Don't all mothers love their children? Deposited infants as animate objects in the Scandinavian Iron Age

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Abstract

Understanding 'counter archaeologies' as taking a counterpoint and challenging normative perspectives, this paper considers infancy in Iron-Age Scandinavia through an examination of children deposited in settlements and wetlands. The paper reports on a data set of child deposition from Scandinavia in the first millennium CE, and compares the practices with cases from other Germanic areas. While a complex phenomenon where cause of death is mostly unknown, textual sources indicate that neither limited emotional responses to child loss nor infanticide was uncommon in the first millennium CE. Infanticide is widespread cross-culturally, yet is foreign to many researchers because it counters deep-held contemporary, Western perceptions of universal maternal instinct. The paper questions whether infant loss within Scandinavian and Germanic societies prompted emotional responses akin to Western, contemporary reactions. Were infants more closely related to animate objects than human beings? And did this ontological logic provoke the use of infant remains in ritual deposition?

Introduction

This paper seeks to counter and nuance normative perceptions of emotional responses to children and child loss, and explore children as a distinct ontological category in Scandinavia and other Germanic areas in the first millennium CE. Decades after seminal works to the contrary (e.g. Brück 1999; Tarlow 2000), significant universalist preconceptions of 'natural' and 'rational' action still shape archaeologists' interpretations of the past. For example, a recent article described a Bronze Age deposit of children's skulls in a Central European lake as an 'irrational, if not macabre' act. The authors stress that extraordinary circumstances must have arisen for the population to sacrifice 'what they valued most: the skulls of their children' (Menotti *et al.* 2014, 467). An even more explicit example is Stephen Mithen's statement: 'I rather doubt that any *woman* in the past has suffered the loss of a young child without emotions (…) similar to those which we describe as grief and sorrow' (Mithen 2000, 738, my emphasis). In countering such normative perspectives, this paper takes as its departure that the conceptualization of children is neither universally given nor a marginal aspect of society. The construction of infancy can rather be a significant proxy to how a culture defines crucial ontological ideas, such as social norms and morals, gender, and even humanity.

Throughout the first millennium CE, infants – or parts thereof – were repeatedly deposited in wetlands and settlements in Scandinavia and other parts of Germania. The article presents a dataset of 52 individuals from 20 archaeological sites. Cause of death is in most cases unknown, although some individuals have been intentionally killed. I use the more neutral 'deposition' instead of 'burial', as the practices contrast with the general mortuary treatment in the same societies. While the focus is on Scandinavia, the article demonstrates that the practice was shared by several Germanic tribes over several centuries. Whether the children were victims of infanticide, human sacrifice, or natural deaths, the depositional practice was intimately connected with specific places, and constituted a distinct tradition across time and space. By drawing on interdisciplinary research on infant loss and infanticide, as well as works on relational ontologies and affect in archaeology, I aim to critically question whether child loss necessarily elicited a severe emotional response; whether children inevitably were the principal subject of the deposition; and ultimately, whether infants constituted proper humans in Scandinavian and Germanic households and societies.

Infancy in Iron and Viking Age Scandinavia

Medievalist Phillipe Ariés (1962) famously argued that childhood is a modern phenomenon, and that children in medieval Europe merely constituted miniature adults. The claim was so provocative that a range of historians worked to dispel it, in effect creating a large discourse on the cultural construction of childhood in the past (Lancy 2008, 3-4). Children have been increasingly in focus also in Scandinavian research over the last decades (e.g. Callow 2006; Lillehammer 1989; 2011; Mundal 1987; 1988; Welinder 1998), as in archaeology at large (e.g. Kamp 2001; Lally and Moore 2011; Soafer Derevenski 2000). Yet, in cannot be denied that children have not been prominent subjects of inquiry in periods dominated by studies of chieftains, kings, warfare, and trade. And when infancy *is* examined, it is frequently part of a separate discourse in topic-specific journals or books. Lynn Meskell (2002, 283) warns that 'the creation of specialty topics, like gender or children, as discursive taxonomic entities has resulted in a predictable ghettoization, whereby the majority of scholars still consider such areas outside their interpretive remit'. I argue that the perception of childhood is not marginal but can rather be *central* to comprehend past life worlds.

