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Familiarity breeds remembrance: on the reiterative power of cemeteries

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ABSTRACT

Based on mortuary evidence from the Norwegian Viking Age (AD 750–1050), this article seeks to present an argument for cemeteries as key components of social memory and collective experience. Rather than focusing on cemeteries as arenas for ritual and funerary drama, it is proposed that cemeteries can also be seen as lived landscapes that are featured as landmarks in people's everyday lives. This interpretation does not detract from cemeteries as potent ritual places, but instead recognizes that they can carry multiple levels of meaning. Aspects such as accessibility, opportunities for regular interaction with the sites, and cemeteries as active and regularly used components of a landscape will be addressed.

KEYWORDS

Cemeteries; Viking Age; landscape; mortuary archaeology; social memory

The question of what a cemetery is can be approached from a multitude of angles. In addition to the obvious status of a cemetery as a physical collection of burials, these types of site can also enforce social order and embody power structures, act as focal points and reminders of divine power, and provide arenas for ritual enactment and funerary drama. They may, however, also serve equally important functions in the maintenance of collective memory and social cohesion by being a staple feature in people's everyday lives. Burials in the archaeological record testify to repeated actions and cultural reiterations and it is argued here that cemeteries in the Viking-Age in Norway were places that were maintained through repetitive, daily interaction.

The complicated nature of burials

Burials contain a wealth of information. They also provide an emotionally enticing link with past practices of commemoration and mourning, as well as information on ritual practices and through this, belief systems. As deliberate deposits, rather than the more haphazard selections we are likely to find in settlement archaeology, they contain reflections of identity and culture (Stutz and Tarlow 2013, 2), though whether or not these expressions reflect a reality or an idealized version is a central question. Burials can be viewed as ideological expressions, open to manipulation and as constructs, made to answer a specific purpose (Parker-Pearson 1982, 99). We cannot, for example, assume that the treatment given to a dead individual necessarily bears direct relation to their status in life (Stylegar 1997, 80; Fahlander 2009, 36). A burial may be a product of particular customs or the individual concerns and wishes either of the deceased or the mourners. Add in the vagaries of

preservation to these challenges and it becomes clear that we may well be constructing ideas about the social status on very partial evidence.

These concerns are secondary in the context of this article, which focuses on cemeteries as *places*, rather than on individual burials. They do reinforce, however, that burials and cemeteries served multiple purposes in early medieval societies, and that we need to view them as multidimensional. No one-sided focus on usage, drama, power or religion will capture the totality of their social significance.

This article concentrates on the sites as focal points for communal action. Cemeteries are conceived as multifaceted places that served as arenas for ritual enactment, for death rites and religious acts, as manifestations of power and wealth, but largely as locations that facilitated the more mundane functions of reiteration and reproduction of social memory. In this sense, they acted as gathering places for rituals and burials, but also as places that were significant within the routine landscape as well as taking on particular roles and meanings at special times.

The archaeological record

The following discussion is based on a review of material dating from the Viking Age (AD 750–1050) from south-eastern Norway, specifically from the area west of the Oslo Fjord in the county of Vestfold (Moen 2019). This is an area rich both in archaeological remains from the Viking Age, and in research history. The presence of monumental ship burials such as Oseberg, Gokstad and Borre (see for example Ingstad 1993; Pedersen 2008; Bill and Daly 2012), together with Norway's only-known Viking Age town at Kaupang, as well as other extensive cemeteries and settlement remains (Skre 2007c, 2007a; Bill and Rødstrud 2017), means the area has long attracted scholarly attention.

The cemeteries discussed in this article broadly correspond in date, falling within the Viking Age and all are found within a limited geographical area (Figure 1), and they share a number of traits which support the assumption of a shared cultural platform between the populations they served, including topographical placement and combinations of grave goods (Nicolaysen 1887, 1888; Gjerpe 2005; Stylegar 2007; Moen 2019).

