

DÖDA PERSONERS SÄLLSKAP



THE HOARDED DEAD

Late Iron Age silver hoards as graves

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As archaeologists increasingly recognise alternative ways of dealing with death and burial – in heaps of fire-cracked stones, settlement debris *etc.* – new inquiries and alternative explanations may be presented. This paper proposes that the hoarding of precious metals was one way of burying the dead during the Scandinavian Late Iron Age, through the inclusion of a few of the dead person’s belongings, or objects thought to be good metaphors for him or her. The contents of the hoard, as well as the act of depositing it, were considered to be essential for the correct transition of the dead person into their new status in the afterlife. Thus, as part of a social contract between the dead and the living, it was in everybody’s interest to properly “create an ancestor”.

Hoard as events

Suddenly, it happens... Somebody dies; a war breaks out; a feather falls somewhere causing a storm on the other side of the earth, which perhaps in turn causes a tree to fall on somebody’s head. Deliberate and unanticipated consequences, direct and indirect causes. “Suddenly, it just happens”.

Still, when it comes to death and burials, few things happen without someone’s direct intervention, and many decisions being made regarding

the Who, How, When and Where of the burial. Social belonging, gender, identity and intrapersonal relations are expressed in grave goods and through the position of the body. Parallel burial customs may cause a lot of archaeological confusion as to their meaning. Not everyone was granted a grave made of stone or earth, and those who were may have passed many stages (reburial, burning, being crushed *etc.*) before ending up there, alone or accompanied by objects, animals or other humans.

It has been noted on many occasions, that some parts of the grave goods are often old and reused; in particular this is true for jewellery. This is perhaps because some categories of personal objects, such as jewellery, were often inherited and passed down from one person to another, following a line of descent, or may have served certain institutional functions in society. Such objects had a 'life cycle' of their own, sometimes independent and longer in years than the person they accompany in death (*cf.* Kopytoff 1996). This is an interesting thing to note and an important clue to the status of the dead person. Here, I am more concerned with the fact that the objects were deposited at all, then and there. That is, at this certain point in time they were taken out of circulation from the world of the Living, and regarded ready or suitable to pass into the realm of the Dead with a certain individual. Why? What was the specific reason or event that led to their deposition and transition of status? Why was this particular individual the one to take the object with him or her, instead of passing it on to another living person?

The composition of grave goods is not casual, but a result of a deliberate process of selection guided by traditions and intentions. This also applies to hoards. A hoard is not just any random collection of objects or valuables, but reflects what was con-

sidered relevant and suitable to deposit in this form. The objects included are many and varied, but still were always picked from a certain sphere or range of objects – the types of objects that are never included in a hoard are of course far more numerous than those which are. The objects in a hoard may together represent a considerable span of time and both coins and jewellery may have been used and passed down for many generations. Coins are normally considered to be the most 'chronologically reliable' objects of the hoard, though many examples show clusters of material from different original time horizons within hoards (*e.g.* ten Roman or Viking-Age coins in a hoard of 2,500 medieval coins), varying degrees of wear, enigmatically late terminating coins *etc.* Of great interest here is the evident *selection* of coins, which complicates the conclusions one may draw from a hoard. What a hoard does show is that certain coins were present at a given time and place. One cannot simply assume it is an accurate or direct reflection of what was in circulation and, for example, it does *not* conclusively show the proportions of coin types existing outside of the hoard, or what was normally used outside the hoarding context.

One example of such a selective process is the Byzantine silver coins imported into Scandinavia during the Viking Age. In Sweden, 28 % of the

Byzantine coins found in graves and hoards were perforated, compared with only 2 % of German, 4 % of English and 4-8 % of Islamic coins, although the other coins greatly outnumbered the Byzantine (Hammarberg, Malmer & Zachrisson 1989; Rispling 2004). Is this fact due to a matter of time, fashion, or the motif of the coin, or does it have something to do with the social context? We cannot answer this at present, but such examples must be kept in mind while attempting to reconstruct coin circulation, trade routes and similar patterns from hoard compositions. What is found reflects not only what once existed, but also what was chosen depending on particular circumstances.

