AN OFFPRINT FROM

Studies in Funerary Archaeology Vol. 14

# GRAVE DISTURBANCES

*The archaeology of post-depositional interactions with the dead*

*edited by*
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*Hardback Edition: ISBN 978-1-78925-442-6*
*Digital Edition: ISBN 978-1-78925-443-3 (ePub)*

OXBOW | books
Oxford & Philadelphia

# 7. What happened at Langeid? Understanding reopened graves after time has taken its toll

*Camilla C. Wenn*

Some cases of grave reopening are easy to detect, as with large plundering holes in great mounds such as the famous case of Oseberg in Norway (see *e.g.* Bill and Daly 2012), but on other occasions the phenomenon is observed only through carefully piecing together the various data from an excavation. During the 2011 excavation of 21 Viking Age pit graves in the Setesdal Valley in south-central Norway, one grave was found to have a visible intrusive cut at the surface, and the excavation and the post-excavation analyses further supported the interpretation that this grave had indeed been reopened in the past. However, a number of other graves also showed irregular traits in certain aspects, although they were not recognised as reopened graves during excavation. Even though preservation was generally poor, the post-excavation work has revealed large amounts of new information about the graves, and the people and objects buried in them, and not least about the treatment of the graves at a later stage. One indication was the fairly systematic destruction of swords in the graves. Another lay in the correspondence between "empty" areas in graves and diverging stratigraphy. Initially appearing to be a one-off occurrence, the reopening of graves might actually have been fairly common.

This paper will give a short presentation of the cemetery at Langeid, followed by the possible evidence of reopened graves, as well as comparison with other reopened graves. The discussion focuses partly on the validity of the interpretations of reopening evidence, and partly on the possible motives for the re-entering of graves.

## The Langeid site

The Langeid site was excavated in 2011 by the Museum of Cultural History (*Kulturhistorisk museum*), part of the University of Oslo (Fig. 7.1). Six fields lying on terraces above the Otra River, to the east, were investigated, revealing human activity from the Early Mesolithic until the medieval period, with a clear focus in the 2nd–5th centuries AD (Fig. 7.2; Loftsgarden and Wenn 2012; Wenn *et al.* 2016; Glørstad and Wenn 2017; Wenn forthcoming). The 21 pit graves were the only features dated to the Viking Period, although there was probably a contemporary settlement close by (Wenn *et al.* 2016). The graves followed the edge of a natural terrace facing the river. The graves were roughly man-sized or larger, although with three notably smaller

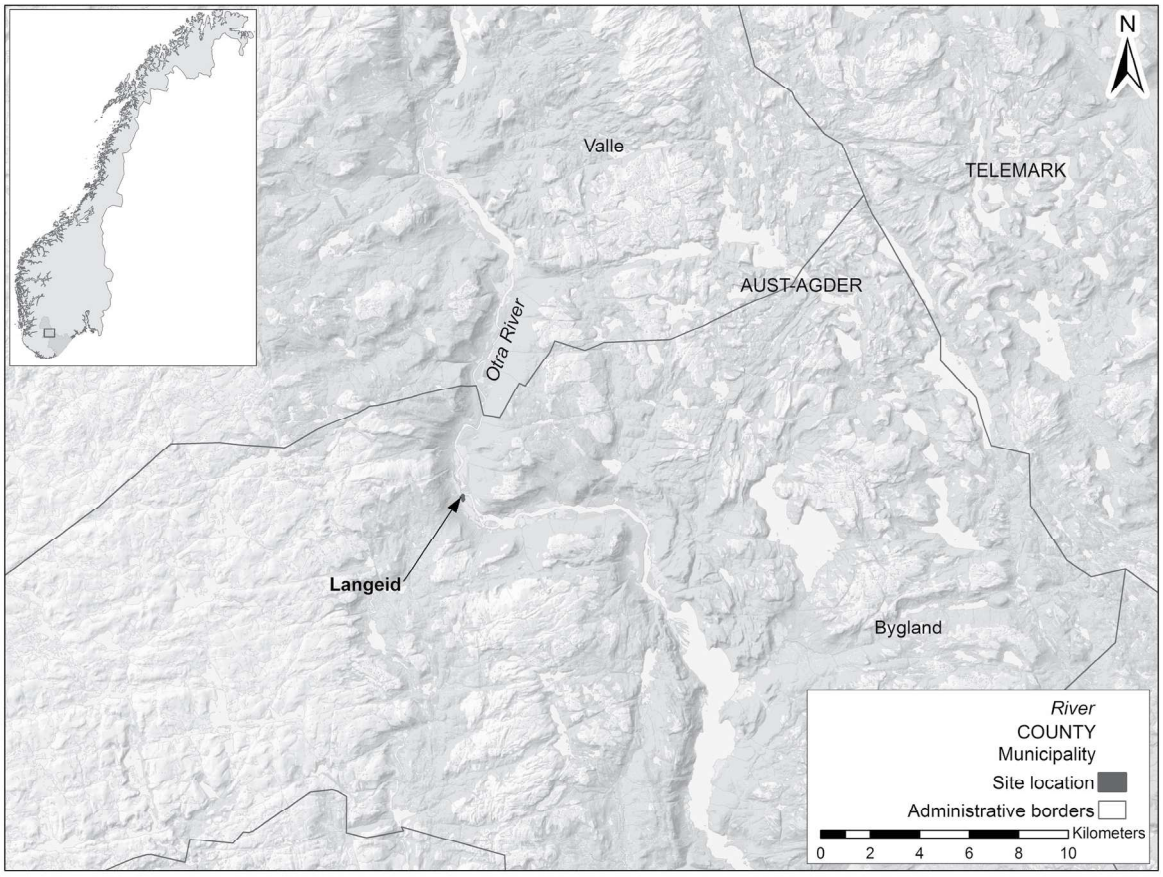


*Fig. 7.1: Site location: the Otra River running down the Setesdal Valley with Langeid (Map: C.C. Wenn).*

exceptions. They showed considerable variation in depth, number and types of grave goods, internal and external constructions and markers, and burial customs. No consistent patterns have emerged in these variables, or in the placement of the graves within the cemetery. There was no apparent chronological development or distribution in terms of gender, status or wealth (further descriptions of the graves can be found in Wenn *et al.* 2016; Glørstad and Wenn 2017; Wenn forthcoming).

The subsoil consisted of fairly loose, coarse sand and pebbles, providing well-drained fields, but with severe consequences from an archaeologist's point of view. For one thing, much of the archaeological stratigraphy was indistinct, as the organic components in the soil had been washed out. Secondly, preservation of organic material was abysmal. Wood and textiles were found occasionally, either as a corrosion product around iron objects, or fragmented around copper alloy objects, but we must presume that there were more that are now gone. Iron objects were for the most part badly corroded, and hardly recognisable before X-raying, although within the corrosion crust their original outlines could generally be observed.