The recently excavated site at Gulli (Gjerpe 2005) provides a high level of detail on landscape considerations, whilst the sites of Melau (Nicolaysen 1884), Bjerke (Nicolaysen 1894), Farmen Søndre (Nicolaysen 1888) and Nes (Nicolaysen 1886) in the area known as Hedrum, all share a direct relationship with the river Numedalslågen which runs directly by them. The Kaupang cemeteries are also linked to communication routes, and to the living community that they surround (Moen 2019).

Burials from Viking-Age Scandinavia are often described as being characterized by *variety* (see Price 2008). The grave goods are varied and often rich, burial rites can take the form of cremation or inhumation, external markers can be mounds of different shapes or flat graves, and internal structures can range from boats and chambers to chests and coffins (Stylegar 2007; Price 2008). Notwithstanding this variety (Svanberg 2003; Moen 2019), there are shared attributes across the Scandinavian regions that testify as well to a broader collective cultural sphere (Price 2008)

Interpreting the mortuary landscape in Viking-Age Norway

Burials alter and influence the landscape in which they are placed, and impact upon the physical reality of those who lived in it. It is worth underlining, however, that death rituals and cemetery



Figure 1. Map of the study area with sites mentioned in the text. Map drawn by the author.

display do not necessarily reflect the actual power relations at play in a given society (Parker-Pearson 1982, 100), instead, they may be expressions of an ideal, or desired situation.

In this sense, burials can be interpreted as acts that naturalize and legitimate hierarchies of power, as is argued for Viking-Age Vestfold. Many studies of the mortuary landscape have correspondingly focused on questions of status and ownership (see Gansum 1995, 1997; Skre 1997, 1998; Iversen 1999; Gansum 2004; Skre 2007b; Brink 2008). As a result of this preoccupation with power relations, the mortuary landscape is often described in rather loaded terms as imposing, dominating, powerful, competitive, and as an integral part of how the elite communicated their power (Gansum 2004; Skre 2007b; Jennbert 2006, 136; Thäte 2009, 115; Griffiths and Harrison 2011, 132). In this narrative, the landscape is a manifestation of power, manipulated by chieftains, kings and the landowning elite. Burial mounds are cast as expressions of a ruling elite who are, according to different interpretations, either secure (Ingstad 1993, 226; Skre 1997) or insecure in their power (Fuglestedt 1997; Gansum 1997; Opedal 2010, 17).

Another meaning often ascribed to burial mounds is based on the medieval legal classification of burial mounds as property markers (Skre 1997, 43). Two Norwegian medieval legal texts state that land ownership can be proved by following the family line back to heathen burial mounds, or to

haugs ok til heiðni (Skre 1997, 43; Zachrisson 2017). In this interpretation, each household leader in every generation was provided with a burial mound, thereby marking their social importance and connecting the family with the land (Skre 1997, 1998). This is often allied to assertions that inheritance rights to land developed around the time of the Early Iron Age (as problematized in Gjerpe 2017, 154; and detailed by; Zachrisson 2017).¹

More recent approaches to the mortuary landscape of Viking-Age Norway have focused on burial mounds as foci for ritual actions that may have served to legitimize power structures (Østmo 2004). The wider context of the landscape in which the burials are located has also become a key part of many interpretations (Rudebeck 2002; Østmo 2005; Danielsson 2015). In addition, concepts of the landscape as a social and cultural arena (Solli 2002, 30) and the notion of cognitive landscapes (Lund 2009) have seen increasing interest in the last couple of decades. However, these approaches still embrace a belief that the mortuary landscape expresses status of some description.

This article proposes another avenue of enquiry, arguing that cemeteries may also have fulfilled more mundane functions in the reproduction of social structure with burials as manifestations of social cohesion. In this interpretation, the cemetery formed a physical framework which influenced and structured people's experiences, understanding and actions on a more ordinary scale in their everyday lives. A recurring attribute of Viking-Age burials in Norway is that they are often placed on arable land. Norway, as a country, has notoriously little arable land, and so the dedication of such areas to housing the dead has previously been suggested as a potent statement of power and status (for a discussion, see Gansum 2004, 233–235). It could also be interpreted as indicating a desire to keep burials accessible and part of everyday experience, as arable land also attracts settlements. The proximity of burials to places of daily activity, including arable land, settlements, rivers and roads suggests their incorporation and importance in the lived landscape.