It is also striking how many hoards contain similar sets of jewellery. Brooches, rings, pins, earrings, bracelets *etc.* are all regular occurrences. The compositions of hoards vary over time, although within a certain period of time one will often find very similar sorts of jewellery. There appear to be 'fixed sets' (*cf.* Hårdh 1996: 146-147), to be compared with grave goods or tool sets. Working with twelfth- and thirteenth-century coins from the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, I have encountered several such fixed combinations of coins, jewellery and other objects. I have suggested that these combinations represent different social identities or

genres (Myrberg 2007, 2008: 130-132, 2009). In these hoards, the matter of selection is obvious and important, and equally important is the specific context of the hoard. The contents in terms of numbers, types and combinations of objects, and the micro-context of those coins were all apparently carefully selected. This type of hoard apparently occurs during most, if not all, stages of the Iron Age hoarding tradition, independent of what coin type dominated, which brooches were in fashion, or the fluctuations in trade and economy. They reflect not only the material terms of their existence, but also the specific events that determined their creation (fig. 1).

In order to understand these patterns and to distinguish categories of hoards from each other, hoards must be differentiated and examined for the many individual events which led up to their deposition. It is crucial that the whole hoard is treated, not the jewellery or the coins alone, as is normally the case. Important work in distinguishing categories of hoards according to type of content and regional variation has been done by Birgitta Hårdh (1996). She tries to understand diverse uses of precious metals and money in the Viking Age by mainly focussing on the economic and prestigious functions of the prized metal before hoarding (Hårdh 1996:131-132, 163-164). I argue that

composition and depositional contexts are as important clues to the situational decisions and the specific reasons leading up to the event of hoarding itself (cf. Myrberg 2007, 2008:49, 2009).



Fig 1. Hoard including coins, beads, pendants and bracelets. Found in a copper bottle of oriental type in 1866 by Johannes Nilsson, while he was digging a ditch in a meadow to be cultivated. Fölbagen, Gotland, Sweden, SHM 3547. Photo: Nils Lagergren, ATA.

Hoard as graves

A source-critical archaeological discussion concerns the goods that ac-

companied the dead in the grave. To what extent does this material reflect the situation of the living? Were those objects chosen because they were representative of the deceased's social or civil status, age or occupation? Or do they represent an ideal, considered to be the proper way to honour the dead, reflecting the desires and ambitions of the living family (cf. Parker Pearson 1999:3-10, Goldhahn this volume). In short, do the things in a grave actually say anything at all about the previous life of the dead person interred in it? The parallel to be made with hoards is that we tend to draw conclusions about the normal life of coins and objects from a very specific burial context. When we see, for example, that a rare group of coins is over-represented among those perforated or transformed into jewellery, it is a clear indication that particular coins, like other objects, were selected for the occasion. Therefore, it can be suggested that in the hoard they should be regarded as 'grave goods' rather than reflecting how they were normally used among the living.

Parallels may also be drawn between the contents of certain hoards and grave goods. In particular this applies to hoards with jewellery and objects of silver or gold, or different types of beads (Myrberg 2007, 2008:130-132, 2009). Kilger recently applied the thought to Viking-Age hoards with complementary (or cen-

tral) brooches worn by females (Kilger 2008) and Pfisterer to certain hoards of Roman coins (Pfisterer 2008).

The thought of hoard contents as “fixed sets” (see above) may be compared with the ‘shaving tool set’ or ‘belt box/belt plate sets’ of the Bronze Age. Indeed, Bronze Age hoards of female equipment were discussed as sets, and possible graves, by Kristiansen (1974). While male equipment was still found in graves during the later Scandinavian Bronze Age, female graves (or grave equipment) at the same time ‘disappeared’, and the ‘female’ objects during that period were hoarded rather than buried with a dead body. The ‘female’ hoards are not uncommon, and may represent one or more sets of personal objects (Kristiansen 1974:22-23; Bradley 1990:110-111). In earlier periods the ‘fixed sets’ of female equipment were found in graves and hoards alike, and the consistency of these combinations apparently transcend the specific depositional context. The animal bones found in association with several hoards may be remnants of a ritual meal devoured during the deposition, and the specific way of packing the objects together in the hoard also points to a ritualized and institutionalized practice. Kristiansen suggests that the hoards are either offerings, perhaps only of the goods, perhaps also of the women that once carried the objects, or that they are proper grave

goods, deposited in a separate ceremony (Kristiansen 1974:25-26).

