

Living with death – or what moral consideration of mortuary practices reveals about the plurality of worldviews in the multi-millennial past of Central Fennoscandia

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Notes on contributors

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Abstract

Mortuary practices evident in the materiality of Central Fennoscandia in Northern Europe are interpreted here rather unconventionally as expressions of morality. This is defined as the correct way to manage death without scruples. The last seven millennia are set on a flat temporal scale, which reveals contradictions between different ideologies and worldviews. The unifying themes that emerge are agency of place and the bond between life, death, and fire. Special critique, on the other hand, is reserved to projections of the fear of the dead to far prehistory. While it is true that this fear can be seen as overwhelming in the region during 2nd millennium, based on ethnography and folklore, it is at least possible that it had been aggravated by Christian dogma. Thus, projecting similar notions of fear to local prehistoric burials is problematic and should be made with caution. The study acts as a reminder that archaeological interpretation is drawn from theory, which affects both the hypotheses and the results. Changing the key, in this case from power or fear to respect, may turn even an established interpretation on its head.

Keywords: archaeology, Bothnian Gulf, mortuary practice, morality, respect.

1. Introduction

This paper explores mortuary practices of the past seven thousand years in Central Fennoscandia. The study area is the drainage basin of the Bothnian Gulf, north of the 62nd parallel (Figure 1). Here, at the rapidly changing northern reaches of Europe, cultures with different worldviews have coexisted throughout the past. By interpreting the materiality of a varying set of mortuaries as the moral and proper way to handle the dead, we are offered rare glimpses into the mindsets of the local communities. The subject is approached thematically with a non-linear flattened temporality, with connections made throughout a vast timespan, from the 5th millennium BCE till present day, which allows us to identify disconnections and continuities in the cultural past of the region. This gives us insight into the long-term foundations of local worldviews. Although the study is based primarily on local materiality, some of the conceptualizations and interpretations are relevant in wider contexts.

2. Respect as an interpretational key – from mortuary data to worldviews

The interpretations made here are based on a specifically formulated theoretical framework, based on a conceptual lineage that guides interpretations from material remains to mental notions (Figure 2). Looking back in time, the materiality of the region's mortuary data was formed by practice on two temporal levels. This includes not only the actual burial ceremony and related actions, such as the preparation of the body and the choice of location, but also the actions of archaeologists who produce data by selective filtering. Between the two levels are various reductive agencies – geochemical and biological – which cause the documented data to be inherently fragmentary. This detachment between the original actions and the recorded data is a common theme in archaeology. The deficiency of the data must be accepted, especially when interpreting the absence of it, which may originate either in the original practice or the leftover materiality.

To bridge the gap between materiality and mentality of grave sites, new perspectives had to be considered. Burials are regularly interpreted politically as expressions of power, wealth, authority, and territory (see e.g. Kristiansen & Larsson 2005; Lavento 2012; Hakonen et al. 2017). These interpretations are based on acknowledged or subconscious theory, or what may be understood in cryptographical terms as a decryption key. The key, when applied to a dataset, dictates the interpretation. Some keys, when applied to unfitting data, produce interpretations that have little validity, exemplified by established pseudo-sciences. Thus, the key has to be chosen with great care. If used carelessly, any form of materiality may become expressions of a given theme. (See Latour 2013: 48–53, 57–58.)

While politically and economically themed keys have provided the basis for many fruitful and illuminating studies, they are not readily applicable to the current dataset due to the unusually vast timespan and changing contexts. For example, as we will see, surprising similarities between materiality of a Mesolithic burial ground and historical Christian cemeteries form a connection according to the chosen interpretational key. Interpreting the connection as similarities in political or economic framework is undoubtedly problematic when considering the long-term formulation of related ideological concepts (see Clastres 1989; Graeber 2011). Thus, the first step is to determine an attribute that is shared throughout humanity, and suitable to the context of mortuary practices. This allows them to be interpreted from a common standpoint. Here the most commonly shared motive for ceremonial burying is considered to be respect.

