

# Waking the Dead: A Comparative Examination of Ancient Ritual Technologies for Modern Rites

## Introduction

The matter of ancestry and honoring one's ancestors looms large for many modern Heathens. However, despite this common interest (which also holds undeniable political and social dimensions), modern Heathen ideas and practices surrounding the Cult of the Dead, worship of the dead, and ancestor cults remain largely undeveloped and unsophisticated.

In *Living On: Ancestors and the Soul*, Alexandra Sanmark argues that generally speaking, pre-Christian Norse religion consisted of three strands: the cult of the gods, the animistic strand, and magic. The cult of the ancestors, as numinous entities that do not belong to the tribes of gods, rests within this second strand of Heathen religious expression. However, the recreation of this second strand is not so simple for modern Heathens. There was a physicality to the Old Norse ancestor cults, and physical proximity to the remains of the dead themselves a seemingly necessary part of cult practice. This can make it all but impossible for modern Heathens to revive, especially for Heathens dwelling in lands far from those of their ancestors.

Modern Heathens in what might be termed as the "diaspora" face a very unique quandary with regards to this second strand. Adherents face an unenviable choice between two opposing positions: the first being one in which ancestor cultus is only possible at the gravesite, and in which migration represents a permanent separation from one's elder ancestors; and the second position which largely requires the adherent to disregard the seemingly irrefutable evidence against belief in disembodied spirits. The

question of how to negotiate the space between the available evidence and largely unfulfilled “second strand” religious needs is one that has largely gone unexamined.

It is this very modern dilemma that this paper seeks to address. This paper will examine not only textual and archaeological evidence from Heathen Period Scandinavian cultures, but also comparative evidence from Ancient Greece. Finally, a series of suggestions for ritual and magical technologies that may be employed by modern day adherents will be presented.

## **1. Examining the Evidence**

### **1.1 Textual Evidence**

The veneration of the dead, regardless of familial relationship, was likely an important part of Old Norse religion at the local level. Both ancestor cults and cult of the dead practices are well attested in textual and archaeological sources, and textual accounts are found within both the Old Norse literary tradition and the Latin chronicles. Within the Old Norse corpus, the majority of Norse textual accounts are to be found in the *Legendary Sagas (Fornaldarsögur)*, the *Kings’ Sagas* in Snorri Sturluson’s *Heimskringla*, and *Landnámabók* (Gardela, 2016, pp. 171-179). Thematically speaking, these accounts describe a wide range of activities involving the dead such as approaching the dead for matters of fertility, mound cults, raising the dead in order to gain help or mantic wisdom, and drinking rituals in honor of the dead.

In *Worshipping the Dead: Viking Age Cemeteries as Cult Sites*, Leszek Gardela notes that many of the accounts that feature the motif of venerating or worshipping the dead can only be found in one source (the *Heimskringla*), and often have no parallels in other Old Norse texts. That is not to say that we can wholly discount the evidence from the *Heimskringla* though, texts from the Latin chronicles such as

Rimbaut's *Vita Anskari*, Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*, and Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* all mention practices centered around worshipping the dead (Gardela, 2016, p. 172). When taken together, these Latin sources possibly represent a continuous testimony of these practices that stretches from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. There is also a geographical element to these accounts that needs to be acknowledged here before proceeding further. Hilda Ellis Davidson makes the observation in *The Road to Hel* that textual evidence for the cult of the dead mainly originates from Norway and Sweden as opposed to Iceland (Davidson, 1943, p. 99). Per Ellis-Davidson, the cult of the dead only gained importance among the Icelanders as time went on, settlers died, and their bones laid to rest in the land (Davidson, 1988, p. 115).

The picture painted by the textual sources is one in which practices are carried out at the gravesite as opposed to in any other location, and in which the presence of physical remains is believed to be intrinsically powerful. One story that demonstrates this belief in the intrinsic power of physical remains is that of the postmortem treatment of King Hálfðan the Black's remains in *Hálfðanar saga svarta*. Instead of burial in the a single mound, we are told that Hálfðan was dismembered after death and his body parts buried in various parts of the kingdom in order to ensure prosperity (Gardela, 2016, p. 174). The story of Hálfðan's postmortem treatment is not the only evidence for the importance of physical remains to the Viking Age cult of the dead though. Per Hilda Ellis Davidson, inhumation graves were far more commonly featured as cultic sites than cremation graves (Davidson, 1943, p. 99).

But it does not seem to have been the case that all types of inhumation graves were considered of equal importance when it came to cultic activity. If anything, textual evidence gives us a very specific conception of the cult of the Dead and/or ancestor cults. For the authors of these texts at least, the worshipped dead were exclusively male, and dwelled in mounds or chambers dwellers as opposed to

any other kind of funerary structure (Gardela, 2016, pp. 177, 196).

Perhaps the best example of the textual cult of the dead can be seen in *Ynglinga saga* and the story of Freyr. While presented as a god elsewhere in the Old Norse texts, the Freyr of the *Ynglinga saga* is god enough to be worshipped, but human enough to die. When Freyr dies of an illness, his followers place his body in a mound with a door and three windows. His sister Freyja then becomes the sacrificial priestess of his cult, and the Swedes continue to make offerings to his mound for “peace and good seasons”, pouring offerings of gold, silver, and copper through the windows of his mound (Gardela, 2016, p. 173).

