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Neil Price

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Nine paces from Hel: time and motion in Old Norse ritual performance

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Abstract

Recent research on burial ritual and cultic practice among the Scandinavian peoples during the Viking Age (c. AD 750–1100) has generated an increasing interest in the notion of performance as one of their integral components. Building on earlier studies that have addressed the issue in principle, this paper focuses on the practical ways in which evidence for funerary and cultic drama can be recovered from the archaeological record. With an emphasis on the reconstruction of participatory movement and the time frame of ritual, a series of case studies is explored, drawing on both excavated graves and the archaeology of sacred space.

Keywords

Drama; performance; mortuary behaviour; cult sites; Viking Age; Scandinavia.

Dramas for the living, dramas for the dead: the performative rituals of the Vikings

The last two decades have seen an increasing interest in the notion of performance as integral to the ritual practices of Viking-Age Scandinavia (c. AD 750–1100). A concern for such an operative dimension to spiritual belief has long been present in studies of Norse religion, especially of its earliest textual source material in the form of the medieval Eddic poems on heroic and religious themes (e.g. Phillpotts 1920). Latterly this was revitalized and taken further by the research of the folklorist Terry Gunnell (1995), whose work on the origins of Norse drama convincingly suggested that many of these sacred narratives had been composed not just for oral delivery but actually for performance with a cast of actors. As other scholars worked in parallel on similar themes (see Harris 2000), these studies were extended into the dramatic use of material culture (Back Danielsson 2007; Gunnell 2008a) and the spatial arena and social meaning of such dramas (Gunnell 2004, 2008b).

Alongside these new understandings of how what we now call Norse mythology may originally have been communicated and perceived, archaeologists, including the author, began to explore similar theoretical directions in the parallel realm of mortuary behaviour and the complex practice of funerals. A key problem in Viking-Age burial research is to explain the almost infinite variation of detailed ritual practice evident within a relatively limited but consistent repertoire of outer grave forms. In a series of earlier papers, I have argued that a possible explanation may be found in the nature of the burial rituals themselves, which may have taken the form of funerary dramas literally acted out at the graveside. Such performances could relate to the dead, their family and community, broader tales of identity and (spiritual) history, or the great stories of culture heroes and myths: any or all of these elements combined, altered and renegotiated into a unique funerary act specific to the deceased, in turn set within landscapes of burial monuments and numinous power, themselves perhaps the subjects of ancestral narratives. The ‘grave-goods’, including larger items such as furniture and vehicles (sleds, wagons, ships etc.), can be seen as props, finally placed with great precision and deliberation at the point where their part in the plays was done. The same applies to the ‘actors’ themselves: the animals – and occasionally humans – killed as part of the funeral performance and of course the dead person(s) at the centre of the drama (Price 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2012, 2013a and references therein).

On the combined evidence of archaeology and textual sources, such burial theatrics could be prolonged, taking up to ten days and necessitating the temporary interment of the body while the permanent grave was prepared; the performances could include nocturnal rituals by moonlight; they might be mounted on a lavish scale, involving the whole community and visitors coming from long distances; they could include prolonged episodes of feasting and drinking, music, songs and chants, visionary experiences, consensual sexual acts between couples and in groups, gang rape, suicide, human sacrifice and the mass killing of dozens of animals. There are eyewitness descriptions of funeral performances of this kind proceeding under the formal, almost professional, direction of female specialists and their daughters. The dead could be burned on pyres, interred in wooden chambers, on ships, in shrouds, in boxes, under mounds, within stone settings or otherwise accorded a wide range of elaborate rites, sometimes in combination (Price 2008b; Fig. 1).

A similar but place-specific range of dramatic enactments has also been suggested to have taken place at the cultic places and sacred sites of the wider landscape. The latter was definitely ordered by socio-political and religious function, perhaps even embodying a human version of the divine world, and was presided over by a hierarchy of ritual specialists and functionaries (Hedeager 1999; Brink 2004, 2008 and references therein).