A major challenge in studying infancy in the Iron and Viking Ages is the obvious problem that, broadly speaking, children are significantly under-represented in the mortuary material record (Holck 2008, 103, 69; Price 2008, 259; Welinder 1998; Wicker 2012). Paradoxically, child mortality rates were likely extremely high in the period; estimated to 30-60% (Holck 2008, 119; Welinder 1998). Children's low representation in the mortuary record is often explained to be due to poor preservation conditions for bone; a higher decomposition rate for smaller bones; or excavation technique (e.g. Holck 2008). However, as in many other cultures, the relative lack of children's graves may also reflect that children did not receive burial in a way that can be archaeologically observed today (Ucko 1969).

In many cultures, infants (in this article, defined as 0-12 months) go through a rite of passage before they are perceived as full social beings. In Norse sources, infants' rite of passage seems a multi-staged event. Name-giving and shedding water over the infant occurs as one such ritual, perhaps of a more public and élite character (Mejsholm 2009, 104-07). However, other, more private thresholds are also possible: In the early Christian laws, another rite of passage was *placing the infant at its mother's breast* for the first time (Mejsholm 2009, 111-16; Mundal 1987, 55). Intriguingly, as several Frisian sites will be discussed in this paper, *Lex Frisionum* has the same legal provision as medieval Scandinavia (Cuijpers *et al.* 1999, 317): through the first nursing, the infant was woven into the social fabric. Another threshold mentioned in the

Norse sources is teething (Mejsholm 2009, 116), which usually happens sometime in the first year, and underlines a multi-staged development towards becoming human. Childhood arguably ended at puberty. In early medieval law, the span between 12 and 15 years encompassed the age of marriage, the age of criminal responsibility, and the age of majority (Mundal 1988). This article limits cases of child deposition to c. 12 years of age.

Little is known of the 'childscapes' (Gamble 2007) of the first millennium — i.e. the material environs shaping the lived experience of children. Miniature horses, boats, and weapons have been discovered in medieval urban contexts, and toy horses are attested in the Icelandic sagas (Callow 2006, 66). Yet, children were plausibly to some extent seen from a utilitarian perspective — they were needed as labourers in agricultural work. The permeating form of dwelling in Scandinavia, as well as the Germanic areas to the south (Schutz 2001, 10-12), was the three-aisled longhouse. Children were certainly a vital part of the longhouse assemblage, which otherwise was made up of a heterogeneous meshwork of animals, guests, traders, weapons, workers, wood, wattle, textiles, technologies, and so forth. Whether children were related to any specific spatial contexts in the longhouse, or had any specific household tasks, is unknown. However, they may have been treated distinctly within the households. Small-scale stable isotope studies from the Viking Age indicate that children in various Scandinavian regions had a differentiated diet from adults, as children consumed less marine foods than adults. Moreover, surviving adults' diets had been altered through their lifespans, indicating that diets were to some extent connected with age (Kosiba *et al.* 2007; Naumann 2012).

Insights may also be gained from the relatively rare elaborate children's burials, such as the 10th century 'Birka girl' from the eponymic urban settlement outside of modern-day Stockholm (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2015). Not only interred with high-status objects and jewellery, isotope analyses show that this 5-year-old girl additionally ate like the male warriors of the site. However, she is probably representative of only a small proportion of children in Viking Age Scandinavia – *high-status children*. Another high-status trait common in the Norse sagas and poetry, is to name children after ancestors (Bø 1956; Mejsholm 2009, 105-06). In societies where this is common, perceptions of children as ancestors reborn may prevail (e.g. Gottlieb 2004). According to legend, Olafr Haraldsson, the later saint, was born through the help of his grandfather's belt retrieved from his burial mound, and given his sword and name (*Óláfs saga hins Helga*). Plausibly, by naming children after renowned ancestors and transferring artefacts across generations, children could inherit the qualities of their forebears.

Emotional responses to child death and cross-cultural practices of infanticide

Entwined with a growing discourse on 'sensuous' archaeologies, recent years have seen a turn toward the *affective* in archaeology (e.g. Hamilakis 2013; Harris 2010; Harris and Sørensen 2010; Tarlow 2000). While a number of scholars argue that archaeology can no longer ignore the immeasurable significance emotions play in human experience, the consensus is that emotions are nonetheless always culturally and historically situated. And yet, some emotions are habitually assumed to be universal, without reflection; the most prominent of which arguably being the emotional attachment between mother and child. In contemporary, Western culture, infant loss is frequently cited as exceptionally traumatic, and among the most difficult emotional trauma any adult can go through (e.g. Murphy *et al.* 2014; Toedter *et al.* 2001). However, even though the trauma of infant loss is often perceived and communicated as a human universal, it is arguably not (*contra* Mithen 2000).

