Chapter 3

A Piece of the Mesolithic
Horizontal Stratigraphy and Bodily Manipulations at Skateholm

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ABSTRACT The present text concerns theoretical and methodological aspects of burial archaeology, with special attention given to the graves of the Late Mesolithic site Skateholm in Southern Sweden. It is argued that ‘burial-places’ in general need to be discussed individually from a ‘bottom-up perspective’ in order to minimise the bias of general assumptions based on other data of the same region and time period. Such microarchaeological studies focus on social practice involved in the disposal of the dead as a mediating level between the local and particular on one hand and the normative and general on the other. The study suggests that the Skateholm site can be divided into four different phases of burial activity, each with significant changes in both burial ritual and in the view of dead bodies; one phase even suggests possible use of the site by two separate groups. Special attention has also been given to two diachronic horizontal patterns. One is the marginal placement of dead dogs and children at the borders of the main area, arranged as small clusters in the four cardinal points. The other concerns postdepositional manipulation of dead bodies and graves.

According to the culture critic Slavoj Žižek, the burial act is a symbolic practice par excellence. It is a situation forced upon the subject demanding some sort of action because of something that actually is out of the subject’s control (death). Žižek’s argument is that burial rituals are simply our way to make an irrational and completely nature given process the sense of a free choice (1996:247). I believe that Žižek has got a point here, death has no meaning in itself, except perhaps in a long-term evolutionary perspective. The social subject needs, however, to invent ways of dealing with the reoccurring fact of death in order to cope with existence and the loss of valuable or dear persons. The knowledge of our limited time-span and our ever-present mortality must have had a great impact on general ontology and cosmology in most past societies as well as in the present. Some argue that we in the contemporary, western world have alienated ourselves from death and the practices of burial, while others, such as Zygmunt Baumann, argue that we, although implicitly, are occupied with death now more than ever (1992:8). Indeed, death is something that the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan probably would have put in the realm of the Real, that is, something that cannot be satisfactory rewritten symbolically or imaginary (Lacan 1977:279f). Nonetheless, such alterations and paraphrasing of death is what people tend to do all the time. The problem for archaeology is that symbolic and imaginary alterations of the Real have few universal properties and that there are no ‘natural’ or typical ways for humans to deal with death. Consider the following quote from Metcalf and Huntington:

“What could be more universal than death? Yet what an incredible variety of responses it evokes. Corpses are burned or buried, with or without animal or human sacrifice; they are preserved by smoking, embalming, or pickling; they are eaten - raw, cooked, or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrion or simply abandoned; or they are dismembered and treated in a variety of these ways. Funerals are the occasion for avoiding people or holding parties, for fighting or having sexual orgies, for weeping or laughing, in a thousand different combinations. The diversity of cultural reaction is a measure of the universal impact of death” (Metcalf & Huntington 1991:24).

The ethnographic record is full of different ways of dealing with death that range from obsession with bodies and bones of ancestors to mundane views of the dead as contagious trash. Faced with this great variability in attitudes towards death and dead bodies in contemporary societies alone, one certainly begins to wonder about the
possibilities of properly approaching these issues in prehistory. There are, of course, a number of quantitative and qualitative archaeological approaches and methods which have been developed through the years, but there is still curiously little consensus about what burial data can tell us about the living. Indeed, burials constitute complex and problematic types of archaeological information, leaving a number of questions hanging in the air: Are they primarily an expression of cosmology, religion, and eschatology? Or is the burial event merely an arena for social strategies? Do the properties of a burial represent the life and world of the deceased individual or are they mainly determined by the funeral organisers?

Despite popular belief, we have little means of grasping prehistoric peoples’ attitudes towards death and what may come after; but what we do have are fragmentary traces of how they dealt with death and dead bodies. Graves are the remains of some of the practices performed by the living after a body died. The type of practices that seem appropriate, necessary, or possible, may differ from case to case, but there are nonetheless a few aspects that usually need to be attended to. The most evident issue concerns the inevitable decomposition process of the dead body, which might turn the focus of the living away from grief towards a problem of disposal. The dead body soon will swell up, turning into a grotesque form. It will change colour and start to smell. The dead body needs to be taken care of in some way, whether it is left in the woods, sent out (or submerged) into water, buried, cremated, or embalmed. Either way, the dead body invokes, or demands, a response from the living and a number of practices are called for depending on burial traditions (cf. Williams 2004:284). There are at least three somewhat interrelated processes involved here: First, there is the decomposition process of the body, then there are the different stages of the burial ritual and the construction of the grave, and finally, the need to cope with space, that is, finding proper room for the dead in relation to landscape features, settlement, and the old dead. The important point to keep in mind is, of course, that it is normally only in the final stage of all these three processes that we meet the dead as archaeologists. It may or may not be possible to trace elements of previous stages, but the important issue I wish to emphasise here is the temporality of all these processes connected to death.

The Temporal Materiality of the Body

Most people would probably view the human body as a subject rather than an object, but the body is also a materiality, and as such, it may have great social effects besides conscious agency. The corporeal body as materiality has very little to do with the concepts of individual or person. Instead, it emphasizes the role of each body’s appearance and physical constitution in the process of subjectivation and categorization as well as the varying abilities in getting certain tasks done. Corporeal aspects, such as body posture, sex, age and variations in hair, and skin colour, are well documented aspects that certainly affect the individual’s possibilities to do things. But, what may be more important is that corporeal aspects of the body also tend to invoke certain responses or attitudes from others. No matter how we may wish it to be, we are not alike in a bodily sense, and these differences (e.g., short/tall, child/adult/elderly, muscular/weak, sick, disabled etc), affect our means for agency and the ways in which others consider us (Fahlander 2006a). The corporeal body also undergo several biological stages in life (puberty, coming of age, menopause etc) as well as other changes in appearance related to achieved positions, accidents or bodily manipulations (Fahlander 2008). Some of these corporeal aspects are likely to function as active social signifiers, arranging and subjecting individuals into social categories or groups, like the way some phenotypic aspects such as sex, age, skin colour, etc. today are conventional bases for the construction of social categories and identity (Fahlander 2001:78ff). Which of the corporeal aspects that are socially significant in a given time and place, are, however, a question to investigate for each given case.