These ideas have now begun to make their way into the popular literature on the Viking Age (e.g. Harrison and Svensson 2007; Lihammer 2012, 159–86), and have gained widespread acceptance. However, it is one thing to note the *probable existence* of ritual performance in these contexts, but a quite different matter to uncover *what it was that actually happened*. How might these postulated dramas be staged? What really occurred at the gravesides of the Vikings and in their cultic places? In this article I suggest a few approaches we can take, illustrated with archaeological examples and focusing primarily on the detailed recovery of time and motion. Particular attention will be paid to the excavated potential for understanding the spatial arena and duration of specific action.

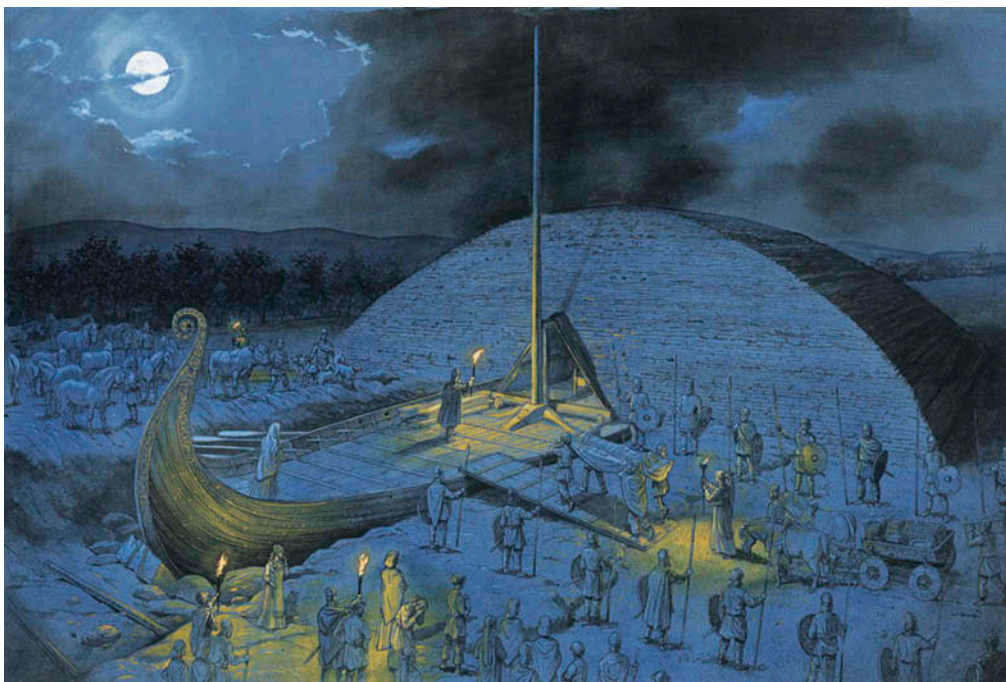


Figure 1 A reconstruction of the ship burial at Oseberg, Vestfold, Norway, dendrochronologically dated to c. 834. Following the work of Terje Gansum (2004), the grave is shown as a half-mound covering part of the vessel, while the primary interments are installed. This image gives a good approximation of the kind of activities accompanying a major Viking-Age funeral (painting by Anders Kvåle Rue, NordicImage.com, © the artist and used by kind permission).

Setting the stage: a Swedish sanctuary?

A beginning can be made with the ‘stage’ of performance, turning to two Swedish case studies of probable cultic sites in which bounded spaces can be clearly discerned and explored, and where it is possible to trace something of the rituals that took place there.

