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To cite this article: Mark A Hall (2016) Board Games in Boat Burials: Play in the Performance of Migration and Viking Age Mortuary Practice, *European Journal of Archaeology*, 19:3, 439-455, DOI: [10.1080/14619571.2016.1175774](https://doi.org/10.1080/14619571.2016.1175774)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14619571.2016.1175774>



Published online: 06 Jul 2016.



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Board Games in Boat Burials: Play in the Performance of Migration and Viking Age Mortuary Practice

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This contribution explores an aspect of boat burials in the second half of the first millennium AD across Northern Europe, specifically boat burials that included equipment for board games (surviving variously as boards and playing pieces, playing pieces only, or dice and playing pieces). Entangled aspects of identity, gender, cosmogony, performance, and commemoration are considered within a framework of cultural citation and connection between death and play. The crux of this article's citational thrust is the notion of quoting life in the rituals surrounding death. This was done both in the service of the deceased and in the service of those wanting to remember the deceased, the argument distills around the biographical trajectories or the different social and individual uses to which people put ostensibly simple things such as gaming pieces.

Keywords: Migration period, Viking Age, afterlife, board games, boat burials, ship burials, performance, play, remembrance

CASTING-OFF: BIOGRAPHY AND CITATION

This article explores one of the manifestations of play: board games. As with all manifestations of play, to fully understand board games we have to understand the social contexts in which they are deployed. Games have play, symbolic, and metaphorical values and their amenability to cultural transfer and change makes them a worthwhile case study of cultural biography (not hagiography, as cautioned by [Burström, 2014](#)). The biographical lens adopted for this paper is that of cultural citation, drawing in particular on its active and performing aspects, implied in the philological trajectory set out by [Barnhart \(1988\)](#). Suffice it to say here that the

concept of citing and citation is deeply rooted in European culture, linked with performing and doing. A deep-seated, flexible concept of summoning can be seen in the archaeological record in the form and use of material culture and in the contexts in which it is found. Memes ([DeMarrais et al., 2004](#); [Lake, 1998](#)) and biographical entities with agency, itineraries, and trajectories ([Hahn & Weiss, 2013](#)) form the deeper background of complex human materiality and cultural behaviour. Here the focus is on the roles of board games, whose biographical trajectory gave them funerary performative and symbolic values. The period concerned is the Viking Age but inevitably, given the theme, I refer back to Late Roman/

Vendel/Migration period examples and contexts as these helped to shape Viking Age cultural forms (as has been so astutely argued by Hedeager, 2011). The Scandinavian burial rite in the Viking Age and the immediately preceding Late Iron Age is heterogeneous and changing (Schönbäck, 1981; Crumlin-Pedersen & Thye, 1995; Olsen et al., 1995; Schön, 1999 [including a fifth century Continental Saxon boat burial with gaming pieces]; Ballard et al., 2003; Carver, 2005; Gerds, 2006; Larsson, 2007; Svanberg, 2003). Within it gaming pieces and ships are not automatically associated with each other. They are a particular element in specific circumstances, linked to actual or aspiring maritime identities, something also reflected in the survival of board games in shipwrecks and their use on board the ship, mentioned in several Icelandic Sagas and other historical sources (e.g. Caldwell et al., 2009). In life, strategic thinking and fighting ability were fundamental to success on the gaming board and such success accentuated the status of a warrior. Placing the gaming kit in the grave served to remember or commemorate that status and skill and to make it available for the deceased in the afterlife.

DEATH AND PLAY

The association of board games with, particularly, elite burial rites is as old as the invention of such games in the Neolithic of the Near and Middle East (Finkel, 2007; Woolley, 1934), in part due to their links with divination (Becker, 2007; Culin, 1891; David, 1998: 13–20; Finkel, 2007; Gilmour, 1997: 171–73; Shimizu, 2014). The early establishment of the idea of board games (for divination and play) as appropriate for the burial of warrior elites may have been crucial in establishing them as a cross-cultural meme, a

persistently recurring reification of an enduring idea.