As argued by philosopher Joel Feinberg (1973), respect consists of three main categories: *respekt*, *observentia*, and *reverentia*. *Respekt* is the wariness of the subject's danger and power, *observentia*

the acknowledgement that subjects have intrinsic value, and *reverentia* is the feeling of awe towards a valued subject. Whether a loved one, a stranger, or an enemy, a deceased person is likely to receive one or more of these forms of respect. Otherwise there would be no reason to perform a burial ritual. If respect was not involved, the dead would simply be discarded with minimal effort. This does not mean that archaeologically invisible burials are always indifferent or disrespectful. They may still have been afforded with ceremonies that produce no archaeological materiality (see e.g. Weiss-Krejci 2013). The argument here is simply that disrespectful burials are unlikely, but not impossible, to be invested with similar effort compared to respectful burials, making respectful burials much more likely to appear in large datasets of mortuary sites.

If we accept respect in this tentative role, we may begin to see more encompassing connections. Respect takes its values from morality, the determination of good and bad. This definition of morality manifests itself, as shown by Émilie Hache and Bruno Latour (2010), by being “seized by scruples” or mental hesitation due to ethical consideration. In the case of burials, avoiding scruples is arguably the most sensible method for those conducting them. Mortuary customs in general can thus be regarded as moral statements regarding the proper ways to treat the dead. Through this vague glimpse of moral reality of a studied community, we may tentatively access the ideological heritage, the basis of thought, and ultimately the overall worldview to which it connects. Thus, way we may have a fragile, yet connected chain of reasoning between materiality and mind.

3. Changing geography of Central Fennoscandia and the human chronology

The study region is unique both in its history and geography. It is located at the core of what was the Scandinavian Ice Sheet – a massive glacier which covered most of Northern Europe during the Pleistocene and still remains as one of the major factors for the development of the area’s topography and nature. Compressed by the ice shield for approximately 100,000 years, and released early in the Holocene, the landmass continues to slowly strive for an equilibrium and are constantly engaged in post-glacial land uplift even after 8,000 years has passed since the melting of the glacier. The rate of uplift was strongest right after the Ice Age and has slowed down considerably over the course of millennia. (Okkonen 2003: 85–92; Lindén 2006.) Still, even during the last 500 years, land has risen some 4 meters above the mean sea-level, creating a strip of new land up to 6 km wide, leaving former coastal villages inland.

The following is a localized chronology of the study region based on its materiality (Table 1). Humans adapted to these changing conditions early on. Following the edge of the receding ice until

the whole region surrounding the Bothnian Gulf was inhabited by the Late Mesolithic (6,000–4,000 BCE, Swedish chronology), these early forager communities settled at the many large river estuaries flowing into the Europe's northern mediterranean sea. Despite the long frigid winters, the region offered bountiful subsistence in a variety of environments: large salmon and fresh water fish from rivers and lakes, seals from the sea as well as elk, deer and smaller mammals from the ubiquitous woodlands supplied with nutritious flora. The environments and interactions influenced the worldviews of many consecutive societies (see e.g. Okkonen 2012; Herva & Ylimaunu 2014).

Agricultural ideology began to affect the Northern Bothnian Gulf region sometime after the Early Neolithic (4,000–3,200 BCE), probably during the Middle Neolithic (3,200–2,500 CE), when pastoralism emerged in the southern parts (Bläuer & Kantanen 2013; Cramp et al. 2014). The consolidation of farming south of the Kvarken during the Late Neolithic (2,500–1,700 CE), and the emergence of hierarchies in the same regions during the Bronze Ages (Early: 1,700–1,000 BCE; Late: 1,000–300 BCE) resulted in two wholly different worldviews that coexisted through the Iron Ages (Early: 300 BCE – 300 CE; Middle: 300–800 CE; Late 800–1,300 CE). The Fenno-Nordic people take their heritage from the southern agriculturalists, while the Sámi people may be seen as the ideological descendants of the forager way of life.