Cannon and Cook (2015) recently discussed the emotional reactions to infant loss in the past. In their review, they demonstrate how responses to infant death may vary considerably between individuals, social groups, and cultures. Historical, economical, and psychological factors all come into play. Broadly speaking, however, it is argued that when child mortality is high, parents may not be as emotionally attached to each child, and/or children may not be regarded as full members of society. Consequently, grief reactions upon losing a child may be limited (Hrdy 1992; Mays 2000). For instance, in the Roman world, to excessively grieve neonates was socially unacceptable, as new-borns were not viewed as fully human (Moore 2009). A study of 1980s populations in slum quarters of northeast Brazil found that mothers of dire economic and social circumstances did not experience significant grief reactions upon losing a child (Scheper-Hughes 1992).

It is uncertain whether Iron and Viking Age populations perceived infants as full members of society, and thus experienced a similar emotional response to child loss as a Western, contemporary response. Based on written accounts such as sagas and Norse poetry from the 11th century onwards, there is no doubt that parents were *capable* of loving their children (Mundal 1988). The bond between nursing infants and their mother is particularly strong in the literature. On the other hand, we can ask if this does not point to the same mechanism as identified anthropologically: In households of high standing, such as the protagonists of the Norse sagas, children were wanted and loved. Their place in a kinship system ensured that they

were assigned individual identities within the social fabric from the very start, such as the burial of the Birka girl might indicate. In low-status households, living in poverty, children may to a lesser extent have been assigned a specific identity or position within a social network. An analogy is the brutal treatment of slaves and the lack of punishment for killing them in the same societies (e.g. Brink 2012). The existence of unfree populations, and the fact that some slaves were referred to as 'cattle' (Heggstad *et al.* 2008, 105), demonstrates a differentiated view of what being human entails, and opens for other kinds of being in the Iron and Viking Ages. Possibly, some children were perceived as less than individuals and more like *animate objects*, a notion I will return to.

Early legal sources in Scandinavia and later folklore suggest that infanticide was a well-known means to control reproduction. An anthropologist and primatologist in the forefront of infanticide research is Sarah B. Hrdy, who through several works has challenged the Western utopia of the loving, nurturing mother. Her research shows that females across the primate species are capable of abandoning, aborting, abusing and killing their offspring, including *homo sapiens* (Hausfater and Hrdy 1984; Hrdy 1992; 1999). A study of nearly 400 cultures found that infanticide was practiced in some form in eighty percent (Mays 2000). Likewise, infanticide has been recorded on all continents (Pentikäinen 1990), and it has been pointed out that the contemporary Western perception of infanticide as inherently wrong, is the *exception* to the norm (Mays 2000). Infanticide can take active and passive forms. Under dire social and economic circumstances, children may die from intentional neglect where mothers stop nursing their children very early, thereby significantly reducing their chance of survival (Lancy 2008, 80-81). In premodern Europe, leaving a child with a wet-nurse may have been a concealed way of ensuring a swift demise of the child, hence the term 'angel-maker' (Hrdy 1992, 415-16). However, infanticide can also take an *active* form, i.e. through strangulation, live burial, stabbing, treading to death, bleeding out, etc. (Hrdy 1992; Mays 2000; Pentikäinen 1990). And unlike rudimentary forms of abortion, infanticide does not endanger the health of the mother (Mays 2000, 181).

Infanticide as a strategy for reproductive control was arguably practiced among all the Germanic peoples (Schutz 2001, 112-13). Several authors have examined infanticide in the Scandinavian Iron Age, generally based on written sources (Clover 1988; Mejsholm 2009; Mundal 1987; Sawyer 1992; Wicker 2012). An example is the contemporary account by al-Tartushi, an Andalusian Jew who visited the Viking town Hedeby in the 10th century, and writes

that surplus children were simply thrown into the sea (Lunde and Stone 2011, 163). While the statement has received limited serious scholarly attention, it clearly creates a possible link with wetland deposition. If we were to take al-Tartushi's observation seriously, we need not wonder why so few children's burials survive from the Iron and Viking Ages. Many children were conceivably disposed of in manners that leave no commemorative material expression.

