

Understanding The Early Middle Ages: From Life Stories to Grave Goods

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Abstract

For the early Middle Ages, there are few primary sources dealing with the lives of everyday people, as the existing ones tend to focus on rich landowners or nobility. In these situations, it has been proposed that all aspects of a person's identity (occupation, ethnicity, biological sex, etc.) can be determined solely from items and belongings buried alongside them. This viewpoint has most recently been upheld by the historian Heinrich Härke, who has used his grave goods analysis as the sole basis for numerous studies. However, grave goods analysis can project modern understandings and biases onto the past instead of accurately representing the nuances of individuals, communities, and their understandings of the world. This paper will explore the disadvantages to relying solely on grave goods analysis and the importance of employing methods in tandem, while being aware of how modern understandings and assumptions can be projected onto archaeological material.

Introduction

For those of us studying the early Middle Ages, understanding the lives of those who lived during this period can be incredibly helpful to broadening our understanding of the Middle Ages as a whole. Unfortunately, most of our primary sources deal with recording major religious and political events, rather than the lives of those affected by them. The few sources that do detail life stories tend to deal with the exploits and adventures of holy figures or the contributions of wealthy, male landowners (Fleming 2009). It is in this context that many historians must turn to archaeology to conduct studies on the individuals who lived and died in the early Middle Ages. As with many things within this field, our understandings and methods have evolved over time. However, there are certain attitudes and assumptions that can hinder the analysis of graves and the individuals within them. Traditionally, it has been assumed that the analysis of grave goods and funerary assemblages can tell us much about a person's life, including their occupation, ethnicity, cultural traditions, and biological sex. Most recently, this narrative has been upheld and defended through the works of Heinrich Härke, who focuses on the use of grave good analysis in an Anglo-Saxon context. However, as will be explored, the notion that a heavy focus on grave goods and burial rites can reveal almost everything about an individual is an oversimplification at best, and a gross error at worst. This essay aims to deconstruct this narrative and, using examples of other studies, outline that it is wiser to use grave good analysis and other methods in tandem to gain a fuller understanding of the lives of those who lived in the early Middle Ages.

Härke's work, "Warrior Graves"? The Background of the Anglo-Saxon Weapon Burial Rite", presents several points that are reflective of the larger attitude that this essay will be

addressing, which is the continued assumption that items a person was buried with will reveal almost everything about a person's life. For example, Härke asserts that the presence of weaponry means it is likely the person within the grave was once a 'warrior', while the relative quality and quantity of these weapons is reflective of their socio-economic status within society (Härke 1990). While the analysis of grave goods can be beneficial for the initial assessment of what a person's identity or status might have been in life, it is the assumption that grave goods allow us to easily determine a person's ethnic and cultural identities, as well as their biological sex, which can become problematic.

Weapons as Grave Goods

Burial rites were impacted by a number of changes occurring in the early Middle Ages and would ultimately decline in popularity (Härke 1990). However, for such burials that occurred when these rites were popular, Härke assumes that those including weapons can be firmly classified as Germanic men (40), especially if they are found in areas of known Germanic migration such as early medieval Britain. Another component of this narrative is the identification of biological sex. Härke's paper makes the assumption that all burials with weapons were male burials, while other graves found containing weapons could be explained by "[the] secondary us[age] of weapon parts" (36). It is important to note that these secondary usages observed by Härke are mentioned alongside the assertion that most of the male population were not active soldiers during the sixth century; yet, he still makes a distinction between the 'types' of weapons found in male graves and those found in non-male graves (33). Härke also neglects to mention if any alternative methods for determining biological sex were used. Instead, the analysis of biological sex appears to have been done solely through grave goods analysis and associating items with gender roles, even if the role of 'warrior' was not common for men during this period.

This emphasis on grave goods analysis is further stressed in Härke's collaboration with Micheal P. Stumpf and Mark G. Thomas, which hypothesized that the high percentages of Germanic DNA in modern populations of Britain is the result of an apartheid-like system imposed by the Anglo-Saxons during the fifth to sixth centuries (Thomas et al. 2006). Within this study, Härke and his fellow researchers assert that one can positively identify ethnic identity, which in this case is Anglo-Saxon, and social status based on grave good assemblages because of the association between weapons and the Anglo-Saxons mercenaries. The proposed power and wealth imbalance between the Anglo-Saxons and the native Britons is based on the assumption that graves with weapons, alongside other types of grave goods, must belong to wealthy individuals, as the authors believe weapons to be symbolic of Anglo-Saxon power. Considering that the study was looking at genetic input of Germanic peoples on a modern population, an apartheid would seem probable because of what appeared to be a wealth disparity, which could have easily been a manifestation of a wealthy minority imposing restrictions on a native population. But, had the study done testing on the buried individuals instead of relying on grave goods to identify ethnicity, the results may have turned out very differently and the proposition of an apartheid system may not have been made in the first place.