The years 1,300–1,600 CE are labeled here as the Church Period, which represents the consolidation of Christianity in the region. Population aggregation began with the establishment of religious temples, with settlements forming around them. This necessitated intense agriculture and surplus food storing, which built the foundation for urbanization. The Town Period (1,600–1,800 CE) saw the founding of regulated settlements, through which the Swedish kingdom sought to control maritime trade and territory of the gulf region. This control was shared from the beginning of the Industrial Age (1,800–1,950 CE), with Sweden ceding Finland to Russia, and Finland gaining political independence a century later. During this period, archaeological research began in earnest, and thus the archaeology of the region is heavily rooted in nationalistic and colonial principles. The prehistory of the gulf is traditionally divided by current state borders (for recent prehistories see Welinder 2009 and Haggrén et al. 2015), which has made the overall narrative particularly disarticulated.

4. Conceptions of holy grounds and protecting entities

For us it is proper to begin the excursion into materiality and past mindsets from the recent times, since this forms the basis for our understanding. The last 700 years of mortuary practice has been

mainly dictated by the Judeo-Christian tradition, beginning from the Church Period. For the majority of this period, the communal cemeteries were controlled by rules set in authoritative scripture: graves were dug in specialized plots, the holy ground was placed near the temple and the dead were readied to serve the supreme spirit come Judgment day (see Jonsson 2009). Originating in the Eastern Mediterranean, this doctrine had been reinventing itself for a millennium before spreading to the far north as a novel idea. An exemplary early Christian inhumation burial site is the cemetery of Valmarinniemi from the Church Period (see Koponen & Peltari 2017). The Late Iron Age cemetery of Suutarinniemi, containing dozens of underground inhumation burials, may also indicate far-reaching early influence of Christianity, either in its western Catholic or eastern Orthodox form (Kuusela 2015). Both sites also contain a lesser number of cremation burials, which will be discussed later.

A puzzling connection exists between the aforementioned periods and the 5th millennium BCE. Thus far, the only Late Mesolithic example of a large communal underground inhumation burial ground in the region is offered by the site of Tainiaro on Simojoki River. Excavated in 1984–1991, the site has thus far yielded around 40 inhumations in rectangular graves (Wallenius-Saksanen 1985; Wallenius 1990; 1991; 1992), but, in all likelihood, even more are to be found (see Figure 3). It is yet unknown whether the site is a unique expression of local traditions, or whether similar large cemeteries were used throughout the region. It remained in use until around 4,500 BCE, but not much later as indicated for example by the absence of amber jewelry, which became widespread during the 4th millennium BCE. Recent AMS-dates have narrowed the life-span of the cemetery to 4,700–4,400 calBC (see Nordqvist & Mökkönen 2016). Similar sites, but with fewer graves, have been found from Mid-Neolithic around 3,000 BCE (see Lappalainen 2007). The practice of large inhumation cemeteries seems to have been abandoned, or at least no evidence of them exists until the Late Iron Age.

A sacred allotment has been in effect from the Church Period, but why the similar pattern so long ago? One possibility is a connected notion of holy ground. Tainiaro was located near the estuary where the river joins the sea. Similarly, 100 km to the west, contemporaneous Late Mesolithic stone setting graves filled with red-ochre are documented mostly on the ancient Kalix River estuary in Northern Sweden (Liedgren 2014) and although similar examples are also likely to surface in Finland, only one such stone setting has so far been documented in the Iijoki River estuary 50 km to the south of Tainiaro (Mökkönen 2013). In the Neolithic Period, similar choice of locale for burial sites persists, such as in Laajamaa on Kemijoki River (Kotivuori 1991: 26–27) and in Kangas on Perhonjoki River (Halinen 1997).

The strong emphasis on prominent rivers suggests that they may have been seen as benevolent entities. This was certainly so in practice. The rivers offered an unlimited source of fresh water and plenty of seasonal fish. They also provided stable reference in understanding the local landscape. In essence, subsistence and sense of direction were guaranteed by the rivers. These agencies of nature influenced settlement patterns, most notably of the Neolithic, when villages of semi-subterranean houses were concentrated on the estuaries. The agencies or spirits of the rivers, acutely present at the estuaries, may have been an important reason for the aggregation (see also Vaneeckhout 2009).