In many ways, Freyr’s cult as described in the *Ynglinga saga* is the archetypal expression of the textual cult of the dead. The inhabitant of the mound is male and of high social status. During life his reign is notable for its good luck and prosperity, and when he dies he is placed within a mound possessed of elements more commonly associated with chamber graves such as a door and windows.

Additionally, as a deity associated with elves, there is also clear overlap between the cult of the mound-dwelling Freyr here, and practices associated with other mound-dwelling elves.

## **1.2 Archaeological Evidence**

In terms of quantity, the archeological evidence is more substantial, albeit much harder to interpret. Viking Age burials can be quite problematic when it comes to interpretation, because as Neil Price has argued, no two burials are exactly the same (Price, 2012). There is an incredible amount of funerary

diversity and personalization of burials from this era. However, while these burials lack the uniformity of modern burial practices, it is still possible to identify some common elements.

Both inhumation and cremation burials were practiced in the Viking Age, but the degree to which each form of disposal was practiced varied by locality. Some parts of Scandinavia favored cremation whereas others favored inhumation. Moreover, that burial practices changed significantly between the Bronze Age and Viking Age, and so it would be a mistake to consider Viking Age burial practices and conceptions of the dead as representative of older Heathen Period practices and conceptions.

During the early Bronze Age, inhumation was universal but fell out of favor by the late Bronze Age when cremation became the most common way of processing the body after death. Cremation remained dominant (with some local exceptions) throughout the Iron Age until Roman cultural influence in the first century AD saw the rise of inhumation once more (Davidson, 1943, pp. 7-9). Finally, with the spread of Christianity and associated beliefs regarding the necessity of keeping the body whole for Judgement Day, inhumation became universal throughout Scandinavia.

Unlike modern gravesites, Viking Age gravesites seem to have been intentionally created for interaction with the living and evidence suggests a tradition of grave side feasting. Though rare, this interactivity could also go further as the evidence of the Oseberg boat burial demonstrates. Because not only was the burial site left unsealed for months, but it seems the living also interacted with the grave goods and dead as well (Price, 2012). Aside from burial sites, there is a further form of medium through which the living may have interacted with the dead attested to within the archaeological record. For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to refer to these features as *intermediary structures*. These intermediary structures are either features added to a burial site or that exist independently of any

burials, through which the living and dead may have interacted. Examples of intermediary structures that I will cover in greater detail in section 4 include portals, grids, doorposts, and stone ship settings (Eriksen, 2013).

Generally speaking, the Viking Age dead were buried in pits, regardless of whether the deceased were inhumed or cremated. The cremated would be burned, occasionally with a form of vehicle, and then the ashes collected in an urn for burial in a pit. Those who were buried whole were buried without a container, and for the most part laid on their backs. There are of course exceptions to this, such as the so-called “deviant” burials in which the bodies were positioned differently, and some burial sites in Birka or Rus’ in which the dead were buried seated on chairs (Gardela, 2016, pp. 183 - 184).

Both inhumation and cremation burial pits often included grave goods of some kind, and similar categories of grave goods have been observed in both inhumation and cremation graves. External structures varied, and inhumation graves could be flat, covered by mounds or cairns, contained within stone ship settings, or marked by wooden posts. A similar range of external structures has been observed in cremation graves. Like inhumation graves, cremation graves could be flat, covered by mounds, or contained within stone ship settings or other geometric patterns (Gardela, 2016, pp. 183 - 184). Evidence of ritual food offerings have been found at inhumation and cremation graves alike, as well as within possible intermediary structures (Gardela, 2016, pp. 187, 196 - 197).

For the most part, the archaeological evidence supports the assertion that access to the burial site itself was important to participation in the cult of the dead and/or ancestor veneration. However, some of the ritual technologies represented by the various kinds of intermediary structure may be transferable.

There has also been some speculation that some of the small anthropomorphic figures found within era

homesteads may have served as ancestor idols. However, it is impossible to know with any certainty what these figures represented for those that created or used them (Gardela, 2016, p. 177).

Before further examination of intermediary structures though, some discussion of eschatology and its relationship to burial is necessary.

## **2. The Norse Dead: Revenants, Ghosts, Rebirth, and the Hel-Road**

For most people, the term eschatology refers to the end of the world. It is the branch of mythology that tells of the “final things”, the things we pray we ourselves never encounter in life. This is eschatology on a macro scale, barely imaginable and safer for it. However, eschatology is the end of days on both a cosmological and individual level. It is also the final journey of the soul into the afterlife and the potential continuation of whatever it is that makes a person who they are beyond the world of the living.

It is impossible to speak of one single Viking Age eschatology. Mythology, contemporary accounts of cultic activities, and archaeological finds all describe or hint at differing beliefs.

The mythology of Hel speaks of a journey that is undertaken, a road that must be traveled by the dead that slopes “downwards and northwards” and that passes over a river. When Hermod rides to Hel in *Gylfaginning*, the journey takes him nine nights on horseback through valleys deep and dark. But when the legendary king Hadingus of the *Gesta Danorum* makes the journey, the land around the Hel-Road is sunny and fertile. All accounts of the journey to Hel though, include a mighty gate and wall that is too high to scale without magical help (Davidson, 1943, pp. 171 - 172).

