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DEATH AND CHANGING RITUALS

*Function and Meaning in Ancient Funerary Practices*

*Edited by*

J. RASMUS BRANDT, MARINA PRUSAC AND HÅKON ROLAND

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*The frieze in the upper band:* Tarquinia, Tomba del Barone, rear wall. Courtesy of the Ministero per i Beni e  
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*Back cover:* The body of John Williams being taken for staked burial at Cannon Street crossroads, London,  
in 1811. The Newgate Calendar, [http: //www.exclassics.com/newgate/ngbibl.htm](http://www.exclassics.com/newgate/ngbibl.htm).

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## CHANGING RITUALS AND REINVENTING TRADITION: The burnt Viking Ship at Myklebostad, Western Norway

*Terje Oestigaard*

*At Myklebostad in Eid in Nordfjord, western Norway, five large grave mounds were discovered. In 1874, a large Viking ship was excavated in grave mound no. 1. However, contrary to the Oseberg and Gokstad Viking ships, the ship at Myklebostad was burnt. Only half of the mound was excavated, but the ship may have been the size of Gokstad or perhaps even larger. The most spectacular find was the urn in which the cremated bones of a 30–35 year old man were found. In mound no. 2 there were six burials dating from the 8th to the 10th century AD, including both inhumations, cremations and two smaller boats – one burnt and one unburnt. Mounds nos 3 and 5 were not excavated, but in mound no. 4 cremated remains from a woman in a small boat were found. The most striking feature at this cemetery regarding rituals is that all of these funerals were conducted in a different manner, even those within mound no. 2. Nevertheless, the deceased belonged to the same cultural and religious sphere, and may have been one family or at least part of the same community. Thus, the different practices must have been used deliberately and this cemetery enables therefore a discussion of why the rituals vary, the relationship between cremation and inhumation, the invention and reinvention of tradition, and the ritual transformation of the society in the development of the Norwegian kingdom.*

*Keywords:* Cremation, inhumation, Norwegian kingdom, ritual mobilisation, tradition, Viking ship



Fig. 12.1. Map of Myklebostad in Eid in Nordfjord, Norway (courtesy of Ragnar Børsheim and Arkikon).

The most famous Viking ship in the world is most likely the Oseberg ship. In Norway, ever since the first Viking ship was excavated at Borre in Vestfold in 1852, Snorre's sagas (he himself being an Icelandic poet, historian and politician, 1179?–1241) have been used to interpret which chieftains and kings were given ship burials, thus linking the Viking ships to the *Ynglingatal*, the *Ynglinga Saga*, and the foundation of the Norwegian kingdom. According to history, King Harald Hårfagre (Fairhair) started the conquest of Norway, which ended with the formation of the Norwegian kingdom, hence unifying the previous former petty kingdoms or chiefdoms. Traditionally, Harald Hårfagre and the development of the Norwegian kingdom have been located to Vestfold in eastern Norway (Andersen 1977). However, although the final battle in Håfrsfjord where Hårfagre unified Norway has traditionally been set at AD 872, it is now believed that Harald Hårfagre started his conquest from his strongholds in southwestern Norway and that the unification took place somewhat later (Krag 1995: 86, Opedal 1998; 2005; Myhre & Gansum 2003).



Next to Oseberg's fame is the Gokstad Viking ship. These, together with the lesser known Borre ship, are all buried in Vestfold, while the Tune ship was buried across Oslofjord in Østfold. The Oseberg burial took place in AD 834, while those at Gokstad, Borre and Tune occurred around AD 900. In addition, in southwestern Norway, two ship burials have been found at Avaldsnes: Storhaug dating to *c.* AD 690–750 and Grønhaug to *c.* AD 930, respectively. It is commonly agreed that those who were given these extraordinary burials were part of the elites, political centres, processes and even the conquests that led in one way or another to the unification of Norway as a kingdom. It is, however, highly problematic to link these graves to historical figures or persons described in the sagas. Noteworthy, all these ship burials were unburnt and the deceased inhumated, but perhaps the largest of all Viking ships found in Norway and the least discussed, the Myklebostad ship in Eid in Nordfjord, western Norway, was burnt and the deceased cremated.