During the apparent hiatus of the underground cemetery tradition, from Late Neolithic to Late Iron Age, burial monuments such as cairns and earthen mounds became a common feature. While stone cairns were erected throughout the coastal regions (Okkonen 2003), and in lesser numbers in the inland (Taavitsainen 2003; Saipio 2015), earthen mounds were mostly built on the south-west coast of the Bothnian Bay during the Iron Age and probably indicate the northeastern extent of the early Norse world (Ramqvist & Hörnberg 2015). These monuments were mostly constructed on hilltops, ridges and islands on the main travelling routes. Spatial analysis reveals that close proximity to water was more prevailing in the northern coast, with more cairn sites located on islands than in the south, where they were frequently adjacent to or near mainland dwelling sites (see Wessman 2010). This again, as mentioned previously, suggests a probable separation between two distinct worldviews. In some places, such as on both sides of the Kvarken, these highly visible monuments were almost ubiquitous, located on nearly every accessible promontory. With this in mind, it can be argued that the dead were not isolated into remote locales, but instead ancestors played significant roles in day-to-day lives.

5. The comfort and protection of fire

The burial monument tradition signaled a new treatment of the dead body: cremation. The practice involves a ritual where the body is incinerated on a pyre, transforming the deceased into ashes and bleached bone. In essence, this transformation can be seen as two-fold: the reduction of the deceased's body and the subsequent burial rituals. The mental implications of rising smoke and dancing fire are likely to have been significant parts of the cremation process (Rebay-Salisbury 2010a; 2010b).

A notable aspect of the age of burial monuments is that there was no overruling way to bury. Both cremations and inhumations were frequently placed in the same burial structures. The cremation process was laborious and thus expensive, probably mostly afforded to persons of influence. On the

other hand, many earlier Bronze Age burial cairns also feature inner cists for inhumations containing large number of grave goods. Similarly, in Högom near Sundsvall in Sweden, a massive burial mound contained richly furnished inhumations from the Mid-Iron Age (Ramqvist 1992). The roughly contemporary smaller stone cairns of Välikangas in Oulu contained both inhumations and cremations (Mäkivuoti 1996). When the Rus man, in the famous account of the 10th century traveler Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, exclaimed his abhorrence about the idea burying loved ones in the ground to be eaten by maggots, instead of burning them and watching their souls rise into afterlife (see e.g. DuBois 1999: 70), he may have been commenting not only Islamic morality, but also the ideological plurality back home.

There are two main scenarios for interpreting the relationship between inhumation and cremations. The first is that the two mortuary practices were not considered morally incompatible, with both being morally correct for different circumstances. The second is that there was considerable tension within communities concerning these practices throughout the Metal Ages, with two competing moral views. The latter scenario was in effect at least during the Late Iron Age and Early Church Period, which ultimately lead to the abandonment of cremation. Interpreting which scenario was prevalent during the earlier times requires a more focused study.

Still, this dichotomy between the two treatments of bodies did not arise out of nowhere. Even before cremation, fire seems to have had a role in death. While only some of the Late Mesolithic burials in Tainiari were lined with red ochre, as was common in the Neolithic, some were tellingly lined with soot-mixed sand and burnt rocks (Wallenius-Saksanen 1985; Wallenius 1990; 1991; 1992). This offers a perspective into the meaning of red ochre. Were the burials of Tainiari furnished with residues of burning to signify similar ideals as red ochre? Ilga Zagorska (2008) noted in her study of East Baltic red ochre graves, that to strengthen the color, ochre was fired in temperatures of up to 500 degrees Celsius. If this is true also in our study region, a much earlier connection between fire and burials is established than is indicated by the later tradition of cremation. In red ochre graves, the body itself is not immolated, but a link between fire and the deceased person is created through a medium, the burnt soil. Only later, during the use of burial monuments, was fire and body merged in the cremation pyre

These ideological aspects lived on during the Metal Periods. Both fire and environment had prominent roles in two distinctly separate and yet inherently related burials: the Early Bronze Age cremation of Hangaskangas on the Bothnian Bay coast (Ikäheimo 2005) and the Late Iron Age cremation of Heinisaari some 150 km inland (Hakamäki & Anttonen 2017; Hakamäki & Maijanen forthcoming). Although separated by geography and 2,500 years, both are single cremations,

originally placed on an island shore, either on the surface or under the turf, probably in a decomposable container, along with several grave goods. West of the Bothnian Sea, 500 km from Hangaskangas, a similar burial with notable differences was found. The cremation, designated Tuna 123:2, was placed in an iron kettle, some 80 meters from the shore of River Ljungan, and probably under the turf with grave goods. The bones here were radiocarbon dated to the beginning of the Mid-Iron Age (Holmqvist 2008). Variations of these burials were common, and cremations placed in cairns, stone settings, or boulder fields are found throughout the gulf region.