Hrdy (1992, 436-37) argues that in societies where infanticide occurs, 'delays' in being perceived fully human, such as the multi-staged rites of passage chartered above, develop partly to facilitate infanticide. In Scandinavia, there appears to be a difference in attitude towards infanticide from the pre-Christian period, where it seems to be an act of necessity and socially acceptable (Mejsholm 2009), to the increasingly strict prohibition of infanticide after the Conversion. For instance, it was still legal to expose *disabled* children after the conversion, but the act would have to take place before the first nursing (Mejsholm 2009, 111-16). Else Mundal (1987) argues that the following children had a higher risk of falling victim to infanticide: disabled children of all social strata; children of slaves and dependants; children of a middle- or high-status woman where the father denied paternity; children that resulted from socially unacceptable relationships (e.g. male slave/high-status woman); and possibly, female children (for a discussion of female infanticide in Scandinavia, see Clover 1988; Wicker 2012). A pertinent question is *who* among the household was responsible for infanticide. In the legal sources, the male household leader could decide which children should live or die, including slaves' and dependants' offspring. The sagas often use the motif of a vicious father or male relative who, against the protesting mother's will, takes the child outside of the settlement. However, in parts of the early Christian legislation the mother is portrayed as the primary agent of infanticide (Mundal 1987, 19-20). For instance, it became illegal for women to labour alone after the Conversion, as a means to ensure that the mother could not kill the baby and then pretend it was stillborn (Mundal 1987, 21). The law stresses that stillborns should be examined for signs of strangulation, hand marks over nose and mouth, or around the throat – incidentally forms of violence that would not be observable in the archaeological record.

The fact that infanticide was practiced in Iron and Viking Age Scandinavia does not necessarily mean that mothers, or parents in general, did not love their children. However, to my mind there is a dissonance between the unreflected, essentialist assumption of universal maternal love reflected in parts of the scholarly literature, and anthropological and historical examples indicating that emotional attachment to children can be contextual and contingent (Cannon and

Cook 2015, 401-02; Hrdy 1999; Scheper-Hughes 1992). I am therefore questioning whether all children necessarily were conceptualised analogous to how the modern, Western world views children – as full social beings, individuals with inherent rights. To examine this question, I will in the following present a dataset of 52 children, from foetal stage to c.12 years of age, that have been deposited in wetlands and settlements in Scandinavia and in Germania at large.

Deposition of infants and children in the first millennium

[Figure 1]

Infant deposition in Scandinavia

Artefact deposition in wetlands is known from the Neolithic to the Medieval period in Scandinavia, interpreted as a ritual practice of the *longue durée* (e.g. Karsten 1994; Kaul 2003; Lund 2004). More rarely, however, human remains are found in wetlands, including rare finds of children. Figure 1 displays the fragments of *at least* four neonate skulls deposited in a marsh sometime during the first centuries CE, at Hå, Rogaland, Norway (Lillehammer 2011; Sellevold 1987). The skulls were found clustered in an area of half a metre in diameter, indicating that they are the result of one depositional event. No other parts of the infants' bodies were found. The skulls of Hå are not the only remains of children in wetlands in first-millennium Scandinavia. At Hundrup Mose, Zealand, Denmark, seven individuals were deposited in a bog in at least three incidents between c. 500-800 CE: two adults, where one was of non-local origin, two older children where one was non-local, and three neonates of unknown origin. Although the causes of death are unknown, the circumstances have led to an interpretation of repeated human sacrifice on the site, possibly of foreign slaves (Jørgensen *et al.* 2014).

Children can also be deposited in human-built wetlands. In the 8th-10th centuries, four children, accompanied by various animals and an adult skull, were deposited in two wells under the later military encampment of Trelleborg (Gotfredsen *et al.* 2014; Nørlund 1948). Cause of death could not be established, and strontium isotope analyses indicate local origin for all four. However, the analyses pair up, indicating that the children originated from two different areas surrounding Trelleborg, one child from each area deposited in each well. This has been

interpreted to suggest that children from the surrounding areas were repeatedly sacrificed in the two wells (Gotfredsen *et al.* 2014, 159).