Human remains were generally not recovered because of the soil conditions, a phenomenon not uncommonly observed in southern Norway. Only three graves yielded human bones, all of them


*Fig. 7.2: The excavated areas at Langeid in the landscape: the cemetery and one foot ditch at upper right and second foot ditch to the lower left (Plan: C.C. Wenn).*

cremated. Considerations of gender, age, status, occupation and so on are therefore mainly based upon the combinations of grave goods, along with the size and construction of the grave, and the interpretations are open to discussion (see *e.g.* Glørstad and Wenn 2017; Wenn forthcoming; Wenn *et al.* 2016 on the Langeid graves; a more general discussion of this challenge in Norway is found in Stylegar 2010. The challenges to such interpretations have gained new momentum after a grave from Birka has been reinterpreted in the light of new bio-archaeological evidence, see *e.g.* Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017). Four graves appeared to have contained double burials, and so an estimated 22 inhumations are likely in addition to the three cremations. Two of the double burials have most likely contained an original inhumation, to which a cremation was later added, while the other two probably held double inhumations. For the double inhumations it was not possible to ascertain if the people had been buried at the same time or not. The stratigraphy did not show any apparent signs of a second burial event, but due to the preservation conditions, such traces may have disappeared over time. The three very small graves have been interpreted as possibly belonging to children. For the rest of the graves, the finds suggest 12 male and 9 female burials, along with one undetermined cremation.

Weapons and possible weapons were fairly common as grave goods, together with various items for everyday use. Textile-working equipment and other more specific tools also occurred. Jewellery was not very frequent. As discussed in a separate article, items related to trade and exchange appeared in an uncommonly high proportion of graves (Glørstad and Wenn 2017). Six graves stood out among the rest due to the number and/or quality of the grave goods.

**Evidence of reopened graves at Langeid**

Grave 29 showed clear evidence of a reopening, which appeared immediately after removal of the topsoil. A roundish intrusive cut containing brown, organic fill extended into the trapezoidal north–south pit of the grave, characterised by yellow, sandy fill (Figs 7.3 and 7.4). The intrusive cut could be followed to the bottom of the grave pit, where it had been dug through a wooden platform, of which organic traces remained in the rest of the grave. Not only was the fill of the intrusive cut markedly different from the rest of the grave; it was also nearly devoid of objects, apart from occasional iron fragments, while the untouched floor of the grave was covered with objects. Two oval brooches, three glass beads and one amber bead, a weaving sword, two spindle whorls, scissors and two wool combs suggested a female burial along one side. Other finds included two axes, five knives, two sets of fire strikers and flints, two whetstones, two sickles, a comb, a bronze pin, a possible bridle, the upper and lower guard and parts of the blade of a sword, as well as various unidentified iron objects. The sword in particular may hint at a male burial, and the double sets of various items further support the interpretation that the grave contained two burials. Around the edges of the intrusive cut the objects seemed to be lying in confusion: this applies to the two oval brooches, the axes, beads and knives, as well as the sword fragments.

Several insights can be gained from this. Firstly, the brown fill was secondary, the result of refilling, intentional or gradual, after the grave was reopened, and indicates a cut made for entering the grave. Secondly, the many objects lying in disarray outside the brown fill are likely to have been affected by the reopening. As a consequence, although only the remains of a wooden platform in the bottom were visible, it is likely that the grave had a lidded container or coffin: otherwise the grave goods would have lain in soil at the time of the reopening, making it unlikely they would have been moved around, at least not without disturbing the stratigraphy. As it is, a hole seems to have been dug, through which it was possible to grab a number of objects. This would imply that the reopening took place before the grave structures disintegrated. Thirdly, the fragmented sword is interesting. The guards had been removed from the tang, which was not recovered. The blade had been broken, and only parts were left in the grave. When excavated, the sword fragments were found to be spread out over a substantial area.

In grave 29 the visible intrusive cut made it possible to excavate the grave with a focus on documenting the reopening as well as the grave itself. This was not the case for any of the other graves, but working through the documentation afterwards has revealed that several graves show similarities to the situation in grave 29.

Swords were found in seven graves, but only in two instances were they complete. In grave 28, a fragment of a sword blade was found by the southern short side of the grave, while the upper guard lay in the northern part by the eastern long side. In the corrosion on the guard textile fragments were encrusted, indicating that corrosion had already set in at the time when the grave was reopened and the sword broken. In the case of grave 11, the tip of a sword blade, the tang