Thus, I will present and discuss the Myklebostad ship burial in the context of the unification of the kingdom of Norway (Fig. 12.1). Although it is possible that this funeral represents something ritually and cosmologically unique with regards to the circumstances of the deceased's death necessitating such a massive cremation, in a political context (which will be discussed) one may assume that the deceased was a local

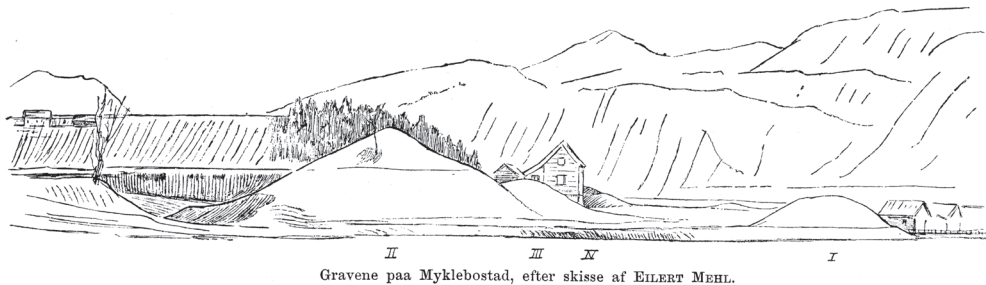


Fig. 12.2. *The Myklebostad cemetery (after Shetelig 1905: 6, fig. 1).*



Fig. 12.3. *Mound no. 1, Rundehogjen, at Myklebostad (courtesy of Ragnar Børshheim).*



king or chieftain. Why was *this* ship burnt? Why only was this local king or chieftain cremated when the common practice for royal burials was inhumation? How can this ritual practice be contextualised in relation to the local traditions at Myklebostad, the foundation of the Norwegian kingdom, and the religious beliefs in the Viking Age?

## The Myklebostad ship burial

Originally, there were five large grave mounds at Myklebostad (Fig. 12.2). In grave mound no. 1. (Fig. 12.3), a large Viking ship was excavated in 1874 by Anders Lorange (Lorange 1875). The mound measured 31 m in diameter with a height of 4 m. Around the mound there was a ditch measuring 4 m in width and 1 m in depth. As indicated, contrary to the Oseberg and Gokstad burials, the Viking ship at Myklebostad was burnt. Only half of the mound was excavated and 44 shield bosses were found (Shetelig 1912: 201), which indicates the large size of the ship, and the fact that more shields may still be *in situ*. The Gokstad ship may have had 64 shields, but only 32 were found (Nicolaysen 1882: 62). Thus, the Myklebostad ship may have been the size of Gokstad, which was 24 m long, or perhaps even longer. However, since this ship was burnt and excavated as early as 1874, the documentation is rather poor according to today's standards. There are no drawings or maps of the site from the excavation; indeed, the original documentation is also lost (Magnus 1967: 60). In fact, the only information about the excavation is a nine page published report describing the context (Lorange 1875: 153–61). Thus, in the absence of excavating the remaining mound, our interpretations are restricted to the 1875 publication, which nevertheless reveals information about the stratigraphy, the cremation, and the successive rituals.

Before the mound was built, a layer of charcoal and burnt soil was deposited on the field. The layer had the same diameter as the mound itself, around 30 m, and was a bit thicker at the centre than at the edges. Above this layer, fine sand was deposited covering most of the charcoal beneath, but leaving the outer edges bare. Subsequently, another layer of charcoal was deposited with the same diameter as the one beneath, thus connecting the two charcoal layers at the edge of the mound, but separated by about 20 cm of sand at the centre. In both the charcoal layers, scattered ship nails, spikes, cremated remains, shield bosses and intentionally destroyed weapons were found (Lorange 1875: 154–55). Based on the description of the context, it is for the time being impossible to decide whether the ship was burnt on the spot where the mound was raised or if the material for the charcoal layers was transported to the site and thereafter scattered. It is possible to argue for both alternatives.

The most remarkable find is nevertheless the urn, which was deposited in a pit in the gravel beneath the lower charcoal layer (Fig. 12.4). Twelve shield bosses covered the urn which was filled 2/3 with a mixture of burnt bones, ashes, and charcoal. In between the cremated bones there were found pieces of burnt iron tools and smelted bronze, together with an arrowhead, three bone dices and six counters (Lorange 1875:



Fig. 12.4. The urn with shield bosses from grave mound no. 1, Myklebostad (courtesy of Bergen Museum, Bergen).

155). All the cremated bones in the urn belonged to a 30–35 year old man, but he might have been younger. The total weight of the bones was 1712 g. In the shoulder there was an indication of a cut, which may stem from a battle or *post mortem* treatment (Holck 1983).

The urn itself is one of the most spectacular finds in Norwegian archaeology. The three figures (Fig. 12.5) and the decoration at the bottom of the urn (Fig. 12.6), in particular, show unique craftsmanship, with the figures bearing a resemblance to the ‘Buddha-bucket’ in the Oseberg burial. It is uncertain what kind of cauldron this urn originally was. Paralleling hanging bowls in Anglo-Saxon graves, it is most likely Irish, though whether it was made in Ireland or in Irish monasteries in England is not known. Indeed, its original function may have been as a liturgical bowl for washing during Mass in early Christian communities (Liestøl 1953) or as a baptismal font. The bowl is dated to the middle or the end of the 8th century AD (Henry 1936; 1965: 93; Magnus 1967: 111), and some time have elapsed before being used as an urn and deposited in the grave.