Conversely, contemporary accounts of the dead underline the physical nature of the dead. The dead were considered to inhabit their mounds, and when they ventured forth to haunt the living, they did so as revenants called *draugar*. These revenants were possessed of unnatural strength and an ability to pass through the earth. For the most part, they brought violence and death through sickness, and at their worst, could ride the roofs in order to bring down the houses in which the living hid themselves. They were thought to be most active during fall and winter. The disembodied spirit of modern ghost lore simply did not exist within the Old Norse corpus (Davidson, 1943, pp. 94, 95, 163).

There is however a contradiction here that needs to be addressed with regards to necromancy, or the art of gaining mantic wisdom from the dead. As previously mentioned, the only “ghosts” in the Old Norse corpus are draugar, yet as a group they lack any sign of possessing mantic wisdom. The advice given by draugar, when it is given, is unremarkable. Draugar, as the stories tell us, are much the same in death as they were in life.

Yet the dead are approached for mantic wisdom repeatedly in the sources. Kings sit on and rule from the mounds of other kings and poets sleep on the mounds of poets in order to gain their skill (Davidson, 1943, pp. 108, 119). In *Grógaldr*, Svipdagr raises his mother in search of knowledge, so too does Hervör raise her father in similar fashion in *Hervarar Saga* to obtain a familial sword (Davidson, 1943, pp. 154, 159). Finally, the god Óðinn – a god known for his wisdom – approaches the dead for mantic knowledge in multiple ways (Davidson, 1943, pp. 153, 159). Moreover, while draugar may recognize and even show favor towards living relatives, the dead who are consulted for wisdom are devoid of personal sentiment towards their questioners even where familial relationship is involved. Their answers are formulaic and must be coerced by spells. There is also a notable undercurrent of hostility in the exchanges (Davidson,

1943, p. 164).

This collage of afterlife belief is further complicated by the matter of rebirth. Perhaps the most well-known account of rebirth is that of Helgi and Svava from the *Helgakviða Hjorvarðssonar* poem of the *Poetic Edda*, though it is not the only one (Davidson, 1988, p. 123). The mound-elf Olaf Geirstaðaálf also features in a tale of rebirth in the *Flateyjarbók* in which he appears in dream to a man called Hrani. Then Olaf proceeds to instruct him to enter his mound, take his ring, belt, and sword, then cut the head off his body in order to free him from his life in the mound. Hrani is then instructed to go secretly to a pregnant woman called Ásta and to put his belt around her. This he does, and Olaf, the man who would become King Olaf the Holy, is born (Davidson, 1943, pp. 138 - 139).

This is an undeniably complex mixture of eschatological imagery, and consideration of archaeological evidence does nothing to simplify matters. The evidence of mound burials accord well with the stories of draugar and contemporary accounts of mound cults. But mortuary stone ship settings, and possible intermediary structures at sites seem to hint at interactions with disembodied dead. For if interaction with the dead must take place at the burial site itself, what is to be made of food offering deposits at sites associated with the dead but that otherwise lack physical remains?

We find ourselves in a grave-field filled with different stories, all simultaneously being told. Some, like those contained within stone ship settings are exceedingly old, while others are clearly younger. If we are to possibly understand these stories and why they may have all risen up though, then a comparative approach may be helpful.

### 3. Comparative View: Ancient Greece

At first glance, the Ancient Greek and Norse cultures seem to have little in common though they derive from a common cultural root. However, there are several reasons why a comparison with Ancient Greek culture may be helpful within this context.

The first reason boils down to common origin. As previously mentioned, both Norse and Greek cultures come from the same root, that is, they are Indo-European, and so originate from the same theoretical homeland and peoples.

The second reason is that these shared origins were not the only transmission vector for cross-cultural exchange between the two groups. The Greeks were the preeminent traders in the Mediterranean from around 600 BC onwards, which enabled the wide proliferation of Greek goods and cultural influence. This influence spread first to the Gaulish tribes and their warband religion, then to the Germans who emulated them (Enright, 1996, pp. 133 - 139). We see this influence most strongly in items and practices related to feasting. Grave goods of Greek origin such as fine cauldrons, drinking services, and horns have been found in around 40 Hallstatt period burials. Furthermore, the festal pattern of the Celts and Germans of this period have been shown to parallel that of the Greeks in many ways (Enright, pp. 136 - 137). But this early trade cannot have been the only vector for cross-cultural transmission. Given the widespread influence of Roman culture (with its heavy Greek influence) throughout Europe, and trade between Scandinavia and mainland Europe, it is not unreasonable to speculate further transmission vectors. However, it was in the Migration Period when these imported elements really began to make their way further north, migrating with the warbands and their cult of Óðinn as they moved (Gunnell, 2013, pp. 160 - 163).

The final and arguably best reason though, is that unlike the Norse, the Greeks had a literary culture long before the arrival of Christianity. Even more relevant to our examination though – there is a rich tradition of necromancy in Greek literature.

A cursory comparison reveals several striking similarities between the two cultures. Like the Norse, the Greeks had a cult of the dead in which the dead were believed to inhabit the mound and offerings were poured in via libation tubes (Burkert, pp. 194 -196). Both cultures situated the realms of the dead in the north (Puhvel, p. 138), and both Hades and Hel were located in a downward direction and accessed by passing over water (Retief, p. 45).

