

PROCESSING DEATH

OVAL BROOCHES AND VIKING GRAVES IN BRITAIN, IRELAND, AND ICELAND

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Abstract

TITLE: Processing death: Oval brooches and Viking graves in Britain, Ireland, and Iceland

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Burials with oval brooches from the Viking Age settlements in Britain, Ireland, and Iceland have frequently been interpreted as the graves of a specific and uniform group of people: (pagan) Scandinavian women of relatively high status. This interpretation is partly a result of the way in which the material has been treated, as static entities with more or less fixed meanings. How similar were these graves, however, and can they be interpreted as belonging to a specific group of people? By studying oval brooches and the graves in which these appear, this thesis examines how grave-goods were used in life and in death, and how the funerary rites themselves were performed. It provides an approach to grave-goods and graves that allows for the identification of variation in the material. Seeing the material as processes rather than objects is accentuated in order to identify variation. Through a theoretical framework emphasising ritualization, the focus is placed on ritual practice as meaningful in and of itself, rather than as reflective of uniform ideas and concepts. The meaning of funerary rites is also acknowledged as relational rather than essential; they must be understood in relation to each other and to other ways of acting.

The thesis comprises two in-depth case studies. The first case study (chapter 2) demonstrates that there are considerable differences in how oval brooches were used in both life and death and argues that these variations in use affected the brooches' abilities to evoke remembrances in funerary rites. Instead of regarding their meaning as static, the chapter emphasises how their meaning was relational and dependent on people's previous experience with oval brooches, both as a category and as individual objects. The second case study (chapter 3) examines how the funerary rites themselves were performed. It demonstrates that there were norms governing the funerary practices, but also that these practices in several cases varied or deviated from the norms. These variations and deviations highlight funerary practices as responses to an actual and contemporary situation: the death of a specific member of the community.

Whereas earlier studies have regarded graves with oval brooches as clearly defined and uniform, this study demonstrates that there was considerable variation in how the actual practices were performed. The graves with oval brooches were not uniform. Therefore, interpretations should not be uniform either. The considerable differences in how artefacts were used and funerary practices performed strongly suggest that there would have been distinctions in the intentions and effects of the funerary rituals. Although burials with oval brooches could at times be regarded as informative about the identities and social groups of the dead, this would have depended on factors other than merely the presence or absence of specific objects. Overall, the thesis argues that studies of burials with oval brooches – and Viking graves more generally – have been too concerned with the supposed paganism and 'Scandinavianess' of the graves. Such research stands in danger of reducing all parts of the Viking graves to questions about identities, and leave little room for the funerary rites as responses to the death of specific individuals. Instead, by decentralising the significance of grave-goods, both as an ethnic and religious marker and also as the unifying feature of the rituals, the approach presented here opens up for the possibility to explore communal as well as case-specific approaches and attitudes towards death and dying in Viking Age Britain, Ireland, and Iceland.

KEYWORDS: Oval brooches, Burials, Viking Age, Funerary rituals, Memory, Performance, Death, England, Scotland, Ireland, Iceland