The Celtic and Germanic/Scandinavian worlds clearly enjoyed the materiality of the Roman game of *ludus latruncularum* ('the game of little soldiers', a strategic capture game; see Hall & Forsyth, 2011) judging from the numerous boards and playing pieces recovered from Late Roman/Iron Age graves (e.g. Jacobsen & Wiener, 2013). In non-Roman hands *ludus latruncularum* developed into the *tafl* group of games, including *hnefatafl* (see below) (Hall & Forsyth, 2011; Solberg, 2007; Whittaker, 2006). The argument presented here suggests that through their occurrence in burial contexts board games helped to cite the social order and privilege of the living. They also expressed the aspiration for it to continue in the afterlife and their appeal is such that they came to signify identity, primarily for male elites. Inclusion of gaming equipment in graves is not limited to any single ethnicity, although local variations of a game may well have added to a sense of ethnic identity in support of the package of funerary rituals being followed. But it does seem to have more in common with an elite, warrior lifestyle (male or female) across northern Europe. Warrior mentality is certainly projected by the burial evidence generally rich in weapons. However, that same burial evidence also reveals cross-cultural value and use by travellers and traders. None of these categories of occupation are mutually exclusive: the grave assemblage from the farm at Egge in Norway is that of an individual who may have been both a trader and a warrior (Sørheim, 1997; see Table 1).

Across the Baltic region, the tradition of boat burial is certainly not restricted to males but the inclusion of board games in such burials is almost exclusively so. Solberg (2007: 267) has observed that the signal of female burials with gaming

Table 1. Summary of the board-game evidence from boat burials in the Late Roman/Migration periods and the Viking Age (c. 150–1000 AD)

Country	Site	Date	Gaming kit	Burial type	Gender	Disturbed	Reference
Sweden	Valsgärde	c. 630-680	63 playing pieces	Mound 6, inhumation	Male	No	Ardwisson 1954; Ardwisson 1977, 79-80; Ardwisson 1983; fig. 2a-b; Herschend 2001, 68-73; Carver 2005, 304, table 4
		c. 600-640	36/7 playing pieces (bone), 3 die, with board	Mound 7, inhumation	Male	No	
		c. 560-600	31 playing pieces (bone) with board	Mound 8, inhumation	Male	No	
		c. 750-800	36 playing pieces	Mound 13, inhumation	Male	No	
	Vendel	c. 720-750	2 playing pieces	Mound III, inhumation	Male	Robbed	Ardwisson 1983; fig. 2a-b
		c. 720	15 playing pieces	Mound VII, inhumation	Male	Robbed	
		c. 560-600	17 playing pieces	Mound XII, inhumation	Male	?	
	Vallentuna, Rickeby	c. 560-600	2 playing pieces	Mound XIV, inhumation	Male	?	
		c. 600-650	800 fragments giving a minimum 48 pieces, board fragments and 3 dice (1 with a runic inscription)	Mound, Construction 1 – cremation	Male	No	Sjösvärd et al. 1983, 138, 142-49
	Skamby, Östergötland	c. 600-800	gaming pieces in upper cremation	Mound, double cremation	?	No (?)	Sjösvärd et al. 1983, 134
800-900		23 playing pieces (amber)	Mound – inhumation (with stone setting)	Male (?)	No	Williams and Rundkvist 2008	
Gamla Uppsala	c. 900	23 playing pieces (bone)	Mound, grave 1	Male	Robbed	Nordahl 2001; Klevnäs 2007	
Årby, Uppland	c. 900-920	Wooden board for nine men's morris	Grave	? Female	Uncertain	Arbman 1940 in Cederlund (ed.) 1993, fig. 24 & p. 35-36, 58-9.	
Tyresta	885-975	3 playing pieces and 5 fragments of 1 dice	Mound, cremation	Male	No	Pettersson & Wikell 2013a, no pagination; Pettersson & Wikell 2013b, 77-88.	
Norway	Gokstad, Sandefjord, Vestfold	c. 900	1 playing piece (horn) and 1 edge of a double-sided wooden board for hnefatafl & nine men's morris	Mound, inhumation	Male	No	Nicolaysen 1882, 46-47
	Storhaug, Avaldsnes, Karmøy	779	18 ivory playing pieces and 17 glass (12 blue, 4 yellow, 1 black)	Mound, inhumation	Male	Robbed	Shetelig 1912; Solberg 2007: 267;
	Åkra, Karmøy	900-930	3 bone gaming pieces	Grave, inhumation	Uncertain	No (?)	Solberg 2007, 267
	Egge farm, Steinkjer, Nord-Trøndelag	950-1000	15 bone playing pieces and 2 bone dice	Mound, cremation	Male	No	Sørheim 1997
	Myklebostad, Eid, Sogn og Fjordane	800-900 900-1000	6 bone playing pieces and 3 dice Gaming pieces observed in situ but not preserved	Mound, cremation Grave, inhumation	Male Male	No No	Shetelig 1905; Shetelig 1917; Müller-Wille 1970; Solberg 2007: 267

