges of marriage partners, prestige goods and esoteric knowledge.

The free man and woman represented the social ideal. However, far from everybody were free, nor were all free persons of an equal social standing. This affected the codes of social behaviour, each class having its own peculiar code. Morten Hanisch (2002) has argued that in the Late Roman and Migration periods – as in Medieval Iceland (Meulengracht Sørensen 1995) – honour was a basic social obligation. Unless the code of honour was followed by both man and woman, not only the person, but also the whole family would lose honour. Therefore, it was of vast importance not only to retain and increase the family honour, but to make it public.

Êre (honour) by definition was the approval or respect of other people. According to Meulengracht Sørensen, a man’s objective is to achieve as much honour as possible at the expense of others. But the limits of aggression are narrow. The basis of society is the balance of men’s power, and therefore each guards his own measure of honour. The rules that apply to the mature, established man are different to those of the youth. To the former, the ideal is steadfastness and moderation, to defend himself when necessary and show generosity in other situations (Meulengracht Sørensen 1995:338).

Honour for a free woman was to be skilled in the duties of the farm, for instance spinning, weaving and the preparation of textiles. But only the married woman, the “*húsfreyja*”, had an important social position. She resided over the household, and in conflict situations she should guard the family’s integrity, thus contributing to the family honour.

Honour cannot be separated from gender, both because honour defines the cultural gender and because it depends upon it, men’s and women’s honour are mutually dependent. Actually, the genders may be defined as an asymmetric opposition (*ibid.*).

Mortuary ritual as performance

Death represents the final stage in a person’s succession of stages; birth, social puberty, marriage, occupational specialization – and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is – enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined (van Gennep 1960). Victor Turner, who adopted van Gennep’s view of rites of passage, defined ritual as “a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors’ goals and interests” (Turner 1977:183). Turner’s definition of ritual refers to ritual performances involving manipulation of symbols that refer to religious beliefs.

The idea that rituals are performances is not new. Already Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) thought that performing rituals created and sustained “social solidarity”. He insisted that although rituals may communicate or express religious ideas, rituals were not ideas or abstractions, but performances enacting known patterns of behaviour and texts (Schechner 2002:50). The participants in a ritual are sharing communicative experiences through many different sensory channels simultaneously. They are acting out an ordered sequence of metaphoric events within a territorial space, which has itself been ordered to provide a metaphoric context for the playacting. Verbal, musical, choreographic, and visual-aesthetic

“dimensions” are all likely to form components of the total message. The participants in such a ritual pick up all these messages at the same time and condense them into a single experience. When we take part in such a ritual we pick up all these messages at the same time and condense them into a single experience (Leach 1976:41). The performance of the rites is designed to influence the minds of those who participated.

Symbols and binary opposition

We seem as a species to be driven by a desire to make meanings, and we make meanings through our creation and interpretation of ‘signs’. Indeed, according to Peirce, ‘we think only in signs’ (Peirce 1931-58, 2.302). Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning and they become signs only when we invest them with meaning. We interpret things as signs largely unconsciously by relating them to familiar systems of conventions.

Different forms and levels of the experience of and relationship to reality are linked with the concepts of symbol, sign, and picture. The function of the symbol is to represent a reality or a truth and to reveal them either instantaneously or gradually. The relationship of the symbol to a reality is conceived of as somewhat direct and intimate and also as somewhat indirect and distant. The ritual symbol stretches between two poles: the ideological and the sensory (Dolgin *et al.* 1977). The ritual symbol joins these two opposing poles together and offers both emotion and social values (Turner & Turner 1978:247). So, when it is said that a ritual symbol is multivocal it means that it can represent multiple themes simultaneously. (Dolgin *et al.* 1977). A ritual symbol expresses a theme in a formalized manner and does not allow for individual choice in its expression (*ibid*:186). Within the entire system of the ritual, there are clustered together a set of dominant ritual symbols which are centralized during each ritual (*ibid*).