A more frequent phenomenon was to place children in the constructional elements of buildings. Not only children are known to be deposited within the built environment in Iron Age Scandinavia; adults or parts of adults were deposited and/or buried in connection with entrances and doors (Artelius 1999; Eriksen 2013), on the central axis of the house (Grindkåsa 2012), in walls (Ambrosiani and Erikson 1993; Backe *et al.* 1993) and associated with hearths (Gejvall 1955). Yet, depositing *children* in constructional remains seems to constitute a distinct and significant tradition throughout the first millennium CE. Commencing in the Early Iron Age, single neonates/infants were deposited at the settlement sites of Nørre Hedegård (Runge 2009, 120-21) and Nørre Tranders (Hansen 2006, 146), both in Denmark, in the last centuries BCE. At the settlement site of Sejlflod, Jutland, eight infants were deposited between the 1st century BCE and the 5th century CE, mainly in the roof-supporting postholes of abandoned longhouses (Nielsen 1987; Nielsen and Rasmussen 1986). In Migration-period Brista, Sweden, the cremated remains of a small child were placed within the posthole of a longhouse (Renck 2000). At approximately the same time at Rolfstaån and Trogsta in Hälsingeland, Sweden, children were burnt *in situ* or deposited in/by the hearths of houses that subsequently burnt and were superimposed by burial mounds (Liedgren 1992, 81, 113, cf. Eriksen 2016).

Finally, in 11th century Lund, Sweden, an infant between neonate and three months of age was discovered in front of the hearth in a house built with roof-supporting posts (Roslund 1990). The deposition is interpreted to have occurred while the house was inhabited, a cut made through the clay floor. This deposition is distinguished by the fact that Lund was an early medieval Church town, and the household in question has therefore made the intentional choice of disposing the infant body inside their dwelling, rather than at the Christian cemetery. The infant was also oriented N-S, against the traditional Christian E-W orientation.

[Figure 2]
[Table 1]

Germanic parallels

The act of depositing children in buildings is not an exclusively Scandinavian phenomenon (Fig. 2). Children or infants were repeatedly deposited in constructional remains along the

North Atlantic fringe, including south and central Scandinavia, Old Saxony, Friesland, and Anglo-Saxon areas on the British isles (Capelle 1987; Hamerow 2006). These are all Germanic nations which throughout the first millennium were profoundly oriented towards the North Atlantic seascapes, and in close contact with each other.[1]

I will elaborate on selected, relevant North European parallels. Of note is the fact that many of the following sites have exceptional preservation conditions for bone. At Tofting in Schleswig, north Germany, a child was deposited in a backfilled well in the 2nd century CE. Subsequently, a house was built on the spot, and the central hearth placed directly above the well containing the infant (Bantelmann 1955, 37). Likewise, at Feddersen Wierde, also northern Germany, four infant depositions occurred. In one of them, an infant – probably female – was deposited *seated* in a pit underneath a hearth (Haarnagel 1979, 231). In these two cases, the hearth was thus constructed stratigraphically above a deposited child.

Three Frisian sites are also worth elaborating. First, Wijnaldum in the Netherlands displays some connections with Sejlflod, as five infants from 0-2 months of age were deposited in recurring events from the 4th-9th centuries (Cuijpers *et al.* 1999). Two infants were discovered in a bronzecaster's workshop amidst several hearths; another in a 'cultural layer', in an intriguing assemblage including two horse foetuses and sherds of pottery. The final two were found in a domestic wall and in the cut of a well respectively. The act of depositing infants thus occurred every 100-150 years at Wijnaldum, i.e. every 4-6 generations. Likewise, at Elisenhof in Northern Germany, seven neonates were deposited in in walls, floors, corners and the yard of longhouses in the 8th-9th centuries. The Elisenhof infants have been interpreted as the

[1] Although infant deposition in Romano-British domestic contexts is well documented (Moore 2009), I have excluded this material from the potentially shared Germanic tradition I am exploring herein. However, particularly for the British Isles, a continuation of Roman practices may be implied (Hamerow 2006, 27). Infant depositions in domestic space have also been chartered in other areas of Europe in later prehistory. A study of the Languedoc region, France, in the 1st millennium BCE mentions 70 perinatal individuals from 11 oppida, deposited under floors, in yards, and under the dwelling wall (Dedet and Schwaller 1990, 145-46). Future research could potentially investigate infant deposition in domestic space in a larger geographical and temporal scope.

surreptitious burial of victims of infanticide (Bantelmann 1975, 135-37), occurring repeatedly in this community within a few generations.