Continued

Table 1. Continued

Country	Site	Date	Gaming kit	Burial type	Gender	Disturbed	Reference
	Hauge, Gloppen, Sogn og Fjordane.	900-1000	Amber gaming piece	Grave B 5405, inhumation	Male	No	Shetelig 1917; Müller-Wille 1970; Solberg 2007: 267
	Gjemmestad, Gloppen, Sogn og Fjordane	900-1000	14 gaming pieces and 1 die, all bone	Grave B 11390, inhumation	Male	No	
Denmark	Ladby im Fyn	900-1000	Gaming board (frag. including corners)	Mound, cremation	Unknown	Yes	Sørensen 2001
Germany	Hedeby, Schleswig	800-900	Gaming board (12 fragments)	Mound, inhumations	Male (3)	Yes	Arents & Eisenschmidt 2010, 1 (174-5) & 2 (123); Hilberg & Kalmring 2014
Poland	Weklice, Elbląg	150-300	Possible blue glass gaming piece	Grave 452, inhumation	Female	Yes	Lund-Hansen & Bitner-Wróblewska 2010: 304-05
Iceland	Baldursheimar	900-1000	24 bone gaming pieces and 1 die	Mound, inhumation, (ship is putative)	Male	No	Kálund 1882
Estonia	Saalme, Saaremaa Island	c. 750 c. 750	75 playing pieces (whale bone) 300 + playing pieces (whale bone and walrus tusk [2]) and 6 dice	Saalme I inhumations Saalme II inhumations	Male (7) Male (33)	No No	Peets <i>et al.</i> 2010; Peets <i>et al.</i> 2012
Russia	Gnězdovo, near Smolensk	800-1000	Several playing pieces	Mound, cremations	Male & Female	?	Duczko 2004, 105, 155-88
Ukraine	Chernaja Mogila, Chernigov	800-1000	Many playing pieces, 31 beaver astragali and a beard-puller figurine	Mound, cremation	Male	?	Duczko 2004, 238-41.
	Karovel, Chernigov	800-1000	Several playing pieces	Mound, cremation	Male	?	Duczko 2004, 245
France	Ile de Groix, Brittany	900-1000	19 bone playing pieces and 2 bone dice	Mound, cremation	Male	No	Du Chatelier & Le Pontois 1909; Müller-Wille 1978; Price 1989
England	Sutton Hoo	600-630 600-630	5/6 playing pieces (ivory) Uncertain	Mound 1, inhumation Mound 2, inhumation	Male Male	Robbed Robbed	Youngs 1983; Carver 2005, 153-77
Scotland	Westness, Rousay, Orkney	800-900	25 bone playing pieces, 1 die	Boat-shape stone setting – inhumation (including boat planks)	Male	No	Kaland 1995
	Scar, Sanday, Orkney	875-950	22 whalebone playing pieces	Mound (?), inhumation	Male (2) Female	No	Owen & Dalland 1999

boards (and not restricted to boat burials) is much stronger in the Late Roman/Migration period than it is in the Viking Age. The earliest known female boat burial with a possible gaming kit is the Roman Iron Age example from Wekllice in Poland (Natuniewicz-Sekula & Seehusen, 2010: 288–89). There are a couple of female burials potentially with games (notably Årby: Cederlund, 1993; see Table 1) but the only certain Scandinavian, Viking Age female-gendered grave assemblages with a board game element seems to be the double cremation, female and male, of Gnëzdovo in Russia (Duzcko, 2004: 105, 155–88; see Table 1) and the elderly woman in the triple burial, with a male and child, found at Scar,

Sanday, Orkney (Owen & Dalland, 1999: 152–53) (Figure 1). However, in the Scar burial the gaming pieces were understood by the excavators to have been so placed as to imply a direct association with the mature male of the group and we cannot be certain that the pieces committed to the Gnëzdovo cremation were not intended for the man only.