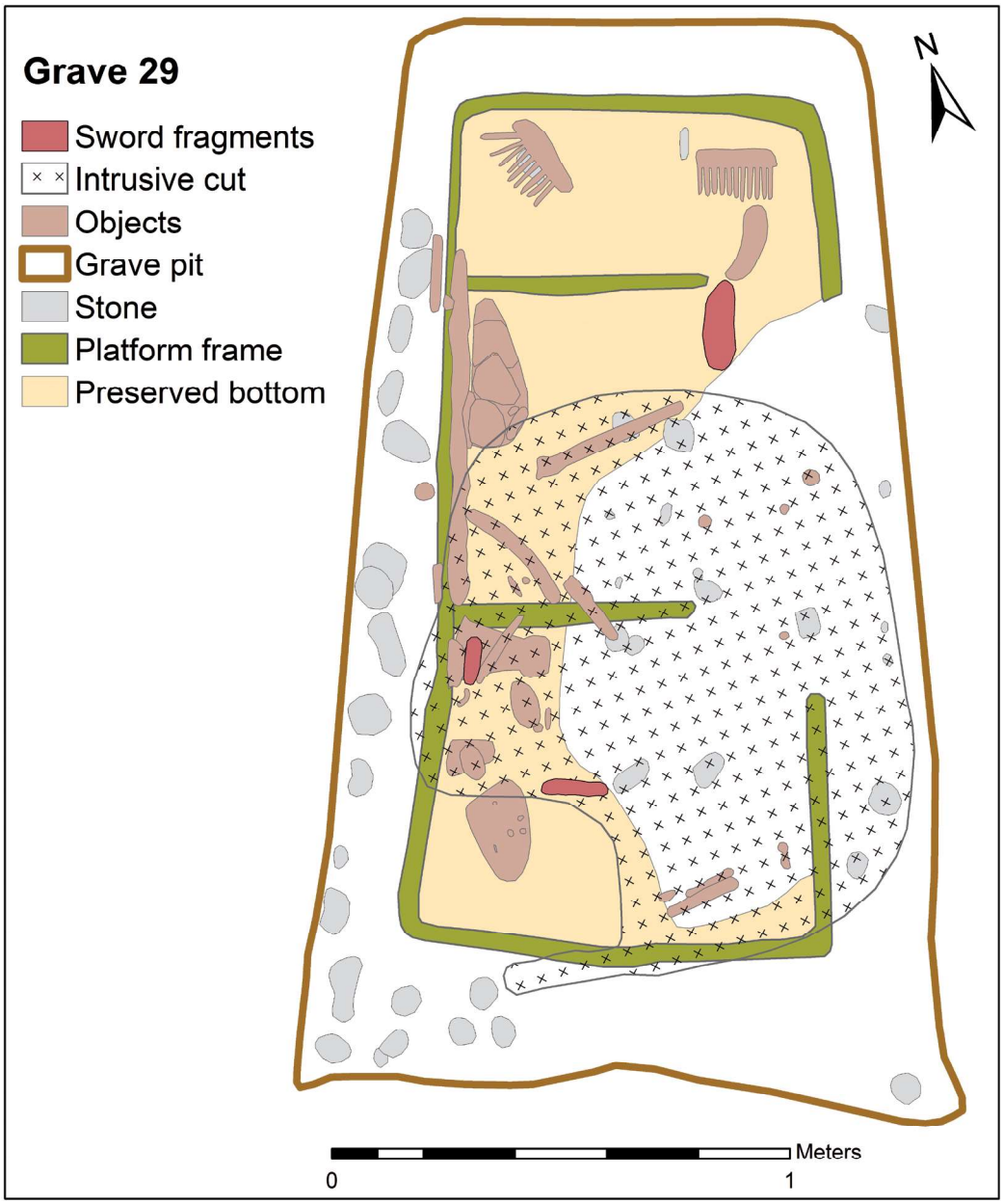


*Fig. 7.3: Grave 29 with intrusive cut and sword fragments marked out (Map: C.C. Wenn).*

and other possible blade fragments were dispersed within the grave pit. Grave 14 contained part of a sword blade, lying along the western part of the northern long side. In grave 9, the upper and lower guard of a sword were found together in the middle part of the grave.

In short, in all the cases where one or both guards of a sword were found, they had been forcefully taken off the tang onto which they had originally been affixed. Where the tang was recovered,

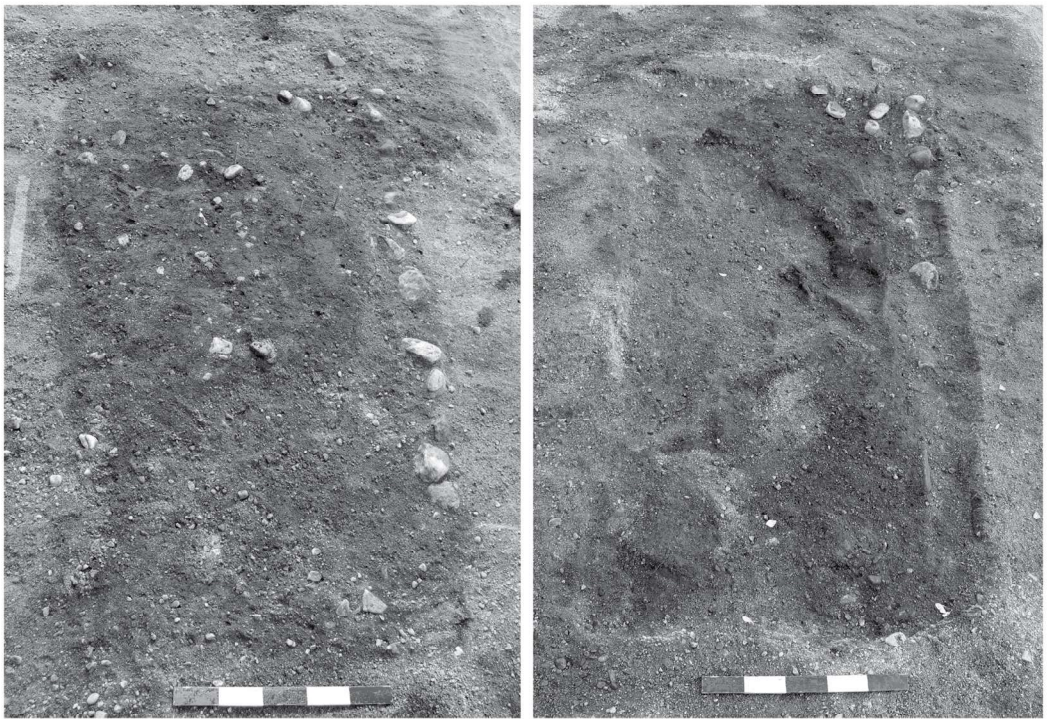

*Fig. 7.4: Grave 29. To the left is the grave before excavation, the intrusive cut being clearly visible by the darker colour. To the right the fill in the cut has been removed, as well as the fill in the rest of the grave down to the floor with objects: it can be seen how the cut has gone through the floor of the grave, and any structures and objects have been removed (Photos: C.C. Wenn, Courtesy of Museum of Cultural History).*

there was no sign of the guards. Although preservation at Langeid was not good, the condition of other iron objects makes it seem highly unlikely that some parts of a sword should have corroded into oblivion while others remained, and particularly that a tang inside a guard should have disintegrated completely. If the absence of these pieces were due to natural processes, one would expect the sword fragments to be found "in order", rather than randomly spread about. The missing pieces indicate that the swords were not just broken, but that parts were also removed from the graves.

Paralleling the fragmented state of the swords are observations made in a 10th-century grave mound at Lunde in the municipality of Vinje, Telemark County. The pommel and cross-guard of a sword were found in the mound, as were a knife, a bridle, an iron handle and several rivets (Kile-Vesik and Glørstad 2016, 27–29). The objects did not appear to be *in situ*, but rather spread out in the fill in the reopened mound (Kile-Vesik and Glørstad 2016, 34–35).

Likewise, at the Viking Period burial ground of Gulli in the municipality of Tønsberg, Vestfold County, swords had been broken and partially removed in two of the graves (Gjerpe 2005, 69, 89–90). Grave reopening was frequent at Gulli, and other objects as well as bodies were similarly found to have been intentionally broken, moved and/or removed (Gjerpe 2005, 145). At Langeid no particular object type except the swords was observed to be systematically broken or missing, though there are many indeterminate iron fragments that might have revealed a pattern, had they been identifiable.

The other indicators of a reopening that were found in grave 29 in addition to the broken sword, *i.e.*, the intrusive cut and/or fill irregularities and areas without objects or with fragmented or displaced objects, occur to various degrees in other graves. One such example is grave 6, containing a male and a female burial. The majority of the objects were recovered from the middle section of the grave, along the waistlines of the bodies, so to speak, but a fair number of objects also came from the western part, presumably the foot of the grave. The eastern part was nearly devoid of finds, and had different fills than the western part. A couple of glass beads were found, but at a distance from each other. In the western part, there was a fairly easily recognisable difference between the pit fill, yellowish and sandy, and the burial, brown and organic. The pit fill also contained a number of fist-sized stones in alignment; such a feature was lacking in the eastern part, or rather, the stones here seemed to form a heap. The eastern side lacked the distinction between pit and burial fill, and seemed mixed. The eastern end has been interpreted as the head of the grave, and if it was reopened, then the head and upper body areas seem to have been targeted. The number and types of finds in the grave puts it at the same level as grave 29 and grave 18, another double grave, both of which contained two oval brooches. It is thus possible that grave 6 may have had brooches, and possibly also more beads, which were removed. If this is the case, it would, however, be the only case of the removal of brooches.

