

Performed identities- approaching political topographies utilising burial data

Mari Arentz Østmo

Reiterated practices and material expressions feed into discourses of sameness and difference. Whether relating to how to dress, how to organise the built environment, or how to perform ritual activities, shared notions of proper practice contribute significantly to formation of group identities. Burials form one amongst several highly ritualised social arenas that are particularly suitable for negotiations of identities and social positions. The diversity of mortuary practices displayed in the Viking Age as well as the preceding centuries, opens for explorations of identities performed and articulated by living relatives using shared symbolic, material, and ritual expressions.

An examination of variations in the deposition of brooches and selected aspects of mortuary practices in burials from south-western Norway display ongoing processes of homogenisation, but also concurrent upsurges of local or regional particularities in the period 200-1000 CE. These spatial variations are interpreted as materialisations of politicised, gendered identities bound to different landscapes. A deep-time approach makes it possible to address how these landscapes unfold over time, and how they interrelate with neighbouring landscapes. These interrelations are indicative of ongoing processes of centralisation, but also that political constellations dissolve, become fragmented or transform over time. Based on a series of diachronic sub-regional landscapes, a deep-time political micro-topography that incorporates the elite settlement at Avaldsnes on the west coast of Norway is suggested.

In this paper I argue that these findings suggest that further investigations of Viking Age political topographies would benefit by integrating a deep-time perspective on the unfolding of political structures of the Viking Age. And furthermore, that investigations of how collective identities form and transform over time offers a bottom-up approach to political constellations. Geographies of power may then be studied not only by identifying elite networks or socio-political centres, but drawing on materialised practises of a broader selection of the population.