Turner (1967, 1968) separates dominant symbols from instrumental symbols. Dominant symbols will unify disparate significata. Their meaning will be constant and consistent throughout the total symbolic system. Dominant symbols appear in many different ritual contexts, but their meaning possesses a high degree of autonomy and consistency throughout the total symbolic system. Instrumental symbols are the means of attaining the specific goals of each ritual performance. Instrumental symbols can be investigated only in terms of the total system of symbols that makes up a particular ritual, since their meaning can be revealed only in relation to other symbols.

Turner (1967:28 p; 50 p; 1968:18 p) identified three major empirical properties of dominant symbols: (1) condensation, polysemy, or multivocality, when one single dominant symbol represents many different things and actions; (2) unification of disparate significata, where the significata (the underlying meanings of the symbol) are interconnected by virtue of their common analogous qualities, or by association in fact or thought; and (3) polarization of meaning or bipolarity, in which dominant symbols possess two distinct poles of meaning. At the ideological or normative pole, a cluster of significata refers to components of the moral and social order, to principles of social organization; at the sensory pole, the significata are natural or physiological phenomena and processes that arouse desires and feelings. One single dominant symbol comprises both a natural necessity and a social need or desire; it “represents both the obligatory and the desirable. Here we have an intimate union of the material and the moral” (Turner 1967:54).

The anthropologist Edmund Leach argued that all humans share certain fundamental cognitive structuring capabilities (primarily a propensity for binary structuring on all dimensions of the behaviours and material production) such that it is reasonable to assume that “there may well be characteristics of that archaic mental landscape that we can recognise” (Leach 1977:169), something that would provide a basis for grasping the cognitive, semiological significance of their surviving material culture (Wylie 1982).

Dualism seems to be deeply-rooted in the development of human categorization. Jakobson and Halle (1956:60) observe that ‘the binary opposition is a child’s first logical operation’. Whilst there are no opposites in ‘nature’, the binary oppositions which we employ in our cultural practices help to generate order out of the dynamic complexity of experience. At the most basic level of individual survival, humans share with other animals the need to distinguish between “own species and other, dominance and submission, sexual availability or lack of availability, what is edible and what is not” (Leach 1970:39).

According to Pierre Bourdieu, the whole system of ritual symbols and actions can be described by means of a small number of *antagonistic* symbols, the paradigm of which is the binary opposition men versus women (Bourdieu 1977:125).

In the graves from the Late Roman and Migration periods certain items are repeatedly chosen as grave furniture, indicating that they are ‘semiological’ cultural constructs, that is, analogous to sentence structures in that they have a definable meaning due to the arrangement of the component word-like elements, inviting to an evaluation of whether binary structuring is present in the mortuary remains.

Male - female

The human body is involved in nearly all communicative episodes. The body is not merely a flesh object with skin and bones. Rather, it has symbolic meaning to the owners and to others who observe it. The presentation of self is an everyday occurrence, and the body is intimately involved in these presentations. Bourdieu called the way in which the fundamental, though arbitrary principles of a culture are appropriated by the body, and thus rendered durable, “bodily hexis” (1977:87 pp). This affects how the body was perceived and treated, not only in life but also how the corpse was treated in mortuary practices (Shanks & Tilley 1982; Harré 1994, Treherne 1995). In the mortuary rituals the body of the deceased was the centre-piece of a signification system involving grave goods arranged around and upon it.

Already from the infancy of the discipline, archaeologists became aware that objects deposited in graves often refer to the sex of the interred persons. This has later been supported by historical analogy and results of examinations of skeletons. In Denmark, comparison of the grave goods with the results arrived at by skeletal analysis showed that weapons were exclusively found with male skeletons (Sellevold *et al.* 1984). Also examinations of Anglo-Saxon weapon burials arrived at the same conclusion (Härke 1992). One is therefore on safe ground when weapons in Norwegian graves are seen as symbols of the male sex (Fig. 1).