[Figure 3]

Finally, a few cases indicate violent death. From a third Frisian site, Hessens, dating to the Merovingian Period, an approximately three-week old neonate, possibly female, was found completely bound in woollen fabric; again, *under a hearth*. This implies that in three instances, households intentionally placed the social focal point of the dwelling, the hearth, directly above infants buried beneath. Moreover, the Hessens infant had a cord wrapped around her neck and body on the outside of the fabric. The cervical vertebrae showed signs of strangulation, an original examination interpreting the cause of death as choking in combination with a backward bending of the head. Additionally, it was argued, the neonate was stabbed in the ribs three times (Schlabow 1953). An examination in 1992, however, concluded that all injuries occurred postmortem, and stated that this deposition should be seen as an act of loving burial, partly due to the presence of a vessel containing food/drink (Siegmüller 2010). The 1992 examination was, however, somewhat limited by the fact that the fracture sites could not be examined because they were glued with adhesive for the exhibition of the remains. Cause of death for the Hessens neonate is thus unclear.

A second individual from Tofting, Schleswig, a child of about 10 months, was deposited in the byre-section of the longhouse, inside the entrance. A wooden trough, possibly remade as a cradle, was deposited with the child inside (Fig. 3). This case is particularly intriguing because of the treatment of the body, as the cervical vertebrae showed signs of damage indicating that the child was decapitated (Bantelmann 1955, 97).

Depositional patterns across time and space

Nothing about the deposition of these 52 individuals suggests random acts (Table 1). The depositions date from the 2nd-1st century BCE to the turn to the second millennium CE. However, the majority of deposits are from the Migration Period, 5th-7th century CE, an era of large-scale mobility and strife in northern Europe. The most striking finding in my opinion is the temporal depth of these practices, also within single sites.

[Figure 4]

[Figure 5]
[Figure 6]

Across large geographical areas, certain spatial contexts are preferred for infant deposition. More than 80% of children are deposited in a settlement context (n=43). Within a settlement, the dwelling, usually a longhouse, is overall by far the most preferred setting (Fig. 4). However, regional variation applies: in Anglo-Saxon settlements, infants are consistently deposited in sunken-featured buildings (Hamerow 2006). Looking inside the domestic house, some constructional elements stand out (Fig. 5): particularly, infant deposition connected to the hearth, in walls, and in postholes. These traditions are shared over large regions and through several centuries. Intriguingly, infant deposition could occur at the foundation of a building, during its life, and as a concluding ritual at abandonment. Other known concluding rituals for buildings in Iron Age Scandinavia include artefact deposition, animal deposition, and burning and burying the house (Carlie 2004; Eriksen 2016).

The mortuary treatment of the children is consistent. In one area, eastern Sweden, cremation is evident, while in all other regions, inhumation is ubiquitous. In seven cases, children were deposited with animals, and in four cases, in assemblages including adults or adult body parts. Most deposited children were infants (i.e. 0-1 year), and if neonates and infants are combined, this age group accounts for c. 75% (Fig. 6). Notably, the eldest child of the collected material, of 11-13 years, may have been regarded as an adult in their society. Seven children have been tentatively sexed, four females and three males. Finally, almost 50% of the sites display traditions of multiple or recurring deposition, either in wetlands (Hå, Hundstrup Mose, Trelleborg), or within domestic space (Sejlflod, Wijnaldum, Feddersen Wierde, Elisenhof, Tofting). This may indicate that certain communities had long-lived traditions for infant deposition, perhaps in a cyclical, recurring rhythm.

Thus, the archaeological record clearly demonstrates that Iron-Age populations over large areas of Northern Europe desired to place dead children in highly charged spatial contexts. How we interpret deposited children is closely related to how the children died. And yet, in most of the present cases, we do not know. The three plausible causes of death are *natural deaths, human sacrifice, and infanticide*. Deposition may reflect, as has been suggested in some instances, a specific, loving burial practice for children dying of natural causes (Siegmüller 2010, 95-96). That is nonetheless a very selective burial treatment. Sites with repeated deposition every 100-

150 years clearly does not encompass all stillborns or early deaths that occurred within the societies. At Sejlflod, there is a contemporary burial ground including child burials, and yet eight infants have been placed within the houses instead of the burial ground (Nielsen 1987). Deliberately, only some children have been placed within settlements or wetlands, and they were generally inhumed – also where the norm for mortuary treatment was cremation (Cuijpers *et al.* 1999, 316). Second, as has been quite convincingly interpreted for the Trelleborg wells and the Hundstrup bog, some of the children may have been victims of sacrifice – human sacrifice is attested to the period (e.g. Price 2008). Several of the Frisian and Saxon sites have been interpreted as 'house sacrifices' (Capelle 1987), however without, I would argue, considering the full consequences of such an interpretation. Third, and not in strict opposition to the former, some of the children have been interpreted as victims of infanticide.