The first of these is an unusual stone feature and its environs excavated at Lilla Ullevi in Uppland province, north of the great Lake Mälaren in central Sweden (Bäck et al. 2008; Hållans Stenholm 2010). The place-name is theophoric, combining the name of a god with the suffix *-vi*, usually interpreted to refer to a sanctuary of some kind, and indicative of a sacred site in the vicinity. Here, the meaning is clearly ‘little sanctuary of Ullr’, Ullr being a poorly understood but widely worshipped god associated with the wilderness, forest and snow (place-names indicate that he was well anchored in this part of Scandinavia: Vikstrand 2001, 2010). The core of the site as excavated was a trapezoidal platform of closely packed stone, roughly 10 metres a side and oriented almost exactly east-west. The platform was edged with larger boulders of consistent size and with two projecting 6m-long lines of stones on the eastern side forming a semi-enclosed space between them (Fig. 2). The platform was raised up on an artificial terrace and situated on a low rocky outcrop, with the ‘forecourt’ area oriented so as to face the cliff edge to the east with a view over the surrounding area (Fig. 3). Dateable material



Figure 2 The Vendel Period and early Viking-Age stone platform at Lilla Ullevi in Uppland, Sweden, seen from above. The packed stone feature with projecting lines and ‘forecourt’ can be clearly seen (photo, after Bäck et al. 2008, by Max Marcus, © www.flygfoto.com and used by kind permission).



Figure 3 An aerial photograph of the Lilla Ullevi platform (see Fig. 2), seen from the north-east and showing its position in the rocky terrain. The main activity area was to the south of the stone structure (i.e. the left of the image) (photo, after Bäck et al. 2008, by Max Marcus, © www.flygfoto.com and used by kind permission).

recovered from contemporary deposits gives a period of use for the site from AD 600 to AD 750, ending at the very start of the Viking Age.

Within the ‘forecourt’ were four deep postholes, forming the corners of a rectangle with the long sides aligned east-west, parallel to the projecting lines of stones. The excavators interpreted

this as the remains of a wooden platform erected in the centre of the ‘forecourt’, and suggested that this may be the first recorded trace of a *seiðhjallr* – a kind of elevated ritual stage associated in Icelandic sagas with the performance of *seiðr* magic. The interpretation may be supported by a find made just outside the southern edge of the stone platform, a basket-like part of an iron object of a kind interpreted as a staff of sorcery, the primary tool of the *völur* seeresses and other women associated with the practice of *seiðr* (see Price 2002, ch. 3).

A number of postholes around the stone platform suggest a mixture of small timber structures and free-standing posts. The latter included a rough north-south line of timber uprights approximately 15m east of the stone packing, and a linear feature of stones delimiting the southern edge of the rocky outcrop. Within these boundaries, a large number of finds can be used to reconstruct the actions that took place there. People had clearly been moving around the outer edges of the stone platform, as evidenced by a build-up there of cultural deposits. Many fires had been lit around the site, especially to the immediate south of the platform where there was a large area of baked soil indicating prolonged and repeated burning. This southern area in general seemed to be a focus of activity: here stood a number of individual, slim upright posts in groups of three, with more than sixty iron amulet rings buried in the ground between the posts and the southern edge of the stones (a handful of others were found on top of the platform). This same area was strewn with more amulets in the form of miniature shields, together with lances, arrows and fire steels. Some thirty-six iron knives had also been dug down around the stone platform. Interestingly, large numbers of iron crampons – season-specific winter artefacts – were deposited around the outer edges of the overall area bounded by the alignments on the outcrop.

Although a few broadly similar sites have been found (Zachrisson 2004; Andersson and Skjallberg 2008; Bratt and Grönwall 2010; Price 2013b), the stone platform at Lilla Ullevi is probably one of the first securely dated, located and identified cultic sanctuaries to be discovered from late Iron Age Scandinavia, in all likelihood dedicated to the god Ullr as the place-name implies. At the very beginning of the Viking Age, we can begin to reconstruct what happened there, up on the rock, in a manner that has not hitherto been possible at such places. We must see the sanctuary in three dimensions, raised up to see and be seen, but with activities within its bounds partly shielded from view by the timber and stone alignments. We see the movement around the periphery of the platform, only rarely upon its surface. Especially to the south we see the digging and burying, people bringing objects to the site and leaving them there. Then there is the burning, and we must think of the smoke from the fires, another barrier to outside eyes; it is also possible that the Ullevi rituals took place at night, which would add a very different dimension to the flames on the rock. We must consider the effort, the investment of time and energy, but also who was doing this and who was not; were there actors and audiences here? Elevated above the archaeologically accessible surface, and thus unknown to us, there is lastly the possible wooden structure in the ‘forecourt’, where seeresses may have worked their magic.