The dead body has no intentional powers aside from the decaying material remains. Despite that, the dead body may by some still be seen as a social subject, sometimes even considered to have agency (cf. Williams 2004, Gansum this volume), but to most people, death transposes a subject to an object (or in Bruno Latour’s terms: from actor to actant). Indeed, the dead body lacks the intentional ability to present itself as a social subject, but its material constitution may still potentially interfere with and initiate certain actions and responses among the living; in this sense the body is not very different from any other materiality (cf. Williams 2004, Fahlander in press). But, precisely as the living body undergoes an aging process and corporeal changes, the dead body soon go through a number of changes; it stiffens as a result of rigor mortis, it swells up because of gases, it starts to smell and leak fluids, etc. The dead body has because of this been considered by some as something repugnant and resentful. But, of course, the dead body need not necessarily be an abject by default, such value statements are defined out of culturally specific ideology and relations between binary oppositions such as pure and polluted, or dangerous and safe.2 We might therefore be cautious not to be too presumptuous about what is repellent and not in different social contexts.

2 In a sense, the post-mortem decomposition process reveals our symbolic or imaginary phantasms of the body because death exposes our bodies’ real constitution. Under the skin we all consist of bone, blood, muscles, fluids, organs of varying viscosity and colour, but most of us prefer not to think about that. Slavoj Žižek has suggested, as a test, that we during copulation should attempt to picture our partner’s body’s real constitution of muscles, blood, organs and bone, and then try to continue with the act. Žižek’s point is, of course, to illustrate how the real constitution of the human body is being symbolically rewritten in more idealised terms.
The main point is that the division between either living subject and dead object is too simple. Both living and dead bodies are subject to change and there can be great differences in, for instance, how a body in one stage of decompositions is viewed in contrast to a later stage when all soft tissue have decomposed and left only the bones bare.

The perhaps most persistent theme in burial archaeology is the inclination to assert that the properties of a burial are in some way related to the life of the buried individual. Indeed, many burials consist of a ‘set’ of objects, for instance a single individual buried with artefacts, and it is not strange that archaeologists tend to link them together. There is, however, nothing that states that the properties of the grave and burial act need to be related to the dead person’s social persona. In some cases it rather seems like certain bodies, or even certain deaths, may need certain treatment, which may have little to do with the deceased’s social persona (Taylor 2003:236, 240). The main problem in relating aspects of the grave and burial to the buried is that the dead seldom have any influence over the process. Some have thus argued that mortuary variability rather reflects social aspects of the funeral organisers rather than of the buried individual (Fahlander 2003, Gansum 2002:252). If those responsible for the formation of the burial are primarily ritual specialists, the next of kin, or all members of the community, is thus a primary question to pursue in every given case. We may also need to consider scenarios in which only one or a few actually knew what happened to a body after the point of death. The intermediate phase may be hidden from the major part of the population. Even the burial itself can be a matter for a few, even excluding the next of kin and other close family members. Another aspect to consider is that the burial event can be employed for power displays or negotiations. For instance, social inequalities can be masked by less fashionable burials for those who actually have the power or wealth or by letting subjected groups have the same treatment in death as the elites and thus reproducing an illusion of a “good” (equal) society (Parker-Pearson 1999). The question of what a grave actually signifies; the dead individual, its corporeality, the way of death, the conceptions and strategies of the living, or a combination of them all, cannot be answered in general terms. Neither can there be only one unified approach that can tackle these uncertainties, thus, the issues have to be investigated on a case to case basis.

The Temporality of the Grave

Another process, or rather, a temporal issue, in burial analysis concerns the idea of burials as closed finds. Indeed, many burials seem to be the result of one single situation and thus function as ‘time-capsules’. Nonetheless, we must be open to the possibility that graves and the bodies and bones contained therein may have been postdepositionally re-arranged and that some graves represent a cumulative process of many separate situations. This is not only the case for Stone Age collective burials; it seems to have been frequent in the Bronze Age and Iron Age as well. One example is the huge Bronze Age burial cairn of Kivik in southern Sweden. Due to its exceptional size and monumental appearance it has since the 19th century been believed to be the grave of a powerful chief. Recently performed osteological and dental analyses of the bone fragments from the grave do, however, prove that theory less likely. Through these, it was discovered that the chamber of the cairn hosted four to five different individuals, all in their teens except for one adult. The carbon determinations also reveal that the individuals were deposited on at least three different occasions (c. 1400-1200, 1200-1000 and 900-800 BC.). Interestingly, the adult individual is the only one buried during the last phase and should hence have little to do with the original construction of the monument (Goldhahn 2005:223-54). Also more normalized Bronze Age cairns seem to have been reused during different occasions. A recently excavated cairn on the island of Hisingen in the south-west coast of Sweden is but one example that has been constructed and modified in different phases (Ragnesten 2005). Reconstruction and modifications of burials are also found in the Iron Age. For instance, some Iron Age ship settings, which are generally thought of as constructions for a single individual, have been found to contain several individuals buried in different phases (e.g., Sigvallius 2005). Another example is the complex and extended construction phase of the Viking Age burial mound of Oseberg in Norway (Gansum 2004). These examples are the result of a quite recent awareness of the possibility of later additions and modifications of grave constructions, which suggests that the number of similar cases are likely to increase in the future and thus call for our concern when we interpret burials.

The Temporality in Burial Places

Archaeologists have generally approached burial grounds in a rather unproblematic and one-dimensional manner. For instance, there is a tradition among archaeologists to treat burial places as entities in the sense that most graves are assumed to be more or less contemporary and constructed by one and the same group of people (i.e., like a burial ground or cemetery). That particular view, however, neglects the important synchronic and diachronic developments within a burial place, as well as ruling out the possibility that the site might have been used synchronously by independent groups. It is obvious that no burial ground suddenly exists; normally they slowly expand over time, often over a couple of hundred years. The later graves must thus not only be situated in relation to the local topography, but also in relation to previous graves and other features. Recently, many archaeologists have begun to consider these temporal aspects to a greater extent than before. For instance, Mike Chapman’s (2000) intra-site studies of Hungarian Copper
Age grave fields are based on the idea that a number of sub-groups of burials can be distinguished and attributed to individual households. By keeping the analysis on a small scale level, Chapman was able to discern a number of local micro-traditions as well as some general aspects of a regional level (cf. Sestieri 1992). Another methodologically interesting example is Müllers’ (2002) analysis of the Neolithic graves at Trebur in Germany. By performing statistical operations on a large number of carbon determinations, he could show that the burial place has expanded from three different zones and directions (fig 1). These three zones, he argued, must represent different phases of burial of either the same group of people, or possible three different groups that buried their dead independently of each other at Trebur. In either case, Müller’s study illustrates both the need and the potential in intra-site analysis of grave clusters instead of simply threat them as a totality.

