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To cite:

Eriksen, M.H.
2016 Commemorating dwelling. The death and burial of houses in Iron and Viking Age Scandinavia. *European Journal of Archaeology* 19(3):477-496.

Commemorating Dwelling: The Death and Burial of Houses in Iron and Viking Age Scandinavia

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Current debates on the ontology of objects and matter have reinvigorated archaeological theoretical discourse and opened a multitude of perspectives on understanding the past, perspectives which have only just begun to be explored in scholarship on Late Iron Age Scandinavia. This article is a critical discussion of the sporadic tradition of covering longhouses and halls with burial mounds in the Iron and Viking ages. After having stood as social markers in the landscape for decades or even centuries, some dwellings were transformed into mortuary monuments – material and mnemonic spaces of the dead. Yet, was it the house or a deceased individual that was being interred and memorialized? Through an exploration of buildings that have been overlain by burial mounds, and by drawing on theoretical debates about social biographies and the material turn, this article illuminates mortuary citations between houses and bodies in Late Iron Age Scandinavia. Ultimately, I question the assumed anthropocentricity of the practice of burying houses. Rather, I suggest that the house was interwoven with the essence of the household and that the transformation of the building was a mortuary citation not necessarily of an individual, but of the entire, entangled social meshwork of the house.

Keywords: Iron Age, Viking Age, Scandinavia, halls, burial mounds, buried houses, social biography, agency of the house, material turn

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to question the *a priori* assumption that human bodies were ubiquitously the focal point of burial mounds in first-millennium AD Scandinavia. Burial mounds are commemorative monuments, material displays of past investment of labour and soil into earthen memorials venerating the dead. Mounds can be the foci of social memory in the intangible form of narratives, myths, and legends, as well as through commemorative practice. In Scandinavia in the first millennium AD, some dwellings were transformed into mortuary monuments by being covered by burial mounds — and thereby converted into memorials and citations of the dead — after having stood as social markers in the landscape for decades or even centuries. Yet, is it the house or a deceased individual that was being commemorated when a building was overlain with graves?

Ongoing debates concerning the agency of objects and matter have revived interpretations and opened an array of new approaches in archaeology. One of the consequences of such approaches is to open our minds to ontologies both in the past and the present which transcend Cartesian dichotomies of nature/culture, thing/agent, animal/human (e.g. Ingold, 2006; Boivin, 2008; Alberti & Marshall, 2009). In this article, I argue that, although the practice of covering houses with burial mounds has been interpreted as ancestral worship or expressing territorial claims, it may rather reflect a burial custom centred on *the house*, because the house itself was conceptualized as an agent with a life-span that had come to an end. I do not intend to be insistent and dogmatic, but rather to propose a new perspective and ask different questions of the settlement evidence. To explore this alternative interpretation, I will suggest that there are citational links and mnemonic references between the Scandinavian-style longhouse and human/animal bodies. This point of departure leads to a three-stage interpretation. First, that the house was an agglomerate of agencies, constituting an embodied *meshwork* of people, things, animals, and materials (Ingold, 2007). Second, that this meshwork — the *house-body* — was to some extent perceived as agential, capturing some of the essence of the household. And third, when the house was abandoned, this was understood as the death of the meshwork. The house-body was consequently treated similar to the human body, and could be fragmented, cremated, interred, cited, and commemorated.

BURIED HOUSES OF CENTRAL SCANDINAVIA

One of the most apparent mortuary dimensions of Late Iron Age settlement has long been recognized but seldom interpreted: some houses were covered with graves after their abandonment. The phenomenon has not been quantified, but it is not a frequent practice. Yet, superimposing dwellings with burial mounds occurred from the Bronze Age throughout the Viking Age in Scandinavia. The phenomenon seems to be particularly recurrent in the transition between the Early and Late Iron Age, and is especially frequent in Mälardalen in eastern Sweden (Renck, 2008: 95) and Rogaland in south-western Norway (Thäte, 2007: 109–10), indicating that this was a central-Scandinavian phenomenon. Buried houses can be of the regular three-aisled longhouse type; but there is a bias towards aristocratic settlements, so-called hall buildings (e.g. Herschend, 1993; Carstens, 2015) being covered by burial mounds.

A few interpretations of buried houses have been offered. It has been suggested that in the Bronze Age the intention behind erecting mounds over abandoned houses was to ensure that the dead, the mound, and the house could all travel together to the realm of the dead (Kristiansen, 2013: 242). For the Early Iron Age, Baudou (1989) argues that grave mounds were cult places, and the practice is seen as the ultimate evidence of ancestral worship (Baudou, 1989: 35–36). However, Herschend rejects any particularly sacrosanct quality in buried houses at this time. He sees the practice as connected with social memory, as buried houses representing the past constituted ‘a settlement history displayed among each generation of standing houses’ (Herschend, 2009: 152). Renck (2000; 2008) is among those who envisage a more strategic intent: she connects the practice with territorial claims, and regards houses overlain by mounds as material documents of inheritance. Likewise, Thäte (2007) perceives this tradition to be both religious and strategic in nature, recognizing a ritualization of the longhouse, but also connecting the practice with inheritance rights and economy.

In this article, while acknowledging the value of the interpretations above, I will turn to alternative pathways of exploration in an attempt to approach dwellings covered by burial mounds from another perspective. Rather than interpreting the custom as reflecting travel to the realm of the dead, ancestral worship, or strategic actions to communicate territorial claims, my objective is to consider a possible past ontology of the house as an active assemblage or meshwork. In line with recent critique of Bronze Age studies (Brück & Fontijn, 2013), Iron and Viking Age

scholarship is often imbued with an unquestioned *homo economicus* rhetoric which should be critically discussed (Eriksen, 2015a: 27–37). I intend to tackle the material from a different point of view – by interpreting the burial evidence in relation to the life-history of the dwellings, opening up the debate to include worldviews somewhat foreign to Western, post-Enlightenment preconceptions.