Although there are no radiocarbon dates or exact typological dates for the ship burial, it has generally been considered to date from the end of the 9th century AD or the first



Fig. 12.5. The urn of grave mound no. 1: 'The Myklebostad Man' on the urn (courtesy of Bergen Museum, Bergen).

half of the 10th century AD (Shetelig 1906; Magnus 1967; 1978; 1992). This chronology would place the funeral within a similar timeframe as the formation of the Norwegian state and King Harald Hårfagre's conquest of the petty kingdoms along the west coast. According to Snorre Sturlasson (1993), there was a political centre in Nordfjord resisting King Harald Hårfagre's unification, and both the local kings, Audbjørn and Vemund, were killed by Harald Hårfagre's men. However, it is difficult to relate Snorre's sagas to historical events. Even if there were two local kings named Audbjørn and Vemund in Nordfjord at this time, it is not obvious that one of them was buried with the burnt ship in the Myklebostad grave. Thus, in order to contextualise this unique ship one has to look closer at the local ritual and religious practices, which took place at this farmstead, and how they deviate from other funerary practices at the same time.

### The Myklebostad grave field

The political centre in Nordfjordeid from AD 600 to 1000 was situated at Myklebostad, where five large grave mounds were constructed, including the one with the burnt Viking ship (Table 12.1). In grave mound no. 2, there were six burials (Fig. 12.7) dating from the 8th to the 10th century AD, which were excavated by

Håkon Shetelig in 1902–3. The first and second graves were the eldest of these (Grave II), which was a double burial of a man and a woman – both inhumated. The third was a cremation burial of a man (Grave III), consisting of a cremation patch measuring 1.60 × 1 m scattered with human bones, but the grave also contained a concentration of cleaned bones together with intentionally destroyed weapons (Shetelig 1905: 24–32). The fourth grave was a ship burial. Throughout large parts of the mound ship nails were scattered, and by their size it must have been a ship of considerable proportions. It is possible that later graves disturbed this burial of an unburnt ship (Grave V), as the distribution of nails and pieces of wood seemed unstructured (Shetelig 1905: 38, 51). The fifth grave was a cremation burial where a smaller boat was burnt (Grave I), which left an imprint of its size, measuring 7 m in length. In the charcoal layer there were



Table 12.1. Relative and absolute dating of the grave-mounds (from Shetelig 1905).

Graves		Sex	Date	Contents
Mound no. 1	R727	Man	End of 9th century?	Burnt ship
Mound no. 2	Grave II	Man	8th century, may be older	Inhumation
	Grave II	Woman	8th century, may be older	Inhumation
	Grave III	Man	8th century	Cremation
	Grave V	Man?	?	Unburnt boat
	Grave I	Man	End of 9th century, may be younger	Burnt boat
	Grave IV	Woman	End of 9th century, may be younger	Cremation, boat?
Mound no. 3				Unburnt boat/ship
Mound no. 4		Woman	10th century	Burnt boat
		Man	10th century	Inhumation
Mound no. 5				Two graves?



Fig. 12.6. The urn of grave mound no. 1: The décor at the bottom of the urn (after Shetelig 1905, folio at the end).