Despite this, most archaeologists would probably agree that burials are mainly an outcome of specific rituals; that is, a particular set of practices quite different from more mundane praxis. This has fostered an idea that ritual can (or even should) be studied separately and according to some ‘typical’ traits. The most popular is van Gennep’s tripartite concept of rite de passage that distinguishes three phases in the ritual process, which, according to some, have universal status. But, are not the same premises also true for almost all bundles of social practice? We can easily divide everyday life activities such as playing, cocking, hunting etc, into phases of separation, liminality, and incorporation. Either everything is ritual or ritual is just another bundle of structurated social practices (cf. Derrida 1995). In order to avoid any prejudgment of a particular case, burials can be studied as particular practices performed in relation to death. Such an approach can always later be deepened along a desired direction (social/ritual). It must, however, be noted that it seldom is a matter of choice about which strand of research deal with the social. The social fabric is not in reality divided into separate spheres (like religion, economy etc) that can be studied separately from the rest of life (Insoll 2001:10). In addition, archaeological evidence actually suggests that the sacred and the profane were generally less separated in prehistory than they are in contemporary Christian discourse (Bell 1992, Bradley 2005).

In the following text, I will try to exemplify the importance of these arguments in an analysis of the Late Mesolithic settlement- slash- burial site of Skateholm, located in Scania in southern Sweden (fig. 2). Skateholm is a well suited example for a number of reasons. For instance, the seemingly close relation between the living and the dead at the site illustrates the problems in separating ritual from mundane social spheres. The postdepositional manipulations of graves and bodies highlight issues of how dead bodies are handled and viewed. The many individually buried dogs at the site can also help to illuminate the problems in viewing grave properties as related to the dead individual. Furthermore, the many postdepositional activities serve to question the issue of burials as closed finds of a single event, and the aggressive tendencies in some of these manipulations may shed some light of changing attitudes towards death and dead bodies.
A Piece of the Mesolithic: Skateholm

The Skateholm area includes one of the largest concentrations of graves of the Late Mesolithic in Northern Europe. The site is divided into several separate findspots termed Skateholm I–IX which were situated around what was a brackish lagoon during the Late Mesolithic (fig. 3). The two first areas (Skateholm I and II) contain the majority of the burials and are thus the primarily sites discussed here. Skateholm I is the larger of the two, comprising 65 graves and c. 200 features of a more domestic character, such as remains of postholes, huts and hearts (Larsson 1981:36, 1982:37, Bergenstråhle 1999:338). The most outstanding of the features is the centrally situated construction 10, which is interpreted as the remains of a hut (Strassburg 2000:251). The smaller Skateholm II is situated c. 150m southeast of Skateholm I and contains 22 graves together with about 100 other features (figs. 3 & 4). Perhaps the most interesting of the features is structure 24, which contained quite a lot of red ochre, animal bone (including dog) and a human milk tooth (Larsson 1990b:286).

Fig. 2. Map of Southern Sweden and Skateholm (from Larsson 1988d:12).

All together 87 graves have been excavated at these two sites. The general form of the graves at both sites is the shape of an oval pit c. 0,2-0,4 m deep adjusted to the size of the buried individual. The general burial position is lying on the back with the limbs in extension, but variants of hocker and sitting positions are not uncommon (Nilsson Stutz 2003:256-8). The excavators interpret the Skateholm site as a typical hunter-fisher site, harbouring a few families quietly living at what at the time was a sheltered brackish water lagoon (Larsson 1988d, 2002). This idyllic image of the Late Mesolithic may, however, be questionable. Much evidence from the time period - and the Skateholm site in particular - suggests that violence and aggression was no less frequent than in any other period (Strassburg 2000:162, Brinch Petersen 2001, Milner & Woodman 2005). Also, the traditional idea of Skateholm as predominantly a habitation site has been questioned. Strassburg has argued that Skateholm was primarily a ritual arena where a special category of ‘dangerous’ individuals, like shamans and such, were disposed (Strassburg 2000). Indeed, the other known similar clusters of graves from the Late Mesolithic in Northern Europe are small in number and may thus represent something unusual rather than the norm. Nonetheless, the osteological data from Skateholm are quite evenly distributed in terms of sex and age, which more or less refute the idea that the area was a disposal area of a specially chosen category of individuals. As we shall see, at closer look, the Skateholm site actually reveals a number of criss-crossing synchronous and diachronic patterns that suggest that the social life in the Late Mesolithic was substantially more varied and complex than what either traditional or queer perspectives can fully comprehend.

In this study I mainly focus on the graves and leave aside most of the other traces of activity and features. It is a necessary reduction that has to be made in order not to become mired in a too complex and large set of material. It is always risky to try to relate all traces from a site to each other into one single narrative. This is simply because the traces of a site are generally a result of both singular individual actions and cumulative, repeated actions of a larger group, performed over different extent in time. Many of these traces are thus not compatible or only vaguely related, which would, taken all together, result in a more misleading narrative that one based on a selection (Fahlander 2003:64ff). In this particular case, the main aim is to determine the development of the site and its internal relative chronology by focusing on the practices performed as related to the handling of dead bodies. Concerning the relative ‘uniqueness’ of the site, I will also try to minimise the regional and general, ‘contemporary’, analogies in my analysis. The data is thus deliberately not set in a comparative context.

