Messing with the dead: post-depositional manipulations of burials and bodies in the South Scandinavian Stone Age

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ABSTRACT – *This paper concerns post-depositional manipulations of burials at two Stone Age sites in Southern Sweden: the Late Mesolithic Skateholm and Middle Neolithic Ajvide. A distinction is made between non-aggressive and aggressive manipulations of graves and dead bodies. Fine-grained horizontal stratigraphies make it possible to associate each category with different phases of occupation. It is suggested that aggressive manipulations are generally the result of social stress during periods of hybridisation between different groups and traditions.*

IZVLEČEK – *V razpravi se ukvarjamo s po-depozitnimi posegi v kamenodobne grobove v južni Švedski na poznomezolitskem grobišču Skateholm in srednje neolitskem grobišču Ajvide. Razlikujemo med neagresivinimi in agresivnimi posegi v grobove in trupla. Natančna horizontalna stratigrafija omogoča povezati posege z različnimi fazami poselitve. Agresivni posegi so v glavnem posledica socialnega stresa v času mešanja različnih skupin in tradicij.*

KEY WORDS – *Skateholm; Ajvide; Burial; post-manipulation; hybridisation*

"*When the skull is taken from the grave and the sister's children of the deceased dance with it, he must not look upon the dancers. The skull is kept by the sister's son and the spirit ceremonially sent upon its way to the land of the dead.*" Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, (*1934.146f*).

In Ruth Benedict's classic ethnography, *Patterns of Culture* (*1934*), we find a brief but vivid glimpse of a post-depositional manipulation of a grave where a retrieved human skull is used in rituals by the deceased's relatives. The classic works of anthropology often contain similar accounts of manipulations of graves and corpses, supporting the idea of the 'primitive' as a ritual rather than a rational being. The image of people dancing with the skull of a dead ancestor is indeed dramatic and appealing to the imagination, and it is not surprising that archaeologists generally interpret traces of 'secondary action' taken on the dead along similar lines. However, it often wise to adopt a critical stance towards the rhetoric and exoticism of colonial ethnography and anthro-

pology, and also discuss other possible lines of interpretation. For instance, secondary action taken against a grave or a dead body can also be interpreted as an act of aggression towards the dead. Different groups competing over a site or piece of land may, as part of the struggle, find it effective to disturb the others' dead as mockery. It could also be cases of aggressive acts on the individual level, seeking to deny a dead individual serenity in the afterlife by manipulating the grave. There may even be efforts to manipulate the means of the dead as virtual actants in the world of the living (*cf. Gansum 2008*). The phenomena of reopened, reused, and manipulated burials are known from all periods of prehistory (*e.g., Randsborg 1998; Brinch Petersen 2006; Andrews and Bello 2006*), but in this paper I wish to discuss various interpretations of post-manipulated burials at two different sites in Southern Sweden: the Late Mesolithic site at Skateholm and the Middle Neolithic site at Ajvide (Fig. 1). Despite their distant relation in time, both sites display similarities that facilitate a dual outlook on the phenomena.