Communication in passing

There is a clear link between lines of communication and the burials at several of the sites in this study. The cemetery at Gulli in Vestfold (Gjerpe 2005) consists of 20 burials, mostly under mounds, and all dated to the Viking Age. The burials on the site are neatly divided by a line, interpreted as a road (Figure 2). The road is assumed to have been contemporary with the use of the cemetery, as the graves respect its line and the road does not truncate any of the barrows (Gjerpe 2005, 17). The road leads towards a modern-day farmstead, and the possibility that it once led to a Viking-Age farm, a hall or assembly site, cannot be discounted, but remains speculative. Crucially, however, it seems possible that the road was not constructed because of the graves, but that the graves were consciously placed alongside an already existing routeway.

The relationship between the cemetery and road seems to have been maintained throughout the lifespan of the cemetery. The earliest graves were placed on the southern side of the road, and the northern side then came in to use, when, it seems, the southern side was considered complete. In its earliest phases, travellers passed alongside the cemetery, but over time, they came to pass through it.

The Nordre Kaupang cemetery is one of the largest collections of burials connected with the Viking-Age trading town of Kaupang. It is estimated as having contained over 100 barrows (Nicolaysen 1868; Skre 2007b; Stylegar 2007). It is one of several cemeteries connected with the town and occupies a place of prominence as the main overland travel route into town is generally assumed to have passed directly through the cemetery (Tollnes 1981, 21: as can be seen in Figure 3).

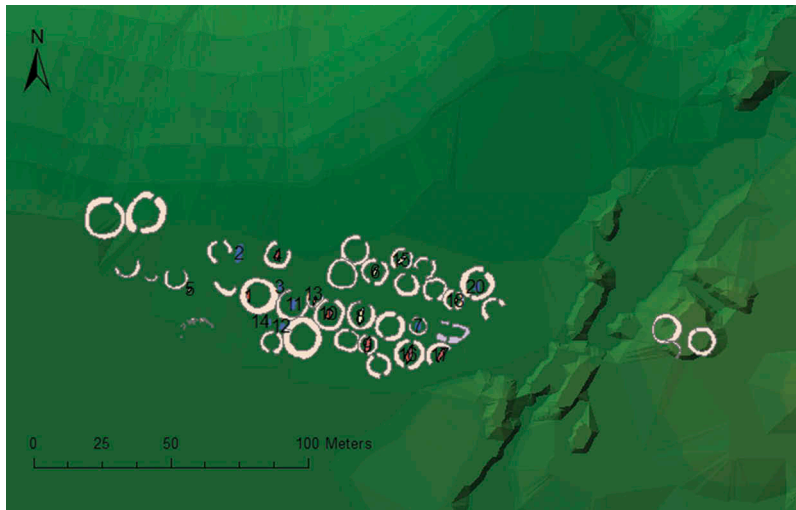


Figure 2. The site at Gulli. Graves marked in blue contain characteristics associated with female-gendered burial. Graves marked in red characteristics associated with male-gendered burial rites. Yellow are indeterminate. The road is described by the gap between the southern and the northern burial clusters.

Travellers both to and from the town would have passed through the barrow cemetery ensuring this site was experienced on a regular basis.

I have previously argued this routeway's position reflects an aspect of control (Moen 2011, 2019), but of equal importance is the heightened visibility enabled by the position of graves close to the road. Those travelling this route were continuously exposed to these monuments, making the site and barrows routine features in the landscape, and thus, familiarity may have been as important as monumentality.