The Greeks also practiced both inhumation burial and cremation burial, though cremation was the most common form of burial (with inhumation burials accounting for roughly 30% of all finds). However, there was never a point in Greek culture where cremation was universally practiced. Greek beliefs pertaining to the nature of the dead themselves feature both revenants and disembodied spirits.

Although there is only one textual account of a Greek revenant to my knowledge, there is mention of a practice referred to as “arm-pitting” which involved mutilating the body in such a way so as to prevent it from rising (Ogden, 2009, pp. 159-160, 162). Furthermore, the archaeological record demonstrates that anxieties regarding revenants were not purely literary inventions. Two burials discovered in Kamarina demonstrate the use of pinning to ensure the dead remained in their tombs (Sulosky-Weaver, 2015). The vast majority of interactions with the Ancient Greek dead though, were of the disembodied kind - Greek literature is filled with tales of ghosts and necromancy.

Due to the long historical record of the Pagan Greeks, it is possible to trace several shifts of afterlife belief. While there was never a Pan-Hellenic uniformity with regards to the afterlife, there were some ideas and concepts that were reasonably mainstream, and it is from these that we may trace those shifts.

The earliest source we have on the afterlife is Homer, though he gives a somewhat contradictory picture. Writing in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, he simultaneously presents an afterlife in which the dead inhabit a shadow existence devoid of characteristics or memory, and an afterlife in which the dead retain their characteristics and memories (Retief, pp. 45 - 46).

The 8<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC saw the arrival of the psychopomp in Greek myth, a figure who is tasked with escorting the souls of the dead to Hades. Two such figures arise in this period: Hermes, messenger of the gods and now escort to the dead; and then later, Charon, the ferryman. In this period, the dead are fully differentiated and able to communicate with the living, albeit only after consuming the animating elixir of sacrificial blood (Retief, p. 46).

In the 5<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, the psychopomp began to make a two-way street of the route to Hades, temporarily guiding the dead back to the living as well as fulfilling his earlier role. He becomes messenger to the living and dead, as well as the gods, and the practice of necromancy begins to flourish. People buried curse tablets called *katedesmoi* in graves, calling upon the dead to cast curses from the Underworld at the living (Retief, pp. 46, 48). This was the dawn of Goeteia, or as the later grimoires would come to call it, *goetia*.

In *Greek Religion*, Walter Burkert writes "*Burial customs and beliefs about the dead have always gone*

*hand in hand, one influencing the other, but as special studies show, there is no strict correlation between the two.*" (Burkert, p. 190) However, while Burkert may be correct that there is no direct correlation, it is my personal view that a ritual technology for raising disembodied dead is more meaningful to a culture in which the majority of people are cremated. Moreover, I do not think it coincidental that the two examples of pinned bodies in the Greek archaeological record come from a necropolis that boasts an above average (for that era) ratio of inhumation burials (some 85%) (Sulosky-Weaver, 2015).

We turn now to those Greek necromantic ritual technologies. There were a number of places where the Greeks believed they could communicate with their dead.

The first, and most obvious place for any culture with a cult of the dead, is the grave itself. The writer Suda talks of the practitioners of goeteia evoking the dead at tombs with incantations and wailing (Ogden, 2009, p. 48). However, necromancy was not limited to the necropolis and there were a number of other venues or mediums through which that contact could be made.

Many of us still recognize the crossroads as being a space in which afterlife contact may be made, crossroads have retained much of their occult connotations in our modern culture. For the Greeks, the crossroads were associated with the goddess Hecate who was credited with making possible conversation with the Dead (Ogden, 2009, pp. 83, 194). Contact could also be made by digging a pit and pouring libations and food offerings into it to bring speech to the dead. This pit necromancy is in fact the earliest form of necromancy recorded in the Greek corpus (Ogden, 2009, p. 116).

Finally, there is evidence for the use of water in Greek necromancy. The Nekyomanteion, a place where people could seek oracles from the dead that typically recreated the underworld journey in some way, were often situated by water (Ogden, 2001). There is also material evidence in a series of 30 vases by the "Cumaean Painter" from around the 4th century BCE. These are believed to depict a woman participating in necromancy, holding a bowl and seated on a chair. Around her stand the dead in burial posture and dressed in shrouds (Ogden, 2001). Additionally, the Greek Magical Papyri give the procedure for summoning a psychopomp and then scrying the dead in a bowl of water (Stratton-Kent, pp. 25 - 44).

As we can see, the existence of physical remains was entirely unnecessary for communication with the dead in Ancient Greek. That is not to say that they never benefited from the proximity of physical remains where possible. That is demonstrably not the case from both a textual and archaeological perspective. However, the lack of physical remains was not a deal-breaker for the Greeks, and they were not afraid of using a range of intermediary places and structures in order to facilitate communication. These were places that were inherently liminal, and that in my opinion, reflected an effort to meet the dead "halfway". The pit was dug downwards as Hades was believed to be under the earth, and the Nekyomanteion led the seeker on a journey below. The dead were thought to pass over waters by boat, and so it was through the waters the living called.

In each case, an intermediary place was made in which the living could interact with the dead, and with that in mind, it is to the possible intermediary structures of the northern grave-fields that we now return.