The Skateholm complex

The late Mesolithic settlement and burial complex of Skateholm (*c.* 6000–4000 BC), located in Scania in southern Sweden, consists of nine more or less contemporary sites. Two of the sites (Skateholm I and II) contain the majority of the burials and are thus the primary sites discussed here (see Figs. 2 and 3). Skateholm I is the larger of the two, comprising 65 graves, while the smaller Skateholm II, situated approx. 150m southeast of Skateholm I, contains 22 graves (*Larsson 1981.36; 1982.37*). The Skateholm complex is interpreted by the excavators as a typical hunter-fisher site, harbouring a few families quietly living in what at the time was a sheltered brackish water lagoon (*Larsson 1988; 2002*). There are, however, a number of interesting spatial patterns of crisscrossing synchronous and diachronic character which suggest that the social life in the late Mesolithic at the Skateholm area was substantially more varied and complex (*Strassburg 2000; Fahlander 2008a*). For instance, changes in burial practice and analyses of animal bones in the area suggest seasonal occupation, possibly by separate, non-related groups (*Carter 2004; Eriksson and Lidén 2003*). In total, 87 have graves been excavated, together with about 200 features of more domestic character (*e.g.*, postholes, huts and hearts). The osteological material is inconclusive in many cases and interpreted differently by different scholars (*Persson and Persson 1984; 1988; Strassburg 2000.155; Nilsson Stutz 2003.172–173, 177–179*). It is thus difficult to convincingly relate corporeal aspects of the dead (*i.e.*, sex and age) to their respective interments. The shore displacement, artefact typology and changes in burial practice provide us with a general stratigraphic horizon in which we find the oldest graves at the smaller site, Skateholm II. The burial area then expanded to cover the southern lower levels of Skateholm I, while the most recent graves are situated in the north, on top of the ridge (*Larsson 1985. 369*). The shore displacement change actually suggests that Skateholm II became submerged, compelling movement to the higher area of Skateholm I (see Fig. 2).

General development of Skateholm I and II

It is not possible to go into the details of this rather complex development here; suffice to say that the key to understanding horizontal development at Skateholm is in the placement of the graves of children and dogs. Children under the age of eight and dogs are consistently placed on the outskirts of the

Fig. 1. Map of Southern Sweden and the Skateholm and Ajvide sites.

two sites (*Fahlander 2008a.36–37*). Taken altogether, it is possible to distinguish three general phases of burial activity at Skateholm. The earliest burials at Skateholm II are characterised by high variability in burial practices. Many different kinds of bodies are buried, including small children and dogs, which are placed on the fringes. Dogs are buried in the east and west, and children in the north and south. The lack of formalised burial practice supports this sequence and strengthens the interpretation of Skateholm II as an early formative phase.

The subsequent burials are those situated at the south-west part of Skateholm I. Most of the bodies are still being buried, including children and dogs, which continue to be placed on the fringes of the main burial area. Another continuous feature here, linking Skateholm II with these graves, is the double adult burials. There is, however, less variability in grave shape, and far fewer interments in graves of this area. The proportion of double burials taken together with fewer interments in the graves suggests that ritual is of less importance, or perhaps that fewer people were involved in the burial act. The greater number of double graves may also indicate a period of stress, with a higher mortality rate. The last phase of burial activity is found higher up on the ridge of the northern half of Skateholm I. Here, we find even less variability in burial practices. There are no individually buried children or dogs, nor any double adult burials. The standardisation of

the burials may indicate a consolidation phase in comparison to the greater variability of the earlier Skateholm II. The lack of children and dogs in this area is interesting, and indicates a change in how such animals and individuals of young age were perceived. It does not necessarily suggest that their status declined; if the last phase was of short duration, the lack of children's graves can actually indicate a lower mortality rate among the youngest.

These three phases will not be viewed as separate wholes, or as belonging to three different seasonal phases. As we shall see further on, there are a number of criss-crossing patterns and individual 'anomalies' at Skateholm, but in general, these phases provide a broad overview of the development of the site.

Manipulated graves

It is interesting to note that the post-depositional manipulated graves, as well as those that intersect with others, are all located in the midst of Skateholm I. In some of these cases, parts of the bones were removed after the soft tissue had dissolved, such as in the case of grave 28. The buried man's left radius and ulna, the left ox coxae and the left femur were removed after the flesh had decomposed (*Nilsson Stutz 2003.242; cf. Larsson 1988.121*). Other examples are grave 7 (male 30–40 years old) and grave 35 (female 30–40 years old), both of which are missing the left femur (*Nilsson Stutz 2003.312*). There is also one grave, no. 13, with partly disarticulated bones that shows traces of having been cut up and buried as a 'package' (*Larsson 1988*). Whether this event was part of the original burial ritual or a later