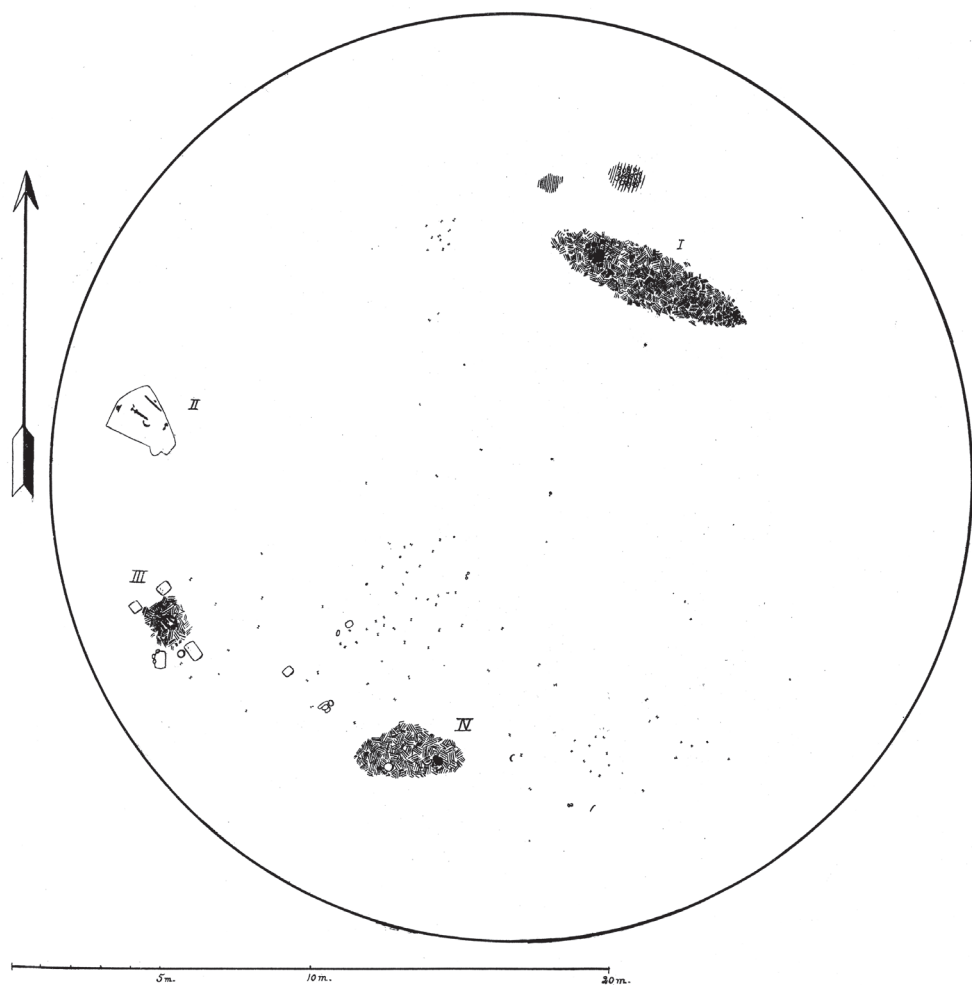


Fig. 12.7. Grave mound no. 2 with the six graves (after Shetelig 1905, folio at the end).

numerous nails, a sword and eight shield bosses. The cremated bones were collected and cleaned, and piled together under a cauldron. Finally, there was a cremation of a woman (Grave IV) consisting of two cauldrons: one of iron and one of bronze, stemming from the British Islands. Most of the cremated bones together with the grave gifts, such as two bronze fibulae, were scattered in the charcoal layer of  $2 \times 3$  m in extension. The cremation had not taken place on the spot; furthermore ten unburnt boat nails were also found in the layer, indicating that parts of a boat were involved in the funerary procedures, although one would not label this as a boat grave (Shetelig 1905: 32–37).

Grave mound no. 4 was severely damaged and in 1847 large parts were removed as part of a road construction. Nevertheless, it seems that there were at least two burials in this mound. In one part, a sword, a spear and a cauldron were found, indicating

that it was a male burial. In another part, Shetelig found a layer of charcoal of 1.80 × 1.30 m in extension, with a maximum thickness of six cm, containing about 350 boat nails, of which the majority measured between 2.5 cm and 3.5 cm in length. The deceased was a woman who had been cremated in a boat, but not where the mound was made because the charcoal layer, in which the bones were scattered, was too small for such a cremation. Grave mounds nos 3 and 5 were not excavated by archaeologists, though numerous boat nails in mound no. 3 were found earlier during construction work, but no other finds (Shetelig 1905: 40–41). Grave mound no. 5 was removed around 1875, from which two swords, two axes and a spear had been recovered and taken care of, indicating at least two male funerals in the mound (Magnus 1967: 60). Thus, there may have been other graves apart from the ones described.

## Changing rituals and ‘death myths’

The term ‘religion’ is contested in Iron Age studies. On the one hand, it is commonly acknowledged that there was no pre-Christian religion as such. On the other hand, depending upon definitions, one may also say that religion focuses on answering three main questions: 1) What becomes of us after death?, 2) How should we lead a moral life?, and 3) How and why were the universe, life, and human beings created? (Davies 1999). This relates to ritual practices and why certain rituals are performed and conducted the way they are. In this sense, death is the door to religion.

The grave mounds in this cemetery date from the 8th century AD, perhaps even earlier, to the end of the 10th century AD, thus giving a ritual continuity covering the Merovingian and the Viking Periods (c. AD 550–1000). The most striking feature with regards to rituals is that all of these funerals were conducted differently. Although there were some inhumations, the majority of men and women were cremated. The burnt Viking ship is an anomaly as a funeral practice, but also two smaller boats were burnt. There are also indications of one unburnt Viking ship of considerable size, as well as nails from two other unburnt ships or boats. To add to the variation, men and women were cremated or inhumed with burnt and unburnt ships or boats. Nevertheless, the deceased belonged to the same cultural and religious sphere, possibly originating from one family or at least the same community.