Seven Buried Buildings

This article presents seven examples of halls and houses from five archaeological sites in Norway and Sweden, dating from *c.* AD 400–900, overlain with burial mounds (Figures 1–3). The cases presented in Table 1 (a non-exhaustive list), and described in chronological order in the following, are discussed within a biographical framework. One of the sites has been explored in a previous study on the reuse of monuments (Thäte, 2007).

1) *Högom*. The oldest case study included here is that of two buried buildings from Högom, Medelpad, Sweden. First, a 40m longhouse, longhouse IV, was covered by a monumental mound at the beginning of the fifth century AD. The mound contained a primary cremation burial, possibly of a man, and a secondary burial with female-gendered items. Second, a hall building standing in close proximity to the first mound (Högom III) caught fire in the fifth century, a bone arrowhead found stuck in the wattle wall perhaps indicating that the house was burnt down in an attack (Ramqvist, 1992: 189). However, it is equally possible that the inhabitants intentionally set fire to the hall after its abandonment. Subsequently, the timber posts were removed, and a monumental but empty grave mound was erected over the remains of the building. Ramqvist (1992: 189) suggests that an artefact assemblage within the house represents two women burnt to death within the building, yet no human remains were identified. The mound is interpreted as a cenotaph over the postulated dead women.

2) *Ullandhaug*. Dwellings with superimposed burial mounds likewise occur at two houses from the Migration-period settlement of Ullandhaug in Rogaland, southwestern Norway (Myhre, 1980; Thäte, 2007). A burial mound had been erected centrally over house 6, covering most of the building. An iron spearhead was recovered from the mound, but no human remains were identified. The time-span between the period of inhabitation and the erection of the mound is unknown. Ullandhaug 1, like Högom III, ended its life span through a fire. Two mounds were

constructed over the house remains: one mound was centred on the doorway (see Eriksen, 2013: 197-8), while the second mound was situated neatly inside the walls. The fact that the stone walls had time to collapse before the construction of the mounds, as well as the mounds' ship-alluding shape, led the excavator to suggest that the mortuary monuments date to the Viking Age, centuries later than the house (Myhre 1992: 55-57).

3) *Brista*. A Migration-period longhouse from Brista, Uppland, Sweden, was similarly burnt to the ground (Renck, 2000; 2008). The cremated bones of a small child, accompanied by a bone comb, had been deposited in a posthole of the burnt building. It is not specified whether this deposition occurred during the construction of the house or in connection with the fire (see Carlie, 2004: 141). Some decades or up to a century after the fire, four small grave cairns were constructed over the plot. One cairn was constructed directly on top of the child's burial, possibly indicating knowledge of the child deposited in the post-hole.

4) *Jarlsberg*. At Jarlsberg, Vestfold, Norway, a sixth- to seventh-century building with possible hall function was also destroyed in a fire (Grindkåsa, 2012). After the fire, an adult individual was inhumed in the remains of the burnt-down house, interred on the central axis of the dwelling section of the longhouse. Funerary objects, including an assemblage of weapons, a type of pin pointing to a continental origin, and a horse's head indicate that the social display of the deceased was that of an elite warrior. The spatial relationship between settlement and inhumation burial is deliberate, and the time span between the two is thought to be 'very short' (Grindkåsa, 2012: 87). Subsequently, five burial mounds with diameters of 10 to 12 m were erected over and around the house. The mounds were placed exclusively over and adjacent to the *dwelling* quarters of the longhouse, and one of the mounds' ring ditch was placed directly above the inhumation burial. This may in turn imply a long-lived memory of the spatial organisation of the house. The mounds were removed in modern times, and nothing is known of their content.

5) *Engelaug*. Finally, a three-aisled longhouse from Engelaug, Hedmark, Norway was in the Viking Age covered by a burial cairn, 7m in diameter. The house, and thereby the mortuary monument, had been placed on a ridge at the highest point of the landscape. The grave, possibly of a woman based on the artefact assemblage, contained burnt human remains, a spindle whorl, an iron knife, and unidentifiable iron fragments. The individual with female-gendered items may have been cremated with

animals, as a mixture of human and animal bone was recovered. The excavator argues that several elements point to the house being constructed in the mid-Viking Age (tenth century), and subsequently being dismantled in order to build the cairn (Risbøl Nielsen, 1995: 17)¹.

These seven houses were thus covered by graves after the end of their life-span. In all cases, the excavators interpret the placement of the burials as deliberate. However, there are some differences between them. First, the size and spatial order of the mounds vary significantly (Figures 2 and 3). Second, the characteristics of the deceased humans vary. Both genders are likely to be represented, as well as a small child, as are diverse body treatments, and miscellaneous funerary objects. Significantly, not all graves contain traces of dead bodies, even when the conditions for preservation suggest that bones should have been preserved (i.e. Högom). Third, the time span between habitation and the construction of the mound varies significantly among the sites. The inhumation in the dwelling room at Jarlsberg seems to have taken place immediately after destruction. Likewise, at Engelaug and Högom, the burial mounds were erected immediately or very shortly after the houses were dismantled. After the end of habitation, the character of these sites changed radically from *lived spaces*, dwellings surrounded by fields and grazing animals, to mortuary landscapes. At Ullandhaug and Brista, on the other hand, decades or centuries may have passed between the discontinuation of settlement and the construction of the burial mounds. The mounds were nevertheless in all likelihood foci of diverse commemorative practices, as well as ‘enduring structures onto which memories could be portrayed or inscribed’ (Williams, 2006: 178). As I will argue, these memories, narratives, or legends may not have been of a named individual, but instead of the remembered meshwork of the house.

INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK: THE SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY OF HOUSES

How we interpret the mortuary treatment of abandoned houses depends on how we conceptualize houses and their life-histories in the Iron Age of Scandinavia. If houses may die and be interred, this presumes that the house has had a *life*. Houses are a particular form of material assemblages. Although sometimes treated as such, architecture is not neutral, but emanates from and in itself produces the social world

¹ Unfortunately, no illustration of the spatial relationship between the house and grave at Engelaug could be located in the topographical archives in the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.

(e.g. Bourdieu, 1977: 89-91). The house has significant agency in shaping large-scale social organization, but also directly affects people's movements, thought patterns, and everyday practice (Wilson, 1988: e.g. chapter 3; Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995b: 2-3). Dwellings constitute material frameworks where fundamental social practices take place: rearing children, food consumption, knowledge exchange, gender constructions, power negotiations, and ritual practice. Three-aisled buildings stood as markers in the Scandinavian landscapes, expressing kinship, significant cultural norms, and constituting pivotal mnemonics of social memory (Eriksen, 2015a).

However, houses are not only static, durable frameworks for social memory and production. Among others, Jones (2007: 91–92) stresses that houses are not fixed memorials, but malleable and flexible material entities, encapsulating social *process*. The dynamic, transformational quality of the house becomes apparent when houses are analysed from a biographical perspective (e.g. Blier, 1987; Bailey, 1990; Bloch, 1995). Like humans, buildings can be perceived as living, developing beings — they have a beginning and an end, a life-span frequently including phases of repair and rebuilding. Bloch (1995) compares Madagascan houses with human agents, underlining how the house undergoes life cycles: it is born, lives, matures, and dies, just like people. The Batammaliba people of West Africa treat houses under construction as they would people, with sequential rituals corresponding to rites of passage for newborn infants, initiates, and adolescents. The final act of building involves rituals to reinforce the completion of the construction process, and is conceptualized as 'killing' the house so that it becomes inhabitable (Blier, 1987: 24–34).

Biographical perspectives have been applied to buildings in studies of Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Early Iron Age houses (Bailey, 1990; Brück, 1999; Gerritsen, 1999). Moreover, now classic debates about the social biographies of things (Appadurai, 1986) have in recent years been reinvigorated through the so-called *material turn*. This multifaceted, and at times internally conflicted, theoretical movement has extended the discussion of the biography and agency of objects (e.g. Latour, 2005; Boivin, 2008; Olsen, 2010; Hodder, 2012; for an overview see Thomas, 2015). Springing from a wish to challenge a stated anthropocentric stance in archaeology (e.g. Hodder 2012), the focus is redirected to the many ways things and materiality affect, shape, and structure us. The material turn has convincingly placed the spotlight on the complex, intricate, and intimate relations and networks that develop between

humans and their material surroundings. The distinction between nature and culture, humans and things, is in current debates challenged. Instead, a relational perspective is suggested, where the dichotomy between people and objects is transcended and where humans, animals, and things are interwoven in a meshwork, a notion I shall return to.

Materiality theory is not without its flaws. A point of critique of symmetrical archaeology is its insistence on humans and things being equal social agents or *actants* (e.g. Latour, 2005; Olsen, 2010). I do not entertain the idea that objects have primary agency, constituted in and by themselves, *without* human bodies and minds to perceive them (see the elegant critique by Glørstad, 2008). If human beings are removed from the equation, things will be quiet and still. Thus, when anthropocentricity is critiqued in this article, I do not suggest that people are somehow absent from the act of burying houses. Rather I challenge the assumption of specific individuals being the crux of the practice. Buried houses may arguably transcend specific individuals, and commemorate a larger assemblage of human and non-human agents.

If we are to accept that houses have life cycles similar to those of humans, how would the buildings' life and death be manifested in the archaeological record? In a previous work, through a comparative analysis of nine hall sites from the first millennium AD², I identified sequences of events observable in the archaeological record that may be said to interweave with human life cycles (Eriksen, 2010). I developed a heuristic device to untangle these archaeological sequences, divided into five biographical stages³:

- Before construction: 'Conception'
- Construction: 'Birth'
- In use and rebuilding: 'Life'
- Abandonment, dismantling, or decay: deconstruction: 'Death'
- Post-abandonment: 'Burial'

It is important to stress that the proposed heuristic is merely a model. The past was undoubtedly more complex, and less static than this heuristic scheme might portray. Nevertheless, the analysis showed that the hall buildings' two first life stages included

² One of the nine sites, i.e. Högom, is also used in this article.

³ This framework has subsequently been used by other Iron-Age scholars in non-elite settlement contexts (Amundsen & Fredriksen, 2014).

acts of clearing previous burial mounds, building artificial plateaus, and inauguration rituals in the form of intentional deposits underneath roof-supporting posts. Their life as a standing structure was marked by several phases of repair and rebuilding, sometimes including repeated artefact deposition. Their demise was marked by intentional dismantling, concluding deposition, and ritual cleaning of the plot (Eriksen, 2010; 2015b). The complexity in the life-span of the monumental buildings analysed was extremely high, and was conceivably directly linked with the status and symbolic importance of aristocratic estates. Although perhaps biased towards elite built environments, the heuristic device may nevertheless be used as an analytical tool to interpret the buried houses discussed in this article. Here, the later phases of the building's lives are in focus, i.e. their *standing life*, *death*, and *burial*. As the biographical approach springs from a proposed homology between houses and humans, I will however first discuss citations between *houses* and *bodies*.