There are, however, always problems in analysing archaeological evidence without first-hand knowledge of the excavation process; some aspects have to be taken at face value while others need to be questioned. The case of Skateholm is no different in this respect; rather, it is perhaps more complicated because results have been published over a number of years, continuously adding new data, re-evaluations and new analysis with each new report or article (a final publication volume is due to come within a few years). One example of this problem is the buried animal which first was reported to be a wild cat, and later on argued to be a fox, but which finally was determined as a young dog (Larsson 1984).
Fig. 3. The Skateholm area including sites I-IX. 1: area above 5 m asl, 2: 4-5m asl, 3: 3-4m asl, 4: 3-2m asl, 5: area less than 2m asl, and 6: contemporary sea level (after Bergenstråhle 1999:337).

Table 1. The sex and age estimations for the human bodies of Skateholm I and II. Note that the table is based on Nilsson Stutz’s critical re-evaluation (2003, database on CD).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Osteology</th>
<th>Skateholm I (63 humans, 9 dogs)</th>
<th>Skateholm II (22 humans, 4-5 dogs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>11 (+5 insecure) 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>10 (+6 insecure) 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undeterminable</td>
<td>42/31 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;20 years old</td>
<td>41 15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-19 years old</td>
<td>8 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-12 years old</td>
<td>7 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undeterminable</td>
<td>7 0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are other examples of contradictions and uncertainties concerning the data (see Bäcklund Blank & Fahlander 2006:257), but the most problematic area concerns the sex and age estimations of the osteological data. In the early texts, Larsson sometimes seems to mix preliminary osteological estimations with assumptions of what artefacts in the graves represent, for instance, assuming that an axe in a grave indicate a male (1981:20, 26). In more recent texts he relies on Persson & Persson’s (1984 & 1988) osteological analyses, which unfortunately are based on old fashioned methods and are in general not very reliable. Both Nilsson Stutz (2003: 172-173, 177f) and Strassburg (2000:155), who recently worked with the Skateholm material, have made re-evaluations of the sex of a number of individuals. In this text I have chosen to follow Nilsson Stutz’s critical examination of Persson & Persson’s osteological data and Alexandersen’s (1988) tooth morphological studies because her approach seems to be the most up-to-date in a methodological sense.

The uncertainty regarding the data has great ramifications and somewhat hampers attempts to perform statistical or quantitative operations on the Skateholm material. One illustrative example is Robert Schmidt’s (2004) recent analysis of the graves. Schmidt argues that because stone tools, especially the axes, are more frequently found in 'male' burials, than 'female' ditto’s, a marginal category of ‘women with stone’ can be singled out. Schmidt then suggests that there were at least two different female genders during the late Mesolithic: One that worked with stone, and one that did not (2004:103). There can be many objections made to Schmidt’s reasoning, but the uncertainty of the osteology and the unknown contemporality of the sample would still make such comparative analysis untenable. In addition, departing from a critical stance towards the sex evaluations, the data reveals no indications that this particular corporeal aspect was accentuated in the burials. On the contrary, there are very few indications that the properties of the burial are related to the buried individual. For instance, there are no clear patterns concerning the placement of grave interments such as ochre, axes, tools, amber etc in relation to different bodies. Some graves contain quite a lot of grave goods, while others are more or less empty aside from the bones of the buried. Does this imply that the people at Skateholm were hierarchically stratified but equal when it comes to sex/gender? Or are the graves and their interments simply determined by the composition of the participants in the burial act? In order to answer that
question we need to construct some sort of relational chronology to adhere to possible diachronic and synchronic variability in order to avoid confusing social variability with social change.

The Relative Chronology of Skateholm I and II

The dating of Skateholm I and Skateholm II rests upon a combination of stratigraphy, artefact typology and a few carbon determinations (Table 2). Larsson argues, based on uncalibrated carbon determinations, that both areas were inhabited continuously or recurrently for two or three hundred years (1983:22). Skateholm II is assumed to be the older phase, which is abandoned in favour of Skateholm I (1983:22, 1988a:69). Unfortunately, the carbon determinations do not support this scenario. Of all the graves on Skateholm I, only two (nos. 4 and 37) have been successfully dated through bone material and an additional five through charcoal samples from the fill of the grave.3 These determinations are generally unreliable because the samples are too small and the context is uncertain (Gob 1990:181ff). Furthermore, the general ‘width’ of calibrated determinations often spans several hundred years even when using 1 sigma (c. 62% probability). From a ‘calibrated point of view’, the carbon determinations are thus not precise enough to support any difference in date between the two sites (see e.g., Buck et al 1994).

Another argument in favour of a chronological difference between Skateholm I and Skateholm II is the difference in altitude between the two sites. At the transgression from the Late Mesolithic to the Neolithic, the water level in southern Sweden was approximately 5-6 meters higher than it is today (Gedda 2007). Larsson (1981:42, 1988c:84) thus suggests, based on a general rate of transgression, that the two sites were actually situated on two small islands of which the lower Skateholm II over time became submerged forcing people to move to the higher located Skateholm I (fig. 3). The problem with this scenario is that the difference in sea-level is too small to back up such an interpretation. Estimations of past sea levels have quite a large margin of error because of limited number of samples and the general width of the carbon determinations they are based upon. There are also great daily and yearly variations in sea-level, up to 1-2 meters, due to tides or heavy storms (Björk et al 2000).

Although the sea-level hypothesis is weak, it nonetheless seems probable that the accumulation of graves generally follow the rising water level and thus render the graves on the lower levels earlier and the ones on top of the ridge later (which also is indicated by one of the carbon determinations taken from the ridge, Larsson 1988d:100).

There are also some typological differences found in the flint artefacts and distribution of ceramics of the non-grave features and cultural layers between the two sites. This suggests that at least the ‘domestic’ activities are generally earlier at Skateholm II (Larsson 1981:38, 1983:22f, 1985:369, Stilborg & Bergenstråhle 2000, but see also Larsson 1988d:98). Furthermore, antlers and tools made out of horn are found almost exclusively at Skateholm II, the only exceptions at Skateholm I are graves 22 and 28, which happen to be situated in the south-east and thus closest to Skateholm II (see Bäcklund Blank & Fahlander 2006:264f for more details).