At the time of writing at least 36 examples of boat burials with board games have been identified and are summarily catalogued in Table 1. This includes the spectacular burial and location of Baldurshemar in Iceland (Kålund, 1882). Its initial poor recovery in 1860 and brief reporting in 1882 suggest a boat that has survived in poor condition (perhaps only

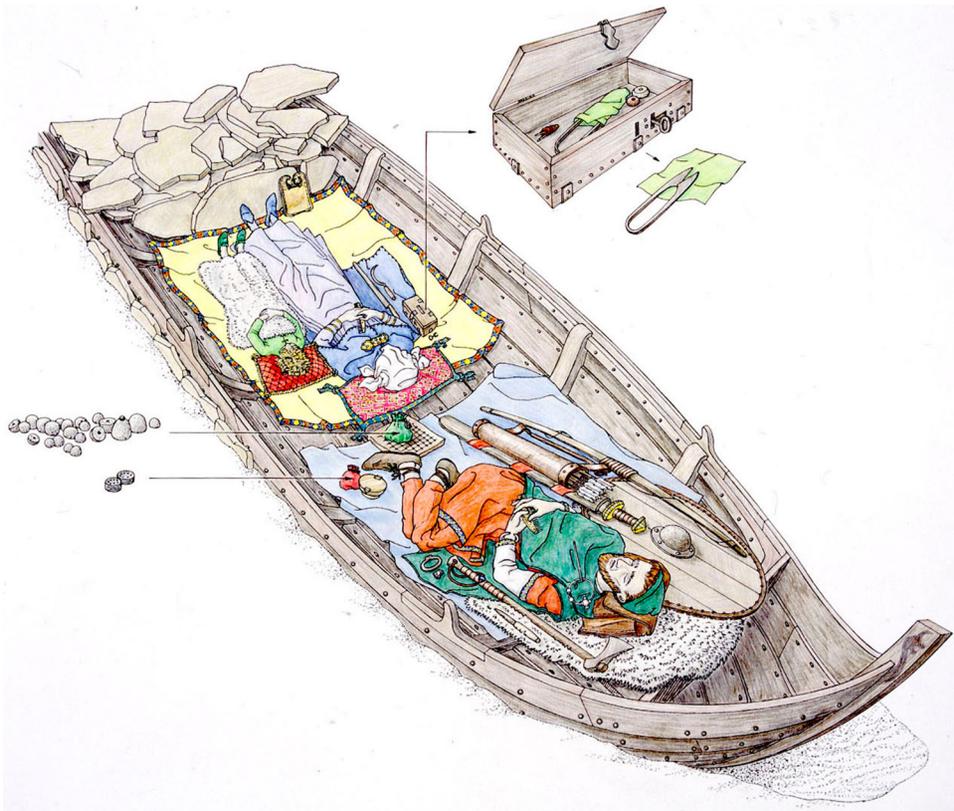


FIGURE 1 Reconstruction drawing of the Scar boat burial on Sanday in Orkney. By permission and courtesy Historic Scotland.

as rivets?) which was missed at the time of discovery. The table lists a mixture of playing pieces, dice, astragali, and boards (usually as fragments).

The playing pieces most likely relate primarily to a version/versions of *hnefatafl*, in which a centrally placed king with defenders must try to reach the edge of the board and safety to win the game. All pieces move orthogonally as the rook does in chess. The dice may be related to an unknown variant of this game but more probably they were linked to a different game (perhaps the backgammon ancestor: *tabula/alea*) or possibly to a divinatory rite. The boards represent at least two games, *hnefatafl* and nine men's morris. In the case of the Gokstad ship (built around AD 890 and buried under a mound at Sandefjord, Vestfold, Norway; Nicolaysen, 1882: 46–47) they feature on either side of the same board. Such double-sidedness is a tradition as old as board games (see de Voogt et al., 2013: 1718). The limited survival of gaming boards from boat burials in the Scandinavian homelands does not necessarily indicate that they were rarely included in the burials; rather the wood was readily consumed by cremation fires or decayed in the conditions prevailing in inhumation burials.