Nine worlds, nine nights, nine paces? A sacrificial site from the late Viking Age

Moving from the beginning of the Viking period towards its end, in the late tenth to mid-eleventh centuries, we find a second Swedish site of broadly similar nature but with its own, enigmatic details. In Närke province, to the north-west of Uppland, is Götavi, another theophoric *-vi* place-name that means ‘sanctuary of the gods’ (Lagerlöf, Lindblom and Svensson 2008; Svensson 2010; Vikstrand



Figure 4 A vertical aerial view of the nine packed stone features uncovered at Götavi in Närke, Sweden. In a sequence of actions occurring sometime in the eleventh century (and thus very late in non-Christian terms), they were dug down into a marshy island in an open plain, before being covered by a thick layer of clay. Timber posts were set up around the perimeter to form an enclosure, within which blood sacrifices were held (photo by Kenneth Svensson, © Arkeologikonsult AB and used by kind permission).

2010). Here, in the middle of a small marsh, nine parallel lines of stone packings had been dug down and then buried beneath a platform of clay to form in effect a little artificial island (Fig. 4). The resulting rectangular feature, oriented north-east/south-west, appears to have had a slightly bowl-shaped depression at the centre and been bounded by timber fences along the short sides. Chemical analyses show that a great deal of fat and blood had been spilled within the enclosure, especially near the north-east end where wooden posts had been erected. There had also been some kind of organic depositions – probably food remains or simply meat – along the south-eastern fence line, on top of the clay surface. A connection to animal (and perhaps human) sacrifice seems clear: this too was some kind of ritual site.

As at Lilla Ullevi, we again see a bounded space, but set within an open and somewhat inaccessible swamp – perhaps a liminal place. Once more this raises questions about onlookers and observers, about different kinds of participation or exclusion – a site of blood and noise. Unlike its Uppland cousin, the sanctuary at Götavi is astonishingly late in date, which would seem to bear out the many literary traditions that depict Sweden as especially resistant to Christian influence for much longer than the rest of Scandinavia.

Patterns, purposes and processions

Both of these sanctuaries were clearly places with a purpose, the site of repeated action and thus repeated performance. At both sites we can trace monumental architecture – albeit in modest

form – with very specific landscape contexts, setting up immediate spatial relationships between ‘actors’ and ‘audiences’. The nature of the sites facilitates movement in some directions and areas, while inhibiting it in others. The rites performed at these Swedish sanctuaries (and we must preserve necessary caution in suggesting *exactly* what took place there) unfolded in other dimensions too, including that of time, and here again the sequence of actions can be partially read from the excavated remains.

Another way to access this behaviour is through numbers, and here too there is evidence from Götavi in the form of those nine parallel lines of packed stone. Invisible beneath their covering of clay (though perhaps they once lay exposed), their existence was probably known to at least some and maybe all of those using the sanctuary. Under the clay surface, the stone rows effectively mark nine successive lines across the width of the enclosed area, extending for its whole length. That this may be related to movement and how the Götavi site was used is suggested by the wider sacred meanings of the number nine, ‘the mythical number of the Germanic tribes’ (Simek 1993, 232).