3 From Skateholm II there are only one grave dated (not yet published), but is claimed to be more or less within the same time span as the graves at Skateholm I (Eriksson & Liden 2003:1).
to other excavation data in an Access-database, which makes it possible to put multidimensional queries to the data that immediately can be displayed graphically on the screen. Such a procedure does not show any clear indications that corporeal aspects of the dead bodies were accentuated in the burials (based on Nilsson Stutz osteological evaluations). Neither are there any clear patterns between different grave constructions nor in the distribution of grave interments such as ochre, axes, tools, amber etc. But a closer look at the practices behind the burials does reveal some interesting patterns that may hint at a rough horizontal stratigraphy.

Towards a Horizontal Stratigraphy

In recent years there have been several attempts made to relate and serialise the burials at Skateholm (e.g., Strassburg 2000:256, Roth Niemi 2001:76), but unfortunately most of them are based on dubious determinations of sex and vague hereditary morphological traits (see Bäcklund 2005:22, Bäcklund Blank & Fahlander 2006). Despite the apparent ‘normality’ of the graves, there are nonetheless a few general patterns among the graves that could hint at a general development of the site. Most significant are a few categories of graves that stick out from the rest and which appear to be asynchronous patterns. For instance, all ‘double-burials’ with more than one adult are found in the south-western part of Skateholm I (nos. 6, 14, 41, 4, 47, 62, 63). Adjacent to construction 10 we also find most of the postdepositional manipulated burials (nos. 4, 7 & 28, including grave 13 which contained an individual which was cut up before burial). Another interesting category are the five occurrences of intersecting burials (e.g., 1/2, 34/35, 40/41, 46/47, and 56/57). The most striking spatial pattern, however, is the apparent close relationship between individually buried dogs and children under the age of eight. On the southernmost part of Skateholm I there is a cluster of dogs buried together with two young children (nos. 9, 10, 15, 17, 18 and 65). The other dog-and-children’s graves are situated in the western (42 & 62) and eastern (19 & 23) edges of the main activity area. Although such graves seem to be lacking in the north, it is apparent that dogs and children are purposely buried at the boundaries of the site (fig. 4). A similar pattern is also found at Skateholm II, but here the dogs are buried at the eastern (XIX) and western (XXI) edges of the cluster and the children in the north (XII) and the south (XIII). It is indeed a striking pattern that needs to be examined in greater detail.

On the Fringes: Dogs and Children

Graves of individually buried dogs are not that uncommon in prehistory, there are even sites containing over a thousand buried dogs (Evans & Welinder 1997, Morey 2006, Tromborg 2006). Larsson (1990a, 1994:568) has suggested that the buried dogs may have been substitutions for human bodies lost at sea. Strassburg reasons in similar lines but suggests that the dogs symbolise shape-shifters or shamans (2000:161, 213f). Also the idea of symbolic watchdogs has been raised. Munt & Meiklejohn (2007:167) suggest that the extreme southern position of the dogs at Skateholm I is intentional as a ‘real or symbolic protection to the encampment’. They seem to take for granted that any dangers would only come from the sea and not from land, an assumption they never elaborate upon.

It has been fashionable in recent decades to favour ritual and ‘mysterious’ interpretations of archaeological data. In this case, the dogs of Skateholm make no exception. Contrary to the somewhat silly trend of ritualising the past, we could, however, argue that dogs simply were dear members of the household and buried as such when they died (cf. Morey 2006). The liminal treatment of dogs can then be explained by their low status as individuals; they are buried when they die, but only at the outskirts of the main burial area. The same reasoning may also apply for the similar placement of the children’s burials. Generally, burials of small children are rarely as elaborated as the graves of adults and the bodies of dead children are often handled differently from the adult in most prehistoric time periods and areas (Baxter 2005, Fahlander 2008). Such seemingly subaltern status of dead children is often associated with an ambiguous identity in life. Indeed, the young child is in a social sense often displaced, or lost, somewhere in between a ‘proper’ gender, sex, identity, citizenship, wild-domestic, animal-human etc. This, however, does not necessarily mean that children cannot have high social status or importance of their own.

It is probably true, that children and juveniles seldom are the great producers, leaders or innovators in prehistoric societies. They way they are treated in death, and their social position in life, can nonetheless be very helpful when exploring the life of the adult world. Consider a grave where a newborn child is buried with a large harpoon which it never could have been able to use in life. Is this simply evidence for a social structure based on inherited prestige (cf. Strassburg 2000:200)? It could, of course, also simply represent a burial gift of one of the participating adults with little or no relation to the dead child. Here the dog burials may help us with an answer. The dogs at Skateholm have been buried with the same kind of artefacts as the humans (e.g., red ochre, flint tools or red deer antler). Nota bene, some of these interments were actual tools and one of the ‘richest’ graves at Skateholm (XXI) is actually given to one of the dogs (Larsson 1988b:23). The individually buried dogs make one question the supposed relationship between the burial interments and the buried individual/family. The most likely interpretation in this particular place must thus be that the burial interments represent some sort of collective effort, either by representatives or by the whole group.
Fig. 4. Skateholm I (above) and Skateholm II (below): The graves with individually buried dogs (black), children under 8 years (grey), and graves containing dogs/children buried together with adults (hatched). (image constructed in ArcGIS).
Notwithstanding how we may understand the child-dog relationship, they still indicate differences between Skateholm I and Skateholm II which may hint at their chronological relations. For instance, Munt & Meiklejohn note that the role of the dog seems to change between Skateholm II and I as the buried dogs become less related spatially to humans and more frequently buried individually (2007:167). Their observation may be important, but it nonetheless stretches the data a bit too far as the number of cases is too limited. Instead, we can conclude that Skateholm I and Skateholm II most probably are two separate burial areas. Although Skateholm I at first sight seems to lack a northern cluster of child/dog burials, we will nonetheless find that both Skateholm II and the southern part of Skateholm I are in fact ‘closed’ in all four cardinal points by dogs and children (see fig. 6). Interestingly, the dogs and children are not ‘alone’ in these clusters. For instance, in the eastern and southern clusters of Skateholm I, we also find the two ‘graves’ consisting of burned human bones (nos. 11 & 20). These circumstances suggest that ‘problematic’ bodies are consequently buried east, west, north and south of the main area. The apparent ‘normality’ of the two adult graves (nos. 22 and 40) in the western and eastern clusters respectively may thus also belong to the same liminal category as small children and dogs. There is, however, nothing in the published data that may explain their placement; but it implies that other corporeal variable may have been at work as well.