These assumptions made by Härke and his co-authors appear to be oversimplifications in the face of isotopic testing done at the cemeteries of Finglesham (Legget 2021) and West Heslerton (Montgomery et al. 2005), both of which were active during the time of the Anglo-Saxons and were established as likely candidates to contain migrant remains. At Finglesham, the testing done on both dentine and bone revealed that many of those buried in the cemetery spent the majority of their childhoods outside of the area, based on the reconstruction of the carbon levels in their diets (Legget 2021, 14). This is a positive indication that these individuals could be considered ethnically different from the native Britons, as there is reason to believe they migrated from another part of Europe. But in relation to grave goods, there did not appear to be any significant association between funerary assemblages and an individual's isotopic signature (Legget 2021, 19), which signifies that the material culture of the individuals at Finglesham was not determined by their geographical origins.

At West Heslerton, isotopic testing was done on strontium ratios to determine the region in which an individual was born (Montgomery et al. 2005). In this case, special attention was paid to the positioning of burials as it was thought to be reflective of a person's origin. However, the study concluded there was not enough correlation between the burial's positioning and an individual's geographic origin, represented by their strontium levels (133). Much like at Finglesham, the grave goods at West Heslerton did not appear to be particular to a specific isotopic grouping, as graves had different combinations of the four identified categories of goods, one of which included weapons (133-134). This data indicates that, in West Heslerton, geographical origin did not directly impact an individual's status or the grave goods that were buried with them in the way that Härke's works assume. It is important to note that while the study conducted at Finglesham did not have a focus on weapons, the study at West Heslerton revealed that burials containing weapons occurred among both sexes (Montgomery et al. 2005, 136). Unlike Härke's study and the traditional association of weapons with biological males, West Heslerton's cemetery presents a contrary example, where weapons are not reserved for one sex, occupation, or origin. Findings at both of the sites, especially West Heslerton, show that there is little positive evidence for an elite made up of foreign warriors when grave goods analysis and isotopic testing are done in tandem.

While Härke's works were primarily concerned with the Anglo-Saxons, the ideas and theories found within these works are shared by other researchers, and have previously been the cause of errors in research and analysis. In particular, the Viking site of Birka, Sweden attracted special attention when it was revealed that an individual referred to as Bj 581 had been sexed incorrectly. Initially, due to the "complete equipment of a professional warrior" found alongside Bj 581, it was assumed that the individual was male (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017, 855). Considering that there were no objects traditionally associated with women, this assumption was reinforced and it is likely this conclusion would have been the same if the skeleton had not survived (Price et al. 2019). However, when genomic testing was performed to determine if the sequencing of sex chromosomes matched the assumed male identity, the results determined that Bj 581 was biologically female (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017).

In this scenario, the conclusion reached from the analysis of grave goods was directly impacted by the bias of those performing it. The assumption that weapons within a burial denote a male identity was so ingrained in the research that Bj 581's biological sex was "taken for granted" (Hedenstierna-Jonson et al. 2017, 857) by everyone involved, until an alternative method was employed. Weapons do not necessarily mean that a person was biologically male, or that their community's understandings of 'bearing arms' and 'warrior-ness' are the same as our own, as these concepts and their implications are unique to each culture (Price et al. 2019). Assuming that the understanding of these concepts, and the identities associated with them, are the same across all cultures is an oversimplification and can lead to misrepresentations of material culture, as seen with Bj 581.

Tracht or Cultural Connections?

As illustrated previously, archaeology concerned with the early Middle Ages has had an emphasis on determining ethnicity using grave goods analysis, since it is assumed that the material culture of an ethnic or cultural group remains uniform and can be easily identified (Hakenbeck 2011). This train of thought is reminiscent of a concept known as 'Tracht', a local or regional costume that has supposedly survived unaltered through time and is thought to act as a visual representation of a group's link to their pre-modern ancestry (Hakenbeck 2011). In this context, 'Tracht' has been applied to grave good analysis and used in an attempt to distinguish between Roman and 'barbarian' populations in central Europe. But a long tradition of Roman military presence in the area means that the local costume and material culture was heavily influenced by the Roman soldiers they were in close contact with – even more so once the physical boundaries separating them became weaker. For example, funerary traditions were heavily influenced by the Romans and the popularity of brooches among the Germanic population was likely another result of interactions between the two groups (Hakenbeck 2011, 42). Despite the seeming continuity of material culture that modern scholars are drawn to, these brooches and the costumes associated with them underwent several stylistic changes over the course of the sixth century.

In these 'barbarian' contexts, female grave goods were interpreted in terms of ethnicity and origin, while male grave goods were seen in terms of social status (Hakenbeck 2011) much like in the previous discussions of the Anglo-Saxons in Britain and the community in Birka. In Bavaria, grave goods typically associated with the typology and style of non-local groups have been found in the graves of local women, which could be evidence of their community's connection to other ethnic and cultural groups (Hakenbeck et al. 2010, 235). At the sites of Altenerding and Straubing, a few female skeletons were found with cranial modifications which is an uncommon practice for southern Germany (Hakenbeck 2011, 48) but has traditionally been associated with Hunnic migrations (Hakenbeck et al. 2010, 236). However, there appears to be little difference between the style of burials for these individuals and those without these cranial modifications (Hakenbeck 2011, 48). For the women at Altenerding, most of those with cranial modifications had outlying carbon-13 values compared to the rest of the individuals buried there.