HOUSE-BODIES: CITATIONS OF CORPOREALITY

Citations between house and body have been described in numerous cultures (e.g. Blier, 1987; Wilson, 1988; contributions in Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995a; Brück, 1999). For instance, one conceptualization is that the body has portals, like a house, another that the house can consist of body parts, similar to a person. Exploring human evolution through the perspective of the built environment, Wilson (1988: 67) writes: 'In other instances it is not so much that the house is laid out according to the plan of the human body as that the house *is* a body (and a body is a house)...'.

A set of intangible material may underpin the corporeal qualities of Iron Age and Viking Age houses too, in the etymology of Old Norse (ON) words for constructional elements of the house. The word 'window', ON *vindaug* literally means 'wind-eye', and probably describes ventilation openings constituting 'eyes' where the wind passed through the wall (Bjorvand & Lindeman, 2007: 1311). Likewise, the word for the short-end of the house, 'gable', ON *gavl*, is related to proto-Germanic **geblan*, meaning 'head, skull, gable' (Bjorvand & Lindeman, 2007: 348–49). And even though the etymology is unclear, many Germanic languages display a relationship between words for roof-supporting posts (ON *stafr*) and verbs and nouns relating to 'walk forwards', 'footprint' (Bjorvand & Lindeman, 2007: 1046–47), indicating a connotation between wooden posts and the 'legs' of the house. This idea is reinforced by Norse texts: in the poem *Thorsdrápa* attributed to the tenth

century, such a post is described as *fornan fótlegg*, i.e. ‘the ancient leg’.

This *kenning* (metaphor) for the wooden posts leads to another question: if Scandinavian houses were cognitively related to bodies, must these bodies necessarily be human? The metaphor from *Thorsdrápa* does not only refer to the post as ‘the ancient leg’, it actually specifies that the post is the ancient leg of ON *fletbjörn*. This word is composed of two elements, *flet*, meaning ‘house’ or ‘storey of a house’ (related to modern English ‘flat’) and *björn*, meaning ‘bear’. Thus, the posts are *the legs of the house-bear* — an animal body is used as a metaphor for the house during the Viking Age (Cleasby et al., 1957: 160).

This is not the only instance where links between the house and animal bodies appear. The hall of the epic *Beowulf* is named *Heorot* (‘deer’), again indicating a link with the animal realm. Intriguingly, a type of Viking Age comb made precisely of deer or elk antler has been regarded as material citations of Scandinavian-style halls (Gansum, 2003) — possibly suggesting a link between the animal realm and the house. Likewise, the fascinating British artefact group known as *hogbacks* (see Williams, this issue) are clearly citations of houses and animals concurrently. Some hogbacks are even flanked by two bears, (see the metaphor of the *house-bear* above). The hogbacks thus create citational fields between animal bodies, houses, and memorials for the dead. Animals were an all-encompassing metaphor in Scandinavia from the Migration period onwards (e.g. Hedeager, 2004), most notably expressed in the Nordic animal styles, but also in the frequent deposition of animals in graves, and the pervading custom of using names of animals as personal names. Perhaps, then, longhouses and halls were intertwined with zoomorphic qualities, encapsulating some essence from the animal realm.

Whether houses were cognately related with a human body or animal body, we should perhaps transcend the idea that houses were merely *representations* of bodies. This is examined, for example, by Alberti and Marshall (2009), who discuss anthropomorphic pottery from first-millennium north-western Argentina. The vessels — ‘body-pots’ — are not understood as clay representations of bodies. Rather, the objects are taken to be literal *body-pots*, agential entities transcending a human/thing divide. Following their argument, the body-pot is thus not a ‘thing’, nor is it a ‘person’ nor a ‘concept’; rather, it is an intertwined entity (Alberti & Marshall, 2009: 352). They argue that using a straightforward representationalist perspective of the body-pots would sabotage the possibility of exploring their ontological logic. By *not*

focusing on an object (pot) imprinted with a cultural idea (body), but rather approaching the artefact, the body-pot, as a literal element of the ontology of its cultural context, a range of novel possibilities of interpretation emerges. I consequently suggest, as a first stage in an alternative interpretation of the buried houses, that these may, like the body-pots, be approached as *house-bodies*.

This house-body may have been intimately connected with the *essence* of the household. As Levi-Strauss (1983: 163–76) notably pointed out, there are several cultures where the house and its inhabitants become cognitively enmeshed (‘house societies’), as for example in the entanglement reflected in the idea of ‘the House of Windsor’. Among others, Fowler (2004) challenges the universalism of the modern idea of the *individual*, and in line with Levi-Strauss points out that the clan or the house may constitute ‘a moral person’. Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995b: 2–3) go even further, arguing that ‘At some level or other, the notion that houses are people is one of the universals of architecture’. Likewise, Brück (1999) illuminates how British Bronze Age roundhouses were metaphorically and practically related to the inhabitants’ life cycles, arguing that roundhouses could therefore have anthropomorphic qualities: ‘In societies where this is so, houses are often considered to possess a *life force* or soul and as such are conceptualized as living entities’ (Brück, 1999: 159, my emphasis).