## 4. Intermediary Structures as Necromantic Technologies

As mentioned above, archaeologists have found a range of what might be termed intermediary structures in the grave-fields of Scandinavia. Though normally situated in grave-fields, surprisingly these structures do not always contain physical remains. Despite this lack of physical remains though, evidence of offerings has been found at some of these structures. As with the Greek sites and structures examined above, there is a component that might be thought to align the structure with an element of myth in all of the Scandinavia examples examined.

### 4.1 Doorways

The most prevalent kind of what might be thought of as an intermediary structure found in Scandinavia is the doorway. Doors are symbolically potent in several ways. The first and most obvious way is that they separate one space from another, limiting passage and offering protection. When open, they are a space between, and they unintentionally delineate axes wherever they exist (Eriksen, p. 189).

The significance of doorways in Old Norse ritual is attested in both textual sources and the archaeological record. In the 922 AD account of Arab writer Ibn Fadlan's *Risala*, a slave is lifted three times over a structure "which looked like the frame of a door" prior to being sacrificed. With each ascent over the lintel, she claims to see her ancestors and deceased lord in the realm of the dead bidding her to come join them. After this ritual action, she is sacrificed and her body burned along with the body of the deceased lord (Eriksen, p. 191).

In *Baldur's Draumar*, Óðinn rides to consult the völva buried "east of the door" of Hel, and in a section of *Svipdagsmal* known as *Grógaldr*, Svipdagr raises his mother with the formula, "Wake thee Gróa, Wake,

*mother good, At the doors of the dead I call thee*" (Eriksen, p. 192). When Gróa appears to her son, she stands on an "earthbound stone" in the doorway to speak with him (Eriksen, p. 193). Finally, the door of Hel is referenced multiple times under different names: *valgrind* (gateway of the fallen), *nágrind* (gateway of bodies), and *helgrind* (gateway to Hel's realm) (Eriksen, p. 193).

Doors were also used as part of a judicial process for dealing with the disruptive dead within the confines of law. Door courts or *duradómr* are mentioned in *Eyrbyggja saga*, the *Gulating Law*, and *Landnámabók*. During a door court, the dead are summoned to the main door of the home and put to trial for their crimes before being expelled one by one through a second door (Eriksen, p. 194).

The archaeological record is rich with evidence of doors in probable necromantic contexts. Though they will be discussed further below in conjunction with stone ship settings, the Gotland picture stones have long been interpreted as memorial stones to the dead.

A uniquely Gotlandic phenomenon (Skogland, p. 396), there are around 450 such stones on the island of Gotland dating from 400 – 1100 AD (Eriksen, p. 194). Archaeologists have identified four different groups of picture stones depending on shape and iconography, but it is the type C grouping which concerns us here. Dating from between 800 – 1000 AD, type C stones seem to parallel the shape of the Urnes stave church portal, and depict iconography related to the dead. Eriksen notes that they're positioned in "transitional zones" – areas that are neither infield nor outfield (Eriksen, p. 195).

Burials have been found at the foot of many of these stones (Clark, p. 117), though these are not the inhumation burials that one might expect. If anything, there seems to be connection between cremation burial and the picture stones that has gone largely underexplored (Andreef, p. 142). However, there are

also examples of picture stones that have no associated burials, but evidence of ritual offerings regardless. The stones at Västerhejde Suderbys and Butte Änge are two examples where evidence of ritual activity has been found before stones without any associated burials. Furthermore, the nature of these items (charcoal, pottery shards, and animal bones), may indicate feasting or food offerings (Andreef, pp. 130 - 131). If we are to assume that these items were offerings made in honor of the dead, then the evidence of Västerhejde Suderbys and Butte Änge would suggest that physical remains were not always necessary for participation in ancestor veneration.

In the *Laxdaela saga*, there is the story of a man called Hrapp, who before death, requested to be buried in the doorway of his home so as to be able to continue to keep an eye on his lands. Unfortunately though, this did not turn out well for anyone but Hrapp, and it soon became apparent that his disposition had not improved with death. He was now far more troublesome, truly dangerous. The implication in this story is that the doorway burial somehow allowed him easier access to the land of the living, and it is that idea we must bear in mind when examining this phenomenon further (Eriksen, p. 196).

Interestingly, the story of Hrapp is reflected in the archaeological record from Rogaland in SW Norway where we find several examples of similar doorway burials. In Storrseheia, doorway burials have been found in two excavated longhouses. The first longhouse was abandoned before becoming the final resting place for the remains of a woman. Buried to the west of a SE door, the woman's ashes were interred with a spindle whorl, weaving sword, and oval brooch. Unlike the first longhouse, the second roundhouse was served as both home and burial site contemporaneously. In this case there was only one entrance to the building in the north, however the entrance was extended at some point in order to create a passageway, and it was in the wall of this passageway that the grave (again a cremation) was

found (Eriksen, p. 197).

These are not the only examples of doorway burials - evidence for this practice has been found dating back to the Roman Iron Age (Eriksen, p. 199). But for the purposes of this paper, examination of these sites must by necessity be limited.

This is enough however, to bring us quite comfortably to the examination of the SW portals. There are too many sites for consideration here. The first is the mound 30 in cemetery 116 on the island of Helgö, and the second is to be found at Åby in Södermanland.