Grave 15 showed a very clear stratigraphy in the southern half, including what was probably the bottom of a coffin or a platform – a highly organic fill of rectangular shape. In the middle of the grave this rectangle morphed into irregular shapes, and then disappeared in the northern half (Fig. 7.5). All object finds, including silver coin fragments and hack silver, were found in the southern part. Grave 11 had few finds, though the fragmented sword, in combination with an axe, indicated a male burial. The western half had some very distinct strata, possibly suggesting the existence of a shroud or the like. The eastern half was rather more uniform, though with some distinction, as in the western half and in other graves, between the sandy pit fill and a more organic fill. The subtle differences observed in the western half were, however, absent. Grave 14 was similar, showing clear stratigraphy in the west, with multiple finds, and a stratigraphically more uniform eastern part, with iron fragments. In grave 28, several objects were found *in situ* in the northern part of the bottom of the grave, while other objects were found in the upper fill of the grave pit, which was up to 42 cm deep, among them a glass bead and a small whetstone. The southern part was nearly empty, apart from a fragment of a sword blade along the southern short side, far from the upper guard.

Other graves were almost empty, with hardly any preserved stratigraphy. In these cases it is possible that the grave was intact, and that the deceased received few grave goods and had a simple burial. However, some of the finds seemed to be fragments of larger objects, and so it might, conversely, be argued that the lack of finds, or occasional broken objects, in combination with the observation that hardly any stratigraphy was preserved, are actually signs of grave reopening.

Grave 8 is a peculiar case. It stood out, both because of four large postholes outside the grave cut itself, suggesting a superstructure such as a grave house, and because of the high-quality grave goods. A large battle axe with a brass fitting (Vike 2016) and an extraordinary sword with decorations in gold, silver and copper alloy on the hilt stood out among the finds from the cemetery. The symbols on the hilt include spirals, rhombic figures, letters and, most surprisingly, a hand with a cross, indicating a Christian origin of the sword (Wenn *et al.* 2016; Glørstad and Wenn 2017; Wenn forthcoming). In addition, two silver coin fragments were found in an organic fill, possibly a purse, as well as a lump of birch tar. While the coins and the birch tar were found inside the faint remains

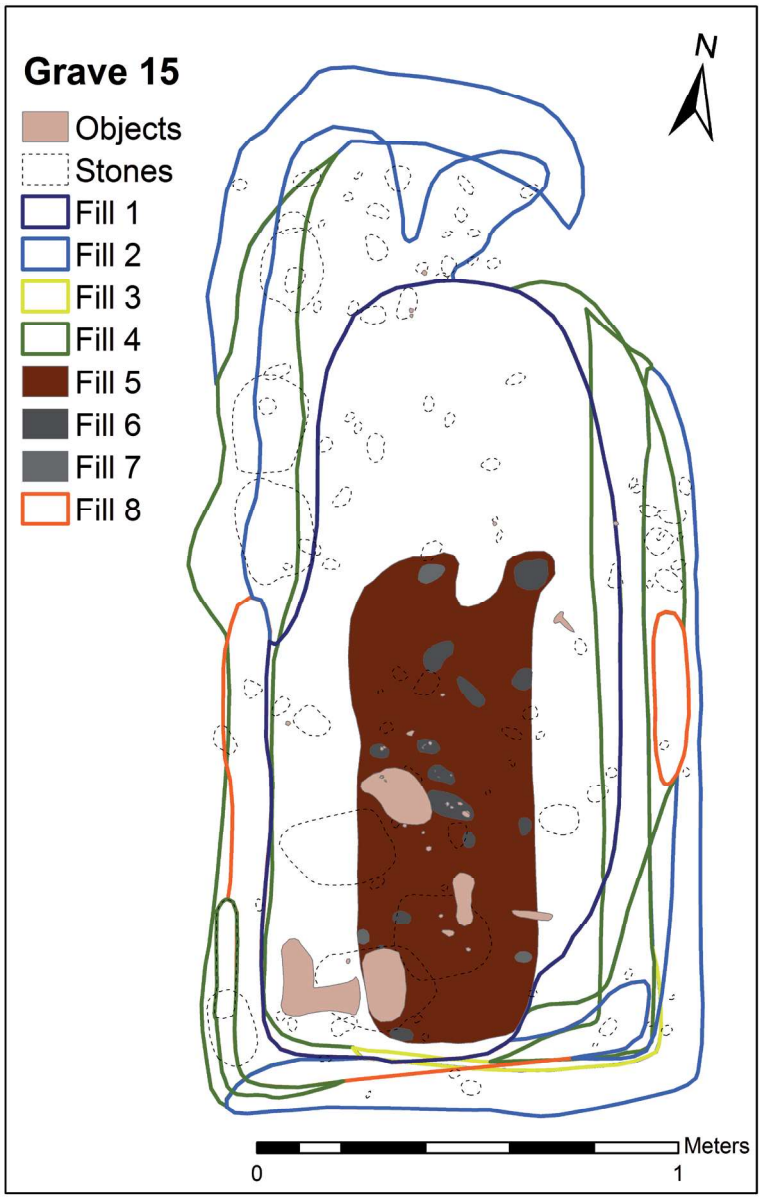


*Fig. 7.5: Grave 15. Fill 5 represents the remains of the coffin or platform, and fill 6/7 represents spots of highly organic remains. Other fills are indicated as outlines, but were generally less organic. The northern part is irregular, and it was difficult to trace the fills during excavation. Notice the apparent lack of object finds in the northern part compared to the southern part (Plan: C.C. Wenn).*

of a coffin, probably 20–30 cm high, at the bottom of the 60 cm deep grave pit, the weapons had been placed outside the coffin, on either of the long sides. Two elements might suggest a reopening of the grave. Firstly, although this was clearly the grave of an important person, the number and variety of finds was very limited. Weapon graves are often, but not always, characterised by an