I propose that the idea of hoards as graves has to some extent a general bearing upon the whole range of Scandinavian Late Iron Age hoards mainly including (but not always exclusively consisting of) gold and/or silver. Still, they must be differentiated and seen as separate categories with slightly varying meanings – as representing different ‘social genders’. The female jewellery (as we find it connected with biological females in graves) stands out and is most easily identifiable as such, but there are other combinations which recur and are not obviously connected with the female gender. For example, there is an assemblage with reliquary crosses or crucifixes, hanging from a thick silver chain with dragon head terminals, and silver bowls with dragon/Romanesque lion bottom plates (*e.g.* Kungsgården, SHM 8889; Padiküla, AI 5000/106). Such crucifix chains and crosses have been found in graves of biological men (Nordman 1924:6-7), and the hoard combination may be interpreted as pointing to the male gender, to a Christian identity and perhaps to a certain status or function within the ritual of the early Christian church of the Baltic Sea area (Myrberg 2007, 2008:130-132, 2009; *cf.* Hårdh 1996:147-148, 150-151 proposing particularly aristocratic connotations for these types of objects).

In addition to silver and gold ornaments comprising personal equipment, coins and vessels, there are other types of objects in hoards which include, for example, beads of several types and materials (*e.g.* Kullsta, SHM 18273; Stora Ryk, SHM 21668; Tingby, SHM 4858), weights and parts of balances (*e.g.* Kumna, AM 1836; Sturkö, SHM 8770), pieces of flint or strike-a-lights (*e.g.* Sturkö, SHM 8770), or imitations of those (strike-a-light-shaped bronze pendants, *e.g.* Liffride, SHM 3171). These are all objects that also typically appear as grave goods. To conclude, these hoards contain ‘valuables’, not randomly thrown together, but selected objects charged with a particular meaning in the burial context (fig. 2).

Not only do the contents of hoards point to a connection with graves, but also the physical circumstances of the hoards underline their likeness to graves. Examples of such contexts include: under or in a cairn (*e.g.* Alvidsjö, SHM 1132; Badeboda, SHM 8285; Gräsgärde, SHM 3596; Torp, JLM 8706), under a slab or stone (*e.g.* Ljunga, SHM 500; Ullevi, SHM 553), in an urn with coal and burnt human bones (*e.g.* Östra Gerum, SHM 908b), in a church building (*e.g.* Smedby, SHM 1859; Öggestorp, SHM 7135 & KMK 102786A), and numerous examples where hoards were deposited in or adjacent to older graves (*e.g.* Köpings klint, SHM 14289 &

14387; Råppe, SHM 13932; Sundveda (see Beckman-Thoor & Rispling 2008) (*cf.* Myrberg 2008, table 5.6.2).

Another aspect of hoards that connects them to burials or graves is their containers. Frequently recovered types of containers are urns, pieces of cloth and wooden boxes. Medieval hoards in particular may come in ox



Fig 2. Hoard including coins, brooches, bracteates and bracelets. Found in a copper repository in 1828 by the farmer Jesper Digraus, who hit it with an axe while chopping down a juniper in an open field. Digraus, Gotland, Sweden, SHM 520. Photo: SHM.

horns, or in metal containers of bronze or copper such as cauldrons. The Late Iron Age container types are admittedly varied, but remain within a conceptual frame related to graves and burials (urns, linen/cerecloth, wooden boxes/coffin, slabs). For the medieval period, there may have been associations with fertilization, abundance and rebirth through the use of cauldrons and horns (fig. 3).