If the extension of the burial area was determined already from the start, or if the dog-children horizon is a cumulative result, is an interesting question, but will have to remain to be answered until additional analyses can be performed. It is, however, evident that the buried dogs and children under the age of eight were intentionally placed at the edges of the main activity area and therefore comprise an asynchronous horizon separated from the general development of both Skateholm I and II (fig. 4).

You Only Die Twice: Postdepositional Manipulations of Burials and Bodies

"I'm gonna kill you. I'm gonna double-kill you. Then I'm gonna put you in a shallow grave, then dig you up and kill you again. That's the beauty of a shallow grave." Homer J. Simpson⁴

Another interesting categories of burials at Skateholm are those that have been postdepositionally manipulated. Manipulations of the dead body are not an uncommon feature in prehistory (e.g., Baxter 1999, Andrews & Bello 2006). That burials are reopened, reused, robbed and manipulated in various ways are known from all periods of prehistory (e.g., Randsborg 1998, Fahlander 2003: 77, 111f, Olofsson 2006). There are many different reasons why bones, body parts or the whole body can be missing (Brinch Petersen 2006), but ‘secondary action’, or post-

⁴ Episode 11, season 17, “We're on the Road to D'ohwhere”.

depositional manipulations, of human bones are generally interpreted as being part of some kind of death cult or forefather veneration, a fiction inspired by various anthropological accounts. Another common explanation for missing or rearranged bones is due to an expanded burial ritual in which the body undergoes certain phases before the remaining bones are finally put to rest (e.g., Ahlström 2001:352f; Andersson 2004:17). There are, of course other possible interpretations. For instance, secondary actions taken against a grave and/or body can also be interpreted as an act of aggression towards the previously dead. Different groups may compete over a site or piece of land, and as a part of the struggle, some may find it effective to disturb the others’ dead. It could also be aggressive acts on the individual level, the idea being that a dead individual is refused serenity in the afterlife because the grave has been destroyed or the bodily remains have been disturbed.

At Skateholm, there are a few examples of post-depositionally manipulated burials. In some of these cases parts of the bones have been removed after the soft tissue has dissolved, for instance, grave 28 (fig. 5). Other examples are grave 7 (male 30-40 years old) and grave 35 (female 30-40 years old) which are both missing their left femur (Nilsson Stutz 2003:312). Instead of simply ritualising the past by interpreting these manipulations as a result of ancestor worship based on popular images of ethnography, we may consider an interpretation in which different groups or individuals mock each other by ‘killing’ the already dead through disturbing their graves. It can also be possible that graves and dead bodies are manipulated in order to influence the means of the dead as virtual actants in the world of the living. Such interpretations can partly be sustained by the intersecting or overlapping burials (Nos. 1, 35, 41, 47 & 56). They could result from unintentional mistakes because older burials have become invisible on the surface (cf. Strassburg 2000:256, Midgley 2005:70). However, the fact that several graves have been reopened and manipulated suggests that at least some graves were
visible many years after the original burial. The reasons for deliberate overlapping can be twofold. Perhaps some would have liked to establish a connection to the previously deceased (cf. Nilsson Stutz 2003:330), but it could also be a matter of the opposite: An act of aggression towards a previously dead individual. The case of overlapping graves 46 and 47 speak in favour of the later hypothesis, in which latter grave is dug right through the former. It must have been obvious to the ones digging the new grave that they cut right through an older one.\(^5\)

Notwithstanding how we like to interpret the post-depositional activities at Skateholm I, it seems evident that something strange is going in the area around construction 10 because all the manipulated bodies and most of the intersecting graves are found here. At least the postdepositional manipulations of the dead bodies (nos. 7, 28, 35) have got to be considered a consistent and intentional practice. In addition to the general horizontal stratigraphy we must therefore add not only the diachronic patterns of individually buried dogs and children, but also the manipulated graves next to construction 10 (it is also possible that some of the intersecting graves belong to this phase). There may certainly be additional synchronous or asynchronous horizons than those considered here, but these nonetheless suffice to sketch out the general development of the Skateholm site and provide a platform from which we can discuss possible social change or use of independent groups in the area.

**Intra-site Changes and Phases of Activity at Skateholm**

Departing from the indications of shore displacement, carbon determinations and, most conclusively, from the similarities and differences in burial practice, it seems reasonable to assume that the graves of Skateholm II constitute a first phase of burials at Skateholm. In general, the sample of 22 graves at Skateholm II is too small to determine any internal horizontal development. There are, however, two clusters of graves that stand out from the rest at Skateholm II (fig. 4). One consists of the five graves close to construction 18 which all have a very high Number of Artefact Types-index (II, VIII, IV, X, XV). In three of these graves we also find all double burials with adults and dogs. Right next to this group there are another cluster of four graves (V, VI, VII and III), which do not contain any items at all - except for the dead bodies (Bäcklund Blank & Fahlander 2006). The difference between these two clusters (A and B) is especially striking concerning their spatial proximity. It can be argued that the first cluster of graves (A) is the oldest of Skateholm II, considering that they are situated on the most prominent space on top of the ridge. The other group of ‘poor’ graves (B) would thus represent a later stage. The difference may indicate either synchronous social differentiation or an asynchronous pattern, but there is no way in which we can tell which is more likely. We have to settle for the notion that Skateholm II seems to display internal differences regarding burial practice and the significance of non-human bodies.

In terms of analysing the view of death and dead bodies during this first phase, the differences between the two clusters of graves (A and B) indicate a formative phase characterised by variability and ambivalence in how burials are to be carried out. Many different bodies are buried, small children, dogs and adults of various sex and ages. The practice of placing dogs and children at the fringes of the main area is either a common practice from the start, or something that develops over time. The only significant exception seems to be that dogs can be buried centrally if together with an adult (which actually may be the oldest practice concerning dogs). The two instances where this occurs are in the proposed earliest cluster (A), which rather suggests that the fringe position of dogs is not an original, ‘pre-Skateholm’ practice, but rather locally developed as new dead need to be buried.