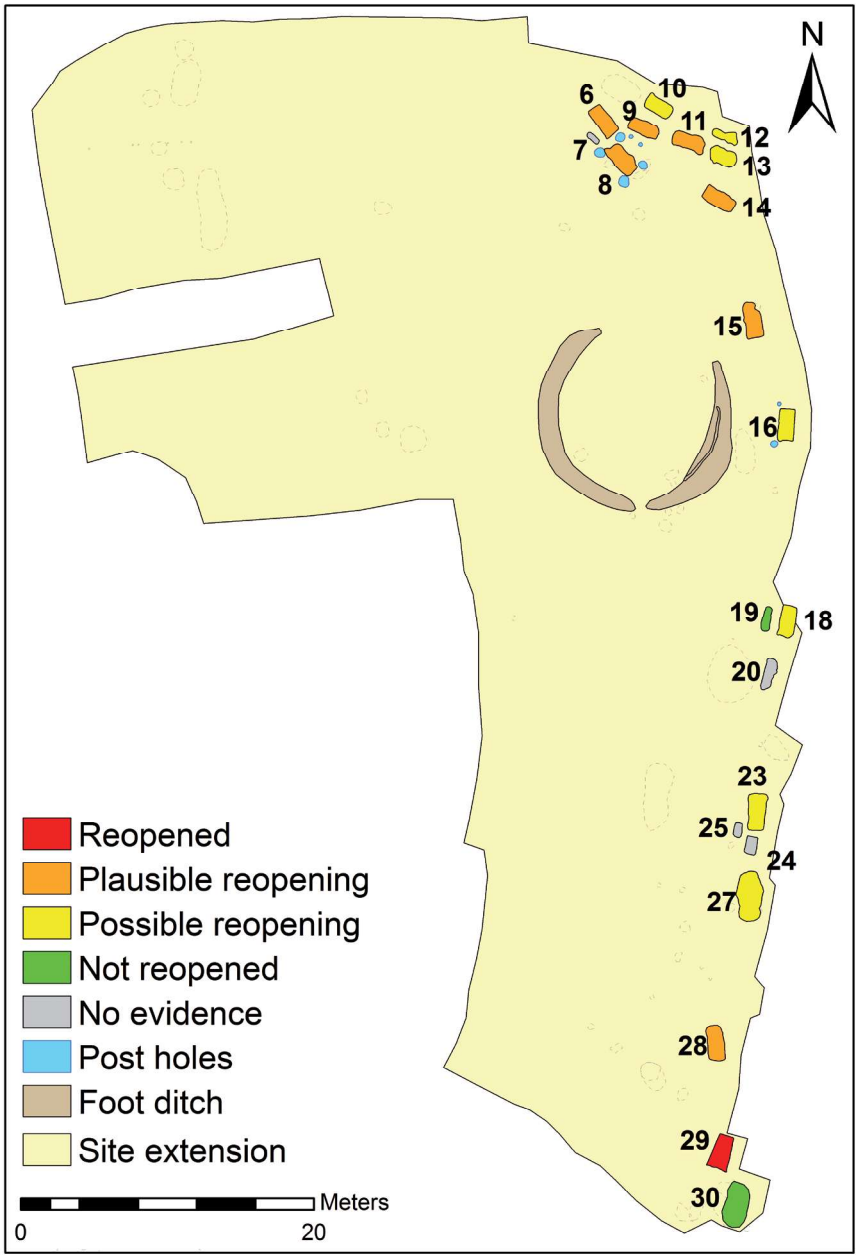


*Fig. 7.6: The graves marked according to potential reopening, with grave numbers (Plan: C.C. Wenn).*

increase in the number, types and/or exclusiveness of the weapons in accordance with the (presumed) social status of the deceased. The simpler graves have just an axe; better-equipped graves will have swords, shields, arrows and/or spears, sometimes including weapons decorated in precious metals and/or imported weapons. Thus, there might seem to be something lacking in grave 8. If not a full set of weapons, at least a shield would be expected, as well as other personal objects, such as a

knife, flint and fire striker. The lack of shields, or rather shield bosses, was observed also in the other graves with weapons. The situation in one of the graves at Gulli should be noted, where a sword and a shield boss had been intentionally broken and spread out in the grave (Gjerpe 2005, 69).

Secondly, the stratigraphy in grave 8 can be questioned. At the bottom of the grave, there is a clear distinction between the sandy and gravelly yellow fill in the pit, and the darker, more organic fill in the coffin. Somewhat more puzzlingly, this difference is evident also in the upper part of the grave, where, logically, one would expect to observe everywhere a fill more similar to the pit fill. If the grave was reopened, this might explain why so few grave goods, but of high quality, were found. The reopening might have focused on the coffin, the perpetrators removing whatever items of interest were inside, and leaving the sword and the axe, being ignorant of their position outside the coffin.

## Assessing the evidence: conditions, likelihoods, and some severe challenges

Apart from the intrusive cut, the markers observed in grave 29, and to some extent in the other graves, are not, in themselves, absolute indicators of grave reopening, and others may be more relevant in other situations. One grave was indisputably reopened, but more should surely be included (Fig. 7.6).

### *Stratigraphical inconsistencies*

The main issue here is the soil in the grave. In an ideal situation, it would be possible to document grave reopening through visible intrusive cuts, where individual processes may be identifiable, that is, not just the cut itself, but also the movements of the perpetrators, how different objects have been moved or removed, broken and/or dropped outside their original context, strata revealing how the cut was refilled, *etc*. The Langeid excavation was a rescue excavation, where time limited possibilities, and the priorities selected when excavating the graves so as to be able to finish on time meant that ideal excavation and documentation methods could not be implemented. Traces that might have contributed to a further understanding of the reopening processes may thus have escaped us.

Similarly, it has not been possible to go through all object fragments found in the graves to establish which ones fit together, as time was limited, and the material was large and in bad shape. Further, the stratigraphy, as explained above, had been partially obliterated by a millennium of water seepage. While the cuts for the grave pits were generally easily defined, a number of other features at Langeid were less clear. Despite these limitations, fill changes such as the ones described above are considered to be a plausible indication of grave reopening, at least in cases where there are notable inconsistencies within the grave, and where these inconsistencies are supported by other markers.

### *Uneven distribution of grave goods*

This is probably the most challenging marker. Does the absence of objects mean they were never there, or that they were removed? Are unidentifiable fragments actual objects, or parts broken off larger objects – and in the latter case, did the breakage occur before or after the burial? Depending on the character of the grave goods, another option is just as plausible, namely that

there were objects in the graves, but, being made of perishable materials, they are long gone. At Langeid, it is easier to argue for grave reopening where such absences in material correspond to other markers, in particular stratigraphical inconsistencies. In graves that have both areas that are virtually empty, and areas with a range of objects, the uneven distribution of objects will be more convincing as a sign of reopening than in the case of graves with generally few objects, especially if the stratigraphy reinforces the interpretation. The latter is the case for three uncommonly small graves; they all have very similar stratigraphy throughout, and the objects found in them seem mostly random, as for instance a piece of slag and a fragment of a soapstone vessel in grave 7. A knife in grave 24 may be considered a grave good. The question remains whether these graves only had sparse grave goods or grave goods of perishable materials, or if they have been thoroughly emptied.

Graves 12, 13, 16 and 27 were among the normal-sized graves, but with limited grave goods. Graves 12 and 16 contained pointed iron fragments that may come from a linen or wool comb; graves 12 and 13 each had two spindle whorls; grave 13, one bead; grave 27, two beads; grave 16, a flint and birch tar; and grave 27, a possible comb. Additionally, all graves yielded occasional iron fragments. In the case of grave 12, erosion is a likely culprit for the absence of finds: the entire northern long side was gone, and the remainder was very shallow. Although graves 13 and 16 were also to some extent eroded, the depth should be sufficient to have kept the bottom intact, and thus also the strata containing the grave goods, judging by other graves at the site. Grave 27 was up to 58 cm deep, and, though heavily eroded along the eastern long side, the bottom was well preserved. In none of these cases was a reopening evident, but as some of the iron fragments found may have come from larger objects, post-burial activity is possible. The difference in object distribution as well as stratigraphic indications in graves such as 6 and 15 offer far more plausible cases of reopening, and highly targeted at that.