The Helgö mound is large and contained multiple burials. The main burial, a cremation burial, is curious in that it was found in the SW side of the mound as opposed to the center (Eriksen, p. 200). Outside the mound, on the SW edge, there are red sandstone slabs forming a rectangle and filled with tightly packed moraine. The use of red sandstone is also noteworthy here, as the only other sites on the island in which this material has been found are excavated longhouses. This structure has been interpreted as a threshold, an interpretation which is supported by 2 large postholes (around ½ meter diameter) flanking the structure on either side (Eriksen, p. 199).

The remains of the Åby “portal” are located in the SW corner of a grave-field. The structure seems to have been pentagonal in shape, comprised of four large freestanding postholes and a rectangular setting with doorposts in the SW of the monument. In the center of the portal, archaeologists found a cremation grave. The site is dated to around 500 AD, though it continued to stand long after it fell out of use and the grave-field as a whole reused in the Viking Age (Eriksen, p. 200).

It should be mentioned here that portal grave mounds such as the one at Helgö are exclusive to the Uppland/Södermanland regions of Sweden. Surveys put the number of grave mounds with SW portals at around 80, the majority of which are empty of remains. Pottery shards and burnt bones have been found at some sites, but actual burials are rare (Eriksen, pp. 200 - 201).

Portals are not the only examples of mound structures with a SW orientation either, causewayed ring-ditches (a widespread mound feature during the Viking Age) also usually have SW orientation.

On the whole, doorways when found in mortuary settings seem to indicate a medium through which the dead may be accessed. In most cases, these various kinds of doorway uses and structures are predominantly associated with cremation graves, but as we have seen, many of these sites have no burials. In any case, with the exception of doorway burials, necromantic activities seem to have been limited to delineated areas. Even when these structures have no associated burials, they are usually situated in grave-fields regardless. In my opinion this is unsurprising given the perceived dangers of necromancy and the fear of the active dead reflected in tales of draugar.

## **4.2 The Götavi Grid**

As demonstrated above, SW portals are inherently connected with the dead regardless of whether the remains of the dead themselves are present or not. However, the examples we have examined so far all have clear necromantic connections. If the dead are not physically present, elements that overtly tie the intermediary structure with the dead are included. For example, empty burial mounds with SW portals still have clear connections with the dead by virtue of the common association between the dead and

burial mounds.

However, with possible intermediary structures like that found at Götavi in the province of Närke, this association with the dead isn't always immediately clear. The grid at Götavi forms part of what was once a cultic center in the late tenth to mid-eleventh century. The name Götavi is theophoric and may be translated as "sanctuary of the gods" (Price, 2014, p. 182).

The grid itself is a curious structure (if we can indeed call it that) as it seems to have been created in order to form an artificial island in the middle of a small marsh. It was formed by digging down 9 parallel linear enclosures plus one square enclosure which were then packed with stone. This was then in turn buried beneath a platform of clay so as to complete the island effect. Interestingly, the resulting rectangular feature is oriented along a south-west/north-east orientation, perhaps further reinforcing the necromantic connotations of this site. The center appears to have had a slight bowl-shaped depression, and there is evidence that there were fences along the short sides of the feature.

There are no burials within the grid, and nor was the site situated within a grave field.

However, it was a place where offerings were spilled - chemical analyses show a large amount of fat and blood within the enclosure. This was especially the case in the north-east of the site, where there were also once wooden posts. Organic depositions, probably food remains, were also found on the clay surface along the south-eastern fence line. Furthermore, as a ritual site, there was likely a connection with animal and possibly even human sacrifice (Price, 2014, p. 183).

In *Nine Paces from Hel: Time and Motion in Old Norse Ritual Performance*, Neil Price connects the grid at

Götavi with the number nine in mythological tales, noting that *“nine more commonly marks duration, sequence, or movement”*. The most relevant mythological fit for the Götavi grid as far as Price is concerned, is when Þórr falls down in battle at Ragnarök, poisoned by the Miðgarð – serpent. Nine great paces is all it takes for him to reach Hel (Price, 2014, p. 184).

Aside from the aforementioned associations with the number nine and Þórr’s descent into Hel, there are yet other elements of this site which tie it to the dead. First of all, just to reiterate, the site has a SW orientation. Secondly, there is a strong association between islands and the dead. To quote Eldar Heide in *Holy Islands and the Otherworld: Places beyond Water*:

*“In northern Norway there are strikingly many Iron Age graves on uninhabitable islets and it is quite common that grave fields from the Iron Age and Viking Age are separated from the settlements by streams. Grave mounds with ditches around them from the same era may be a parallel. This was quite common; the mounds at Borre in Vest-fold, Southeastern Norway, are a good example. For at least some periods of the year, such ditches would fill with water and turn the grave-mound into an island, making an island realm of the dead.”*

Finally, there is a necromantic account in the *Færeyinga Saga* in which a magician summons the dead in order to discover how one of their number met his death.