The common association of roads with cemeteries and burials has attracted considerable attention from an academic perspective (Rudebeck 2002, 182; Lund 2009, 231; Thäte 2009, 108). This association can be traced in many differing geographic and temporal areas, and in Norway is often evident in the presence of remnants of the hollow-ways that mark-out some of the overland transport routes (Gansum 2002b, 16). Though often fragmentary, these are sometimes clearly visible, but can also be wholly ploughed out, as at the cemeteries at Farnen Søndre and Melau in the Hedrum area (see Tønning 2003; Moen 2019).² Whilst many roads are now lost, a solid body evidence exists in Vestfold for Viking-Age, or earlier, roads that run through, or past, cemetery sites. This supports the notion that linkage between travel and burial sites was a common concern for Viking-Age communities. Explanations may be esoteric and mundane. It is possible that such associations reflect the belief that death was a journey, with the positioning of burials by routeways acting as a form of enablement for the deceased to travel to the realms of the dead (Rudebeck 2002, 191) with the road operating as a liminal space (Thäte 2009, 108). More pragmatic reasons might be the wish to broadcast, and memorialize in a very visible way, the status and power of families and to travellers (Rudebeck 2002, 191). A further possibility is that cemeteries were located at roadsides as a form of *control*. Burials beside thoroughfares may have served to intimidate travellers, thereby aiding the control and regulation of movement as potent messages of power (Lund 2009, 231).

Of course cemeteries may have functioned in all these ways at the same time, and if we return to the idea that roads linked together living communities, it is also important to consider that

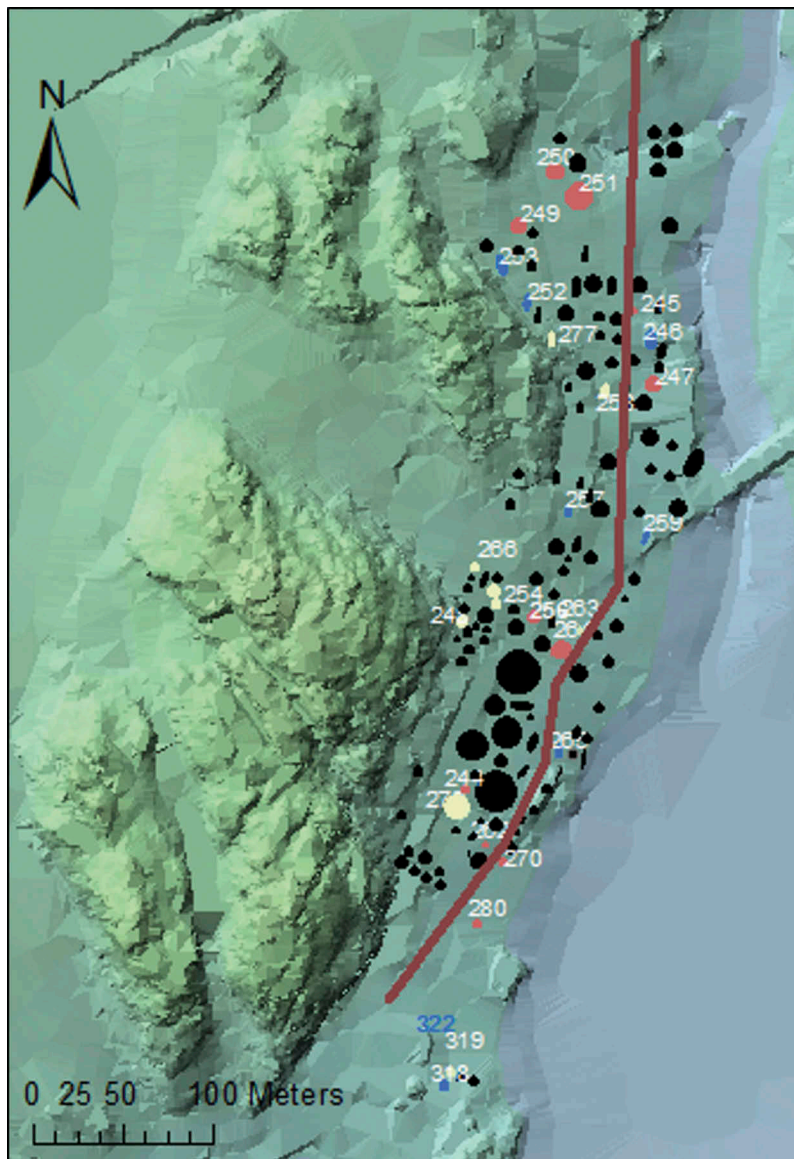


Figure 3. Nordre Kaupang with the approximate location marked out for illustrative purposes. Map after Skre 2007b, fig. 16.11.