### *Intentionally broken or removed objects*

The broken swords that were found in five of the graves are reminiscent of instances of intentionally bent swords in graves (for instance C36770a, C34272, C10649, C29299a in the Museum of Cultural History collections), sometimes accompanied by other broken weapons. In these cases the swords have been broken prior to the burial, and there is no evidence the graves have been reopened to destroy the swords; rather, the swords seem to have been intentionally "killed" before burial. The practice of killing swords is much older, and has been documented at least as far back as Bronze Age Greece (Lloyd 2015), though the motivation for the practice probably changed over time and between regions. The saga literature contains several references to swords in descriptions of *haugbrott*, breaking into grave mounds (*e.g.* Brøgger 1945; Klevnäs 2016). Usually the objective here seems to be to repossess the sword, however, not to break it.

Swords are the only object type at Langeid that can be proved to have been systematically handled during reopening. It is possible that other objects were targeted as well, but there are no signs they were systematically broken, though they may well have been removed. Brooches are one group which may be supposed to have been somewhat more frequently represented in the graves – however, negative presence does not provide confirmation of such actions. At Gulli, one reopened grave contained only a single oval brooch, which is an uncommon situation, and it is presumed that the other one of the pair had been removed. On this basis, double grave 6 at Langeid might be

a likely candidate for the removal of brooches. Four graves are considered to have double burials. Grave 30 has a primary female burial at the bottom of the pit, and a later, presumed male, burial at the top, while graves 6, 18 and 29 each had two individuals, probably a male and a female, in the pit. Graves 18 and 29 both had pairs of oval brooches, while grave 30 had a silver brooch or pendant. Grave 6, on the other hand, had no brooches. The southern part of the grave, presumably the head end, judging from the distribution of grave goods, was very disturbed, and two separate beads were found here.

Following other studies of grave reopening, and taking into account written sources such as the sagas, one might expect other objects than swords to have been disturbed, whether broken or removed, as well. Shields, or at least shield bosses, are in general found frequently together with other weapons, but none have been recovered at Langeid. Following the example from Gulli (Gjerpe 2005, 69), one might suspect shield bosses (and the rest of the shield) to have been removed from the graves when they were reopened. The combination of weapons in graves is, however, not a straightforward matter, and shields may not have been included in the Langeid grave goods at all. For instance, in the Merovingian period it has been demonstrated that, while shields were frequent in graves in the coastal areas of southern Norway, they were virtually absent in the inland valleys (Gudesen 1980, 101–102).

A peculiar object that may have been present in several graves was the wool or linen comb. Two complete combs were found in grave 29, but iron fragments of the same type appeared in a further two graves. As far as the author is aware, these are not objects found to be missing or intentionally broken at other sites, but the possibility of their having been handled during grave reopening should be kept in mind.

A second category of broken or removed materials in graves comprises the bodies of the deceased. Targeting particular areas of the grave, and thus presumably the body, was documented at Gulli. Most of the reopening cuts were where the head of the deceased would have been, and it has been suggested that the heads may have been removed from the graves (Gjerpe 2005, 144–146). At Langeid, this remains unknown to us, as any non-cremated bodies were completely decomposed at the time of excavation. Ascertaining the position of the body in the Langeid graves is challenging, and in none of the graves can it be unequivocally determined, although in some of the graves jewellery in particular is indicative of the location of the upper body. In general, the evidence suggests that it was most common to be buried with the head in the southern or south-eastern part of the grave. In the case of graves 6, 11 and 29 this corresponds to the seemingly reopened area. Graves 14 and 15 have no evident head end, but in both cases reopening seems to have taken place in the northern/north-eastern part. Graves 8 and 9 have neither clear indications of the head end nor of limited areas likely to have been reopened. The targeting of heads is thus possible also at Langeid, but far from positively established. The cremations did not seem to have been touched; as for the inhumations, of which there are probably more than 20, it is entirely possible that the bodies were completely or partially removed, hacked to pieces or handled in other ways during the reopening, but on the other hand they may have been left intact.

## What happened, how and to whom?

Table 7.1 gives an overview of which markers appear in each grave, the likely gender of the deceased and the estimated likelihood of reopening. The broken swords have been given more weight than other markers, followed by fill irregularities. Uneven distribution and/or lack of finds

are noteworthy, but do not carry a strong argument for reopening. In four graves, the preservation and contents do not allow for this kind of interpretation, and only two graves show no convincing evidence of having been reopened. Several graves do, however, have one or more possible markers of grave reopening. Seven graves have markers that make a reopening of the grave plausible, while a further seven are considered possibly reopened; the data here are limited, but one or two markers have been recognised.

Looking at the gender distribution, graves with male burials appear to be overrepresented, even when taking into account the general gender distribution on the site. Two male-female double graves were probably reopened, as well as six male graves. No single female graves can be proved to have been reopened. There are several possible explanations for this. For one thing, the all-male graves generally have more grave goods than the all-female graves, making it easier to observe an uneven distribution of finds. Secondly, the deliberate destruction of swords is more easily recognisable, and provides a more convincing argument for grave reopening than the fill irregularities and poverty of finds in female graves (leaving aside the discussion of whether or not swords are indeed gender-specific to males, and of gender-specific objects in general). As for the two affected double burials, graves 29 and 6, in both cases the reopening seems to have disturbed both burials.

*Table 7.1: Potential markers of reopening per grave, gender and estimated likelihood of reopening (F: female; M: male; C: child; 0: unopened grave; 1: reopening possible; 2: reopening plausible; 3: reopening certain; –: inconclusive).*

| *Grave no.* | *Distinct fill* | *Fill irregularities* | *Broken sword* | *Uneven distribution of finds/fragmentation* | *Lack of finds* | *Erosion* | *M/F/C* | *Likelihood of reopening* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6 | | X | | X | | | M+F | 2 |
| 7 | | | | | X | | C | – |
| 8 | | X | | X | | | M | 2 |
| 9 | | X | X | X | | | M | 2 |
| 10 | | | | X | | | M | 1 |
| 11 | | | X | X | | | M | 2 |
| 12 | | | | X | X | X | F | 1 |
| 13 | | | | X | X | X | F | 1 |
| 14 | | X | X | X | | | M | 2 |
| 15 | | X | | X | | | M | 2 |
| 16 | | | | X | X | | F | 1 |
| 18 | | | X | | | | M+F | 1 |
| 19 | | | | | X | | ? | 0 |
| 20 | | | | | | X | M | – |
| 23 | | | | X | | | F | 1 |
| 24 | | | | | X | | C | – |
| 25 | | | | | X | | C | – |
| 27 | | | | | X | | F | 1 |
| 28 | | X | X | X | | | M | 2 |
| 29 | X | X | X | X | | | M+F | 3 |
| 30 | | | | X | | | F+M | 0 |

Summing up the evidence of reopened graves at Gulli, a slightly different picture emerges (Gjerpe 2005, 142–146). Seven out of 20 graves had been reopened, eight were intact, and five were too poorly preserved to permit assessment. Reopening was twice as frequent in male as in female graves, but the numbers were too small to allow a significant conclusion. Gjerpe points to the fact that graves associated with high status, such as chamber graves and boat graves, are more likely to have been reopened than other graves, though the picture is somewhat ambiguous. Returning to Langeid, this consideration is interesting, but not unproblematic. At Langeid, most of the graves are fairly similar in size and type, and typical high-status grave types, such as chamber graves or boat graves, were not found, a possible exception being grave 8, which was probably furnished with a superstructure, possibly a grave house. The status of the graves is therefore defined primarily on the basis of the grave goods. However, there is rarely evidence that the less well furnished graves were *not* reopened, and the possibility thus remains that they may have had a rich assemblage that has been removed. Thus, the lack of grave goods and a well-defined stratigraphy in certain graves create uncertainty in relation, firstly, to the distribution of wealth in the graves, secondly, to the question of whether these graves were reopened, and thirdly, to understanding which graves were selected for reopening.