Possibly, all these phenomena occur in the dataset. Nevertheless, differentiated treatment in death, distinct diet, and the legal right to expose or kill new-borns, indicate that infants were socially differentiated from adults. Moreover, the relative frequency and consistency in the tradition of infant deposition are the consequences of deliberate acts, indicating specific concerns regarding childhood, as well as persistent tension regarding particular spaces.

Affective webs: Infants, dwellings, and memory

Child deposition along the North Atlantic fringe occurred in two distinct domains. First, in wetlands, the same places as where Iron Age Scandinavians executed communal rituals, a domain to which the 'sacrificial wells' may be added. Sacrificial well is an oxymoron: The structures cannot have been used to collect drinking water, as the water must have been contaminated by the decomposing bodies of humans and animals therein. The 'wells' are something else – the closest interpretation is perhaps that they are *cultivated bogs*, wetlands reconstructed within settled areas, under a settlement's control and care.

A second, more frequent tradition was to place dead infants around and within their homes, and I will focus on deposition in dwellings in the following section. Infant deposition could take place either at the time of construction, during habitation, or at abandonment of a house – incidentally, exactly as *artefacts* are placed in Scandinavian houses during the same stages (e.g. Carlie 2004; Eriksen 2010, 42-55). The infants' patterning in the archaeological record, particularly their deposition in postholes, hearths, and walls, also echoes where artefacts are deposited in domestic space in Scandinavia (e.g. Carlie 2004; Eriksen 2015, 246-47), and other

Germanic areas (Capelle 1987). Thus, their small bodies were deliberately placed in spaces of tension and charge – the hearth, the posthole, the wall – sometimes in houses still occupied.

At this juncture, I wish to draw out two further points regarding deposition of infants in domestic space. First, the intimate relationship between especially young infants and *the house*. Infants deposited in domestic space were part of tacit engagements that literally bound their bodies within the place of dwelling, creating relational lines between infant body and house. Infants and houses were connected. Can this be linked with an idea of children as ancestors (cf. Lally and Moore 2011)? The children are ancestors reborn, and therefore belong in the house? Or, is the practice of placing infants in domestic space not mainly focused toward the child at all, but toward the dwelling? The prevalent spatial pattern of placing the children in or connected to the *hearth* suggests that the practice specifically concerns the house and household. The hearth is a focal point of social life, and of artefact deposition, in the Scandinavian Iron Age (Carlie 2004). Anthropological studies have found that the hearth can represent — or perhaps even *be* — the household (e.g. Bloch 1995). By placing the children under or in front of the hearth, in some cases burning them *in situ*, the child, whether stillborn or killed, is conceivably intended as a devotion for the house. This interpretation falls in line with rare traditions of burying houses in first-millennium Scandinavia. I have previously interpreted a sporadic custom of covering Iron-Age longhouses with burial mounds as a mortuary monument not for an individual, but for the house itself (Eriksen 2016). Taken together, rare traditions of burying the house, and of placing infants in constructional elements and hearths, may point to the house potentially being perceived as an agential presence worthy of devotion or even burial. Perhaps, then, the practice was not primarily focussed towards the child at all, but toward the house.

Second, I wish to consider the mnemonic and affective aspects of the deposited children. The longevity of the tradition at many of the sites, where 4-6 generations could pass between each instance, prompts further reflection. It is difficult to understand this differently than that the mnemonic thrust of infant deposition must be significant – even after 4-6 generations, the communities at Sejlflod or Wijnaldum knew what to do when circumstances prompting infant deposition arose. Harris (2010) introduces the concept of *emotional and mnemonic geographies,* where objects, places and people are enmeshed in affective webs, coming together in a practice of place-making. The act of depositing an infant is embodied and sensual – digging a hole in the yard or in the floor, perhaps bending the arms and legs, placing the

infant in the ground, covering it with earth. A selection of infants to be deposited must have taken place, as the numbers are too low to encompass all dead children within specific communities. Why some were selected to be deposited, we can only speculate: perhaps they were under specific age thresholds; possessed qualities that made them suitable for deposition; or possibly, the practice was regulated by cyclical events or external circumstances. In some cases, Iron Age people dwelled with their dead children, in other instances they came back to place them in postholes of abandoned houses. The deposited infants must have been part of specific concerns and affects connecting adults, children, and the house over significant temporal depth, passed on from generation to generation.