manipulation is not clear. Burials that intersect or overlap older examples comprise another, possibly related, category (nos. 1, 35, 41, 47 and 56). These instances could be the result of research mistakes, because older burials had become invisible on the surface (*cf. Strassburg 2000.256; Midgley 2005.70*). However, the fact that several graves were reopened and manipulated suggests that at least some were visible for many years after the original burial. An important point is that all the manipulated graves at Skateholm are located in the middle of the area around the remains of a hut (construction 10). How this hut correlates with other activities in the area is not immediately evident, but is does overlay one of the graves (no. 12) and is thus stratigraphically later than the burials in this area. Indeed, the sequence of events here is crucial to understanding the secondary actions taken on some of the graves at Skateholm. But before we go into further detail and possible interpretations of these actions, I would like to jump forward a millennium in time, and about 350 kilometres northeast, to the Ajvide site on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea.

The Ajvide site

Ajvide is another coastal site occupied between *c.* 3100–2450 BC, according to the carbon determinations (2sigma, 70 y. res. eff.), and is associated with the Pitted Ware Culture (generally coupled with the Combed Ware Culture). A number of details make this site interesting, but as in the case of Skateholm, basic data must suffice (for an overview and details, see *Burenhult 2002; Fahlander 2003; Österholm 2008*). Thus far, a total of 85 burials have been excavated, of which only the first 62 have yet been
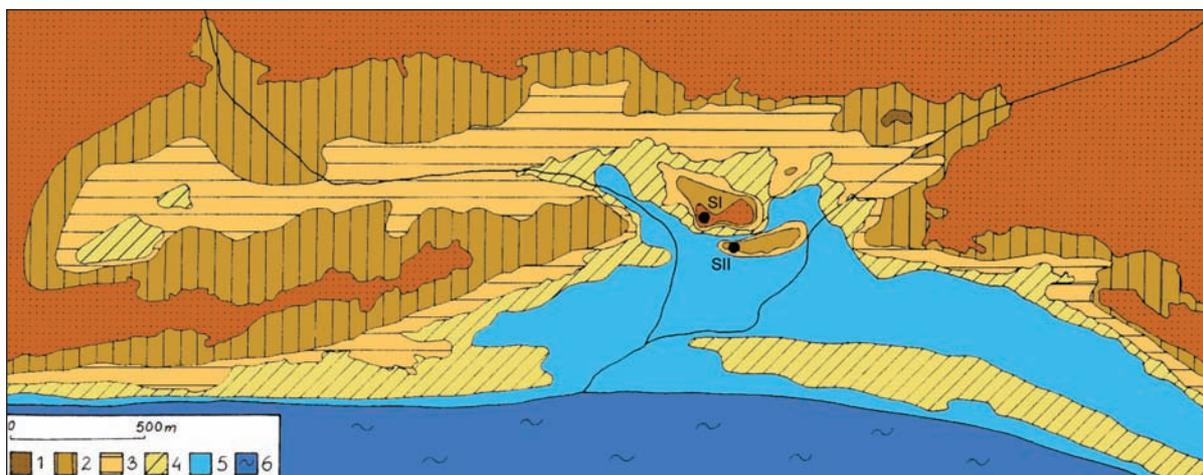

Fig. 2. The Skateholm area with suggested changes in shore displacement. Key to legend: (1) area above 5m asl, (2) 4–5m asl, (3) 3–4m asl, (4) 3–2m asl, (5) area less than 2m asl, and (6) contemporary sea level (modified after Bergenstråhle 1999.337).