The previous observations indicate that similar underlying ideology of death, with its positive relationship to fire and also environmental entities was carried on throughout the region's prehistory. As a functional matter, cremation is laborious process, requiring the collecting of firewood and the construction of a pyre. Once the body is placed and the pyre ignited, the ritual becomes visual, as spectators can observe flames engulfing the body and bleaching the bones, with smoke ascending to the sky. The emanating heat and light are especially spectacular at night. In fact, even if the process of cremation burial is initiated in the daytime, it may proceed well into the night, since the pyre needs to cool before bones can be extracted. Thus, cremations can be regarded as protracted ceremonies, which occupy a multitude of senses. (Rebay-Salisbury 2010a; 2010b; Oestigaard 2013.)

Seemingly related to cremation, but still a completely different treatment, is obliteration. During the Town Period, population growth and aggregation swelled urban areas, overcrowding cemeteries. Burial spaces became valued assets and thus costly. Introduced during the Late Industrial Age, obliteration is quickly becoming the norm (Ikäheimo 2011). This is the reduction of the body into ash. Here the procedure itself is unimportant, and in modern crematories the process includes the crushing of leftover bleached bones, so the product has no resemblance of a once-living person. Obliteration and cremation, although traditionally confused as identical, are more dissimilar than similar. Contrary to the visualism of cremation, obliterations are hidden processes, meant to conveniently destroy physical remains.

The traditions of cremation and obliteration in the region are separated by some 500 years of Christian tradition. The waning of cremation practice at the end of the Late Iron Age or early Church Period may be studied through the burial sites of Illinsaari 2 (Suutarinniemi) and Valmarinniemi. Here, in addition to inhumation burials, a lesser number of cremation burials have been excavated. At both sites, the oldest radiocarbon dates of cremations indicate an earlier date than the inhumations by up to 200 years (Taavitsainen et al. 2009; Kuusela 2015; Ikäheimo et al. 2017). The early dates suggest that at least some of the cremations were reinterred into the

cemeteries, since there is a considerable chance that the excavated locations were waterlogged at the time. It is even likelier when considering the sea-level rise caused by the Medieval Warm Period.

The most concrete evidence of reinternment comes from Suutarinniemi, where a cremation dating to c. 1120–1160 CE had been placed on top of a supine inhumation dating to 1300–1395 CE (Kuusela 2015). If more cremations are interpreted similarly, this may indicate posthumous moral conversion during the early days of a novel worldview. Descendants of the cremated deceased, or perhaps ideological authorities, may have seen reinternment as the respectful and morally correct treatment of ancestors, since the change in burial customs might otherwise sever ties with the earlier times. This interpretation should be considered uncertain. There is also the possibility that some cremated bones erroneously indicate an older date, possibly due to the mixing of older carbon isotopes from deadwood or reservoir effect due to the consumption of migratory fish.

The earlier long-standing affinity with fire, extending from the Early Church Period to the Mesolithic, should not be surprising. Fire plays several positive roles in the glossary of human mythology, whether as a deity, expressed by different fire cults, the symbol for civilization like in the Prometheus myth, or a channel to other worlds (see e.g. Ziker 2013). Certainly, in the cold near-arctic winters of Central Fennoscandia, fire and hearth were essential for sustaining life, even during climatic optimums. It seems fitting that fire was integral in many mortuary practices, as it provides a link between the dead and the hearth. The memory of a cremation pyre or the ingrained heat of red-burnt soil covering a body may be recalled whenever staring at the dancing flames of the hearth or touching the discolored sand surrounding a fading campfire. Eventually this established morality collided with the Christian concept of hellfire, a pre-eminent manifestation of immorality in the 2nd millennium CE Fennoscandia.

