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Reading New Social Contexts for Viking-Age Atypical Burials

Váru þeir færðir í flæðarurð eina ok dysjaðir þar

- *Grettis Saga Ásmundarsonar*; Guðni Jónsson 1936: 70

“They were carried to some rocks below the high-water mark and buried there”

- Faulkes 2004: 113

Advances in considering the *Íslendingasögur* (Sagas of Icelanders) from the perspective of cultural memory open exciting opportunities for bringing textual scholarship into dialogue with archaeology. Lisa Bennet (2014) has highlighted burial practice as a key site of cultural memory in these narratives, but these texts are still underutilised in fully exploring and nuancing the dramatic and often unsettling atypical burials of the Viking Age, which are all too often still discussed in highly binary terms.

This interdisciplinary paper will put forward a social approach to saga narratives, especially those that are commonly cited in discussions of atypical burial. In doing so, it will highlight overlooked elements of normativity, law, negotiation, and social organisation in the cultural memory preserved in these vignettes. Using these subtler and more nuanced readings of atypical funerary practices and their context in these narratives, the paper will demonstrate how new avenues of interpretation can be opened, especially around discussions of community understandings of and responses to transgression, individual and group identity, and pragmatic social negotiation. A final case study, originally tested in my doctoral thesis (Ruiter 2018), will bring all these issues to the fore by considering the Gerdrup grave in light of this social approach to sagas and the recently announced DNA results revealing the interred to be mother and son. Rather than considering these DNA results as a ‘solution’ to the mystery of the grave, the paper will highlight the new interpretive possibilities presented by these findings. The paper will conclude with a call to action to work between disciplines to develop new interpretive models to discuss these atypical burials, and the people who lay in them, in deeper, broader, & more nuanced ways.