The next phase of burials is found in the southern half of Skateholm I. Here we find all types of bodies, adults, children and dogs properly buried. Some changes in grave interments occur and, as pointed out earlier, the closest burials (nos. 22, and 28) may constitute links with Skateholm II. This second phase of activity is somewhat ambivalent, as all kinds of dead bodies seem to have required a proper burial, but the lesser number of grave interments and the new practice of double adult burials may suggest that the ritual is of less concern during this phase. Of course, the double burials could also indicate a lack of inalienable objects or that fewer people were involved in the burial act. Indeed, the double burials may simply indicate a period of higher mortality. The pattern from Skateholm II of placing dogs and children in the four cardinal points is also present during this phase. One difference is that those clusters are much more distinct than earlier and also seem to include other possibly liminal bodies. It is not surprising to find the only two ‘graves’ containing burned human bones (nos. 11 and 20) in the eastern and southern cluster.

\(^5\) A further example of aggressive attitudes towards the dead is found in grave 13 (Skateholm I). It is a single case that does not fit any of the two discussed categories, but nonetheless shows evidence of hostility towards the dead. In the grave, a number of transverse arrowheads were found at an intermediate level in the grave (above the body) in such positions as they seem to have been shot down into the grave (Larsson 1988d). Whether this event was a part of the burial ritual performed at the same occasion or a later ‘addition’ is not clear.
There are, however, complications in this area. The southern part of Skateholm I is confused by what must be later practices of a different kind. Construction 10 seems to play an important part in what can be considered a shorter third phase at Skateholm. Construction 10 (a hut?) is clearly later than grave 12, which it is superimposed upon. It is not too farfetched to assume that the postdepositional manipulations of the graves around this construction belong the same phase (although the burials themselves are likely to have been constructed during phase two). It is thus probable that phase three only was a short intermediate period of occupation during which no, or only a few burials were constructed. Of course, it is possible that some of the intersecting graves may belong to this phase. The intersecting graves are obviously younger than those they intersect and the majority are situated close to Construction 10. Such a hypothesis can, however, not be substantiated by the data at this point, but can only be regarded a possibility. It is nonetheless interesting to note that most of the intersecting burials run along a north-south axis across the area (fig. 6). Some of these instances with intersecting graves seem thus likely to have been intentional practices. Another special aspect of these graves is their general alignment. The ones that obviously are intersecting previous burials are all aligned in north-south direction (nos. 1, 35 and 47), which suggests that alignment can be another asynchronous formation. It is a bit striking that this alignment also includes grave 14 and grave 22, of the southern and eastern child/dog clusters respectively.
narrative, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge as it may only be a short intermission in the Skateholm disrespect for the dead of the other. Although phase three practice in terms of mockery and aggression or simply carried out by another group, we can also discuss the forefathers. But if we assume that the manipulation was perhaps in terms of veneration of real or imagined as a closer, less traumatic relationship to the dead body, depositional can thus at the same time can be interpreted death is more traumatic. The attitudes behind post- become charged with greater importance, or perhaps that general, however, can be interpreted as the dead body has become charged with greater importance, or perhaps that death is more traumatic. The attitudes behind post-depositional can thus at the same time can be interpreted as a closer, less traumatic relationship to the dead body, perhaps in terms of veneration of real or imagined forefathers. But if we assume that the manipulation was carried out by another group, we can also discuss the practice in terms of mockery and aggression or simply disrespect for the dead of the other. Although phase three may only be a short intermission in the Skateholm narrative, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge as it so clearly highlights the fallacies in studying burial places as contemporary entities.

Finally, we need to consider the northernmost graves higher up the ridge. Of course, we cannot be certain whether the graves are related to third phase of occupation, or if they actually constitute a separate, fourth, and final phase. It is quite clear, however, that the burials of the north-eastern half of Skateholm I are a different cluster separate from those of phase two. The graves in this area do not exhibit any particular conspicuous attributes, but are generally ‘ordinary’ in term of construction and interments. This apparent homogeneity may thus be interpreted as belonging to a late consolidating phase. The occurrence of red ochre in the northernmost graves separates them from the others but does not necessarily indicate a change in burial ritual. The remaining coloured soil is perhaps simply due to change in clothing (Larsson 1988d). The most interesting characteristic of this cluster is that no dogs or small children are buried here. These bodies are thus probably still regarded as liminal, and are either not buried at all or placed somewhere else (or simply disposed in such a way that they no longer are identifiably archaeologically). Thus, there is a change in practice regarding these bodies during this phase, but whether this also implies a radically different view of how these bodies/individuals are apprehended is unfortunately not determinable.

An interesting but awkward question is whether these graves are constructed by returning ‘original’ inhabitants, or if they are a product of a ‘new’ group that first established themselves in concurrence with construction 10 during phase three? A third possibility is also a hybrid of ‘old’ and ‘new’ individuals (of course, normal social variability within an ethnic collective can often be as great or casual as it can be between two separate collectives). If a new generation of people settled down at Skateholm during this phase, they probably had some recollection of the previous inhabitants in memory, myth or by remaining elderly individuals. It could thus be a case of taking up old traditions, but without fully understand them – hence the differences in burial practice. What we do know is that several of the individuals buried at Skateholm did move around. C13 analysis suggests that both dogs and humans circulated, especially along the west coast of Sweden (Eriksson & Lidén 2003, Larsson 1985:374, Strassburg 2000:140). Furthermore, studies of the animal bone from the cultural layers indicate that there was little or no activity during

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Skateholm II, beginning on the ridge</td>
<td>High synchronous variability. All bodies are buried, Children and dogs are placed at the fringes. Dogs in the east and west, children in the north and south</td>
<td>Formation phase, great variability and little standardised ritual. Bodies of dogs and small children differentiated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The south 2/3 of Skateholm I.</td>
<td>Less synchronous variability. All bodies buried (children, dog, adults). Children and dogs are placed in the fringes in all four cardinal points. Double adult burials. Fewer interments.</td>
<td>Ritual of less importance or fewer people involved in the burial act. Less separation of dogs and children. Double graves may indicate period of stress with higher mortality rate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The middle of Skateholm I, centred around construction 10.</td>
<td>Probably no, or few burials, only post-depositional manipulations of the already buried. Possible construction of some intersecting and north-south aligned graves.</td>
<td>The dead body is charged (traumatic or mundane). Traces of veneration or aggression of the previously dead. New constellation at Skateholm associated with construction 10?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Northern part of Skateholm I</td>
<td>Little variability. No children or dogs buried. No double burials.</td>
<td>Consolidation phase? The return of the original inhabitants or possible a hybrid of different groups?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Brief summary of the four phases of activity at Skateholm, their differences in burial practice and possible interpretation.
the summer months of June to September at Skateholm (Carter 2004). This supports the re-evaluation of the shore-displacement effects previously discussed, suggesting that the Skateholm area was probably not an ideal site for continuous habitation. The question of ‘multi-ethnic’ use of the site, parallel or synchronous, is thus rather something to expect.