COSMOGONY, REMEMBRANCE AND THE AFTERLIFE

Several perspectives on the burial traditions of Scandinavia have articulated their performance quality and motivation. Ekengren (2006: 112) concludes that the rituals being followed were not a straightforward 'expression of everyday social realities' but rather 'a stock of objects invested with distinctive meanings through the mortuary practices.' The meanings of these objects deployed in the grave were not entirely reliant on their

'lived-world' functions but contingent on 'the interactive and creative process of ritual, and the convergence of different symbols and contexts in the moment of ritual performance that the meaning of the objects was created' (Ekengren, 2006: 113). Jennbert's analysis of objects deployed in a mortuary setting includes gaming equipment (particularly that from the Ladby ship burial, Denmark; see Table 1); the author suggests that the inclusion of board games articulated a key rhetoric of active remembrance, that of negotiation and communication. The rituals were metaphorical, 'material parallels to skaldic poetry' (Jennbert, 2006: 137), an idea first put forward by Andrén (1993: 49–50) who also observed that Snorri Sturluson had a similar thought, writing that women were 'poetically paraphrased by all kinds of women's clothes, golden objects, precious stones and glass beads'. The idea was developed for the interpretation of the Sutton Hoo ship burials (Carver, 2000, 2005) and extended into drama and myth-making through the performance aspects of funerary rituals (Price, 2010, 2014; Price & Mortimer, 2014; Tolkien, 2014). Carver has suggested that burial practice was not practice but rather the resourced enactment of 'a statement which can emerge at any time from a hidden mind-set' and that an appropriate analogy for how this might be understood and articulated is poetry. So understood, poetry is a prime medium of citation, one that can be carried over into material culture. Burial 'is a palimpsest of allusions, constructed in a certain time and place [...] It is the allusions themselves that must first be studied' (Carver, 2000: 37). Price reminds us that these fabulous burials are about the treatment of society's elites and that these elites include an element of spin or propaganda in their game of retaining power; however, the burials' rootedness in drama and poetry

was not limited to elite practice but entangled the whole of society (Price, 2010: 148–51). The funerary rituals were not poetry but they were poetical and shared reference points in their citations of life and afterlife expectations.

Acts of the Living, Gifts for the Dead

It may seem too obvious, even banal, to say that the practitioners of the burial rites under discussion did not know what happened at death; they knew what they wanted to, desired to or hoped might happen, but uncertainty reigned and what happened ‘none can report with truth, not lords in their halls nor mighty men beneath the sky’ (Tolkien, 1983: 60, glossing *Beowulf* lines 50–52, the ship funeral of Scyld). An interpretation of the meaning of gaming equipment in the burial rite does not have to be the search for an either/or explanation (see Ballard et al., 2003; Williams, 2010). Thus equipping the deceased in burial would have seen them provided for in afterlife both as an act of remembrance and to make sure the dead were not lacking in anything, ensuring that they would move on and not — disturbingly — be drawn back to the living world. The leaving of mourning gifts in or around the grave would have also been fuelled similarly by commemoration and anxiety (for details see Price, 2010).

The furnishing of burials to reflect the deceased’s life and the afterlife to come is readily deductible from the prevalence of gaming equipment in daily life. Its specific association with ships and boats is supported by gaming pieces and boards (Hall, 2007) and by other associations between ships and play (Gardeta, 2012: 241; Grimm, 2014; Pentz, 2014: 221–22, 226). The magical power of ships is attested by the ship of the gods, *Skidbladnir*. This

vessel is mentioned in several poetic texts of the thirteenth century AD and said to belong to both Freyr (as in *Skálskaparmál*) and Odin (as in *Ynglinga saga*); it had the ability to be folded up and placed in a pouch or purse (Faulkes, 1998; Hollander, 2007; Simek, 2007). A range of early and late medieval shipwrecks testify to the use of board games on board ships and boats as do various sagas and romances (Caldwell et al., 2009: 166–67). *Króka-Refis saga* tells us that board games as high-status gifts were transported by ship (for a translation and discussion see Caldwell et al., 2009: 180; Murray, 1913: 444). It seems a valid speculation that board games were probably a staple element of a ship’s equipment, reminding us of how life on board ship could be a microcosm of that on land — in both contexts board games allowed social bonding, supported diplomacy, and relieved boredom — and how ideas moved through the movement of people, not just the narrowly defined exchange of goods.