fully published. The additional excavated burials are available in various details in the annual excavation reports (*Norderäng 2001–2009*). Because of the lack of detail, the present discussion departs mainly from the first 62 graves. In general, the graves at Ajvide are inhumations, normally containing one individual buried in supine position, along with a variety of interments, but there are also eight grave-like pits (cenotaphs) as well as a few areas of scattered human bones from multiple individuals. Taken all together, the demography seems to correspond to a normal population distribution: The age and sex ratios are evenly distributed and the child-adult ratio is about 1:3. At first glance, this suggests continuous occupation by a few families. But as we shall see, this site is also more likely to have been seasonally occupied, possibly by different non-related groups (*cf. Norderäng 2009.23*).The shore displacement process at Ajvide is the opposite of that at Skateholm; during this period, the land rises over time, but not with any dramatic changes, as in the Skateholm case. The burials seem instead to have been placed in a broad band aligned with the contemporary shoreline (*Norderäng 2009.23*). By transforming the burial plan into vector graphic and polygons in ArcGIS®, and the excavation data into an Access-database, it is possible to put multidimensional queries and display the result graphically on the screen. Such procedures allow a more detailed pattern to emerge that suggests the general development of the site followed a slight slope southwards over time, leaving the oldest burials in the north and the youngest in the south (*Fahlander 2003.87–120*). From this general horizon, it is possible to further identify at least three phases of burial activity at the site (Fig. 4).

General development of the site

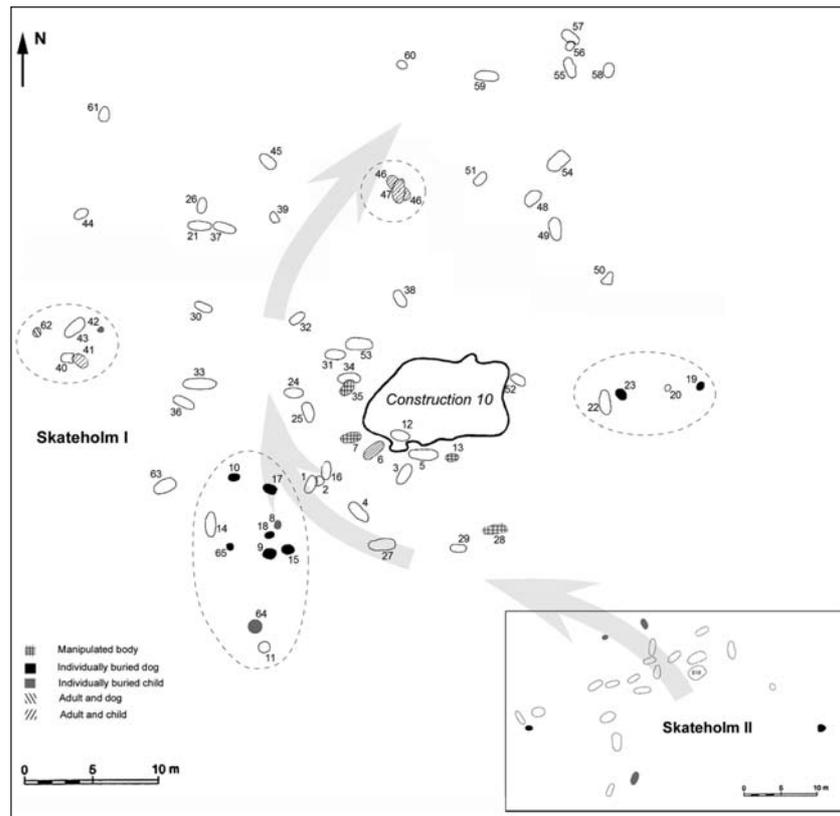The first phase (I) of burials comprises those of the northern cluster. The great variability in interments

Fig. 3. The graves at Skateholm I and II (the latter in 1/3 scale). The grey arrows illustrate the general horizontal stratigraphy of the area. Graves with individually buried dogs (black), children under 8 years (grey), and graves containing dogs/children buried together with adults (lines). The manipulated burials mentioned in the text are hatched. Image constructed in ArcGIS.