Building on this line of argument, a second suggested interpretation is that the Scandinavian longhouses may be approached not only as cognates of bodies, whether animal or human, but as embodied, agential *meshworks* (Ingold, 2006; 2007). To Ingold, a meshwork is a set of interwoven lines where each line is a relation between agents (humans, things, animals). However, the line is not traced *between*, for example, a person and a thing, but is rather a trajectory of *movement* where different agencies encounter each other, transact, and are transformed. Agents, whether human or non-human, are bundles or knots in the mesh (Ingold, 2007: 35). The idea of the house as a meshwork relates to Jones’s statement that ‘houses act as nodes knitting together social relations’ (Jones 2007: 92). The meshwork of agencies, practices, and materials constituting a house undoubtedly relates to social memory and would be dynamic and transform over time. With regard to the longhouses, this meshwork comprised several elements (‘knots’). First, the inhabitants owning and dwelling in the house. Norse households could incorporate not only biological kin, but guests, foster-children, animals, itinerant workers, concubines, dependants, and slaves

(Eriksen forthcoming). Second, a crucial knot in the meshwork was the materiality of the building, its physical capacities, and properties. Third, a number of other elements formed part of the network, such as artefacts of various kinds, but also immaterial things such as memories and practices. I suggest that the agglomerate of all these elements and agencies constituted an embodied meshwork: the *house-body*.

MAPPING OUT THE MESHWORK

To illustrate the dynamic and eclectic nature of the proposed web of agencies constituting the longhouse, I have attempted to map out the meshwork of one of the sites discussed herein: Jarlsberg, Vestfold, Norway (Grindkåsa, 2012).

The house at Jarlsberg was built in the early sixth century and is thought to have had a standing life of approximately a hundred years – i.e. three or four generations. Two opposing entrances divide the longhouse into two sections: the north end of the house is interpreted as a byre, built with posts on pad stones, while the southern end is interpreted as the dwelling section. The artefact assemblages from the house include beads of glass and clay, c. 500 g of ceramics from different vessels used for food preparation (among them a bucket-shaped pot seemingly older than the house, with lipid residue intact), and burnt faunal remains of pig, cattle, horse, and sheep/goat. In addition, the archaeobotanical material from the site indicates cultivation of oat and barley.

This set of archaeological material implies that certain social practices took place at Jarlsberg: tending livestock, cultivating the fields, slaughtering animals, preparing food by the hearth, including using the old bucket-shaped pot, communal consumption, social interaction. The beads point to practices of body ornamentation, plausibly female-gendered, and implies travel or networks to places where glass beads were produced. The burial of the person displayed as a warrior also points to certain practices: real or idealized connections with a warrior band or allies, a relation between the decapitated horse and the deceased, a particular pin implying a relational line (travel? trade? gift exchange?) with the Continent, and of course, the burial itself implies a deliberate act of commemorating the dead through a set of mortuary practices.

The meshwork of Jarlsberg, like other settlement sites, clearly works as a node knitting together internal, social relations in the household (see Jones, 2007). However, it also includes relational lines of movement towards other things, places,

and people (craftspeople, materials, allies, landscapes, kin) and, equally important, it also *transcends time*. The house stood for approximately three or four generations. This entails that weddings, births and deaths will have taken place within the physical framework of the house, as well as decades of domestic practices, the use of countless artefacts, and the creation of thousands of memories. The meshwork of the house cannot be reduced to only the artefact material, or the architectural structure, or the humans dwelling there. The aggregate of all these interwoven elements make up the meshwork that is later commemorated through burying the house.

THE STANDING LIFE OF THE HOUSE

During their life, houses dispersed throughout the landscape may thus have constituted dynamic embodiments of essence and intertwined human/non-human agencies, linking networks of previous generations with the present and the future. A common trait of the halls, which may differentiate them from more average settlements, is that they are built and rebuilt on the same spot for long periods of time, sometimes centuries (Eriksen, 2010: 52–53). This may be a deliberate act to extend the life-span of the building, an increasing institutionalization of the house. This practice of *curating* houses was executed by repeatedly replacing the roof-supporting posts. Some of the longest standing halls have life-spans extending across centuries, with roof-supporting posts replaced time and again, for example at Lejre in Denmark (Christensen, 2010) or Borg in Norway (Herschend & Mikkelsen, 2003). At Lejre even the same postholes were reused, indicating an extreme spatial conservatism. At Borg, on the other hand, an expansion from the earlier to the later building was done in a manner that kept the hall room in position on the very highest point of the ridge, but extended and altered the rest of the building (Herschend & Mikkelsen, 2003:65).

Stenholm (2006) has convincingly argued that overlaying houses in this manner is a form of ‘spatial remembrance’, where the repeated overlaying of houses was a ‘way to create legitimacy for the social order’ (Stenholm, 2006: 344). The curation of the halls may thus be seen as a strategy to create continuity not only spatially, but also socially and politically — the hall was the foremost monument of power for a regional or supra-regional leader. However, drawing on the idea of the house-body, the extension of the standing life of the hall could also be a strategy to ‘keep the house alive’, to enforce and strengthen the entire intertwined meshwork of the house, beyond political ramifications. In his discussion of memory and material

culture, Jones (2007: 82–84) divides objects into two categories: artefacts which endure over time, and ephemeral artefacts. The first are objects which extend through time due to their durability and thus connect different networks, while the latter are objects that are created and disposed of, perhaps in recurring cycles. Through the act of curating the hall, I would argue that it became an enduring artefact in Jones's terminology, 'indexes or objects worthy of citation over considerable periods of time; they physically *extend through* networks over time' (Jones, 2007: 82, original emphasis). From this perspective, the hall was rebuilt over and over again to prevent its death.