Death is contra-social and the funerary rites may meet the threat that death makes to the social system (Goody 1962: 26). Before addressing the question of inventing and reinventing tradition and why cremation is the dominant funeral practice in this region as opposed to inhumation which the elite practiced in other parts, it is necessary to put emphasis on the observed variation in the mortuary rituals: why are there differences in funeral practices when the descendants are assumed to share the same cosmological ideas and worldviews? The differences cannot be explained by different religions or ethnicities. Gender or social identities may have influenced the wealth of grave gifts, but prescribing cremation or not to both men and women cannot explain the variation within the respective rituals.

An approach that may explain part of the variation is through an analytical perspective, which we have called 'death myths' (Kristoffersen & Oestigaard 2006; 2008). If one assumes that the variation in rituals conducted by the descendants was intentional, then the differences are meaningful in themselves. Each funeral was carried out individually according to an overall cosmological or mythological scheme, which one may label a 'death myth'. In death there are a set of ritual possibilities, whereby the descendants can compose and conduct the funeral in accordance to: specific causes of death; the ancestors; the spiritual world, or; using the deceased as a medium for social outcomes in the reconstruction of society. Hence, a funeral is not a fixed set of ritual sequences, but an open field of mediations and interactions between the descendants and the divinities. Consequently, the participants may compose and perform particular rites to obtain a special desired result. Despite the differences in funeral practices, a large degree of homogeneity existed in burial customs. There are variations on a theme and a religious code must have defined and prescribed what was allowed: this is what a 'death myth' is. It is a collective conception of how, why, and who can perform death rituals at a given time. Variation in funeral customs can thus be seen as an expression where different rituals have been performed according to certain objectives based on a given repertoire of ritual possibilities. By seeing a ritual as a practice in social and religious life, it opens up a sphere of negotiations, manipulations and constructions of political and cosmological orders (Kristoffersen & Oestigaard 2006; 2008).

In pre-modern societies, tradition is intimately connected to truth. Based on analogies, one may also assume that this is true for the Viking Age. The access to truth or the possibility and capacity to make true statements about certain domains of reality are restricted to only some actors (Boyer 1990: 94). This is not limited to statements, but includes ritual participation and performance, particularly in funerals of the elite in a society. Not everybody can perform the most important and auspicious parts of the rituals, and hence, there will be a hierarchy among the descendants and ritual participants in a funeral (Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006). In the words of Geertz (1980: 120), 'A royal cremation was not an echo of a politics taking place somewhere else. It was an intensification of a politics taking place everywhere else'. Political rituals and the state cult were not a cult of the state, but a repeated argument in the vocabulary of rituals that worldly status had a cosmic origin and that hierarchy was the governing principle of the universe (Geertz 1980: 102). Political rituals construct power and they are elaborate and efficacious arguments about power and how it is made. Indeed, the political order was often perceived as coming from divine sources (Bell 1997: 129).

Traditions may be created in two ways: new inventions acquiring legitimacy from tradition by being seen as a *direct continuity*, or; through being explicitly perceived as a *re-creation of a lost tradition*. Hence, an invented tradition may not bear any direct or visible relationship to the past, although believers may perceive it differently. Consequently, the re-creation or the presence of an authentic past in the present is often seen as an invention of tradition (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988: 241).



All social and ritual practices change through time, and the belief in tradition as a timeless continuity without change is a construction. Indeed, continuity is more remarkable than change. Roy Rappaport (2001: 6–7) has emphasised that ‘structural transformations in some subsystems [have] made it possible to maintain more basic aspects of the system unchanged’, and he stresses that the crucial question to ask is ‘*What does this change maintain unchanged?*’ Changes in parts of the subsystems may preserve the continuity of the system as a whole living entity (Rappaport 2001: 7), in this case the religious and political institutions, and thus it is necessary to invent traditions and change rituals in order to preserve the existing ideologies and hierarchies of power in a time of transition.

The variation in funeral practices at Myklebostad indicates that death was an active medium by which the descendants or the elite probably reconstructed the deceased and their relationship to the ancestors, society and cosmos. Moreover, if one looks at the Myklebostad grave field with a particular emphasis on the burnt Viking ship, there are several factors suggesting that the funerals were mass mobilisations recreating or reinventing a former tradition with its roots in the Migration Period (c. AD 400–550), or in other words, re-creating a lost tradition.