*“...Then Þrándr had great fires made up in the hall, and had four hurdles (?) set up to form a square. Then he marked out nine enclosures from the hurdles, in all directions, and he sat on a stool between the fire and the hurdles. Now he forbade them to talk among themselves, and they obeyed him. Þrándr sat thus for a while, and when some time had elapsed, a man came into the hall, soaking wet. They*

*recognised the man as Einarr the Hebridean. He went up to the fire and stretched out his hands to it for a little while, and after that turned and went out. After a while a second man walked into the hall; he went to the fire, stretched out his hands to it, and then went out; and they knew that this was Þórir. Soon after a third man came into the hall; he was a tall man, much covered in blood, and he held his head in his hand. They all recognised him; it was Sigmundur Brestison; he stood still on the floor for a little while, and then went out. And after that Þrándr drew a deep breath and said: 'Now you may see how the man has met his death'..."*

From the image below, it is clear that the Götavi grid matches the description of the square with nine enclosures exactly. Moreover, physical remains were lacking in both cases of necromancy (Davidson, 1943, p. 161).



Given the available evidence, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the grid uncovered at Götavi was a site of necromantic ritual. It was a place where the living could make offerings to and possibly even interact with the dead despite the lack of physical remains. This was an exquisite magical and ritual technology that seemed to recreate both the sacred geography of the island mound as seen by the living,

and the pathways to and from Hel within the “mound” itself. That the evidence for blood and fat offerings were found in copious amounts along the North-eastern side where there were once wooden posts seems significant. Unfortunately though, it is impossible to guess at possible door portals/helgrind representations without further information about the posts themselves. In my opinion though, there is something reminiscent of the Ancient Greek belief that the dead require blood in order to interact with the living here in those offerings.

### **4.3 Ships**

The history of ships in Scandinavia is a long and complex one, full of changing religious and symbolic meanings. At times they have been associated with the solar cult and carrying the sun through her daily cycle through the heavens and down through the underworld. However, the earliest and most predominant association that ships carry is with the dead (Skogland, p. 392).

The mortuary tradition of stone ship settings in Southern Scandinavia dates back to at least 1300 BC (Skogland, p. 392). Primarily associated with cremation graves, these stone ship settings were especially prevalent on the island of Gotland (Ballard, 2003, p. 389).

In *There and Back Again: Ancestor Veneration and Necromancy in Ship-Themed Scandinavian Burials*, Cassandra Clark posits that these stone ship settings (and indeed boat burials in general) served as “ancestral touchpoints”. In other words, they were places in which familial or communal ancestors could traverse the presumably watery boundaries between the realms of living and dead. For Clark, these

burials were not simply symbolic of the dead going off to the land of the dead in their boats, but also their ability to return (Clark, p. 115). There are several factors that seem to support this interpretation.

First of all, while the vast majority of stone ship settings contain cremation burials, there are some that are empty of remains. Regardless of this lack of remains though, these empty boats show evidence of fires and meals within, potentially suggesting food offerings or feasting activities (Price, 2011, p. 261).

Secondly, there is evidence of some overlap between boat burials and doorway burials. In Ullandhaug, a Migration Period settlement with younger burials, there are two examples of burial in which later burials were incorporated with the ruined longhouses that were originally there. These burials were ship burials, but of the mound variety, that is to say that they were mounds albeit in an oval shape so as to emulate ships. Both ship-shaped mounds were constructed over different parts of the same longhouse, with the first ship mound sitting neatly within the walls of the north-west side of the house. The second ship mound however, completely envelops the entrance that once lay in the south-east. Here we seem to have a kind of “layering” of necromantic technologies, though we could only ever guess at the level of intentionality that went into burials such as these.

Finally, I would like to mention an interesting contradiction of the Oseberg boat burial that may potentially support the concept of ship burials as necromantic tools. It may be stating the obvious, but the nature of a ship is to travel. Within the context of a burial, we might surmise that a whole, exquisitely-carved ship, filled with grave goods, was intended in some way to convey the dead to whatever afterlife the ship and mound-builders believed in. However, in the case of the Oseberg boat burial, this symbolism of movement and travel is contradicted by the fact that the ship was also moored to a huge rock within the mound (Clark, p. 119).

Interestingly, and also possibly salient here, the burial was the final destination of two women who have been interpreted as either being two sorceresses, or an elder sorceress and her apprentice. If this interpretation is correct, this is noteworthy because of the aforementioned tradition of consulting dead sorceresses for mantic knowledge. To return once more to *Grógaldr* and the words Svipdagr uses to raise his mother:

*“Awake, Gróa! Awake, good woman!*

*Awake at the door of the dead!*

*If you remember bidding your son*

*Come to your grave cairn.”*

(Davidson, 1943, p. 154)

“Come to your grave cairn” said Svipdagr, suggesting that the dead were possibly able to leave and return to this world when the right spells or words were spoken. From this perspective, it is possible that the moored ship represented a way of anchoring the *völva* to this world so as to allow return when needed by their community in life. Clark also goes on to suggest that the house urns so often found within the stone ship settings may function to moor the ship in much the same way as the rock did the Oseberg boat. For Clark, these symbolic houses serve as touchstones within the landscape to which the dead can always return (Clark, 2018, p. 120).

Though not a boat burial, a similar contradiction may be observed in the burial of the Fyrkat “witch”.

The so-called “witch” found at Fyrkat was buried in the middle of an east-west oriented causeway

situated at the center of a grave-field. The causeway appears to have been built for this purpose as it does not go anywhere and therefore has no practical use. The deceased herself, was placed in the hull of a wagon, again, a vehicle suggesting movement. But she was in a sense barred by the orientation of the causeway from making her journey northwards towards Hel. She does not seem to have been fully disconnected from the land of the dead however, as there is evidence of two postholes to the north of the causeway, set at a 45 degree angle so that they would have leant over her. These were burned in situ down to the postholes. Given the orientation of these posts, it would not be unreasonable to suggest a necromantic portal of the kind explored above, but we can only guess as to the meaning of burning such a portal down (Price, 2014, pp. 185 - 186).