and grave form indicates a formation phase (although the additional, unpublished graves further north may be even older). In this area, we find all of the cenotaphs, and most of the manipulated burials. We also find extremely long pits here (2.5–4m) and the greatest number of artefact types, which together hint that the ritual was important and emphasised. The excavators noticed that the four east-west aligned graves are stratigraphically later than those aligned north to south (*Burenhult 1997.54*). At first, it may seem that there are two layers of burials here, whereas the first consists of the N-S aligned burials, and that the E-W ones are associated with a subsequent period of occupation. The almost contemporary carbon determinations, as well as the many similarities between the burials in this area do, however, suggest that they were all dug within a quite short time span and probably constructed during the same phase. The obviously intentional overlapping of the T-shaped pairs of the graves (nos. 7/6, 2/1, 13/4, and 14/15) are of special interest here, as they indicate intentions of establishing relations with those buried earlier. The second phase (II) consists

mainly of the burials in the midst of the area. Here, there is much less variability and fewer artefact types. We also find all the double and triple burials in this area. This general pattern could indicate a less traumatic relationship with the dead body and hence also less interest in the ritual. But, of course, it could also indicate a period of stress and higher mortality. The third phase (III) covers the burials in the southern part of the site and can be interpreted as a period of consolidation. The burials are all very similar, there is little variation, and the alignment of the pits is much more varied here – almost dissolving the earlier dual distinction between the N-S and E-W orientation. This vagueness in burial practice makes it difficult to interpret any general attitude toward the dead, but they are nonetheless differently constituted and less organised than the earlier two phases of graves. These phases are not absolute or do not correspond individually to three different occupation phases, but rather emphasise differences over time and provide a more fine-grained basis for the interpretation of individual burials such as those that were manipulated.

Manipulated graves

Interestingly, we find similar types of manipulation of older burials and bodies at Ajvide as in the case of the Late Mesolithic Skateholm complex. Here, too, bones were removed after the soft tissue had dissolved. Just to mention a few cases, we may consider graves 16 and 23, which both indicate signs of reburial. Grave no. 16 contains fragmented and dislocated parts of a skeleton. The excavators suggest that the individual, a woman, seemed to have been 'folded' into the grave as a package, similarly to grave 13 at Skateholm (*Österholm 1989.183; cf. Norderäng 2007*). The other grave, no. 23, includes a double burial of a man, 50–60 years old, and a young boy of 12–13 years of age. The extremity bones of the adult are missing and the skeleton shows signs of having been decarnated. The adult is laid out across the chest of the young boy, and the femur bones rearranged to fit into the pit. It thus seems like a two-event burial, where an earlier grave was reopened and adjusted to fit an additional individual. There are also at least ten burials that lack crania at Ajvide. Some of these bodies are missing their skulls due to modern disturbance, but a few of these graves were clearly manipulated in the past. One of the more spectacular cases is grave no 6, which contains the remains of a young man of 18–20 years of age, with the upper vertebrae and cranium missing. In all other respects it is a quite normal burial from the

northern cluster. The really odd thing about this particular grave is that the teeth of the young man were put back in the grave, as they would have been if the cranium had not been removed – that is, most of them, except for two that were replaced with animal teeth (Fig. 5). This instance can perhaps be related to the overall obsession with animal jaws and teeth at the site, but the strangeness of such actions are hard to comprehend – it almost defies interpretation.

There are also intersecting burials at Ajvide. Most notable are the so-called T-shaped pairs of graves in the northern part already mentioned. There are also two cases of overlapping graves in the southern part of the area, which are clearly different from the northern ones. Graves 57 and 58 are reported to have been dug through the older ones (nos. 62 and 61 respectively), but the documentation of these cases is inconclusive. It is burials nos. 57 and 61 that are incomplete and the other two that are intact, which leave doubts as to which grave actually intersects the other (see *Burenhult 2002.111–116, 158–166*). In either case, the attitude behind these cases is clearly different from the less destructive T-shaped pairs of graves in the northern part of the area. While the northern pairs of intersecting graves almost gently touch the older ones as if seeking a relationship with those buried earlier, the examples in the southern part rather suggest a more hostile attitude. In a similar sense, the act of putting the teeth back in grave 6 can hardly be viewed as aggressive, however queer such an act may seem.

