Zusammenfassung


Durch die Untersuchung, wie der Übergang zur Brandbestattung im Detail stattfindet, versuchen wir uns der Frage zu nähern, an welche Konzepte über ihren Körper, das Leben und den Tod die Menschen in der späteren europäischen Urgeschichte geglaubt haben. Nachdem solche Fragen relativ schwierig zu beantworten sind, stellen wir Fragen wie „Wie unterscheidet sich ein verbrannter Körper von einem nicht verbrannten?“, „Können unterschiedliche Körperparteile nach der Verbrennung noch erkannt werden, und wenn ja, werden sie als zu einer Person gehörend behandelt?“ und „Wie gingen die Lebenden mit den Überresten ihrer verbrannten und unverbrannten Toten nach dem Begräbnis um?“

Unsere Fallstudien reichen von der Mittelbronzezeit bis zur frühen Eisenzeit und sind von Dänemark über Vollmarshausen bis Pitten verteilt, zeigen aber doch einige Gemeinsamkeiten und parallele Entwicklungen während der Einführung der Leichenverbrennung.
The aim of the Bronze Age project embedded in the research program ‘Changing beliefs of the human body: a comparative social perspective’, is to investigate the changes in burial practices that took place during the Late Bronze Age in almost all of Central Europe. The five-year, cross-disciplinary initiative based at Cambridge University includes five parallel studies at critical moments in European prehistory and history, to investigate why and how humans change what they believe about the human body, in literate and non-literate, high-tech and traditional, as well as ancient and modern societies. The context of the conference ‘Interpreted Iron Ages 2’ provided the opportunity to present the goals and preliminary results of the project. Since research is ongoing, the presentation focussed upon the approaches and questions rather than results. Seeing the body itself as the core question directing the investigation of burial data, inspires thinking beyond cultural groups and material culture, as well as specific social differences such as age, gender, or status, and engenders thinking about ways of understanding the meaning of burial practices. A theoretical outline of the project can be found in the Past Bodies publication (Sørensen, Rebay 2007), and a first case study on the cemetery of Pitten will be published in the Archaeologia Austriaca (Sørensen, Rebay 2007).

On the threshold between inhumation and cremation, a striking number of variations in burial and grave forms as well as rituals can be investigated within cemetery data – variations that witness changing attitudes to the body and associated beliefs. Simply contrasting inhumations with cremations does not suffice as an analytical framework. Inhumations and cremations cannot be understood as an opposing set of concepts, as black and white. There is a large grey zone as inhumations and cremations share common characteristics in terms of grave architecture, post-funerary rituals and placing of the bodies – all expressions of how the body is perceived. Investigating and demonstrating how the transition to cremation took place in detail get us closer to the main concern ‘What did people believe about bodies, life and death in Later European Prehistory?’

While it is probably not possible to find a straight answer to this question, we can ask a series of data specific questions to gain a better understanding of what cremation was about. We can ask questions like ‘How different is a cremated body to a non-cremated one?’, ‘Could different body parts still be recognized after cremation, and if so, were they treated as belonging to an individual?’ ‘How far is the body size and shape remembered and relevant for the construction of inhumation and cremation graves?’ and ‘How did the living engage and interact with the remains of their cremated and non-cremated dead?’ Looking at sites widely distributed in time and space, we can discover some common narratives of how the body was understood during the introduction of cremation.

In the initial stages, a cremated body is widely perceived and treated in a similar way to a non-cremated body. Different body parts could still be recognized in some cases, and although the overall condition of the bones after cremation depends on various factors, many of the bone fragments such as pieces of the skull, the vertebral column, the teeth and the long bones were still easily identifiable. At Pitten (Austria), the body was placed on the funerary pyre in the same way as an inhumation was laid out in the ground, stretched on its back and dressed in everyday attire (e.g. grave 58, Taf. 35, grave 110:Taf. 48, Hampl, Kerchler, Benkovsky-Pivovarová 1981). Even after cremation, it was very clear which burnt bones represented which body part and where grave goods had to be placed. Presumably dress elements were rearranged after the cremation, before covering the cremation site with stones or soil, and they were often placed deliberately to match the body parts. For example, the body from Hvidegård (Denmark; Brøndsted 1938-1940: 107, after Herbst 1848: Fig. 1), became reconstituted through the burial practices after it had been transformed and fragmented on the pyre. The burnt bones were collected and wrapped in textile before they were laid out in an elongated shape in a tree coffin. In this case, the body is outlined, dressed, and equipped with weapons and tools in the traditional manner. Such evidence argues that the cremated body was still perceived and treated like a whole corpse.