Towards a Bigger Picture: Skateholm and the Late Mesolithic

In sum, it can be established that the Skateholm area was occupied during at least four separate phases (most likely even more than that concerning the seasonality of the habitation). During all phases of activity at Skateholm, possibly except for phase three, a distinction between the bodies of dead adults and children below the age of eight was apparently made. The threshold for proper burial thus coincides with the age when the child has achieved most of the basic abilities most adults have besides the ability of procreation (Fahlender 2008). This could suggest that achievements and abilities were considered more important than corporeal bodily properties such as sex, or for that matter, kinship and status. Concerning the adults, no corporeal aspects such as sex and age seems to have been emphasized in death, but, of course, we cannot tell if this also was the case among the living. We know far too little about the burial ritual to properly be able to interpret placement, orientation and form of the grave, the variability on body position and bodily manipulations and grave interments in any reliable manner. The buried dogs may, however, provide us with some clues. The dog obviously occupied a special position in contrast to other animals. Although other animal bone are present in some graves, only the dogs was buried separately.

Traditionally, large tools found in child graves that are too big for the child to have used in life have often been explained as evidence of inherited prestige. But how do we then explain the tools in the dogs’ graves? It seems rather far fetched to assume that they were intended to be used by the animal in an afterlife. From a general point of view, the simplest explanation must be that the burial interments were not primarily related to the buried individual. It make more sense to assume that the so called burial gifts in the Skateholm graves probably represent something more of a communal effort of the burial participants rather than that the dead were buried with their personal belongings or according to their social persona. This suggests that traditional Saxe-Binford inspired analyses, such as Schmidt’s (2005) previously discussed study, is rather pointless. It seems that issues of personal identity, gender and social structure (beside the distinction of children under the age of eight) are not possible to answer in this particular case.

Concerning the horizontal stratigraphy, the present study confirms that the graves of Skateholm II most probably are earlier than most of the graves of Skateholm I. Skateholm II constitute the first phase of burial activity and is ‘framed’ in all four cardinal points by graves of dogs and children, a structurating practice that is continued in phase two at the southern part of Skateholm I. The following third, possibly short-termed phase is associated with postdepositional manipulations at construction 10 in the midst of the area, but not necessarily with any burials. Finally, the ‘normal’ and less varied graves in the northern part constitute a fourth phase at Skateholm. During this final phase of activity, children and dogs are no longer buried at all. If the status children further declined or not during this phase is not possible to determine, but their position subaltern nonetheless seem to have remained. Unfortunately, there is no way to determine whether the different phases at Skateholm are the result of one and the same collective that repeatedly visited the site or if they may reflect the appropriation of the area by different independent groups, although it seems likely that some time passed between the second and third phases and that the latter was likely to be short termed with few or none burials.

The differences in attitudes towards death and dead bodies between the four phases at Skateholm clearly emphasises the importance of the temporal issues, i.e., the body, the grave and the burial place, raised in the first part of this text. The sometimes parallel synchronous and diachronic patterns in burial ritual emphasised in this study should be argument enough against interpreting all graves of a site from homogeneous cultural perspectives. Obviously, the burials at Skateholm cannot be interpreted from a one-dimensional perspective only – whether it is from a normative or a queer standpoint. It is interesting to note that the bottom-up approach actually tells a different story than the conventional processual and interpretative studies have done. Such a perspective has also evoked new questions that seldom are of concern in traditional analysis. The local, bottom-up approach surely has proven to complicate some common-sense matters, but it nonetheless forces us to look at the material and the social life of the Late Mesolithic differently. It becomes more complex, less stereotyped, and indeed, more fascinating.

But how do these local variations in burial practice relate to a bigger picture? Similar patterns concerning the placement of dogs and small children are not found in any other Late Mesolithic site. One infant burial at Bøgebakken (n. 21) can perhaps be regarded as liminally placed in the south, but this and other burial places from the same date are in general too small and often too poorly preserved to sustain horizontal analysis. However, many of the practices and elements discussed here are also found at other similar sites such as Tägerup, Vedbæk in Denmark or Zvejnieki in northern Latvia. This may indicate that some ideas concerning death and dead bodies extended over larger areas at the time (cf. Nilsson Stutz 2003:322). In order to properly relate these sites with each other, similar local bottom-up studies as the present are necessary in order to be able to relate the right
phase of one site with a contemporary phase of another. Such a comparative study would certainly prove interesting and additional analyses of other sites may possibly provide both earlier and later phases than those at Skateholm as well as some contemporary ones. It must, however, be emphasised that we can never employ such comparative study to reach a singular chronological ritual development of the Late Mesolithic in analogy with the construction of dendrochronologies made of overlapping, but different, wood-samples. It would only be expected to find great variation between different contemporary burials at different sites. It is also evident that similar lifestyles in similar environments often tend to lead to similarities in practice without the need for a common ideology or cosmology. This phenomenon can easily be demonstrated by comparing the many similarities of a much later Pitted Ware site of Ajvide on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. Most of the characteristic elements in burial practices discussed here are also present at Ajvide and at many other sites occupied by hunter-gathering fishers at coastal sites (Fahlander 2006a). The rather large gap in continuity between the Late Mesolithic and the Middle Neolithic groups suggest that such similarities probably originate from similarities in subsistence, biotope and those materialities and practices that normally follow such a lifestyle. The same argument is, of course, also valid for any similarities between different roughly contemporary Late Mesolithic coastal sites.

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