Same, same, but different?

As we have seen, the two sites show some similarities in burial practices, but what does that mean? Is it even significant? Is it possible that the similar way of life at the sites – hunting, fishing and gathering in coastal settings – may have given rise to certain practices regarding the dead? On the other hand, what ethnography and anthropology shows is that similar milieus and ways of life do not necessarily result in similar ways of thinking and acting (*e.g., Metcalf and Huntington 1991*). There could, of course, be some kind of continuity between the Late Mesolithic hunter-gatherers and the later Pitted Ware culture, which could partly explain similarities in burial practice. However, despite many attempts, the archaeology has not been able to sustain such a hypothesis; rather, we are completely lacking in indicative material from the intervening millennia. Of course, the continuity may be found in another geo-

graphical region, considering the mobility of these groups, but such evidence has yet to be discovered. That a memory of an ancestral way of life would be continued, and would appeal to unhappy farmers, does not seem very plausible (*Andersson 2004*; but see *Knutsson 2005*). Although a way of life and ideology may survive in bits and pieces through millennia of oral tradition, it is not likely that actual practices would survive that intact. However the point here is not to connect the sites in any cultural sense, nor to suggest that the causes for similar expressions of the burial ritual are the same. Something that indeed is common to both sites is that the manipulations of graves and bodies described above tend to be interpreted in a somewhat one-sided way as expressions of ancestor veneration or cults of the dead (*e.g., Strassburg 2000; Gill 2003*). Even if that may have been the case in some instances, it is the overall generalisation regarding a single ritual perspective I wish to question. A more careful look at the data does reveal, for example, some interesting patterns. At Skateholm, we find no post-depositional manipulations among the oldest burials at
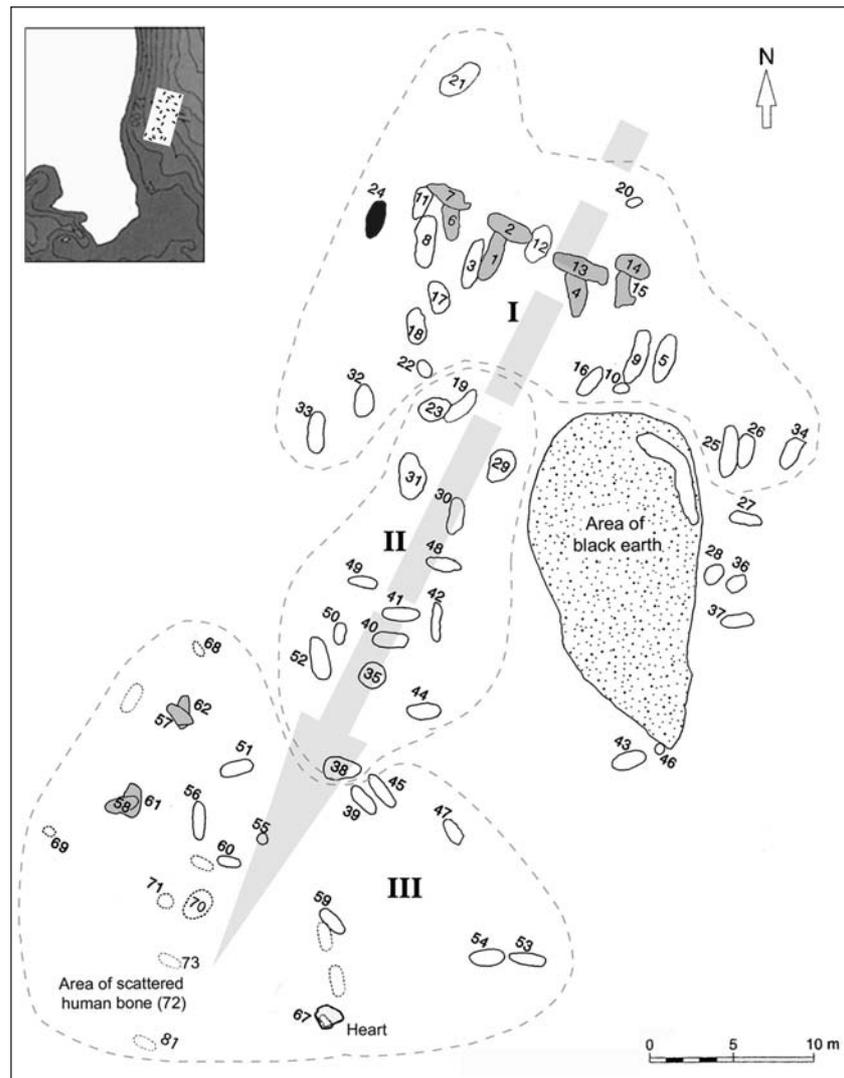