With regard to women, the Danish finds indicate an exclusive correlation between spindles and female skeletons (Sellevold *et al.* 1984). Also in Norway, spinning whorls and spindles in graves serve as a criterion and symbol for women (Fig. 2). Thus the objects given to men and women as grave goods are markedly distinct from each other, referring to separate spheres for

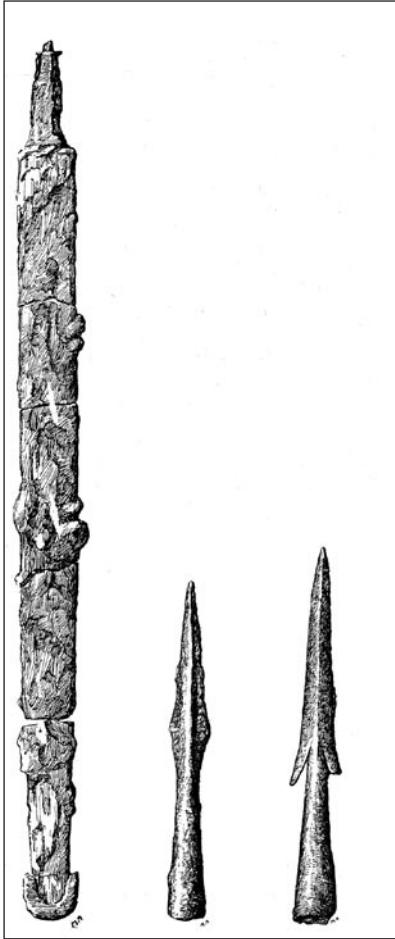


Figure 1. Sword, spear and javelin found at Emblem, Ålesund, Møre og Romsdal. Drawing: M. Abel, Bergen Museum.

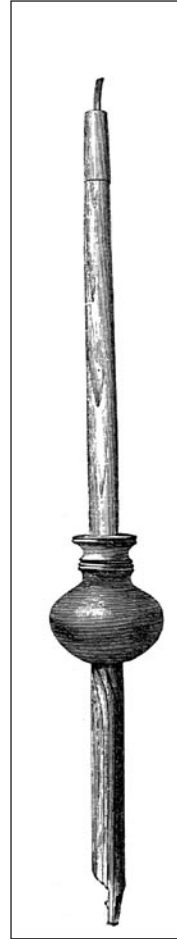


Figure 2. Spindle and spindle whorl from Skåre, Haugesund, Rogaland. After Rygh 1885.

men and women: on one hand warriors and defenders of home and territory, on the other hand spinners and caretakers of the house.

Also the belts of men and women are markedly distinct. The belts were made of perishable material – leather or textile – and these have not as a rule been preserved. In a few exceptional cases, however, the belts found in association with weapons (men's belts) were so richly furnished with mountings and other metal attachments that it has been possible to reconstruct them with a fair degree of certainty (Fett 1937; Sjøvold 1962). The buckles were usually bronze (Fig. 3). A strike-a-light, made from quartzite and pointed oval in shape, was mounted on the belt, usually by means of a solid metal setting fitted into a groove in the narrow sides of the stone. The really fine belts were provided with a pointed oval bronze box, mounted on the belt in the same way as the stone and similar in size and shape. In addition to this equipment, a number of toilet requisites may have had their place on the belt, suspended

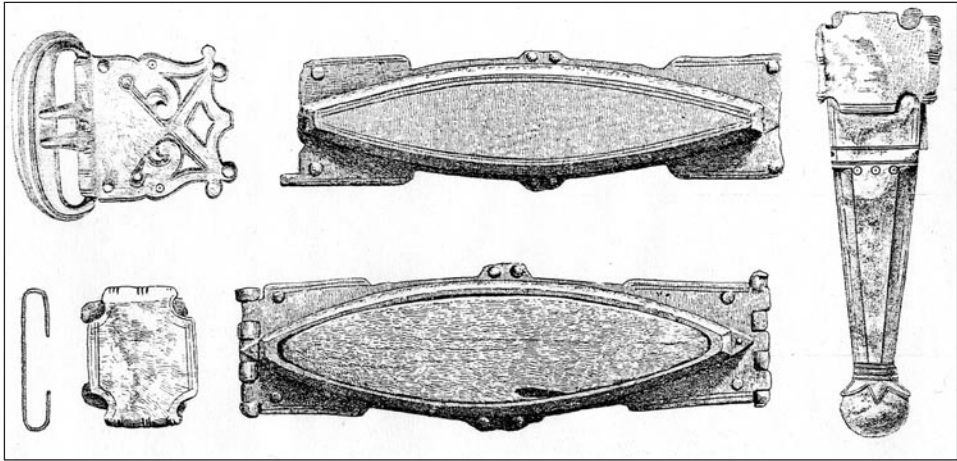


Figure 3. Belt buckle and strike-a-light from a man's grave at Evebø, Gloppen, Sogn og Fjordane. After Schetelig 1912.