## Reinventing tradition

The political and religious context in which the Myklebostad complex appears is characterised by two overall processes: the formation of the Norwegian kingdom and the process of Christianisation. In the context of these processes one may interpret the ritual scenario which unfolded at Myklebostad. Harald Hårfagre unified Norway and conquered his enemies by force. Harald’s eldest son, Eirik Bloodaxe, married Gunnhild, the daughter of the Danish King, Gorm the Old, thus unifying the two dynasties. However, his youngest son, who later became King Håkon the Good, was raised as a Christian by King Athelstan of England. Thus, on the one hand, religion or Christianity seems to have been a political and strategic tool, but on the other hand, religion can often be the key building block of identity (Insoll 2004a) and ‘conceived as the superstructure into which all other aspects of life can be placed’ (Insoll 2004b: 12), structuring all aspects of a given material culture and practices (Insoll 2004b: 13). It is in this light, funerals played a particularly important role.

With Christianity cremation was forbidden, but one cannot interpret inhumations in the Viking Period as influenced by Christianity; this practice started among the elite in the Late Roman Period, with for instance ‘Flagghaugen’, which is the richest grave in Norway from that period. However, cremation is undoubtedly a heathen practice, and coincidentally one of the closest parallels to the Myklebostad ship burial is found in France. In Île de Groix, Morbihan in Bretagne, a Viking ship was burnt in a Viking context for the 930s or ’40s. The ship nails together with cremated bones, burnt soil, sand, and clay were deposited in a layer measuring 5.4 m in diameter with a thickness

of 10–12 cm, but this size is only partial since half of the grave had eroded over a cliff when it was excavated. There were at least 20 shield bosses together with weapons and other artefacts collected in an iron cauldron (Shetelig 1945, Price 1989). This funeral in a Viking colony may hint that the Myklebostad practice may be more common than usually thought (see Price 2010; 2013). Still, with regards to Myklebostad in the particular cultural-religious Norwegian context, one may suggest that the funeral reinforced and reinvented earlier practices on a massive scale:

1. *Cremation*. Even though this was a common funeral practice in the Viking Period, its dominant position during the Migration Period was gradually replaced by inhumation which culminated with Christianity. The burnt Myklebostad ship is unique in the Norwegian context although it is described in written sources such as Ibn Fadlan (2005) and Saxo Grammaticus [1975]. Smaller boats have been burnt in Norway, but the cremation of a large Viking ship especially must have been a demonstration of power and wealth. This ritual manifested a particular religious belief and political ideology, since the other Viking ships such as Oseberg, Gokstad, Borre and Tune were unburnt.
2. *Urn*. During the Roman Iron Age and the Migration Period (until *c.* 550 AD) the use of urns in cremations was the ordinary practice, but with the transition to the Late Iron Age (from *c.* 550 AD) this practice disappears with some few exceptions in Norway (although quite common in for instance Sweden). In Norway, the production of pottery ends abruptly with the transition to the Merovingian Period (*c.* AD 550) and consequently no ceramic urns are made locally. In the Late Iron Age, the common practice was that the bones were scattered in the cremation patch, and using urns may relate to former traditions and practices from the Early Iron Age (Oestigaard 1999; 2000).
3. *Celtic cauldrons*. If one assumes that those living at Myklebostad knew the original meaning of this cauldron, the use of an alleged Christian liturgical cauldron as an urn would then be a deliberate manifestation and replacement of a religious idea with another, which desecrated Christianity, particularly since it was used as an urn. Utilising a liturgical bowl (Henry 1936; 1965; Liestøl 1953) in such a way may also relate to, and have a symbolic parallel to, older Celtic practices, such as employing skulls for ritual purposes. Early baptismal fonts have been interpreted as a continuity of the pagan skull cult and use (Bord & Bord 1985: 8–9; Green 1998), and the cauldron in the Myklebostad grave may relate to Irish heathendom. The double symbolism of cauldrons and skulls may reflect pagan beliefs, and hence the iconic motifs of the three figures on the urn may point backwards to the heathen past rather than towards the process of Christianisation.
4. *Intentional destruction of weapons*. This is a practice only found in cremations and it is a direct continuity of rituals from the Early Iron Age, which may relate to ancestral worship and cult. In the process of smelting and making swords, charcoal derived from the bones of animals and humans was used to transform

iron into steel. Thus, smelting brought life and identities into the objects, and this process may have been considered reversed in the ritual destruction of the weapons during the cremation ritual (Gansum 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; Goldhahn & Oestigaard 2007; Oestigaard 2007).