*Fig. 4. The Ajvide burials with the general three phases circumscribed by dotted lines. The grey arrow illustrates the general horizontal stratigraphy of the area. The incorporated image in the upper-right corner shows the relation of the site to the contemporary shoreline. So far, only graves 1–62 have been fully published. The dotted-outlined additional graves are approximations added from the excavation reports when sufficient data is available (*Norderäng 2001–2009). *There are more graves in the north, but their shape and position are as yet uncertain. Image constructed in ArcGIS.*

Skateholm II (which became submerged); these occur only in the middle of Skateholm I. More precisely, they are located around the remains of a hut (construction 10). This construction overlay grave 12 and is likely to be of a later date than the burials of the second phase. My suggestion is that this construction actually is part of the third, or even an additional fourth phase of activities at Skateholm. The manipulations of the surrounding graves may thus have been performed on the previous occupants' dead. The distinction is crucial, because it suggest that interfering with burials is not a normal cultural trait of ancestral veneration, but might be more

about gaining control over an area previously occupied by another group. The difference obviously has implications for our view of both the ritual and the social life of Late Mesolithic hunter-fisher groups in southern Scandinavia. The three cases of intersecting burials (nos. 1/2, 35/34 and 47/46) at Skateholm are, of course, later than the graves they intersect, but how much later is difficult to tell other than that they intersect the graves of phase two. It is possible that these, too, are associated with activities in conjunction with construction 10. Grave 47 especially, which actually destroyed the earlier grave (46), must be considered aggressive rather than venerating in

character. It is probably no coincidence that this is the deepest of all the graves at Skateholm (it is also the only grave containing a small child). At the Neolithic Ajvide site there are also traces of different groups occupying the area. Although it generally is regarded as a Pitted Ware site, it also contains traces of the contemporary Battle-Axe Culture (generally associated with continental herding and farming Linear-band cultures). Examples of such 'foreign' material are all found at the southern and youngest part of the site. One example is a femur-shaped grind-stone, typical of the Battle-Axe culture, which was found in grave no. 19 (*Burenhult 2002*). Another example is the broken battle axe found in the cultural layer in the southern part (*Norderäng 2002*). The areas of scattered bones in the south-western part may also constitute a feature that can be associated with the death-houses of the Battle-Axe culture complex. It is also telling that the only two individuals (graves nos. 60 and 73) whose ^{13}C values indicate a terrestrial diet were buried in the southern part (see table in *Norderäng 2008.297*). It does seem likely that these instances indicate that the two groups – the fisher-hunting Pitted Ware culture and the predominately herding and farming Battle-Axe culture – became involved with each other during the final period of activities at Ajvide (*Fahlander*

