

The pyre or the power: a discussion of *suttee* and the social status of widows

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The practice of *suttee* as a socially sanctioned act in Viking Age society has been theorised based on the relatively common occurrence of double graves in the Viking Age mortuary record, along with a handful of written sources where widows follow their husbands to the grave. However, the supporting material has yet to be systematically analysed, both with regards to the written and the archaeological record, meaning such interpretations remain speculative at best.

A supposition of widows being offered up to die with their husbands must have a direct bearing on how we envisage gender dynamics and marital power-relations in the Viking Age. The idea of widow-burning has become curiously uncontroversial by entering many interpretations and presentations in the form of a brief comment only. This normalisation of such a subject deserves more thorough investigation however, both with regards to the scholarly traditions around it, and with regards to the material. A further dimension also exists, placing the supposition of such a custom in context with systems of human sacrifice. The question of whether or not *suttee* is to be considered and treated as part of a sacrificial scheme involves both a discussion of how we define human sacrifice, and how we envisage it fitting into Viking Age culture.

Working on multiple levels, I will address the material in the shape of double graves, as well as the discourse surrounding them from a gendered perspective. Further, I will examine material which may be considered contradictory to the habitual sacrifice of wives with their husbands, including same sex double burials, multiple burials with more than two bodies, and the consideration that many double burials clearly reflect repeated actions rather than single contexts. Written material will also be used, both in the form of instances of widows choosing death upon their husband's pyres, but also in the form of independent and powerful widows: Many accounts of the Viking Age emphasise the relative freedom and high social status of widows. They are often described as independent, allowed to act for themselves, dispose of their own property, and even highlighted as eligible parties on the marriage market. The question of how this compares with an assumed custom of *suttee* is well worth asking, as it poses something of a dichotomy.

In short, I aim to challenge the tendency for gendered stereotypes to enter implicitly into interpretations. Arguably, it suits our expectations to see women sacrificed alongside or in tribute to their men. Whether or not it suits the material, is quite another question. The argument will be furthered here that such a custom can hardly have been standardised or even particularly common judging from the material: if widowhood was a desirable position of independence for many women, we cannot at the same time believe that women were habitually offered up as a final tribute along with a man's other possessions.