Nine, and its square root three, appears numerous times in the mythological tales of the Norse. Several supernatural beings appear in groups of nine: the daughters of Ægir, the mothers of Heimdallr, the thralls of Baugi, the maidens of Mengloð, the heads of Þrivaldi and so on. Gróa possesses nine charms, while Óðinn has eighteen (i.e. twice nine). In addition to these counts, nine more commonly marks duration, sequence or movement. Thus nine is the number of the worlds through which gods and others move; it is the number of nights that Óðinn spends on the tree and between the fires, that Freyr waits for Gerðr and that Sleipnir rides to the realm of the dead; the great sacrifices at Uppsala last for nine days and are held every nine years; nine rings drop from Draupnir in Óðinn’s hall, every ninth night; Lægjám’s chest must be closed with nine locks, one by one. Most relevant of all, perhaps, is what happens at the Ragnarök, when the god Þórr falls in battle at the end of worlds: poisoned by the Miðgarð-serpent, he takes nine great paces down into death, the realm of Hel (all examples, Simek 1993, with further references and details therein of the relevant tales). It is hard not to interpret the nine stone rows at Götavi (and the multiple groups of three posts at Ullevi) in similar terms, as markers of pattern, movement and performance, especially in view of the fact that deaths occurred there.

Processional movement in probable ritual contexts can also be read in other aspects of material culture. On the tapestries in the early ninth-century Oseberg ship grave – the most elaborate burial known from the entire Viking Age – people, horses and wagons move across the weave; similar processional movement is implied in the construction of the actual wagon in the same burial, with its fixed harness pole that meant it could move only in straight lines (Ingstad 1995). At the tenth-century cemetery of Fyrkat in Denmark, a wooden causeway raised on posts exactly bisects the grave-field, aligned precisely east-west without actually connecting anything (Roesdahl 1977), suggesting similar progress through the graves. In different ways at different places, traces of both motion and time can be extracted from the record of ritual performance.

Performing death: funerary drama at the graveside

The evidence excavated for Viking-Age burials, and the spatial arenas that surround them, inevitably raises questions as to the process and circumstances of their creation. In an article of this scope, examples must necessarily be limited, but the Fyrkat grave-field, mentioned above, is