*Fig. 5. Vertical photograph of grave no. 6. Detail of the cranial area with extracted teeth in situ. Photograph: Göran Burenhult (modified from **Burenhult 2002**, colour plate 22d of the CD).*

2006). Also at Ajvide, we find that the intersecting graves generally are of two different categories. The T-shaped set of graves (nos. 7, 2, 13, 14) in the northern part must be considered an attempt to relate to the previously buried in an almost gentle, non-destructive way. The two overlapping burials at the southern part are, however, quite different. Both destroy the older graves in an aggressive manner (*cf.* the case of graves 46 and 47 at Skateholm). It is probably no coincidence that both these cases are found in the southern part of the area, which also shows traces of new occupants. Also at Ajvide we thus find indications that interference with the dead is not necessarily a result of ancestral veneration. In the first phase, relationship with those interred are sought, but in a gentle way, not disturbing the remains of the buried. During the later phase, however, the intersections are destructive and brutal and rather suggest an aggressive attitude to those buried earlier.

Hybridity, complexity and intra-site change

At both Skateholm and Ajvide, we find indications of internal changes and traces of social hybridisation during the course of their use. This variability and alterations cannot only be a matter of marginal anomalies, but emphasise the importance of an open rather than static perspective that allows for criss-crossing synchronous and asynchronous chains of events. It also highlights the question of what may happen when different groups interact. In traditional social analysis, a social encounter between two 'cultures' is often seen as superficial (the mere exchange of certain objects), or a matter of one 'strong' culture compelling another culture to adopt their way of life. In recent discussions, however, the viability of such a dual perspective has been questioned (*e.g., White 1991; Bhabha 1994; Lucas 2006*). Instead, encounters between groups of different traditions are much more complex affairs. Cultural critics like Homi Bhabha (*1994*) point out that encounters are typically characterised by intricate layers of mockery and misunderstandings. Others, such as the historian Richard White (*1991*), emphasise the creativity of both sides in the struggle for power (*Fahlander 2007*). The outcome of a social encounter is thus difficult to pre-determine and often has unforeseen consequences. There are no given sets of simple logics, or even pragmatics, operating here. This complexity is valid not only for recent historical situations, but must also be addressed in pre-modern encounters. The aggressive post-depositional manipulations discussed here are among a number of such hybridisation processes. For instance, instead of sim-

ply referring to post-depositional manipulations as a ritual trait of a culture, such events are probably better understood in a differentiated and methodical perspective. In this paper, I have concentrated primarily on non-aggressive as opposed to aggressive manipulations of the dead. It is suggested that the latter may have been a consequence of the social stress that appears during periods of hybridisation of different groups and traditions. This is, however, not a discussion about whereas a social is advocated over a ritual perspective (in a way, to mock by interfering with other peoples dead can also be seen as ritualistic, although the aim of the actions differ). In most cases, it is hard to maintain any sharp distinction between the ritual and the profane – or for that matter, a social and a ritual interpretation (*cf. Bradley 2005; Fahlander 2008a.32*). My aim is rather to think outside the (anthropological) box, arguing with archaeological data rather than reverting to routine interpretations based on colonial ethno-graphy. The issue of secondary action also emphasise the advantages – or even necessity – of treating burial grounds as processes rather than closed cultural units. By using local and detailed analyses of chronology and sequences of events (horizontal stratigraphies) we can minimise regional and cultural generalisations (*cf., Fahlander 2008b*). It is obvious that if we deny those peoples internal complexity, development and agency, we run the risk of doing no better than the modernist ethnographers of the early 20th century. Moreover, the bottom-up approach applied here not only tells a story that is slightly different from that related by conventional culture-based studies; it also raises new questions that are seldom of concern in traditional analysis. Certainly, the local, bottom-up approach complicate matters, but it nonetheless forces us to look at sites such as Ajvide and Skateholm differently. They become more complex, less stereotyped, and indeed, more fascinating.

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