cemeteries may also have acted as gathering places for people even when no funeral was taking place (Danielsson 2015, 69). Thus, by acknowledging that a regularly encountered cemetery must have been firmly within the register of the known and everyday landscape, we can hypothesize that these sites formed part of a subconscious landscape of familiarity. As frequently seen and experienced places, these sites may have been intrinsic to the maintenance of collective memory for the people that used the cemetery and regularly encountered it.

Floating down the river

The region known as Hedrum lies about 30 km from the Viking-Age cemetery at Gulli, and about 15 km from Kaupang. It is a locality rich in Iron Age material including a collection of impressive cemeteries and other archaeological sites and features clustered around the main artery of the Numedalslågen river on the fertile plains of the river valley.

Cemeteries such as Nes, with over 50 recorded burial mounds, the majority of which are Viking Age (Nicolaysen 1887; Tonning 2003), and Farmen Søndre with over 30 mounds, of which 12 date to the Viking Age (Nicolaysen 1888; Tonning 2003), have a direct spatial association with the river. Another cemetery beside the same river is Bjerke, with five Viking-Age burials (Nicolaysen 1894). The river fulfilled important functions as a transport artery (see Aannestad 2011), by allowing boats to travel upstream and downstream, though infrequent rapids would have necessitated occasional breaks in waterborne travel. It must also have provided food and a source of water for agriculture. The entanglement between rivers and people is a subject explored by Matt Edgeworth (Edgeworth 2011), demonstrating the multiple levels of interaction between the river and those who live by it. The river would also have operated as a boundary, dividing the landscape, yet also unifying communities as a means of transport. It was also potentially connected with beliefs and superstitions. The cemeteries next to this river were thus part of a complex and multi-layered active landscape that was both ritual and mundane. In the Kaupang landscape at least three of the known cemeteries would have been clearly visible when approaching the town by water (Figure 5).

Spatial connections between cemeteries and burials and land and river communications are evident in the placement of Viking-Age cemeteries in Britain and Ireland (Harrison and Floinn 2014, 292), and are reflected here in Vestfold in Norway. Such commonalities suggest general concerns with everyday visibility, in a landscape defined and experienced by travel.

Constant exposure to monuments may have made them natural focal points but also served to embed them within the ordinary landscape as constant features in people's lives and an implicit part of everyday practice and movement.

Gathering graves at important sites or gathering at sites of important graves?

The cemetery at Nes contains a barrow recorded under the modern Norwegian name of Tinghaugen. The name is known only from the time of excavation in the 1880s, but it may have medieval or early medieval origins and can be interpreted as meaning 'thing-mound' (Tonning 2003, 42), thus indicating a place of legal assembly. The barrow is the only remaining part of the site today, but it was once part of a collection of comparable monuments. The name has led to suggestions that Nes was the site of a local legal assembly (Østmo 2005, 99). A number of recent publications have argued that Viking-Age assembly rituals were a means of creating communal identities by means of commemorative practice (Semple and Sanmark 2013; Sanmark 2017, 82). The location of *thing*-sites at places with a long history of use, such as cemeteries, also serves to strengthen the argument that cemeteries were places of more than just funerary importance.

The layout of the Nes site follows a distinctive pattern, with several clusters of burials structuring movement at the site (Figure 4).

