

= Norse funeral =

Norse funerals , or the burial customs of Viking Age North Germanic Norsemen ( early medieval Scandinavians ) , are known both from archaeology and from historical accounts such as the Icelandic sagas , Old Norse poetry , and notably from the account of Ahmad ibn Fadlan .

Throughout Scandinavia , there are many remaining tumuli in honour of Viking kings and chieftains , in addition to runestones and other memorials . Some of the most notable of them are at the Borre mound cemetery , in Norway , at Birka in Sweden and Lindholm Høje , and Jelling in Denmark .

A prominent tradition is that of the ship burial , where the deceased was laid in a boat , or a stone ship , and given grave offerings in accordance with his earthly status and profession , sometimes including sacrificed slaves . Afterwards , piles of stone and soil were usually laid on top of the remains in order to create a tumulus .

= = Grave goods = =

It was common to leave gifts with the deceased . Both men and women received grave goods , even if the corpse was to be burnt on a pyre . A Norseman could also be buried with a loved one or house thrall , who were buried alive with the person , or in a funeral pyre . The amount and the value of the goods depended on which social group the dead person came from . It was important to bury the dead in the right way so that he could join the afterlife with the same social standing that he had had in life , and to avoid becoming a homeless soul that wandered eternally .

The usual grave for a thrall was probably not much more than a hole in the ground . He was probably buried in such a way as to ensure both that he did not return to haunt his masters and that he could be of use to his masters after they died . Slaves were sometimes sacrificed to be useful in the next life . A free man was usually given weapons and equipment for riding . An artisan , such as a blacksmith , could receive his entire set of tools . Women were provided with their jewellery and often with tools for female and household activities . The most sumptuous Viking funeral discovered so far is the Oseberg ship burial , which was for a woman ( probably a queen or a priestess ) who lived in the 9th century .

= = Funerary monuments = =

A Viking funeral could be a considerable expense , but the barrow and the grave goods were not considered to have been wasted . In addition to being a homage to the deceased , the barrow remained as a monument to the social position of the descendants . Especially powerful Norse clans could demonstrate their position through monumental grave fields . The Borre mound cemetery in Vestfold is for instance connected to the Yngling dynasty , and it had large tumuli that contained stone ships .

Jelling , in Denmark , is the largest royal memorial from the Viking Age and it was made by Harald Bluetooth in memory of his parents Gorm and Tyra , and in honour of himself . It was only one of the two large tumuli that contained a chamber tomb , but both barrows , the church and the two Jelling stones testify to how important it was to mark death ritually during the pagan era and the earliest Christian times .

On three locations in Scandinavia , there are large grave fields that were used by an entire community : Birka in Mälaren , Hedeby at Schleswig and Lindholm Høje at Ålborg . The graves at Lindholm Høje show a large variation in both shape and size . There are stone ships and there is a mix of graves that are triangular , quadrangular and circular . Such grave fields have been used during many generations and belong to village like settlements .

= = Rituals = =

Death has always been a critical moment for those bereaved , and consequently death is surrounded by taboo @-@ like rules . Family life has to be reorganized and in order to master such

transitions , people use rites . The ceremonies are transitional rites that are intended to give the deceased peace in his or her new situation at the same time as they provide strength for the bereaved to carry on with their lives .

Despite the warlike customs of the Vikings , there was an element of fear surrounding death and what belonged to it . If the deceased was not buried and provided for properly , he might not find peace in the afterlife . The dead person could then visit the bereaved as a revenant or draugr . Such a sight was frightful and ominous and usually it was interpreted as a sign that additional family members would die . It was first and foremost in times of starvation , when communities were struck with a series of misfortunes , that rumours about revenants began to flourish . The sagas tell of drastic precautions being taken after a revenant had appeared . The dead person had to die anew ; a stake could be put through the corpse , or its head might be cut off in order to stop the deceased from finding its way back to the living .

Other rituals involved the preparation of the corpse . Snorri Sturluson in the Prose Edda references a concern funeral rite involving the cutting of nails lest unpaired nails from the dead be available for the completion of the construction of Naglfar , the ship used to transport the army of jötunn at Ragnarök .

= = = Ibn Fadlan account = = =

A 10th @-@ century Arab Muslim writer named Ahmad ibn Fadlan produced a description of a funeral of a Scandinavian , probably Swedish , chieftain who was on an expedition on the eastern route . The account is a unique source on the ceremonies surrounding the Viking funeral of a chieftain . Regardless of ethnic attribution ( Norse , Slavic or else ) the source says " Rus " ( R?siyyah ) , and the attribution is still disputed .

The dead chieftain was put in a temporary grave , which was covered for ten days until they had sewn new clothes for him . One of his thrall women volunteered to join him in the afterlife and she was guarded day and night , being given a great amount of intoxicating drinks while she sang happily . When the time had arrived for cremation , they pulled his longship ashore and put it on a platform of wood , and they made a bed for the dead chieftain on the ship . Thereafter , an old woman referred to as the " Angel of Death " put cushions on the bed . She was responsible for the ritual .