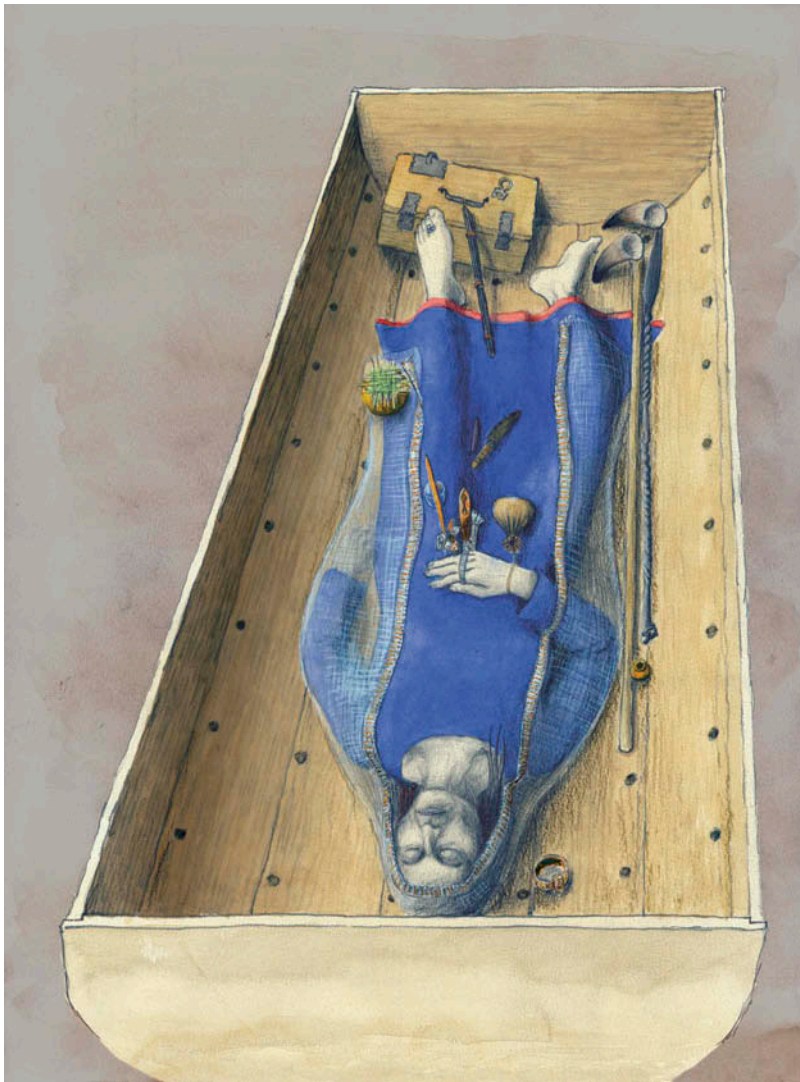


Figure 5 A reconstruction of grave 4 from the Fyrkat cemetery in Jylland, Denmark – a possible sorceress buried in the detachable body of a wagon (illustration by Thomas Hjejle Bredsdorff, after Pentz et al. 2009, © the National Museum of Denmark and used by kind permission).

a good place to begin. In the centre of the cemetery, at the mid-point of the ‘causeway’ and clearly placed in a position of prominence, is a female grave that is the most elaborate on the entire site (Price 2002; Pentz et al. 2009; Pentz and Price 2013; Fig. 5). Apart from its suggestive location, other aspects of the grave provide clues to the details of its creation, not least the use of the removable cargo body of a wagon as a container for the corpse. When we find fragments of things in burials, it is important to remember the rest: thus if a woman is buried in a wagon hull that presupposes a wagon, probably used to transport her to the grave (in this case, presumably along the causeway), and so on. We can even tell in which direction her body was loaded on its bier, with her feet towards the horses.

In our recording and publication it is not enough to list the contents of a grave, like an accountant's inventory. Burials are clearly organic things, developing over sequences of ritual actions. Furthermore, some parts of them were used and then removed. Again at the Fyrkat inhumation, two posts had been erected at the midpoint of the grave-cut on the north side, angled at about 45° so as to lean out over the burial. Whatever these posts were, they had been burned *in situ*, right down into the postholes. Similar posts have been found in chamber graves at Birka in central Sweden, set into the floors of the burials and then drawn up, the postholes filled in before the graves were sealed (Price 2002, ch.3). Whole clusters of post-built structures over graves have recently been excavated in northern Iceland at Litlu-Nupár, Lyngbrekka, Kumlabrekka and Ingirðarstaðir (Roberts 2009; Price 2010), adding dramatically to the three-dimensional aspects of Viking-Age burials, not just in terms of appearance but also through the actions implicit in their origin.

We must also avoid seeing burial as a single act, the 'disposal of the dead', even when more than one person is found. While most graves had a single primary occupant, it is not uncommon to find multiple simultaneous burials. To take a single spectacular example, the twin boat burials at Salme in Estonia, believed to represent the fallen members of a Viking raiding party, contained the bodies of forty-two men (Peets 2013). This too has performative implications of scale, duration, participation, effort and complexity.

It usually seems clear which bodies in a multiple grave are the 'primary' occupants and which may have been included as 'sacrifices' – the latter may have bound limbs, for example, or obviously have been deliberately killed – but we may be deceiving ourselves. In some cases it is hard to tell what the different dead really mean, but it is possible to reconstruct the way in which their relative placement in the grave came about, and thus to approach the ritual performances involved.