The inconsistency in the location of the secondary cuts in relation to the positioning of the dead and the grave goods suggests a limited time frame for the reopening of the graves. Reopening was mostly carried out in the southern/south-eastern parts of the graves, but occasionally the northern/north-western part had been targeted. This may imply an intimate knowledge of how the graves were laid out and where to seek the desired items. As mentioned above, grave 8 presents a peculiar case, with a near-empty coffin and exclusive weapons outside it. Could this indicate a more distant relation to the burial and/or the deceased? If the grave was reopened, do the remaining weapons indicate that the perpetrator was distant in time, or simply not present at the rituals? The unusual position of the weapons remains to be explained as well: were they placed outside the coffin as a result of changing rituals or traditions, or could it be a deliberate move to confuse potential perpetrators (Wenn *et al.* 2016)?

## The reopened graves and related examples – why were they reopened?

Reopened graves in themselves are not a novelty, especially in the later 1st millennium of Northern Europe, and several studies have discussed how to recognise them, and ways to interpret the disturbances (Klevnäs 2007; 2015; 2016; Kümmel 2009; van Haperen 2010; Aspöck 2011; Lund 2013). There is much evidence of reopened graves in Norway and the neighbouring countries, covering a long period of time, and the Viking Period *per se* has its fair share.

The term *haugbrott* is often used when discussing the reopening of Viking Age graves. Occurrences of *haugbrott* have been considered limited in number and targeted towards people who had a particular position in their contemporary societies (Brøgger 1945, 3; Brendalsmo and Røthe 1992; Myhre 1992, 283) and were buried in monumental graves underlining their importance. The saga literature points to several main motives: plundering valuables, entering the grave so that a relative could procure the sword or other power symbols from their ancestors, or ending cases of the dead returning to harass the living, usually by beheading the corpse (Rindal 2004, 199), also as a way to prove valour and conquer a potential danger or as a meeting with the world beyond (Beck 1978, 217, 223). It has been proposed that Viking Period grave reopening could express

power politics in action, where new rulers were destroying their predecessors' symbols of power, in this case the grave mounds, symbolising hereditary rights (Brendalsmo and Røthe 1992; Bill and Daly 2012). The Langeid graves do not seem likely candidates for the latter. For one thing, the reopened pit graves do not comply with the semantic meaning of *haugbrott*, as they do not have mounds (*haug*). More importantly, the graves at Langeid and their grave goods give much the same impression as at Gulli, not of elite burials, but rather of burials of people who were reasonably well off, though not in any way exceptional. Grave reopening as a reaction to previous rulers does not seem an appropriate explanation in the case of multiple reopened graves of more or less equal standing. Other motivational factors listed above may still be valid for these somewhat simpler graves, though.

The purely economic motive for grave reopening does not seem valid, either in general, or at Langeid. Again, as we do not know what is not in the graves any more, it is possible that valuable objects may have been removed, but the general impression shows a different focus, the destruction of swords being the prime example. There is likewise evidence that graves that were probably reopened had their valuables still left in the grave, although they had in some instances been moved as a result of the reopening, for instance the oval brooches in grave 29. Grave 15 had several silver coin fragments and other hack silver, and grave 6 had complete equipment for weighing, with scales, weights, coins and other hack silver.

In discussing the motives for reopening, the later use of the local area may give some indications. For graves lying close to later churches and sites functionally related to churches, the disturbance of graves may be a reaction against pre-Christian cult, as has been suggested for graves at Gamla Uppsala and Vendel (Klevnäs 2007; 2015). While the chronology of the cemetery suggests that the burials at Langeid are some of the latest pagan burials in the area, there are no traces of Christian worship at the site. The terrace with the cemetery held a very limited number of remains other than the graves, and most indicated earlier activities. The only later activity was a cultivation layer along the western part of the terrace, dated to *c.* cal AD 1010–1150. While only a small part of the Langeid area was excavated, and the likelihood of a settlement contemporary with the cemetery is high, there are no sources indicating the establishment of a church nearby. Settlement has most likely continued, but on the terrace above, while the lower terraces have mainly been used for grazing and cereal production – which is the general pattern for settlement in the valley, then as now. Churches were probably built in the century or so following the latest burials, but they were several kilometres from Langeid, near other settlements in the valley.

Concern about revenants may be a possible explanation for the reopened graves at Langeid, but unfortunately the evidence is too scarce to permit any conclusions. The general lack of human remains makes it next to impossible to establish whether the bodies were manipulated in any way, and if so, whether this represented intentional action directed at the bodies, or the consequence of rummaging for items in the grave. As described above, the intrusions mostly seem to have focused on the head ends of the graves, and the condition and in some cases complete absence of objects in the areas targeted indicate thorough removal. It is possible that not only objects but also body parts were removed. If they were not removed, they may have been intentionally dislodged, heads may have been severed, or the bodies may have been removed, either partly or in their entirety. Manipulation of bodies seems to appear fairly frequently during grave disturbances, although it is not always possible to establish if it is intentional or a by-product of other actions (see *e.g.* Bill and Daly 2012 on the Gokstad and Oseberg burials; Gjerpe 2007; Klevnäs 2007, 2015; Aspöck 2011).

Related to the manipulation of bodies is the possibility of *translatio*. Traditionally, the concept is used for moving holy objects, such as relics, from one location to another, but it may also describe the process of moving bodies, or parts of bodies, to a new burial site, presumably by relatives, typically during a period of conversion. A possible case of bones being moved from a pagan to a Christian cemetery can be found at Keldudalur, Iceland (Zoëga 2015, 119), and relocation of bodies from Christian cemeteries, usually coinciding with the transition from household to communal cemeteries, has also been attested. Icelandic Christianity laws of the 12th century even outline how bones should be removed from decommissioned cemeteries (Zoëga and Bolender 2017, 81, with further references).

Returning again to the swords, in view of their fragmented state, robbery for economic or use value is highly unlikely, and likewise, they are not likely to have been reappropriated by kin or others close to the deceased for further use (Jochens 1996, 98–99). Aspects such as the magical properties of swords, their status as special objects or heirlooms, with a significance that transcends their straightforward use as a weapon, do, however, feature prominently in the interpretations of why the swords were attractive objects for the living, and would often be removed from the graves during reopening (see *e.g.* Soma 2007; Aspöck 2011, 313; Klevnäs 2015; 2016). Julie Lund (2008, 66) argues that intended burial, or even accidental loss, of swords and other objects, for example in graves, ritual deposits, *etc.*, signify the conclusion of the social life of the objects, though the objects are still imbued with other aspects. Can the deliberate destruction of the object be a way of concluding, ending, also the metaphysical aspects of the object? Would it be possible that by terminating the end of the life of the object, one would also terminate the threat of the deceased returning? It would depend on how closely the object was connected and identified with the deceased.