While at Straubing, only one of the individuals with cranial modification had outlying values (Hakenbeck et al. 2010, 247-48).

While some of the women were likely non-local, perhaps connected to the Huns, there were also local women with cranial modifications which, alongside the presence of non-local grave goods, suggests an exchange of cultural traditions between different groups. Despite differences in traditions, and perhaps ethnicity, these non-local women had been accepted by the locals. These women likely adopted the locals' cultural traditions in return, which ultimately resulted in them being "treated as local women" (Hakenbeck 2011, 49) by the community upon death. Overall, the data suggests that there is a certain degree of cultural mobility of both people and traditions, likely aided by marriages between people of different backgrounds, where one adopts the material culture of another but still retains aspects of their own background (Hakenbeck et al. 2010). For the discussion of grave good analysis, the women of Altenerding and Straubing present an interesting case where the items buried with these individuals are not likely representative of their ethnic identity or traditions, but rather the interactions between different cultural identities.

In another case of cultural connections, beads are an incredibly common form of grave goods in areas associated with the Merovingian dynasty, despite the scarcity of known bead production sites within Merovingian Gaul. These beads, found in cemeteries that were active during the fifth to sixth centuries, have been linked to production activities on the Indian subcontinent, and their popularity suggests trading activity between the two regions (Pion et al. 2020). The popularity of the beads across the regions of Merovingian Gaul and beyond, despite their Indo-Pacific origins, points to a relatively simple explanation for certain types of grave goods: some items are buried with individuals because they are common items, and not because of culturally significant reasons. The beads have, presumably, never been used as a basis to investigate whether or not the individuals buried with them originated from the Indian subcontinent. Instead, they have been presented as evidence for trade between the two regions (Pion et al 2020). Trade and transcontinental connections are entirely valid explanations for non-local items to be grave goods, as these objects could have easily been popular and considered valuable enough to be buried alongside an individual. The Merovingian popularity of the beads and their connection to the Indo-Pacific means that it is plausible to explain instances of non-local or foreign grave goods through cross-cultural connections, instead of assuming they are a reflection of the individual's ethnicity or cultural identity.

Archaeology to Biography

While this essay has been primarily concerned with how the interpretation of grave goods can be misleading if done in isolation, it is also important to recognize how the analyses can lend us important insight into the lives and communities of those living in the early Middle Ages. Robin Fleming's work, "Writing Biography at the Edge of History" (2009), primarily deals with detailing the life of the young woman from early medieval Britain, referred to as Eighteen, using both osteological profiling and grave good analysis. From the osteological profile, it was determined that Eighteen was quite tall in life and relatively healthy throughout her childhood,

with no evidence of broken bones (608). This profile was also crucial in determining that Eighteen had developed leprosy and that the disease was likely affecting her mobility and appearance (609). The analysis done on her grave goods adds much to our understanding of Eighteen's life. For example, she was buried with more impressive grave goods compared to the men buried in the same cemetery (609) and there were no signs, material or otherwise, that indicated Eighteen had lived as an outcast within her community (608).

These understandings of Eighteen's life and her relationship with her community are direct results of interpreting her osteological profile alongside information suggested by her grave goods. Understanding skeletal remains is crucial to the understanding of a person's life and their social interactions, as the body contains information about "cultural practices, diseases endured, meals eaten, and childhood homes" (Fleming 2009, 614) that cannot be gleaned from grave goods alone. Fleming's work on Eighteen, and her use of osteological profiling alongside grave good analysis, reveals the importance of employing multiple methods while investigating what life was like during the early Middle Ages.

Conclusion

There is a bigger picture of an individual's life that can be missed if grave good analysis is the only focus of a study. While buried items may be helpful for identifying ethnicity and occupation, they are by no means the only way to understand how an individual fits into their community. The interpretation of burials, including both grave goods and skeletal remains, needs to be done with care and an open mind as, often, the buried individual does not have much say in how their community buries them or what is buried alongside them (Price et al. 2019). It is the duty of those performing these analyses to be open to all possibilities and methods, as well as aware of how their own biases and assumptions may be coloring their work. Misinterpretations of material culture can happen and their occurrences are not necessarily reflective of the ability of those performing the research. It is telling, however, when researchers refuse to acknowledge anything except for grave goods, potentially skewing data detrimental to our overall understanding. Once again, it must be stressed that while grave goods are valuable learning tools, we cannot overlook the importance of osteological profiles, isotopic testing, genomics, and knowledge of trade or transcontinental connections. Many of these individuals and communities from the early Middle Ages do not leave much beyond their graves and cemeteries for modern scholars to learn from, so it is important that when we are looking at these graves, we are doing it in a way that focuses on everything they have to offer and ensures that we represent them as accurately as we can manage.

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