Death in Denmark: a Viking-Age grave in sequence

At the cemetery of Trekroner-Gyldehøj east of Roskilde in Denmark, for example, twenty-seven graves were cut into the side of a hill – itself an interesting location – in the early Viking Age. One of them, grave A505, is of particular fascination (Ulriksen 2011; discussed in detail by Gardela 2012; Fig. 6). In a large, oval grave, a woman was interred supine with a handful of objects: a box, a bucket, a knife and a possible metal staff. At her feet but inside the grave-cut, a small standing stone had been erected, and the body of a dog pressed down over it so as to be ripped apart. Chunks of sheep or goats had been strewn around inside the grave, simply pieces of flesh rather than precise cuts of meat butchered for consumption. On top of the woman and dog, with its head towards the former's feet, an adult horse had been deposited. From its position it had probably been killed in the grave, which would have entailed driving the animal down into the hole, actually standing on the woman's body. On top of the horse were parts of two more people – most of a woman's body and pieces of a man. At this point (and, despite its complexity, the sequence in the grave is clear), some large boulders had been placed on the horse and onto the face of the first woman; from their size, the stones must have been rolled or dropped into the grave, and were so heavy as to cause crushing injuries to the bodies beneath. Finally, the grave was filled in with pebbles and covered by a low mound.



Figure 6 A reconstruction of grave A505 from the Trekroner-Gyldehøj cemetery east of Roskilde, dating to the early Viking Age. The burial is shown midway through its construction, after the deposition of a woman, dog and horse but before the placement of two partial human bodies (painting by Miroslav Kužma, © Leszek Gardela and Miroslav Kužma and used by kind permission).

The Trekroner-Gyldehøj grave is startling in its elaboration, its sheer strangeness and the very evidently complex sequence of actions that it incorporated. Again, it raises key questions for the reconstruction of funerary performance. When a grave contains the partial remains of humans and/or animals, where are the rest? What was done with them, and why? In thinking about the shapes of the graves and the spaces they occupy, we can ask how it was done practically to move around and inside them during the (presumably ritualized) process of their creation? Exactly how were the graves filled? How did the corpses of humans and animals, and the objects, get in there? What did the exact body positions and object locations mean? Where and when were the preparations carried out?

An interesting question concerns how ‘normal’ these burials were, seen in their broader contemporary social context. Unusual or elaborate graves of this kind have previously been explored through notions of deviance, whether socially sanctioned or truly transgressive (e.g. Murphy 2008; Reynolds 2009; Gardęła 2011, 2012, 2013), while others have focused on memory and identity (Williams 2006; Sayer and Williams 2009). However the wider social framework is to be understood, it is clear that, if we are truly to get to grips with the performative aspects of Old Norse ritual, it will be necessary to pay precise, close and individual attention to the complex interplay between bodies and material culture (e.g. Pétursdóttir 2009; Wessman 2010; Lund 2013), and also their spatial, cognitive relationship to settlement and landscape (Friðriksson 2013).

Encouragingly, the necessary level of detail and a concern for accurate recording in relation to sequential action can be found in numerous earlier excavations, with excellent potential for reinterpretation or sometimes simple acknowledgement of the sophisticated thinking of our archaeological predecessors. One such is the remarkable burial complex at Ballateare on the Isle of Man (Bersu and Wilson 1966). An apparently modest mound proved to cover a male inhumation, female execution, multiple animal cremation and a two-stage barrow construction, all staged in clear sequence with a recoverable time dimension (it took many days) and complex rituals that even involved the substance of the mound itself, created of turfs unnecessarily brought from some distance and thereby obviously imbued with meaning. Another relevant but neglected example, showcasing the first attempt at the detailed reconstruction of object disposition on a cremation pyre, is the warrior burial from Vallentuna in Sweden (Sjösvärd 1989).

If we are prepared to follow such leads and to seek out new ones, to integrate time and movement with a concern for distance and space (including activity beyond the burial site), then I predict that the reality of Viking-Age funerals will begin to change in our interpretations. As the practical potential for recovering ritual performance increases, so will our opportunities for access to the Viking mind, in all its marvellous variety.

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Neil Price
University of Aberdeen
neil.price@abdn.ac.uk

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Neil Price is Professor of Archaeology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. A specialist on the Vikings and ancient religion, his books include *The Vikings in Brittany* (1989), *Cultural Atlas of the Viking World* (1994), *The Archaeology of Shamanism* (2001), *The Viking Way* (2002) and *The Viking World* (2008) alongside numerous other publications. His research interests also embrace the historical archaeology of the post-medieval and early modern periods, especially in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.