The content – container – physical circumstances actually seem to be interrelated, as demonstrated by

the correlation “retrieved container – found in an arable field – both coins and objects included in the hoard” (Myrberg 2008:129-130, table 5.6.3). As far as the medieval hoards are concerned, a correspondence between “grave-like context” and hoard with objects may be detected. The number of coins also appears to follow a certain pattern, where few coins and more objects correspond with an accentuated “grave-like” context, while a large number of coins and few objects are normally found in hoards



Fig 3. Hoard including more than 1300 coins, found in a bronze container in a cultivated field in 1989 and excavated in situ. Stumle, Gotland, Sweden, KMK 101 844. Photo: Ulf Abramsson, RAGU.

without such a context. The coins may then be interpreted as constituting the “body” of the grave, augmenting the metaphor from ‘inside’ the container of the hoard (Myrberg 2008:129-132).

The objects accompanying the body in a grave reflect the identities of the dead person in different ways, and may further represent the various social relations the individual was involved in. Jewellery, weapons, animals and other objects indicate separate events or statuses resulting from them. One thing may be inherited from a relative, another may be a memory from a battle, and one was perhaps invested upon the day of formal adulthood or marriage *etc.*, following the stages of life and the changes of the individual’s social- and gender-related status. This, I argue, applies also to the contents of hoards. The objects represent some inherited items, some achieved through the individual’s own efforts, and some reflecting the family and external relations of the individual. Coins represent social relations just like other objects do, that is involvement in bartering and selling, voyaging and inheritance to attain them. Many hoards include several chronologically separated ‘clusters’ of coins, a recurrent phenomenon which may be seen as the *material results of different events, actions and social relations*, rather than as

fluctuations in the Late Iron Age coin market (fig. 4).

Also in this respect the hoards and other types of graves and burials resemble one another: their content was delimited by the terms of the time, place and culture in which they were created, but not defined or determined by it. The two phenomena are equally evidence of how humans always act out of persuasion, not knowledge, and of their conviction there is something larger than our own present reality.



Fig 4. Hoard including 205 Arabic coins, found in 1984 during archaeological excavations and excavated in the laboratory. The coins were originally deposited in some container or bag of organic material which had disintegrated. The same year a hoard consisting of three bracelets and a finger-ring was found close to the coin hoard. Prior to this several other hoards of coins and jewellery were found on the same site. Häffinds, Gotland, Sweden, KMK 101 274. Photo: Lenart Rubbestad, RAGU.

To create an ancestor

The argument above aims to show that Late Iron Age hoards, perhaps as a whole category, and certainly specific types, should be interpreted bearing graves and grave metaphors in mind. Should they, then, be considered as ‘metaphors’ only, or as proper graves? Obviously, they are not ‘real’ graves, in the literal sense where human remains are prerequisite (though a few such examples exist, see above). But as we know, ancient burials are too few to represent the entire population at any point. That is, ‘proper’ graves as designated by archaeologists are too few. As we increasingly recognise possible alternative ways of dealing with death and burial and of commemorating a life – in heaps of fire-cracked stones, settlement debris *etc.* – new questions and explanations present themselves. This is discussed by several authors in this volume. The present paper in the same spirit proposes that the hoarding of precious metals was one way of burying the dead during the Scandinavian Iron Age, through the inclusion of a selection of the dead person’s belongings, objects thought to be good metaphors for him or her. In the early medieval hoards, different genders, stages of life or roles are clearly visible, and several sets of female brooches (of different chronological phases) may be included (just as Kristiansen reports for the Bronze Age deposits,

1974:22-23). These objects, and the grave-like burial of them, served to *create* a dead person, independent of the presence of the human body itself. This custom may have been a living and continuous tradition deriving from the Bronze Age, or be inspired by older urn-graves and hoards discovered during the Late Iron Age, when there was a fascination – verging on obsession – with the past and its remnants.