All together, it seems that the cremation and the burning of the Viking ship at Myklebostad reinvented former cremation practices, which had their roots in the Migration Period. Although former traditions were reinvented, there also appears to be a bricolage of syncretistic practices probably influenced by inhumation and beliefs of the body as a unity. Per Holck (1987: 55–56) analysed the cremated remains from eastern Norway: Of 1,082 samples, 919 were from the Early Iron Age and 147 from the Late Iron Age, with a further 16 from the Bronze Age. Based on measurements from the Asker Crematorium outside Oslo, the average weight of cremated bones from modern individuals is 3,075 grams (3375 g for men, 2,625 g for women), whereas other analyses of cremated modern individuals indicate that the average weight is 2,700 g for men and 1,840 g for women (Holck 1987: 71–73, 121). In contrast, the average weight of the cremated bones found in the archaeological record in general in eastern Norway is 269.7 g for single deposits. In many of these contexts it was impossible to determine the sex because too few fragments were available, but where possible the average weight was 637.9 g for men (with a range of 10–3,175 g) and 455.6 g for women (with a range of 30–1,950 g) (Holck 1987: 119). Since the majority of these cremations were conducted in the Early Iron Age, the traditional practice was that only 10–20% of the deceased's bones were placed in the urn and the rest were used for other purposes (Goldhahn & Oestigaard 2007; 2008). In the urn at Myklebostad, there were 1,712 g of bones, and although not a complete skeleton, it seems that the descendants aimed to collect all or most of the cremated bones. This observation appears to indicate a belief that it was necessary to preserve the complete body – a belief which is more in accordance with inhumation and contradicting the Early Iron Age cremation practices.

The massive scale and dimensions of this funeral bears testimony to a ritual mobilisation at a time of transition when the Norwegian kingdom was being established, and concomitant with the Christianisation process taking place (e.g. Gansum & Oestigaard 1999; 2004). The numerous shields deposited may indicate that the deceased king's men paid homage and tribute to their dead leader, who may have been killed in battle as indicated by the cut on his shoulder. If this was the case, one may relate this event to the unification of the kingdom and local chieftains or kings fighting against this process, as they stood to lose part or all of their own political power and sovereignty. This interpretation is, of course, based on a number of assumptions. Nevertheless, given the scale of the cremation in the time era when it took place, it could be of interest to pursue such a line of reasoning and propose some additional interpretations.

Importantly, if the deceased was killed in battle, the successor, who most likely was responsible for conducting the funeral, could have used this ritual as a means for mobilising forces in the ongoing struggle. The massive dimensions of the cremation,

including the burning of the ship, is a strong manifestation of the pagan religion and its practices with continuity from earlier traditions and beliefs. Thus, older beliefs and power structures were emphasised as elite funerals linked the future with the past, which gave the present a divine legitimacy. This deeply rooted heathen tradition is also evident in the other grave mounds at Myklebostad, which seem to indicate a similar ritual and political manifestation, although not on the same scale.

However, if the local king at Myklebostad lost the war, another scenario is also possible. If the grave dates to the first half of the 10th century AD, it is one of the last funerals to have been conducted at Myklebostad, perhaps with a few minor burials later. Nevertheless, such a grandiose funeral can be seen as the final manifestation of a religious tradition. The tradition died with the king. In written sources there are references to the practice and ideal that when the king was killed, the battle was over. In Saxo Grammaticus, a battle is referred to where the Danish King Harald Hildetann went with his fleet to Kalmar in Sweden and attacked King Ring and his men. However, Ring's warriors killed Harald Hildetann, and when Ring became aware of his death, he ended the battle and ordered his men to search for the king's corpse. They searched among the corpses for half a day before they found the king's body. King Ring then prepared a funeral pyre and let the Danes put the deceased king's ship on the pyre before it was lit. When the cremation was completed, the bones of the king were collected in an urn and transported back to Leire in Denmark (Saxo Grammaticus [1975]: 312–16). Thus, the Myklebostad King may have lost the battle, and it was the victorious king's duty to prepare and conduct an honourable funeral for the deceased leader. If this was the case and his death was part of the unification of Norway, the political and ideological resistance against this process from this region would have been crushed. However, the massive dimensions of the funeral at Myklebostad as a continuity of existing tradition may suggest that the funeral was used as a unifying mobilisation within the community.

The Myklebostad king may even have been killed somewhere else and been cremated where he died, whereupon his men collected the bones, ashes and charcoal from the pyre and brought it back home. The uppermost of the two charcoal layers in the mound may provide hints supporting this hypothesis. Since the cremated material was placed upon a layer of sand, this would indicate that the remains from the pyre were collected at a certain stage during the funeral and deposited afterwards. As mentioned, however, the evidence at present is too vague to confirm whether the ship was burnt at the place where the mound was constructed or if the funeral took place somewhere else. In the latter scenario, the possibility exists that the king lost the battle elsewhere or even overseas, and this event may not relate to the unification of Norway, since the urn stems from the British Islands.