Similar layouts can be found at other Viking-Age cemeteries, even as far away as Ingleby, Heath Wood, in the north of England (Richards 2004). While such clusters might be indicative of the use of the site by families or other distinct social groupings, these clusters also serve to structure space

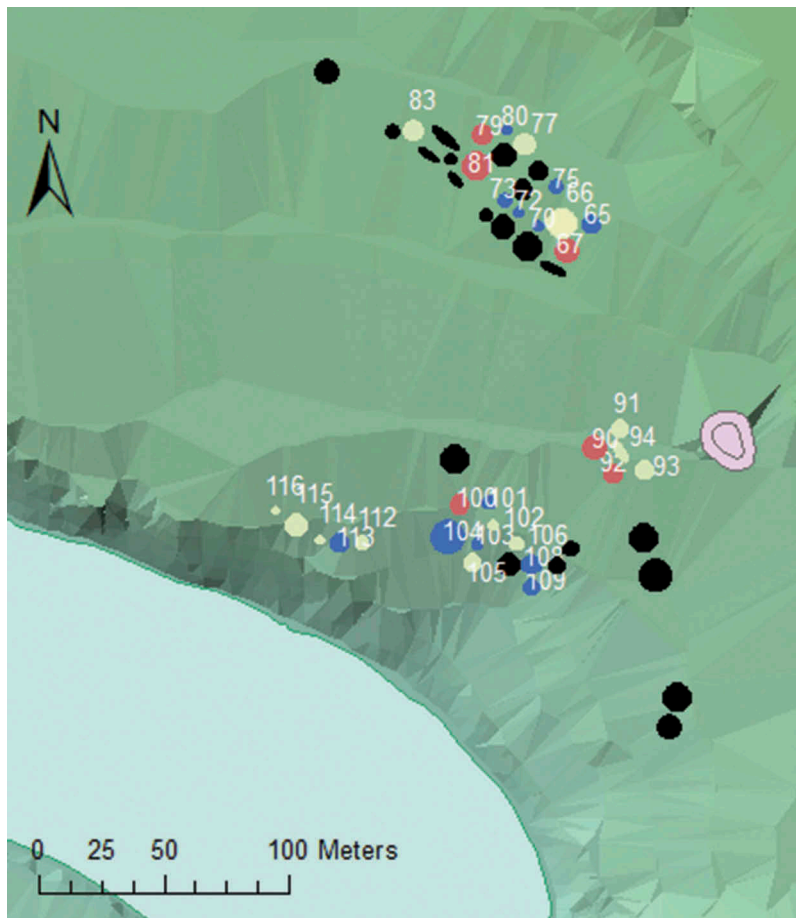


Figure 4. Nes. Graves marked in blue contain characteristics associated with female-gendered burial. Graves marked in red characteristics associated with male-gendered burial rites. Yellow are indeterminate. Undated or Early Iron Age graves are indicated in black. The large mound marked in pink is the unexcavated Tinghaug. Location downloaded from Askeladden (data owned and curated by Riksantikvaren 2019). Burial locations based on original excavation reports and Christer Tonning’s work on the site (Nicolaysen 1886; Tonning 2003).

within the site determining very specific routes and areas of movements and activity and shaping the experience of those encountering the site.

Cooking for the community

In addition to the funerary rites themselves, we can also at times glimpse indications of other performative actions at cemetery sites. One such feature is cooking pits. Found in significant numbers at the cemetery at Gulli, for example, cooking pits have dates spanning the first millennium AD, with the majority falling between AD 200 and AD 500 (Gjerpe 2008a, 204), demonstrating a long history of use for the site predating the cemetery. Cooking pits are also found near the Iron Age cemetery at Hedrum Prestegård, also in Vestfold (Cannell and Lønaas 2008). As the cooking pits often predate the burials, we cannot make assumptions of contemporary use,

but an argument that they show the importance of the place, and later, the cemeteries as active sites in the lived landscape, remains pertinent.

Exactly what these cooking pits are remains a point for discussion, but they are now generally considered to be evidence for places that served as venues for regular events with social and political potency (Gjerpe 2001). At Gulli, they imply the site was important in the centuries preceding the first burial, which took place around AD 700 (Gjerpe 2005). This lends strength to an argument of cemeteries as places of power in part imbued through repeated acts and repetitive uses. A potential link can also be drawn to *thing*-sites, as cooking-pit sites and later *thing*-sites may share significant links (as detailed in Ødegaard 2015; Sanmark 2017, 134).