Who, then, was buried in this way, and why? The Late Iron Age is not lacking female graves as a whole, as was the case in the Bronze Age examples (above). For the Bronze Age, Kristiansen suggested that the hoards could represent females of a high social ranking (Kristiansen 1974:25-26) based on the specific character of the objects recovered in the hoards. Similarly, in several cases the Iron Age hoards include objects of very high quality and particular combinations of gold and silver jewellery, but this is not true for all of them. One suggestion may be that these are cenotaphs, graves made for people who went missing or could not be buried in the proper way. In the early medieval period, a new Christian burial custom may have been another reason why the objects were deposited away from the body in the churchyard (Myrberg 2009). That is, the items hoarded may have been considered unsuitable for the grave, yet the need to part with

them in a symbolic way persisted (*cf.* Bradley 1990:99-114 summarizing the discussion on how Bronze Age metal deposits change context between grave and hoard over time).

Another suggestion is that these hoard-graves were laid down for those who died from specific reasons, such as for their faith or during child-birth. Arrhenius suggests that hoards were female belongings and dowry (*cf.* Burström 1993), intended to be passed on to the following generation, but left unclaimed by their owners after the women passed away (Arrhenius 1995:93). As shown above, not all hoards or artefact combinations can be regarded as 'female' in themselves. This does not *per se* contradict the idea of bride wealth or female management of the hoards, but it remains an important indication that the combinations may represent distinct events or genders, rather than one single category.

When discussing the Scandinavian Iron Age hoards, the tradition about 'Odin's Law' (referred to in the *Ynglinga Saga*, chapter 8) is often cited. According to this law, all (only burnt?) men got to bring what was with them on the pyre (it is not made explicit whether or not the goods were burnt as well) and what they themselves had buried in the ground before their time of death to *Valhalla*, the realm of dead warriors. In another less well known passage of the *Heimskringla* some Vi-

kings travel up the Dvina heading for *Bjarmaland* (Perm). Although travelling for another purpose, they do not lose the opportunity to plunder/steal hoards along the way, which were left for the dead by the inhabitants and, at least in some cases, marked out with idols. When a person died, his (and her?) goods were to be divided between the living and the dead, and the share of the dead was brought to particular places in the woods ('sacred places of the dead', *cf.* examples in Parker Pearson 1999:131), where it was stored and covered with earth (*Saga Ólafs hins helga* 133; Pfisterer 2008:215). This account refers to customs on the Eastern side of the Baltic Sea – that is, not explicitly to Scandinavian customs, but to Northern people living in the adjacent area and sharing much the same religious beliefs and traditions as at least the Eastern and Northern Scandinavians (*e.g.* Price 2002; Bertell 2003).

The accounts above explain the Late Iron Age custom of hoarding metal in two possible ways. In the first case a large number of hoards would have been deposited by the deceased person himself. Equally some were perhaps grave goods from the burial dress/equipment, hoarded by others since it was considered unsuitable for burning. In the second account, the hoards are all apparently shares of what the person left behind, buried by the heirs. In both cases, the hoards

represent the event of somebody's death. Perhaps the idea of the shares (or parcels of wealth) is also the same, regardless of whether it was the owner or the heirs doing the digging. Also, in both cases, the hoards represent objects taken out of their 'life among the living' in order to help somebody to pass on to the next state of personhood. An ancestor was thus created, through the social act of hoarding and through the artefacts themselves, which may also have embodied the person and the social relations he or she was involved in (*cf.* Fowler 2004: 64-71, 75, 86).

My suggestion is that the hoard represents the dead person and constitutes a material obituary. Through the contents of the hoard the posthumous reputation of the dead is created, through his or her own choice and/or by the living. In the act of creating a Hoarded Dead, the wishes and ambitions of the living are paired with concerns for the dead person. This act would have no meaning if it was not rooted in a narrative making it meaningful, and in a belief of something beyond the present world, well worth a sacrifice. All hoards may not reflect precisely the same type of event, but the obvious grave metaphor they express must not be ignored. The hoards were composed of things that were present in the sphere of the living. Thus they reflect the material terms under which they came into

being, and also say something about *e.g.* the terms of production, circulation, economy, coin use and travels in life. But, the 'end product', the hoard, tells us just as much and more about the human being who selected and assembled it, and the notions of existence he/she embraced. To interpret the social practices involved in the transformation of this object-body may help us understand Iron Age notions of personhood (*cf.* Fowler 2004: 41) (fig. 5).