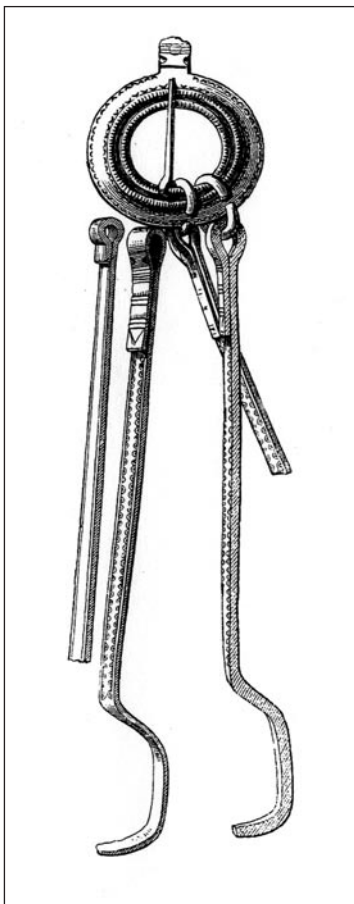


Figure 4. Belt ring and keys of bronze from a woman's grave at Trygslund, Bjelland, Vest-Agder. After Rygh 1885.

from it by rings. The tweezers were probably the most important, but the ear-scoops should also be mentioned.

Belt rings of bronze are usually the only remnants of women's belts (Fig. 4). An iron knife and keys of bronze or iron were attached to the ring. According to the Nordic sagas, the keys were given to the woman when she entered marriage. They are, therefore, symbols of the "*husfrya*", the *patrona* (Steuer 1982; Kristoffersen 2000).

The distinction in belts is paralleled in differences in dress and in hair styles. The Germanic women liked skilful coiffures. Roman marble portraits, as well as archaeological finds of preserved Scandinavian scalps with all the hair left, show that a lot of effort was put into forming complicated hairstyles. Lots of plaits were usual in female hairstyles (Hejll 1996). This is also indicated by hair-pins of bone found in female graves in Norway and Sweden. Together with a comb, three pins constituted a regular set for the female coiffure (Sjøvold 1962:186; Petersen 1923).

The function of tweezers, ear-scoops and coiffure sets was to create a beautiful appearance. If we accept that the consumables interred in the graves metaphorically or metonymically 'spoke of their own history and its association with specific practices' in the lived world (Barrett 1993:121), the 'toilet articles' appear to have been an integral part of both men's and women's life styles. They were implicated in bodily practices that comprised a life style.

From this follows that the material attributes of men and women were markedly distinct. The opposition found in the material objects associated with men and women has equivalents in linguistics. The Norwegian term "spinneseide" ("spinning-side") points to women as opposed to the term "sverdeseide" ("sword-side"), serving as a synonym for men.

Colour – indicating social distinctions

Dress and colours

Because all objects in the visible external world possess attributes of colour, colour difference is always an available means of classification.

What give us the most concrete traces as to how they dressed up in the North are the real remnants of clothes, often in the form of very small textile fragments. The preservation of textiles in graves is a relatively rare phenomenon, but in combinations with metals and in some earth compositions, the fibres can survive. Therefore, in some of the inhumation graves textile remains have been retrieved, for instance in men's graves at Enebø, Gloppen, West Norway (Magnus 1983), Snartemo V, South Norway (Hougen 1935) and Veien, East Norway. In these finds parts of the dress had been red (Bender Jørgensen 1986). A man buried at Högom, Sweden, also had a red tunic and trousers (Ramqvist 1992). All four graves included magnificent weapons, vessels of glass, bronze, as well as objects of gold, indicating that the men were prominent members of the elite. The red colour seems to signal and symbolize this.