The habitual practice of play may be sufficient (but see below) to suggest its incorporation in the rituals of remembrance to be enacted when sending the dead to the afterlife, recalling a life lived and shaping the afterlife to come. As Herschend (2001: 73) put it, the complexity of boat burials ‘structure[s] both reality and fiction’. Within the overall boat burial ritual, board games added resonance because of the performance value of games, which added to the drama inherent in funerary rituals and also linked into the wider cosmology of Viking beliefs. Arwidsson’s study (1983: 76) of the evidence from Valsgårde suggested to her that the grave-ships were loaded as they were in life, for a long journey; hence game boards, dice, and playing pieces, with other personal possessions, were placed amidships. This could have been in a real expectation of an afterlife journey or

a metaphor that dealt with the fear of the unknown. Herschend (2001: 68–73) developed this further by interpreting the chamber of the Valsgårde 8 mound (see below) as a representation of the hall in which the deceased had lived and was now departing on a new journey (see also Williams et al., 2010 and Skamby discussion below). In a similar vein, Larsson's study of Swedish boat burials finds a reciprocity in their layout with the spatial organization of farmsteads (Larsson, 2007: 280–81) and detects a deeper concern underpinning both, with cardinal directions playing a significant role. The reciprocity was further entangled by the phenomenon of boat parts being used in the construction of a wide range of buildings and monuments and in the use of the boat/ship-shape as a design model (Duzcko, 2004: 87; Larsson, 2007: 52–3, 285–86; Pentz, 2014: 224).

The presence of gaming pieces within boat burials does not have to automatically or only signal the placing there of the deceased's possessions. Such depositional acts can be signals of mourning but also of victory. In Saalme, Estonia, the remains of two mass-inhumation ship burials dated to around AD 750 have recently been excavated (Peets et al., 2010, 2012). Over 300 gaming pieces and six dice were recovered, mostly scattered amongst the 33 male skeletons arranged four layers deep. A discrete group was found around the head of Skeleton XIV and an apparently complete set (the only one identified) in the lap of skeleton XXXII. The king piece was designated by its larger size with an iron tack pinned through the top; uniquely it appears to have been placed in or at least very close to the mouth of skeleton XIV (Figure 2). Does this designate the leader of the dead war band or perhaps a captured 'king' or leader taken in battle? Such understandings certainly evoke the rhetoric of a warrior lifestyle and warn us that the more

mundane notion of the burial rite recreating the living space of the deceased can never entirely explain the evidence.

Additional performative dimensions to the placing of gaming pieces are hinted at in other boat burials. This seems to be a deeply rooted phenomenon or tradition and can be detected in one of the earliest examples, the Migration period Mound 8 of Valsgårde, dated to the late sixth century AD (see Table 1). Valsgårde 8 is a ship burial with a male inhumation and includes a board and 31 pieces; most of these were grouped together in the central area of the board (not currently locatable, Herschend *pers. comm.*) but there remains a hint that they were laid out as if a game were in progress. Indeed it appears to show a winning position, the probable king piece having been positioned on the bottom right corner square (Figure 3). Herschend (2001: 71) wonders if the opponent of the deceased was those left alive (and possibly their future generations), who watched the rituals performed. This may have been a factor involved in leaving the mound open for several years. The opponents may also have been envisioned as supernatural: either one of the gods or warriors already in the afterlife. In the context of a burial rite overwhelmingly associated with male warriors (or aspirant warriors), the inclusion of a gaming board certainly acts as a citation of the warrior lifestyle. Just as in life, where success on the gaming board — which needed strategic thinking as well as fighting ability — could be seen to confirm and add to the status of an accomplished warrior, in death the inclusion of a board game signalled ability and success as a warrior and by implication preparedness for the challenge ahead. Strategic skill in life was not only the preserve of the warrior; merchants and farmers also needed to be successful, as was proposed for Egge in Norway.



FIGURE 2 *The king piece and its 'owner' from the Saalme II boat burial.*
Photographs by permission of Liina Maldre.

The ninth-century Skamby boat burial in Sweden (see Table 1) included 23 well-preserved amber gaming pieces, possibly laid out on the top of the grave's cover or roof, perhaps as a mourning gift (Rundkvist & Williams, 2008). It has however also been suggested that at Skamby the landscape and ceremonial contexts may refer to a belief that the dead in some way

continued to occupy the grave (Williams, 2014; Williams et al., 2010), implying that the deceased used the gaming pieces while they waited for their ship to the afterlife to come in (an anonymous referee reminded me that the provision of entertainment for the deceased is recorded in Ibn Fadlan's description of a Rus' funeral. The deceased is placed in a temporary