Then they disinterred the chieftain and gave him new clothes . In his grave , he received intoxicating drinks , fruits , and a stringed instrument . The chieftain was put into his bed with all his weapons and grave offerings around him . Then they had two horses run themselves sweaty , cut them to pieces , and threw the meat into the ship . Finally , they sacrificed a hen and a cock .

Meanwhile , the thrall girl went from one tent to the other and had sexual intercourse with the men . Every man told her : " Tell your master that I did this because of my love to him " . In the afternoon , they moved the thrall girl to something that looked like a door frame , where she was lifted on the palms of the men three times . Every time , the girl told of what she saw . The first time , she saw her father and mother , the second time , she saw all her relatives , and the third time she saw her master in the afterworld . There , it was green and beautiful and together with him , she saw men and young boys . She saw that her master beckoned for her . By using intoxicating drinks , they thought to put the thrall girl in an ecstatic trance that made her psychic and through the symbolic action with the door frame , she would then see into the realm of the dead . The same ritual also appears in the Icelandic short story " Völga þátr , " where two pagan Norwegian men lift the lady of the household over a door frame to help her look into the otherworld .

Thereafter , the thrall girl was taken away to the ship . She removed her bracelets and gave them to the old woman . Thereafter she removed her finger rings and gave them to the old woman 's daughters , who had guarded her . Then they took her aboard the ship , but they did not allow her to enter the tent where the dead chieftain lay . The girl received several vessels of intoxicating drinks and she sang and bade her friends farewell .

Then the girl was pulled into the tent and the men started to beat on the shields so her screams could not be heard . Six men entered the tent to have intercourse with the girl , after which they

forced her onto her master 's bed . Two men grabbed her hands , and two men her wrists . The angel of death put a rope around her neck and while two men pulled the rope , the old woman stabbed the girl between her ribs with a knife . Thereafter , the relatives of the dead chieftain arrived with a burning torch and set the ship aflame . It is said that the fire facilitates the voyage to the realm of the dead .

Afterwards , a round barrow was built over the ashes , and in the centre of the mound they erected a staff of birch wood , where they carved the names of the dead chieftain and his king . Then they departed in their ships .

= = = Human sacrifice = = =

Thralls could be sacrificed during a funeral so they could serve their master in the next world . The sexual rites with the slave girl symbolize her role as a vessel for the transmission of life force to the deceased chieftain .

Sigurðarkviða hin skamma contains several stanzas in which the Valkyrie Brynhildr gives instructions for the number of slaves to be sacrificed for the funeral of the hero Sigurd , and how their bodies were to be arranged on the pyre , as in the following stanza :

Occasionally in the Viking Age , a widow was sacrificed at her husband 's funeral .

= = = Cremation = = =

It was common to burn the corpse and the grave offerings on a pyre , in which the temperature reached 1 @, @ 400 ° C ( 2 @, @ 550 ° F ) ? much higher than modern crematorium furnaces attain . Only some incinerated fragments of metal and of animal and human bones would remain . The pyre was constructed to make the pillar of smoke as massive as possible , in order to elevate the deceased to the afterlife . The symbolism is described in the Ynglinga saga :

" Thus he ( Odin ) established by law that all dead men should be burned , and their belongings laid with them upon the pile , and the ashes be cast into the sea or buried in the earth . Thus , said he , every one will come to Valhalla with the riches he had with him upon the pile ; and he would also enjoy whatever he himself had buried in the earth . For men of consequence a mound should be raised to their memory , and for all other warriors who had been distinguished for manhood a standing stone ; which custom remained long after Odin 's time . "

= = = Funeral ale and the passing of inheritance = = =

On the seventh day after the person had died , people celebrated the sjaund ( the word both for the funeral ale and the feast , since it involved a ritual drinking ) . The funeral ale was a way of socially demarcating the case of death . It was only after drinking the funeral ale that the heirs could rightfully claim their inheritance . If the deceased were a widow or the master of the homestead , the rightful heir could assume the high seat and thereby mark the shift in authority .

Several of the large runestones in Scandinavia notify of an inheritance , such as the Hillersjö stone , which explains how a lady came to inherit the property of not only her children but also her grandchildren and the Högby Runestone , which tells that a girl was the sole heir after the death of all her uncles . They are important proprietary documents from a time when legal decisions were not yet put to paper . One interpretation of the Tune Runestone from Østfold suggests that the long runic inscription deals with the funeral ale in honor of the master of a household and that it declares three daughters to be the rightful heirs . It is dated to the 5th century and is , consequently , the oldest legal document from Scandinavia that addresses a female 's right to inheritance .