6. Problems with projecting fear of the dead to prehistory

As we saw earlier, during the burial monument tradition, the proximity between the living society and the dead was particularly intense, to the effect that may be characterized as routine. The spread of Christian influence during the Late Iron Age and Church Period affected mortuary practices, with the implementation of restricted grounds for the dead. A worldview with a centralized morality was imposed, where the dead and the living alike served the higher being and humans were regarded as god's vessels (e.g. Madsen 1990). Earlier burial traditions, most notably cremations, were discontinued and even outlawed along with the moralities they represented (e.g. Valk 1999: 65).

Some of these burials were repossessed for Christian purposes, as might be the case concerning the early cremations at Suutarinniemi and Valmarinniemi. Personal influence of a deceased was mainly visible in the perceived piety of the grave, for example the proximity to the temple. Local differences in the traditions are subtle, with culturally homogenized communities abiding by the same rules within a shared society controlled by the state (Jonsson 2009).

The contradiction of the later times comes from the clash of the anthropocentric Fenno-Nordic and the holistic Sámi worldviews. Sámi, the constant target for religious conversion, adopted Christian tradition by fusing it with their own (see e.g. Rydving 2004). A local tradition emerged, with temporary graves located on islands used for storing a dead body until it could be transported to holy ground. This practice expresses both a local version of Christian morality and the traditional notion of the liminality of islands between the worlds of the living and the dead (Herva & Ylimaunu 2014). In the remote mountain passes of Northern Sweden, Christian morality underwent some practical reinterpretations, with exposed stone enclosure and rock shelter graves persisting into the Industrial Age (see Manker 1961). This exposes the friction between the two profoundly contradicting worldviews related to the Sámi and the Nordic heritage, where the other is characterized by the connection with nature and the other by the disconnection.

It is evident that these fairly recent developments in the region have had a substantial effect on attitudes towards death. Historical sources are unclear on whether the overwhelming fear of the dead, often described in local folklore and ethnography (Schefferus 1674: 412–413; Waronen 1895; Itkonen 1948: 352–356; see Nuñez 2015a), was inherited from pre-Church Period moralities, or whether it was induced by Christianity (see also Wickholm 2006: 197–198 and references). Ghost stories documented in the 2nd millennium CE, including those in the earliest Islandic sagas, frequently state the reason for unrestful haunting to be the soul's entrapment in purgatory or hell (Schmitt 1998: 178–181; DuBois 1999: 75, 81, 85–91). With this considered, projecting stories of malevolent ghosts as interpretations of archaeological phenomena to Fennoscandian prehistory is problematic, as the later influence of Christianity on them may be substantial. Thus, extreme caution must be exercised when interpreting earlier burials in the region as expressions of negative emotions, of fear or hate (cf. Nuñez 2015b: 86–87).

One signifier of earlier attitudes towards death and dead bodies is the practice of excarnation, the defleshing of the dead. This practice has been proposed to have existed in many different places and times in the Fennoscandian past, even though the practice creates elusive material evidence (see Kaliff & Oestigaard 2004; Lang 2011). Excarnation seems to have been practiced in Southern and Central Sweden at least during Mid-Neolithic (Larsson 2009: 266–274). Removing meat and soft

tissue from the bones by cutting or by exposing the body to the elements or scavengers produces bones that can be deposited or used as moveable mementos. It is clear that the practice represents moralities that are incompatible with some approaches. For example, excarnation makes death a graphic display for the senses while obliteration does its best to hide death. This to some degree exposes the practitioners' affinity toward death. It should not be a far-fetched assumption that cultures practicing excarnation, exposure, and even the displaying of bodies, subsequently empirically encountering death, tend to be more at ease with it than those practicing burials with closed-coffins and obliterations.