There are many questions that remain unanswered here, and the underlying logic for the tension between technologies that keep the dead moored but also allow them to leave (or at least see the land of the dead) is one that will probably never be solved. However, given the strong associations between ships and the dead, evidence of possible feasting within stone ship settings empty of remains, and the seeming contradiction of burial in a vehicle stymied from travel, I do not believe it to be unreasonable to consider ships a form of intermediary structure.

## **5. Modern Heathen Adaptation – Some Suggestions**

At first glance there does not seem to be historical support let alone ritual suggestions for modern Heathen ancestor cults. However, the existence of what I have called intermediary structures within the archaeological record attests that the picture is far more complex than most would imagine. At the beginning of this paper, we began with the view that physical remains had to be present in order to interact with the dead, and that revenants were the only “ghosts” possible. However, as we moved

through the examination of doorways, grids, and finally ships, a different picture emerged. It is one in which necromantic technologies were far more associated with cremation burial, or indeed no burial present at all. This, runs counter to the focus on cults centered on the inhumation burials of the Old Norse corpus. Inevitably this invites the question of just what dead were being summoned during these rites if no bodies were present or the extant remains were ashes? What revenant could be raised there?

The only logical solve for this is that there had to have been a belief in the disembodied dead as well as revenants, at least in some parts of Heathen Period Scandinavia. For what would be the sense of building or using structures through which living and dead may interact? Why make the effort and use the resources? What would be the point of feasting in a stone ship setting devoid of remains, or adding SW portals to an empty mound?

The truth of the matter is that whenever we strive to encounter the dead, we step into a sea of stories. In many ways, stories are far more important to the dead than they are the living. Because it is through stories – our stories – that they are remembered. The intermediary structures and technologies of Ancient Greek and Norse cultures alike rely on story to bring the dead forth. The ships speak of a journey over water to the land of the dead, and the mounds may sometimes speak of islands. Wagon burials and horses can call to mind the journey down the Hel-road, and the Götavi grid possibly recreates the journey in nine steps. This is embodied ritual here, ritual in which the story is writ large and built, then the parts acted out. It is a sacred drama, and like with all great performances of story, you need a stage and to set the scene for the story ahead. The technologies examined in this paper all function to create liminal space and meet the dead “halfway” in some manner. That is the easy part.

Timing is also important, and in at least two sources night is the best time to raise the dead (Davidson,

1943, p. 93).

The hardest part, as always though, is figuring out the script. In other words, what are you going to say?

The evocations recorded in *Grógaldr* and *Hervarar saga* can give us a place to start, but it may take a little more than recycling thousand year old stanzas to “get the ship up in the air”.

The oldest probable mention of necromancy is on a rune stone that was erected sometime between 650 and 700 AD. It is only the barest mention, but it offers an intriguing clue for if the stanzas fail. The stone advises the reader that “*one should not seek the man who howls over the naked dead*”. Clearly, the dead being referred to here are physical dead, but the reference to howling over the dead (if this is indeed referring to necromancy) parallels the wailing and lamentations of the Greek practitioners of Goeteia. The dead were called forth by the sounds of grief.

Not everyone finds it easy to wail and lament though, culturally that is hard for us. There is also little mention of how to dismiss the dead once the ritual is over in the wailing and lamenting. It is for this reason that I recommend the use of an adapted version of the old dirge ‘A Lyke Wake’. ‘A Lyke Wake’ was designed to be sung over corpses and the lyrics reflect the journey to the afterlife (albeit from a mostly Christian worldview). It is the song of a psychopomp.

Offerings, feasting, drinking rituals – these are all things you can do when the dead arrive. But be sure to maintain a sense of separation between yourselves and the dead. I do not believe it to be coincidental that with the exception of doorway burials, even when no remains are present, places where there is evidence of necromancy are not in the areas inhabited by the living. Iron is helpful here. At Lilla Ullevi, a

site with possible but uncertain necromantic associations, more than 60 iron amulet rings were found buried in the ground between the posts that stood on the south-side of the site. From the perspective of a magical practitioner, that is a protective barrier. My personal view is that it is probably no coincidence that one of the so-called “staves of sorcery” was also found on the southern side of what is believed to have once been a platform on the site (Price, 2014, p. 182).

Finally, there is a special role for magic workers indicated here. As Hilda Ellis Davidson noted in *The Road to Hel*, there are similarities in how the wise dead deliver their knowledge and human seers do the same. It is to dead seeresses that Óðinn goes for knowledge in *Völuspá* and *Baldrs Draumar*, and Svipdagr raises his mother who was known to have been a sorceress. The Oseberg sorceress/es and Fyrkat witch find themselves both anchored to the world and set in a vehicle for motion in death. Ibn Fadlan wrote of the “Angel of Death” who directed the funeral proceedings. There is a role here for magic workers, and if you have them in your community, you would do well to involve them (if you do not already) in the planning and facilitation of these rites. The rites of the dead are also the perfect time for prophecy, so consider setting up a north/north-east facing platform or doorposts for the purpose.

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