If a person died abroad or far from home, the urn may have been procured from that region and transported back. Hence, the origin of the urn may give indications of where the deceased died unless urns were procured prior to death (Oestigaard

1999). The parallel find of a burnt Viking ship in France suggests that the funeral was arranged where the battle was lost and that the ship was burnt *in situ* upon which the mound was built.

## Changes in rituals, traditions and ritual variation

Making theoretical elaborations about social processes on a micro-level based on changes in material culture are always a challenge. Complex rituals such as those at Myklebostad can be solely local developments not relating to grander narratives of renegotiating traditions. If, however, they are, it can be of interest to relate the Myklebostad complex to theories of tradition and social change through time.

The past is always a created ideology with a purpose designed to control individuals or to motivate societies and inspire classes (Plumb 1969: 17). The past can be seen as an elaborate house of cards, which the present has been constantly upsetting and using for political purposes. Power needs legitimacy and legitimacy needs justification. Legitimacy can be justified in three ways: from religion, from philosophy, and from the past. More often than not, legitimacy is an amalgam of the three, which is evident at Myklebostad where the past and religion (or possible philosophy) were two sides of the same coin used in the formation of society. The past has constantly been involved in the present, and everything from the past including monuments and funerals were securing the authority (Plumb 1969: 36–38). Hence, tradition is an ideological interpretation and uses the past in the present for the future.

Tradition constitutes a broadly significant phenomenon. A major characteristic of tradition is that the temporal distance separating us from the past or the living from the dead, is not value-free or objective. The time and relation between the past and the present is a transmission which generates and gives legitimacy to meaning, which then gives legitimacy to social control and institutions. Tradition is the outcome of the exchange between an interpreted past and an interpreted present. Within a tradition nobody is an absolute inventor, but rather the contrary, the past is a source for constructing the future, which creates a situation where everybody is an heir of the past. Tradition enables us therefore to understand what has been said and done when this knowledge is transmitted historically through chains of interpretations and reinterpretation, which create some structural properties of societies (Ricoeur 1990: 221, 227):

1. Traditions create an interconnectedness which assures the continuity of understanding the past. Thus, the past becomes a source for making history and the future, whereby the actors are affected by the past.
2. Traditions are bearers of meaning, and it is through tradition that received heritage is given symbolic and moral value. In this sense traditions are not only bearers of meaning, but also proposals and creators of meaning.

3. Traditions are justifying legitimacy, and claims for truths can be found in tradition, particularly when argumentation is offered within the public space of discussion or performed in rituals.

The last point directs the attention from the dead to the living and emphasises that death is a matter of transactions and re-negotiations. From a societal perspective, death is often more important for the living than for the dead (Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006). It is in this light important to distinguish between changes in tradition, rituals and ritual variation. As I have suggested, it seems that there is an intentional reinvention of tradition at Myklebostad, which had an explicit, political, ideological, and religious reason and pre-conceived outcome. In the conquest of Norway, which ended with the formation of a unified kingdom, the past was a source giving religious and political legitimacy to opposition and resistance, and the evidence for this can be traced in the actual funerals. However, there is a lot of contemporary, ritual variation, and an archaeological challenge remains how to distinguish between synchronic variation and diachronic change. The Myklebostad complex is, nevertheless, such an empirical case study, which enables one to analyse and propose suggestions with regard to why ritual change took place.

## Concluding remarks

The burnt Viking ship at Myklebostad in western Norway is a unique example of a funeral which breaks both with tradition, and at the same time reinvents tradition. The death of high-profile individuals provides a political and religious platform, which was arguably more important for the living than the dead. Funerals were events where the descendants could legitimise future hierarchies by transforming the deceased's social and ritual status and power to themselves (Oestigaard & Goldhahn 2006). Funeral rituals were a part of political strategies interwoven and legitimised by religion giving the successors divine power and authenticity. The dead were a means and used as mediums for other social and religious purposes, thus combining social strategies, political ambitions, and religious beliefs. In this process rituals were composed, changed, and reinvented creating the preferred and ideological platform necessary for social change and re-establishing hierarchies. This change was within an overall religious framework, which one may call a 'death myth' prescribing and legitimising what was allowed to be done. Within this ritual sphere it seems that almost every kind of new invention was possible, so long as it was conducted by the right person and rooted in a real or imagined tradition. In particular, such a situation as the unification of Norway and the concomitant Christianisation would have necessitated the ritual mobilisation that occurred.

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