Today, during the Digital Age, the predominantly Christian worldview of the West has gradually been replaced by rationalism in many domains of society, and even more so in the Nordic countries of Fennoscandia. In mortuary practice, the most telling symbol of this is the popularity of obliteration as a treatment of the body. The logic behind the handling of the dead seems to be gradually moving from ritual to convenience. Hidden from sight and without an audience, the cadaver is cremated, with bones ground to dust, and placed in an urn. This vessel can in turn be deposited into a regulated cemetery, which no longer takes its orders from the deity itself, but primarily from the state and the department of urban planning. Also, inhumation burials are mainly practiced with closed coffins, the dead similarly hidden. The emphasis on functionalism is evident, as is the gradual encroachment of disassociation with death within a society, where the presence of a dead body is amoral (see e.g. Ariès 1974; Hakola et al. 2014: 14–18; 79–80; 97–100).

7. Discussion

Overall, this brief excursion into the human mind emphasizes the variety of worldviews and group identities throughout the Central Fennoscandia during the expanse of time. Rather than interpreting burial sites as political expressions of power and control, a path already studied in detail, we chose to start from a broader perspective. The interpretational key that connects materiality and metaphysics was determined to be respect, a widely shared concept within humanity. Previously in archaeological discourse, the concept of respect has mostly come up when considering the handling of human remains by the archaeologists themselves (see e.g. Kaliff 2004; Scarre 2013). But respect in its various forms, as defined by the philosopher Joel Feinberg (1973), is compatible with the overall majority of mortuary practices themselves. Through respect people can deal with the loss of a loved one as well as an enemy or a stranger. We argue that the deceased who were not granted

respect are less likely to appear in the archaeological record. Thus, interpretation of any given burial as disrespectful should not be carelessly made.

From this viewpoint, mortuary practices become expressions of morality, which reveal glimpses into the mindset of the performers. For a long time, arguably at least from the Late Mesolithic, fire was ingrained in the morally proper way to deal with the dead. Heat must have had an overwhelmingly positive tone in the cold subarctic north. It can be interpreted as divine in itself or a representation of the life-sustaining hearth or the sun (e.g. Schefferus 1674: 152). The mainly Christian notion of hellfire, the ultimate contemporary immorality, gave fire a dark undertone (see DuBois 1999: 87; also Kuula 2006). This contributed to the banning of cremation, in line with the rest of the Christian world. During and after the Industrial Age this trend was reversed, with a large share of the dead facing cremation yet again, except in a profoundly differing way. The current followers of the Abrahamic religions may rest easy, knowing that the modern cremation, or the obliteration of the body, cannot truly be compared with the prehistoric “Pagan” cremation practices without the performance of the pyre, which it purposefully forgoes.

We also argue that the fear of the dead, so prominent in historical Fennoscandia (see Núñez 2015a), may have taken much of its power from Early Christian influence (see DuBois 1999: 91; Wickholm 2006: 197–198). The practical aspect of this fear mostly arises from the risk of disease, which is relevant in places of high population density. With the long distances between the communities of the Bothnian Gulf region imposing natural quarantines, there is little knowledge of serious diseases plaguing the region until early urbanization. Even then, the forager regions seem to have been less affected by epidemics. Johannes Schefferus, writing in the late 17th century, even claimed that the Sámi were completely untouched by epidemic diseases (1663: 407–408). The risk of disease, then, might not have been a reason to fear the corrupting effect of the dead. This suggests that this fear originates elsewhere.

In fact, excarnation and the display of dead bodies may have been a common feature in prehistory, suggested by the few elusive burial sites with exposed structures. This is also alluded to by later historical ethnographies of the region, with mentions of excarnation, disembowelment and drying of dead bodies as previously accepted mortuary practices (Itkonen 1948: 350; Storå 1971: 106). In this light, recent developments, especially the hiding and destruction of dead bodies, with only a casket or an urn representing them, is worrisome in regard to the long-term psyche of society. Can the current society truly accept death if it hides it from reality (for commentary see Ariès 1974 and Rinpoche 2004)?

Lastly but most importantly, the study reminds us once again of the importance of context. A great deal of variety existed within stateless societies, with the identities of the communities determined in relation to the neighbors. Moralities, ideologies, and worldviews may have differed vastly within a narrow contemporary region, just as they do for individuals of current societies. Therefore, it is important to base the interpretations of human action on solid and ethical foundations by choosing the interpretational key with careful deliberation. This cautions us, the archaeologists and the public, not to convey values that are prevalent in our society unto others, but to make the best of efforts to value differing worldviews. It is especially necessary to resist the lure of the “common sense” when reflecting on prehistory, since what for us is common sense may turn out to be irrational for others (see Latour 2013: 93–95).