The dead and the living

The continued potency of places is evidenced in the settlement remains from Gulli and Hedrum Prestegård, which are found in the same general area as the Hedrum cemeteries discussed above (Gjerpe 2005; Cannell and Lønaas 2008; Gjerpe 2008b, 2008a). At Hedrum Prestegård, the remains of a Viking-Age house are known (Cannell and Lønaas 2008), whilst at Gulli, there is evidence of a farm of the pre-Roman Iron Age (500 BC to AD 0) (Gjerpe 2008a). At Hedrum Prestegård, the inhabitants of the Viking-Age dwelling would have had more-or-less direct contact with the cemetery, which is in direct proximity. At Gulli, though connections with activity of the Early Iron Age cannot be proven, the location seems to have remained or become relevant in the minds of Late Iron Age and Viking populations.

Kaupang also deserves mention in this context as a settlement surrounded by graves. The cemeteries surrounding the settlement area were all in close proximity to the town in one way or another (Figure 5), and whichever way a traveller approached the town they would have passed by one or more of the cemeteries. Parts of the settlement would also have had clear views to one or more of the graves.

A final potent example in this context is the landscape at the newly excavated urban context at Heimdalsjordet, where again the inhabitants of the town would have had direct visibility to, and physical proximity with, a number of burials (Bill and Rødsrud 2017). These examples demonstrate how cemeteries were embedded in the daily experience of populations in these landscapes and must have become familiar features and focal points for the living.

Places of drama, or places of life?

The ritual and dramatic aspects of Viking-Age funerary rites (see for example Gansum 2008; Price 2010) are undoubtedly a key part of how cemeteries operated. The above examples, however, demonstrate an alternative dimension, with the close proximity to routes, situation on arable land and closeness to settlements, argued as indications that cemeteries were integral to the daily lives of Viking-Age populations.

Burials are idealized actions, a performed set of prescribed actions that fulfil specific goals and needs (Kristoffersen and Østigård 2008, 128–137). However, rituals can also be seen as actions which were performed because they had to be, as a complete goal in and of itself (Gansum 2002a, 251). In this framework, even burial grounds, if encountered as part of a lived reality, become part of the everyday rituals of life and repeated use of these sites and regular contact and encounters can serve to enhance collective knowledge and consolidate a shared sense of purpose. As Paul Connerton argues, social habits can be viewed as legitimating performances (Connerton 1989, 35). Thus, passing a cemetery regularly, viewing it and experiencing it through bodily involvement with its landscape can be equally as important as other forms of ritual practice in the furtherance of social memory and cohesion.