In addition, the body shape and size of graves were initially important to define the dead body and this emphasis was maintained for the earliest cremations. The shape of the reconstituted body is gradually lost and condensed. Interestingly, this change takes longer than the actual introduction of cremation. The understand-
ing of what constitutes a grave lags behind the understanding of what constitutes a body. Although beliefs are manifest and therefore visible through practice, they may be desynchronized. Remains of traditional practices remain integral parts of funerary rites, while new practises take over. In Pitten most of the cremations were left where the funerary pyre was burnt down. For some of the burials of the latest phase in Pitten, the idea of body size and shape was memorised. Stones structures were used to reconstitute the body. On top of the pyre remains, stone chambers were built, that were adjusted to an inhumation rather than a cremation (e.g. grave 121, 123, Taf. 54, grave 191, 192: Taf. 97, Hampl, Kercher, Benkovsy-Pivovarová 1981). A reminiscence of the body shape can also even when the body is relocated from the actual place of cremation. In the Danish Bronze Age, tree coffins continued to be used for cremations. Looking under the coffin lid, we see examples of the remains being scattered over the whole area, as well as examples where the remains are heaped together, thus condensing the body (e.g. 2962 Fröslev, Ksp. Bov. Grabhügel Sb. Nr. 23, Aner, Kersten 1981, Abb. 24). Examples of oblong graves can be found all over Europe, for example in North Tirol (Austria; e.g. Wilten Grab 68, Wagner 1943: 5) or Vollmarshausen (Germany; Bergmann 1982: Taf. 85-106). Eventually, the body shape became irrelevant for the burial, and urns were used as a different way of expressing or containing bodily entity.

Interaction, social engagement, and communication with the dead did not end with interment and abandonment. The living did engage and interact with the remains of their cremated and non-cremated dead in a variety of ways. The investigation of post funerary activities might shed some light on connected beliefs about bodies, grave goods, and the afterlife. The reopening of graves and removal of grave goods, commonly known as ‘grave robbing’, has been investigated and interpreted in detail for inhumation graves (e.g. Sprenger 1999: 18ff.). Naturally, the disturbance of graves is much harder to trace for cremation graves in the archaeological record. It is, however, common to find green discolouring on cremated bones despite the absence of bronze objects that must have been removed (e.g. Pitten, Tschler-Nicola 1985: 137). ‘Grave robbing’ is so common that it can be considered a repeated and accepted social practice – a ritual. The objects associated with the dead body were probably only necessary to accompany the deceased for a certain time of transition, during which the person in the grave might have been perceived as between life and death. After this time, objects could be legitimately transferred back into the possession of the living (Rittershofer 1987: 5-23).
Other pieces of evidence for post funerary activities are pottery and remains of offering and feasting next to the graves. Graves with door openings in Pitten stress the importance of physical access to the deceased (e.g. grave 189, Taf. 96, grave 191, 192: Taf. 97, Hampl, Kerchler, Benkovsý-Pivovarová 1981). In Vollmarshausen, we see a peculiar variation on the same theme: The majority of all urns had an deliberate opening on the side, a hole punched into the body of the urn. J. Bergmann proposed that fluids and food were repeatedly offered directly onto the cremated bones in the urns through these openings (Bergmann 1982: 161-165). Whatever the reasons, the repeated, deliberate, and direct handling of the cremated bones proves that the bodily remains do not become meaningless; they were centre and integral part of various activities. Since the direct interaction with human remains was so important, we argue that the meaning of the rituals exceeds celebrating the memory of the deceased.

We can only imagine what an extraordinary performance a cremation must have been for prehistoric people (Fig. 2). The fire and smoke would trigger all senses, the cracking of the wood would have been heard, the burning flesh could be smelled, and the light of the fire would have been seen. What is on display is the transformation of the body, marking transition and transgression to the last stage of being human. We do not know the exact motivations, but is seems that performance is the focus of the rituals. The bodily remains hold an ongoing importance. In contrast, the Central European Hallstatt C graves appear in a different light, especially the wealthy ones. The emphasis of funerary rituals seems to shift from performance to display. What is on stage now is the living body, displayed as if it was sleeping or frozen in the best stage of its life. Grave chambers mimic domestic environments in a quite realistic way, sets of grave goods provide all a person could ever need. There is much less evidence of grave robbing, feasting, and post funerary rituals. Even when cremation remains the dominant practice, the Hallstatt C graves leave a different impression on the observer. Stage-like arrangements of pottery and grave goods might be used to emphasise status, but more importantly, we seem to witness the development of a belief in a concrete afterlife.
Bibliography


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