Ontological blurring: Infants as animate objects

Finally, the turns to ontology and new materialism have led us into now familiar territories of object agency (e.g. Gell 1998; Hodder 2012; Jones and Boivin 2010; Olsen 2003). The term 'animate object' has been defined as things that have sentient qualities, are conscious, and possess a life force (Brown and Walker 2008). As in other cultures, an arguable ontological blurring exists between people and things in the Germanic societies of the first millennium CE, evident for instance in the idea of 'living swords' (e.g. Brunning 2013; Burström 2015). However, if we are to take the full consequences of the notion that some objects are *animate*, and that things and humans are of the same 'flesh' (Olsen 2003); the question becomes: *If objects can be people, can people be objects?* Infants are also sentient, alert, and have a vivid presence, and yet they are wholly dependent on their immediate surroundings for survival. They cannot sustain themselves, fight back, move independently through space or communicate their needs beyond the most basic channels. Following the cited definition, are not infants animate things? Lally and Ardren (2008) explore similar ideas when they discuss children as 'little artefacts'. After the backlash against Ariés' (1962, 38-40) ideas of children as miniature adults, where attachment was limited, many works have strived to show that children had an intrinsic value in past societies, as e.g. 'spiritual beings' (Moore 2009) or particularly 'powerful' (Lillehammer 2008). Yet, no definite constitution of infancy exists in the present or the past. I follow Lally and Arden (2008, 72) in arguing that archaeologists need to move past comfortable, taken-for-granted frames of reference such as the concept of humanity and the non-objectified infant. Turning object agency on its head and viewing (some) infants as animate objects recognizes ontologies where people are things that can be exploited, interacted with, and manipulated. The archaeological record often counters our 'self-evident' truths – such as the idea of the delimited, non-objectified, inherently valuable, Western subject

(Fowler 2004), yet this is not always acknowledged in archaeological discourse. The human body is an artefact, which can be – and in the Scandinavian Iron Age, is – exploited, fragmented, dismembered, curated, and instrumentalized for ritual purposes.

I thus propose an interpretation where some or most of the deposited children constituted animate objects, transcending the categories of human and thing in societies where personhood was fundamentally dissimilar to modern, Western preconceptions. Instead of seeing material objects and humans as two opposing categories, I wonder if the ontologies of Germanic societies were increasingly complex and messy. I am not here arguing an essentialist notion of infancy over vast areas and several centuries. I have already argued that factors such as kinship or social status significantly determined how children were treated in life as well as death in the first millennium CE. Children had the potential to become full adults – a fact that was surely recognized – and I do not doubt that children could be loved and cherished. Yet, for some of these children, I think the ontological reality was that they related more closely to vibrant things than humans. Obviously, unfree populations, as well as animals (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2004), may also have been regarded as 'animate objects' in Iron-Age ontologies – in a blurred state between being sentient and agential, yet with limited independent agency; enduring treatment as an object; and being exploited for labour, food, or sacrifice. Perhaps their 'between-ness' even made infants, animals, and slaves particularly powerful objects to devote to the house or the gods.

Conclusions

In the introduction, I argued that the construction of infancy can be a significant proxy to how a culture defines crucial ontological ideas. This paper has shown that across northern Europe, children were deposited in a similar manner and in similar spatial contexts throughout the first millennium CE. The study thus highlights the need to look beyond national boundaries when studying past phenomena, and future research will undoubtedly nuance the findings herein. More to the heart of the matter; although cause of death mostly remains unclear, infant deposition may counter *a priori* postulates of intrinsic humanity and emotional responses to child loss. I propose an interpretation where infants are animate objects, a third way of being, collapsing the categories of human and thing, in an ontology where ideas of personhood can both be extended to objects, but can also be reductive in terms of what constitutes a person.

Alberti (2016) recently argued for *alterity* in archaeological discourse. He suggests using ontology as a tool for 'unsettling our certainties' rather than as a tool for description. Ultimately, that is what this paper aims to do – it attempts to unsettle taken-for-granted, contemporary certainties about the world, human relations, and infancy. Not only does an interpretation of children as animate objects provide, to some, provocative insights into later prehistory. Explorations such as these can moreover aid us in discussing fundamental questions; such as what it is to be human – or thing – across time and space.

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