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List of captions



Figure 1. Fennoscandia, northernmost Europe, with the study area marked in red.

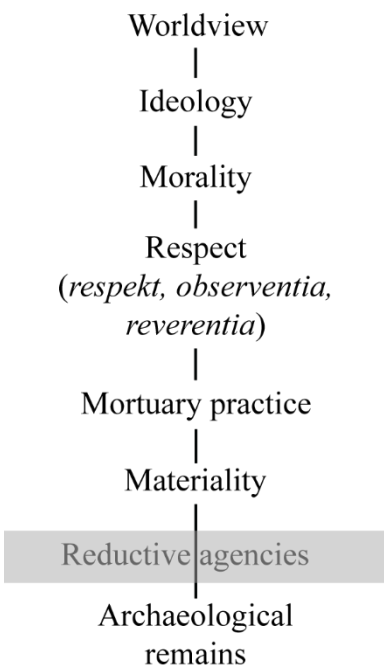


Figure 2. The epistemological sequence.

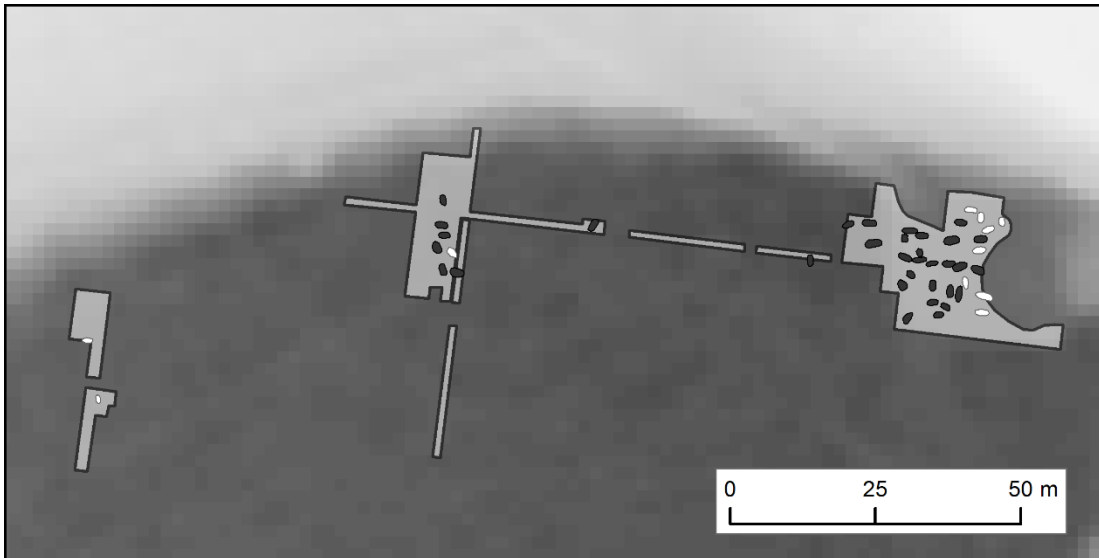


Figure 3. The Late Mesolithic burial grounds of Tainiario in Simo, with the excavated areas on an elevation model. Dark grey ovals are probable graves, while the white ovals are possible graves.

Table 1. The local chronology of Central Fennoscandia.

| | | |
|----------------|----------------|------------------|
| Mesolithic Age | Late | 6000 – 4000 BCE |
| Neolithic Age | Early | 4000 – 3200 BCE |
| | Middle | 3200 – 2500 BCE |
| | Late | 2500 – 1700 BCE |
| Bronze Age | Early | 1700 – 1000 BCE |
| | Late | 1000 – 300 BCE |
| Iron Age | Early | 300 BCE – 300 CE |
| | Middle | 300 – 800 CE |
| | Late | 800 – 1300 CE |
| Historical Age | Church Period | 1300 – 1600 CE |
| | Town Period | 1600 – 1800 CE |
| | Industrial Age | 1800 – 1950 CE |
| Digital Age | – | 1950 CE – |