Many coin hoards are stratified, that is, there is a chronology in the contents. Often this means that there are older coins in the bottom and newer coins appear higher up, but it is not unusual for there to be 'oddities', like one or a few older coins on the top. This indicates that such hoards were added to over time, and eventually finally 'closed' on a certain occasion. That stratification resembles the one of grave urns, where the burnt remains of the body may be deposited carefully in layers as if to reconstruct the individual within the container.

In this way, the body is recreated, and the dead and dissolved individual is reintegrated into a new 'social status' (Gramsch 2006). The subsequent additions of coins and perhaps also objects (the latter less easily detectable due to wider chronological frames) in a hoard should in a similar way be regarded from a social practice perspective. If the notion of hoards as



Fig 5. Hoard including coins, pieces of silver and a pendant. Found in a cultivated field in 1991 and excavated in the laboratory. The hoard was deposited in a tubular container of organic material. Mannegårde, Gotland, Sweden, KMK 102 086. Photo: Leif Zerpe.

graves is accepted, the hoard itself should be regarded as such a recreated and reintegrated body.

Many of the hoards recovered in Scandinavia were found over the past centuries, in particular in the nineteenth century when new fields were cultivated, many ditches were dug in wet areas, and new ploughing machinery was introduced. The hoards recovered at that time were poorly recorded in terms of modern standards, but there are enough instances in which detailed information is available to allow at least some investigation of hoard composition and find circumstances (figs 3, 4, 5). The

evidence indicates that the hoards were composed in a deliberate way and were not just randomly gathered valuables. The patterns of find contexts highlight this interpretation. Spatial connections between Iron Age hoards of precious metals, rune stones and estate boundaries, between metal hoards and settlements, and between metal hoards and natural borders such as rivers and lakes have been discussed in large-scale examples of contextual interpretation (Östergren 1989; Zachrisson 1998; Hedeager 2003). Here, I have dealt more with the contents and the immediate context of the find in an attempt to understand

what those hoards represented, and I have paid much attention to the grave metaphor attached to the hoards. The study deal with some possible lines of interpretation, but at the same time acknowledges that many types of investigations may be conducted on the same material. The main point I wish to make is that the hoards as a phenomenon represent something that goes beyond the historical data of one single object or category of objects, and beyond the rationale of everyday life in the physical world of the living. They were not deposited just any day, but reflect specific events, and their composition is a clue as to the nature of those events. The hoards are results of ritual *and* rational choices, made by the living out of concern for the dead person's existence in the

next life, and for their own existence in the present one.

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Keywords: board, precious metal, burial custom, grave goods, identity, transition, ancestor

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DÖDA PERSONERS SÄLLSKAP

Gravmaterialens identiteter och kulturella uttryck

Gravar har alltid intresserat arkeologer. Men vad är det vi ser i en grav? De sista spåren av någon som en gång var – eller har begravningen skapat en ny person? Och är det bara levande varelser som kan dö och begravas? I denna volym möts gamla material och nya idéer. I fokus står inte bara de gravlagda utan även deras sällskap i form av föremål och efterlevande. Vilken roll spelade dessa?

Dessa och andra frågor diskuteras här med exempel från stenålder till nutid. Välkommen till *Döda Personers Sällskap!*

ON THE THRESHOLD

Burial Archaeology in the Twenty-first Century

Graves have always been important to archaeology. But what are we met with in a grave? The traces of someone who once was - or has the burial created a new person? Can only the living die and be buried? In this volume old material encounters new perspectives. The focus is not just on the deceased, but also on accompanying artefacts, animals and the survivors. What roles did they play?

Here, these and other questions are discussed, with examples from the Stone Age to the present. Reconsider how society deals with death and burial, join us *On the Threshold!*



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