In the male burials from Veien, Central Norway, Gulen, West Norway, Snartemo II and Vemmestad in South Norway, and Sem, East Norway, the garments were green (Bender Jørgensen 1986). This group was also equipped with weapons, but lacked the gold items and glass found in the first group. Even though the number of finds is limited, it seems that green garments were designated for the stratum below the top (Ramqvist 1992:97).

Gold, silver, bronze and jewellery

Gold, silver, copper/bronze, and iron not only represent different metals, they are also easily distinguished because of their colours. The term 'shining like gold' indicates a fascination of the yellow gold whose colour was clearly separated from the "white" silver, and "brownish" bronze and "black" iron.

Jewellery forms an important part of the archaeological finds from the Roman and Migration periods. Some objects, like finger rings, arm rings, bracelets, and pendants were ornaments placed directly on the body, whereas brooches and fibulae were fastened to the dress.

Finger rings, armllets, and necklaces appear both in graves and votive finds/hoards. Only one gold "kolben" necklace has been found in a grave context in Norway. The inhumation grave was interred in a large tumulus at Avaldsnes, Rogaland (Schetelig 1912). The grave goods also included a finger ring of gold, a magnificent sword, a shield boss of silver (see below) and several Roman bronze vessels.

The "kolben" armllets and rings with snake-head terminals of gold have received special attention. This is partly due to the arm ring found in the grave of king Childeric (d. 481-82). Werner has described the ring type as a symbol of Germanic men who had the highest social and military rank (*princeps*) in the Germanic society – in contrast to the Gefolgsleute (*comites*) in the warrior retinue (*comitatus*), who could wear gold bracelets with snake-head terminals (Werner 1980).

Bracelets with snake-head terminals have also been regarded as symbolizing persons who resided in centres of the first order, while finger rings of the same type may indicate centres of a lesser rank (Lund Hansen 1995). Two finds from Denmark, with two sets of gold bracelets with snake-head terminals and a necklace with snake-head terminals, represent women's graves from the Late Roman period (Lund Hansen 2001). Because of the two gold bracelets with snake-head terminals and her two gold finger rings with snake-head terminals the woman from Himlingøje has been regarded as a member of a chieftain family. These female graves indicate that a greater assortment of objects than rings of gold must be taken into consideration when social groupings are evaluated (*ibid*:173).

The Scandinavian gold bracteates and the medallion imitations from the Migration period are made of the prestigious metal as well. The Scandinavian gold bracteate is a round pendant, decorated on one side with a complex religious or symbolic picture. Its origin seems to have been the Roman solidus with a portrait of the emperor. The bracteates reflect a considerable knowledge of the Roman world. Not only the concepts behind iconography and inscriptions were understood, but also the political use of precious-metal coins was adopted. However, the imagery on the gold bracteates was used to express Germanic mythological ideas.

In Scandinavia, the rosette brooches from the 3rd century were made of a range of metals. The intention, however, always seems to have been to apply gold decoration (Plather *et al.* 1995). The same intention appears in most of the square-headed brooches as well. Most of the brooches were of gilded silver, so that the impression was that of being of gold. The square headed brooches stand in a class of its own, due to the elaborate ornamentation in the Nydam style and Style I.

Ornamentation and decoration are meaningful human actions, used in all cultures. Archaeologists have often tended to treat style as a passive, neutral tradition, i.e. one without content. Today, style is regarded as an active medium for communication for both individuals and groups, and it is assumed that elements of style have been selected with great care. Style, then, should be seen as involved in the creation and maintenance of the socio-cosmological order, and as such as part of the legitimisation of power (Hedeager 1999:57). In the Nordic countries, the iconography of animal style depicted a symbolic universe and referred to a shared identity among the elite. In addition to the symbolic language of animal style, origin myths, tales, and legends, which often involved supernatural persons, acts or events, served as the ideological articulation of the warrior-elite. The oldest stories or myths were oral, passed on from teller to teller. However, the myths were not mere entertainment in the halls of kings; they were the core of the socio-cosmological order, offering the people a sense of roots and cultural identity. In this way myths and iconography complemented each other.