Another possible interpretation could be that by breaking the sword, more than one meaningful object was created, where each fragment could stand as a *pars pro toto* of the original object, in this case enabling the deceased to keep the sword in the afterlife, and providing the living, whether close relatives, the local community or others, with an object of singular significance? A comparison might be made to the use of relics, where, for instance, a splinter of the True Cross or a phalange from a saint represents a larger religious entity, and creates a node of cult. Similar parallels have been made for the Dutch cemetery at Bergeijk-Fazantlaan (van Haperen 2013). In the disturbed graves, not only objects, but also bones from the human remains were missing from many of the graves. It is suggested that such bones and objects may have been objects of veneration in the local community or by the family, similar to relics, and that by distributing fragments the power of the ancestor was extended further out. For the objects, this would imply that they were closely associated with the owner, and that the owner and the object made up an entity of qualities, which were in some sense transferrable. Whether this could in some way be the case for the broken swords (or other objects treated similarly) is at this point speculation, but might merit further investigation.

## Religious shift and grave disturbance – a possible connection

Grave 8 stood out among the graves in terms of grave goods and physical appearance, and the sword, of indisputably Christian origin, is unique among the grave goods at Langeid. At the time when the cemetery was in use, the coastal areas of southern Norway were already Christianised, and the burials there almost exclusively Christian by the mid-10th century (Rolfsen 1981; Glørstad 2014, 52; Larsen 2014, 67). The religious shift was imminent in the Setesdal Valley as well. A runic inscription at Evje, some 60 km further down the valley, testifies to the rise of Christianity in the region at about

the same time (Spurkland 2005, 96–99). Although churches in Setesdal are first attested in the early 13th century, it has been argued that the first ones were established already in the mid-11th century (Larsen 2014, 67). Several of the medieval churches in the upper Setesdal Valley were built on or by pagan burial grounds, indicating a strong consciousness of the pagan places, the older religion being taken over and possibly crushed – although an alternative idea has also been advanced. According to early Christian legal documents, the ancestor cult was important in the old Norse religion, where the dead were biologically dead, but socially still alive (Steinsland 1995, 20–25). It has been argued that the erection of churches on the pagan burial grounds underlines the importance of the ancestor cult, which in this scenario is not seen as opposing the new religion (Reitan 2006, 269–270).

So, was grave 8 a pagan grave with a Christian sword, or a Christian grave with grave goods in the pagan style? Both alternatives may be argued, and both may have some impact on how the grave disturbances in the cemetery are interpreted, as the timelines are fairly limited. We have argued that the weapons may have belonged to a warrior in the retinue of the Christian King Canute the Great, probably around 1013–1016 (Wenn *et al.* 2016, 204–206; Wenn forthcoming), and the grave would thus be later than this. The Ethelred coin in the grave gives a *terminus post quem* of *c.* AD 975, while the weapons belong in the late 10th or early 11th century. Other graves, such as 6 and 15, have *termini post quem* of 983 and 991, respectively, and any reopening would have happened after the burial. I have argued above that, although there may be some gap between the burials and the reopenings, it is not likely to have been a long one. The wooden structures inside the graves must have been more or less intact, although corrosion on the iron objects had started. If we accept grave 8 as a more or less Christian burial, implying that the people who buried that person were Christian, this may be in the timeframe for the reopening of the other graves, which may indicate that the grave reopenings were Christian in origin. That is to say, the time between the late burials, including graves 6, 8, 15 and 29, and the Christianisation of the community would have been limited to one or two generations at the maximum. It should be noted that, while the use of the Langeid cemetery is discontinued in the 11th century, there are examples of continued use of the same burial places from pagan to Christian times in the Setesdal Valley (Larsen 1981, 33; Glørstad 2014, 53), and it is possible that the latest burials at Langeid may be hybrid in character.

The religious transition and reactions thereto might be reflected in the occurrence of three cremation burials at Langeid, one of them radiocarbon dated to the 11th–12th century, thus very late, and well into the period when the conversion is supposed to have been completed. Possibly, this could be considered to represent conscious opposition to the new religion and its burial customs, as has been suggested for other late Viking Age sites (Oestigaard 2014; Wenn *et al.* 2016, 180–181, 204–205). Interestingly, the Christian connection is also seen in the sword mentioned above, decorated with a hand holding a cross. King Canute demanded that his retainers convert to the Christian faith, and if this background for the sword is correct, it may be that the sword returned to Norway with its owner and they both received a proper pagan burial (Wenn *et al.* 2016).

Certainly, the late date of grave 8 may, in itself, account for an unusual burial. If it is considered a thoroughly pagan burial, with a sword that happened to have Christian symbolism, then there seem to be elements lacking in the grave. If not a full set of weapons, at least a shield would be expected, as well as other personal objects. The lack of shields, or rather shield bosses, has been noted also for the other graves with swords. If, instead, it is interpreted as a Christian grave, it would show evidence of the past influencing the new burial rites, but in such a case reopening may be less likely. The stratigraphy in the grave gives no conclusive evidence on the question of grave reopening.

Any religious background to grave reopening at Langeid will be tentative. As the reopening cannot be firmly dated, it is certainly possible that they happened in the sphere of religious change. The intentional removal of body parts or complete bodies is an interesting element of grave reopening, but unfortunately not one that can be discussed for Langeid, due to the poor preservation. The possibility of grave reopening partially for the *translatio* of bodies, presumably by relatives, to Christian burial grounds should not be excluded, however.

## Concluding remarks

The study of the Langeid graves and their contents provides some insights into the widespread reopening of Viking Age graves, although it is far from establishing firm answers. Despite large-scale changes within the graves due to natural processes, it is possible to establish the likelihood of grave reopening in several burials through systematic studies of preservation, object distribution and stratigraphy. The reopening has parallels to other sites and should be understood in a wider context, while still endeavouring to explain the particularities of the site. The site underlines the importance of thorough documentation and post-excavation analyses for a firmer understanding of post-depositional processes.

The reopened graves at Langeid, while far from unique, do differ somewhat from the usual picture of Viking Age grave reopening, particularly the one provided by the written sources. They are not the monumental graves of the upper echelon in society, but seem rather the graves of a local community with significant connections to the outside world. The main effect that can be observed is deliberate destruction of objects in the graves, rather than removal of objects, and this suggests a different motivation for grave reopening than in cases where objects are removed. Likewise, the grave reopening at Langeid, coming so late in the period, cannot be interpreted independently of the religious shift, although the actual impact of religion cannot be established. The graves suggest, together with other cited examples of approximately the same wealth, that grave reopening in the Viking Age covered a fairly wide spectrum of society, and that motivations for grave reopening may have been highly varied.

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