THE DEATH OF THE HOUSE

At some point during a house's life-span, the dwelling is forsaken. There may be several reasons why a settlement is discontinued, including agricultural collapse, social or political reorganization, or attacks on the settlement. In some cases, such as at Jarlsberg, the death of an inhabitant and the house seem to coincide, and may very well be linked. In any case, somehow the meshwork of people, animals, things, and matter breaks down, and the house is no longer viable.

In funerary rites of the Scandinavian Iron Age, maintenance of bodily integrity did not necessarily constitute an ideal. On the contrary, burial rites often involved a deliberate fragmentation of the body. Hedeager argues that 'Through a process of deconstruction, skeleton remains achieved an afterlife and thus outlived the living person in a variety of contexts. Bodily remains were imbued with agency and a biography of their own...' (Hedeager, 2010: 111). Following the train of thought of the *house-body*, the same ideal could apply to dead houses. A common trait of hall buildings is that they are consciously deconstructed after their death, when the roof-supporting posts are pulled out of the ground, possibly to be reused in other contexts. This was for instance the case at Högom (Ramqvist, 1992: 190).

Icelandic sagas reveal that posts from houses, particularly posts connected to the high-seat, were taken by Norse migrants to Iceland. The Vikings would throw the posts overboard, and where the posts reached the shore, they would build new halls or cult buildings (e.g. *Eyrbyggja saga* 4). The sagas mention the same custom with regard to cadavers: when Kveldulf died on the voyage to Iceland, his son threw the coffin containing the body overboard, and where the dead man washed ashore, they settled (*Egil's saga* 27). Consequently, these narratives may again underpin a

relationship between house and body, house-parts and body-parts. When roof-supporting posts were removed from buildings during the dismantling phase, this may have been because the posts were imbued with the essence and agency of the house-body. Based on the etymological indications discussed above, the posts may have formed the very *bones* of the house, removed to be inserted into a new context. Through this action, a new dwelling in a novel territory would still cite the ancestral home.

In addition to deliberately dismantling the building, other forms of deconstructing the house-body may have taken place. Table 1 shows that four of the seven houses overlain by burial mounds burnt to the ground before burial. Renck (2000) suggests that it may not be coincidental that several buried houses caught fire before they were transformed into mortuary monuments. She indicates that the houses were burnt deliberately, as a ‘fire sacrifice’. Pursuing this notion further, I question whether houses were purely burnt as a sacrifice, or whether the concept of the *house-body* was at play. May burning the building have constituted a *cremation* of the house? Burning the house may have been a process of deliberate fragmentation and transformation of the house, analogous to how cremation can be understood as the deliberate fragmentation and transformation of the body (e.g. Williams, 2001).

THE BURIAL OF THE HOUSE

After the conception, life, death, and abandonment of certain houses, their transformed bodies were superimposed by mortuary monuments. As the custom has not been quantified, it is very difficult to state how rare the tradition of burying houses was — but in any case it was not common. The fact that only some houses were interred, while the majority were (presumably) merely abandoned, does not render the custom meaningless. In fact, we already know that many *humans* did not receive a burial in a form that is observable through archaeology today; Price (2008: 259) tentatively estimates that more than half of the populations of the Viking period may not have received a formal grave at all. Human bodies could be treated in a myriad of ways in the Iron Age and particularly the Viking Age: cadavers could be cremated, inhumed, or dismembered, their body position supine, prone, or seated; they could be buried in a house, in a ship, in a boat, in a chamber, in a coffin, in the earth, alone, together, decapitated, with animals, with objects, with wagons, in urns, in cauldrons, scattered in a mound, their bones ground, and so on (see for example

Svanberg, 2003; Price, 2008). Perhaps the intentional dismantling of the house, where the posts were pulled up and removed (possibly to be inserted into new contexts), simply constituted an alternative mortuary practice for the meshwork of the house. Intentionally burning the house may be another variant of post-abandonment treatment (see Tringham, 2000).

The seven examples of buried houses discussed here are biased toward high-status settlements, and it is possible that social standing would come into play when deciding the form of post-abandonment treatment. Mound burial is in itself linked with certain social strata. The significance of the house-body may conceivably have been stronger for high-status households, entailing a greater desire for ritual commemoration. A commemoration in the form of a mortuary monument was plausibly an honour only extended to some — whether human or house. However, the custom does not seem solely connected to the upper social strata. Other possible reasons why some houses were treated in this way are open to speculation: one reason could feasibly be the nature of the events leading up to the house's abandonment. Perhaps some reasons for abandonment necessitated certain closing actions to ensure a correct passing of the house. It is conceivable that some houses *had* to be burnt because certain events necessitated a complete destruction of the house, for example certain forms of illness (Tringham, 2000: 124), or the need to force the spirits of the dead inhabitants to leave the dwelling (Blier, 1987: 125–26). Another reason may be the population's desire to create public, performative events which, in the words of Jones (2007: 70), 'engender an active process of remembrance'. Perhaps certain house-bodies had such a life history that they needed to be remembered through complex events of dismantling, burning, or burying the house to ensure its commemoration.

In some instances, the construction of a mound over the house seems to have taken place immediately after abandonment, as for example at Engelaug and Högom (Table 1). However, in other cases, decades or even centuries elapsed between the collapse of the network — the death and abandonment of the house — and its burial, as at Ullandhaug 1 and Brista. In the cases of an extended time-span between the abandonment and burial of the house, the intent was possibly more strategic, following Renck's (2008) interpretation of territorial claims. However, the time lapse means that the memory of the house must have been upheld for centuries, and the knowledge must consequently have been transferred from generation to generation.