Herbert Kühn assumed the elaborately decorated Migration period bow brooches were more than just pieces of jewellery, and that they had a deep spiritual meaning and a strong symbolic value (Kühn 1959). Lately, Bente Magnus has suggested that the women who wore such brooches were high-status women who may have functioned as priestesses in ritual dramas (Magnus 2001:292).

Silver was used for fine quality work; the deliberate effect of contrast was achieved by juxtaposing plain silver surfaces with gilded areas of relief ornament. Niello is used to strengthen the effect of colour. Armlets, finger rings and brooches of silver are not uncommon. Bronze, however, was the most common material for brooches. The female graves include from one to five brooches. Even though brooches are most frequently found in women's graves, a single brooch may appear in men's graves.

In conclusion, gold appears to rank above silver and bronze. The symbolic significance of gold objects appears in both the find contexts and the pictorial art. Gold-rings represent the power of kings, tribal leaders, and warriors, as well as queens, wives, and widows (Näsman 2001). Silver, too, seems to rank above bronze. For instance the silver sheet brooches seem to indicate women of a high social status. There is a trend in silver being present in women's graves.

Shields and colour

Shields have been of different colour too. Two Norwegian shields, from Føre and Bø, North Norway, have been painted with red pigment on one side and blue on the other (Sjøvold 1962). The blue colour of the Bø shield consisted of a crystalline copper-calcium silicate, called Egyptian blue (Rosenqvist 1959). A shield from Malvik, Central Norway, was also in Egyptian blue (Thingstad 1990).

In the Danish votive find from Illerup, red pigment, cinnabar, has been observed on shields furnished with silver bosses and silver sheet decoration (Ilkjær 1997:58). These shields belonged to a small group of military officers in command of the army, indicating that red was reserved for men belonging to the military elite.

The painted colour on the wooden shields is not the only sign of rank differentiation. The same phenomenon is found in the metal parts of the shield. The equipment from Illerup consists of 5 shield bosses of silver (mentioned above), 33 of bronze and c. 300 of iron. The bronze shield bosses have been attributed to officers of a lesser rank than those symbolized

by silver bosses, whereas the c. 300 iron shield bosses seem to represent the ordinary soldier (*ibid*). In Norway, only one grave is known to include a silver shield boss, eight graves have bronze shield bosses (Joki 2006) whereas all remaining bosses are iron (Solberg 2000).

Conclusion

In the Late Roman and Migration periods social categorisation, or the communication of social status, was demonstrated partially through adornments and dress, weapons being part of this complex. Colour is but one distinction, also the shape/form of the objects, their decoration/style has contributed to their function as distinction markers and symbols. Except for some items of personal hygiene, like combs, the objects associated with men and women are markedly different. Thus, the genders are defined as an asymmetric opposition.

When we try to understand the mortuary remains we have to keep in mind that they are an expression of a symbolic language. We also have to remember that burials not only meant that family and friends came together and honoured the deceased. The mortuary ritual also served other functions. When a leader passed away it was by no means obvious that a son should replace his father. Other families might be contenders for the position. In order to strengthen the claim of succession, the family of the deceased might use the burial as an opportunity to underline their own authority and the identity of influential allies. By focusing upon the bravery and the heroic deeds of the dead leader, they also underlined the heir's bravery and ability to defend his territory. Hence, the mortuary ritual represented an arena for both condensed symbolic representation and active manipulation of social relations.

Summary

The interpretation of grave material from the Late Roman and Migration periods in Norway has often been a rather simple connection between variations in grave furnishing and social variation, whereas the mortuary rituals that produced the archaeological material have received little attention. In the present study, rituals are regarded as storehouses of signs and symbols referring to crucial values of the community. In the mortuary rituals adornments, dress and personal belongings referred to the sex and status of the deceased. Except for some items of personal hygiene, the objects associated with men and women were markedly different, indicating that the genders were defined as an asymmetric opposition.

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