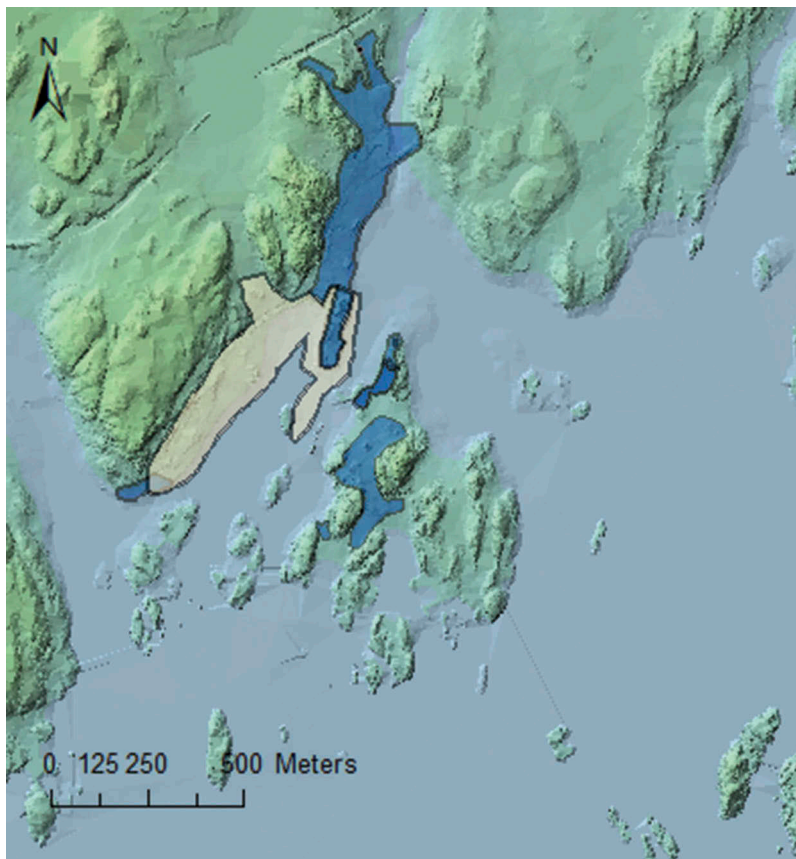


Figure 5. The Kaupang landscape. The settlement area is marked out in beige and the cemeteries are represented in blue. The map has been created using site-outlines downloaded from the Askeladden.

This article has made a case for discussing how Viking-Age cemeteries may have structured and influenced movement, and occupied a prominent role in landscapes in which lives were lived and mundane actions took place. An article by Ing-Marie Back Danielsson that discusses runestones as active structuring aspects of daily life provides several insights that can be equally well applied to cemeteries and burials (Danielsson 2015). One significant point concerns how multiple levels of meanings can be attached to a place like a cemetery: the drama of death can be remembered, but frequent experience of these sites, through their connections with roads for example, also means they would become a more regular part of daily praxis (Danielsson 2015, 69). In this way, cemeteries can be seen as symptomatic of concerns around maintaining social memory (after Connerton 1989). They were structuring, in how they dictated, restricted and shaped movement. And they need to be understood as places of regular rather than occasional use and as living and active agents in the maintenance of collective memory and experience. Viking-Age society relied upon oral transmission to maintain social memory. In such a context, the need for reiterative actions and performance is self-explanatory. By constantly referring to a shared past, for example, communities could reinforce their sense of place and reproduce and reinforce their sense of social order and shared history. Cemeteries presented ideal constructs with which to articulate and reinforce these aspects of communal connection and social ordering.

Conclusion

The mortuary record in Viking-Age Vestfold in Norway can be approached through a multitude of different lenses. There are many viable and relevant interpretations for how burials and cemeteries operated in these communities and none is mutually exclusive. This article has been concerned not so much with what the burials in themselves symbolize, but what the social function of cemeteries may have been in connection with social memory and the maintenance of shared identities. The significance of designated spaces that structure and determine movement in the landscape, viewed in connection with evidence for land and water communications, has revealed the strategic nature of cemetery placement. Furthermore, the dedication of arable land to burial activity may well underline the importance of the cemetery as a place symbolizing collective effort and shared experience.

Cemeteries certainly filled important ritual functions and were places of display and drama, but these monument-types are also important evidence for communal and familiar locations in the landscape operating as places that curated social memory and a sense of collective connection. They were visible and regularly encountered and may have operated as gathering places, used to maintain social relations and ties and curate/commemorate these relations. Familiarity breeds intimacy, and making, regularly using and encountering, these sites would have served to make them fixed and familiar landmarks that provided a spatial and ideological framework for daily existence and the collective world view of these Viking populations.

Notes

1. It is notable in the literature that ownership and inheritance rights are in the main considered as a male prerogative with male burials more visibly demarcated in the landscape (Gjerpe 2017, 161; Zachrisson 2017, 127), yet many burial mounds are erected over women, leading to the logical suggestions that either women could own land or mounds meant something other than ownership.
2. At these sites, hollow ways were recorded at the time of excavation, but due to erosion and the fragmentary survival of these roads, the exact location, as well as extent and direction are now unknown.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Marianne Moen I completed my PhD in Archaeology in 2019, with the thesis *Challenging Gender: A reconsideration of gender in the Viking Age using the mortuary landscape*. Currently employed at the University of Oslo, my research interests include landscape archaeology, mortuary archaeology, gender archaeology and feminist theory, and the creation and maintenance of social and collective memory.

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