Subsequently, after hundreds of years, Late Iron Age people returned to the site and made the economic and ritual investments of interring a long-dead house. Perhaps this was intended not only as an act of commemoration, but even as a way to connect with a dead house-body through a new citation. The strategy may have been to manipulate social memory and conjoin hitherto separate meshworks.

Finally, it is important to stress that only selected mounds constructed over houses contain human remains. Dead humans have generally been assumed to be the crucial point of the burial practice. The house has been interpreted, explicitly or implicitly, as a 'grave-good' for the dead. Renck (2000: 220–21), for instance, interprets the burning of the house at Brista as a sacrifice for the dead child. However, following the line of reasoning that has been here, I wish to turn the argument on its head. Can we assume that the house must be a gift or sacrifice to a dead person? An alternative, although quite radical way of looking at the events of the house at Brista, would be ask whether the child was deposited as a funerary object with the dead house. This falls in line with rare traditions of depositing infants and toddlers as construction deposits in Northern Europe (Capelle, 1987). In Scandinavia this has, in addition to the Brista case, been attested at the Early Iron Age site of Sejlflod in Denmark, where eight infants were deposited in abandoned longhouses (Nielsen & Rasmussen, 1986); at the Early Iron Age site of Rolfståan in Sweden, where the burnt remains of a child were deposited by the hearth (Carlie, 2004: 141); and in the Viking Age by the deposition of four children in what is interpreted as two sacrificial wells at the military encampment of Trelleborg (Jørgensen et al., 2014). Following the argument developed here, I would suggest that these practices are not necessarily centred on the dead children, but on the abandonment of the settlement sites themselves. Whether or not the children died of natural causes and were subsequently deposited in constructional remains, or were sacrificed, is impossible to ascertain. However, we cannot automatically dismiss the possibility that children (or adults) deposited in connections with buildings were sacrificed in honour of the house.

By recognizing and actively challenging the assumptions of anthropocentrism and ideas of inherent rationality, it is possible to approach social phenomena in the past in new and original ways. The broader implications of the argument of this article are threefold. First, to challenge settlement archaeology in Scandinavia, by viewing the built environment as more than a shelter or an economic unit. The house can be seen as a nodal point in the social fabric of the Iron and Viking Ages, a cluster of

heterogeneous agencies and materialities. A second implication is that strict divisions between mortuary archaeology and settlement archaeology should be transcended, and social phenomena should be approached as the interconnected processes they are. Third, my aim has been to widen the interpretative horizons of traditional archaeological models and use current debates on the agency of the material world to approach old material from new points of view.

CONCLUSIONS: COMMEMORATING DWELLING

The intricate intertwinement between architecture, patterns of domestic practice, life rhythm, artefacts, and people — alive and dead — situates the house and household at the centre of social production in Iron Age and Viking Age Scandinavia (Eriksen, 2015a). In this article I have, through three interpretative steps, argued that this intertwinement may have been conceptualized as an essence in an embodied form, a *house-body* that was born, lived, matured, and eventually died. Elite architectural monuments in particular may have been conceptualized as social agents, and as material expressions of symbolic capital, territorial claims, and social memory. The extended curation of halls may have constituted strategies of power legitimation, upholding the social order (Stenholm, 2006). Yet more average settlements could also seemingly be entangled in complex relations between house and person, fragmentation of bodies and fragmentation of houses, and mortuary citations between the two.

Burial practices can be understood as transactions involving the encounter and circulation of various agencies and entities, material and immaterial, human and non-human. In this article, I argue that overlaying a longhouse with a burial mound is not necessarily an elaborate mortuary monument for a particularly powerful individual, as is often assumed. Nor is it necessarily limited to a rational-economic act of communicating territorial rights. I suggest that the practice should be explored as an ontological reality in the past, where the house-body *was* an entire relational meshwork of humans, animals, things, practices, and spaces. This social agent, the house-body, could be curated for extended periods, and subsequently disrupted, deconstructed, cremated, and interred. Its mortuary transformation into a burial mound is thus a commemoration and a *rite de passage* of the entire relational intertwinement of people, things, bodies, spaces, and materialities that made up the house. Ultimately, I have questioned the *a priori* assumption of the anthropocentricity

of burial in the Iron and Viking Ages. As researchers, we should not assume uncritically that people in the past thought about the world in rational-economic terms. In light of the interpretation of houses being the primary focus of certain burial practices in the Iron and Viking Ages, perhaps puzzling archaeological categories such as cenotaphs and votive deposition could be revisited and explored anew.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Howard Williams for inviting me to contribute to this special issue, and his helpful comments on earlier drafts. Some ideas presented in this article originally derive from my master's dissertation, and during my MA work I benefitted substantially from discussions with supervisor Per Ditlef Fredriksen. These ideas were developed further as a side branch to my doctoral work at the Department of Archaeology, Conservation, and History at the University of Oslo. Lotte Hedeager, Unn Pedersen, Per Ditlef Fredriksen, and Elise Naumann provided thought-provoking and useful suggestions for this article, for which I am very grateful. Many thanks also to two anonymous reviewers.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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La commémoration des structures d'habitats: mort et enterrement de maisons en Scandinavie à l'âge du Fer et pendant l'époque Viking

Les débats actuels sur l'ontologie des objets et sur la matière ont ravivé les discussions théoriques en archéologie et ouvert nombre de perspectives sur le passé, des perspectives qui ont à peine commencé à être l'objet de recherches concernant l'âge du Fer récent en Scandinavie. L'article présenté ici est un examen critique de la tradition, qui se manifeste de façon intermittente, de recouvrir les maisons longues et les 'manoirs' (halls) de tertres funéraires pendant l'âge du Fer et l'époque Viking. Après avoir servi de marqueurs sociaux dans le paysage pendant des décennies ou même des siècles, certaines habitations furent transformées en monuments funéraires et remplirent un rôle mnémotechnique, rappelant l'espace dédié aux morts. Mais est-ce la maison ou le défunt que l'on enterre et honore ? Un examen des structures d'habitat recouvertes par des tertres funéraires, ainsi qu'un recours aux discussions théoriques sur la biographie sociale et la matérialité, nous permet d'éclaircir les citations entre maisons et corps en Scandinavie à la fin de l'âge du Fer. En fin de compte c'est l'interprétation anthropocentrique de la pratique d'ensevelir les maisons qui est mise en cause. Ici il s'agit plutôt de suggérer que la maison était entremêlée avec l'essentiel du foyer et que la transformation des structures d'habitat était une forme de citation funéraire non pas d'un individu mais du réseau entier que la maison représentait. Translation by Madeleine Hummler

Mots-clés : âge du Fer, époque Viking, manoirs, tertres funéraires, maisons ensevelies, biographie sociale, agentivité de la maison, matérialité

Im Gedenken an die Wohnstätten: der Tod und die Bestattung von Häusern in der Eisenzeit und Wikingerzeit in Skandinavien

Die aktuellen Diskussionen über die Ontologie der Gegenstände und der Materien haben den Diskurs in der archäologischen Theorie erneut und eine Vielfalt von Perspektiven über die Vergangenheit erschlossen. Diese Sichtweisen haben erst

begonnen, in den Untersuchungen der späten Eisenzeit in Skandinavien aufzutauchen. In diesem Artikel wird die in der späten Eisenzeit und Wikingerzeit sporadisch dokumentierte Tradition Langhäuser und Edelsitze mit einem Grabhügel zu überdecken kritisch angesehen. Nachdem diese Häuser Jahrzehnt- oder sogar Jahrhundert-lang als Landschaftsmerkmale dienten, wurden einige Wohnsitze in Grabhügel umgestaltet, die als materielle Gedächtnisstütze des Bereiches der Toten galten. Ist es aber das Haus oder der Tote, den man so beerdigen und ehren wollte? Durch die Untersuchung von Wohnstrukturen, die mit Grabhügel überdeckt wurden und mit Hinsicht auf die theoretischen Diskussionen über die soziale Biografie und Materialität wird hier versucht, die Zitierung von Häusern und Körper in der späten Eisenzeit und Wikingerzeit in Skandinavien zu erleuchten. Schlussendlich wird unsere anthropozentrische Einstellung gegenüber der Sitte Häuser zu begraben infrage gestellt. Hier wird betont, dass das Haus eher mit der Wesentlichkeit des Haushaltes verknüpft ist und dass die Umgestaltung der Gebäude eine Art von Zitierung war, aber nicht unbedingt eines individuellen Toten, sondern des gesamten, verknüpften sozialen Netzwerkes eines Hauses. Translation by Madeleine Hummler

Stichworte: Eisenzeit, Wikingerzeit, Edelsitze, Grabhügel, vergrabene Häuser, soziale Biografie, Agentur eines Hauses, Materialität

Figure captions

FIGURE 1 Location map of the central Scandinavian sites with buried houses discussed in this article.

FIGURE 2 Plans of buried houses from central Scandinavia. Högom adapted after Ramqvist (1992: 34) and Ullandhaug adapted after Myhre (1980: 33).

By permission of Per Ramqvist, Lise Nordenborg Myhre.

FIGURE 3 Plans of buried houses from central Scandinavia. Brista adapted after Renck (2000: 219) and Jarlsberg adapted after Grindkåsa (2012: 46).

By permission of Michael Olausson, Lars Erik Gjerpe/E18-prosjektet Gulli-Langåker.

TABLE 1
OVERVIEW OF SEVEN BURIED HOUSES FROM CENTRAL SCANDINAVIA

| Site | Date of house | Post-abandonment treatment | Time-span between house and grave | Interpreted gender | Body treatment | Funerary objects |
|---------------------|--|--------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Högom IV</i> | 4 th –5 th century | - | Immediate to decades? | Interpreted male in primary burial | Cremation | Iron kettle with cleaned, burnt bones, horse, bear claws, bronze fragments, comb |
| | | | | Int. female in secondary burial | Cremation | Burnt bones, comb, brooch, bear claws, horse, dog, sheep/goat |
| <i>Högom III</i> | 5 th century | Fire Post removal | Immediate | - | - | - |
| <i>Ullandhaug 1</i> | 5 th –6 th century | Fire | Centuries? | - | - | - |
| <i>Ullandhaug 6</i> | 5 th –6 th century | - | Unknown | - | - | Spearhead |
| <i>Brista</i> | 5 th –6 th century | Fire | Decades? | Unsexed child in posthole | Cremation (child) | Comb in child burial |
| | | | | Unknown gender(s) in mounds | Unknown body treatment in mounds | Unknown artefacts in mounds |
| <i>Jarlsberg</i> | 6 th –7 th century | Fire | Immediate inhumation burial in floor layer | Int. male inhumed on central axis | Inhumation burial in floor layer | Inhumation: Sword, spear, shield, knives, whetstone, horse's head |
| | | | Unknown time-span before mounds were erected | Unknown gender(s) in mounds | Unknown body treatments in mounds | Unknown artefacts in mounds |
| <i>Engelaug</i> | 8 th –9 th century | Pulled down to build the mound | Immediate | Int. female | Cremation | Spindle whorl, iron fragments, iron knife, fragment of pin (oval brooch?) |