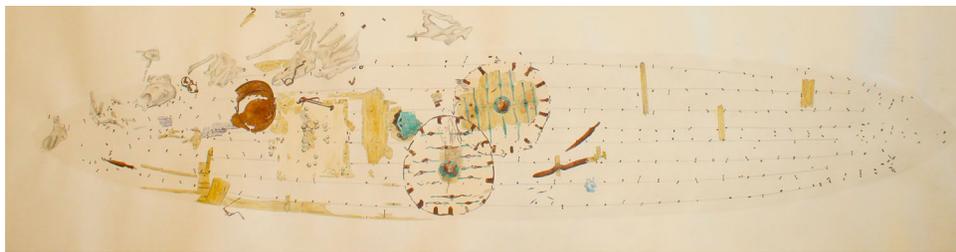


FIGURE 3 *Layout of the Valsgärde 8 ship burial.* Photograph by Frands Herschend, by permission and courtesy of Museum Gustavianum, University of Uppsala (with thanks to John Worley).

chamber grave provisioned with food, drink, and a musical instrument, before being cremated on his ship). The finding of 15 playing pieces and 2 dice in a bowl-like shield boss within the already cited boat burial at the farm of Egge in Norway is thought to represent the means by which the playing pieces that survived the cremation ceremony were carried to the mound for interment. There is a clear effort to witness, collect and bury here that emphasizes a drama, a transformative performance around the deceased (see Williams, 2010: 72–74). The drama of the ceremony could, of course, be on a much bigger scale, as the dragging of the Ile de Groix ship along a prescribed route (Price, 1989: 64/382–65/383) or the leaving open of the Valsgärde 8 mound for several years illustrate (Arwidsson, 1954; Herschend, 2001: 68–73).

Entropy and Cosmology

The board game evidence is significant in revealing the complexity of the burial performance and how the vestiges of those performances become entangled in the entropy effects of the archaeological record. Thus, on a pragmatic level, the finding of the gaming pieces inside the cauldron of the Ile de Groix burial in Brittany (see Table 1; Price, 1989: 64/382–

65/383) can be read as a consequence of a board and pieces being placed on top of the cauldron, their remains falling inside as a consequence of the cremation. It is also conceivable that the association of the cauldron with other objects (including gaming pieces) served as a cosmological citation. Cauldrons have a deep symbolic value in European folklore (witness, for example, the Gundestrup cauldron, found in a Swedish bog; Farley & Hunter, 2015: 262–71), and in Scandinavian mythology the *Hymiskviða* tells the story of the giant Hymir's cauldron stolen by Thor and Týr, to make beer (Davidson, 1993; Larrington, 2014: 74–79). So the combination of cauldron and gaming pieces in the Ile de Groix assemblage may, amongst other things, have worked to invoke or cite heroic feasting and entertainment with the gods.

Clearly when the adopted burial rites were enacted the audience or celebrants comprised mourners and (in the case of victory in battle) enemies but this does not mean we should dispense with a consideration of the afterlife. The best-known textual reference to Scandinavian gaming is found in *Völuspá*, the story of the world from creation to Ragnarök (most recently and authoritatively translated by Larrington, 2014). It may have been composed at the time of Iceland's conversion to Christianity or it may be a pre-Christian text

that became Christianized through several redactions (Nordal, 1973; Pétursson, 2006: 316–17). Gaming in *Völuspá* embeds a suggestion of divination, a seeking to know what was to come (for a related, wider discussion of fate, see Taggart, 2013: 29–32). At the dawn of creation the Aesir play with golden playing pieces on a splendid plain, until three giants steal them. Ragnarök arrives and afterwards the Aesir, on a new plain on a newly created Earth, discuss the past and speculate that golden playing pieces will be found in the grass. The conventional interpretation holds that the playing of board games was an expression of merriness and idleness in a youthful paradise that amounted to a golden age, one shattered by the giants and their theft, with fate then following its course until Ragnarök destroys all. A second golden age is ushered in by a newly created paradise symbolized by the rediscovery of the golden gaming pieces. However, as Teichert (2014, following the scepticism expressed by van Hamel, 1934) has shown, this picture does not match what *Völuspá* tells us; indeed we are not dealing with a paradise but a world full of violence and conflicts, introduced by the gnawing world serpent at the foot of *Yggdrasil*. The notion of a golden age is an interpretation introduced by the Christian and Classicizing writer Snorri Sturluson in his *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes, 2005), his prose paraphrase of *Völuspá*. Seduced by the easy link between a golden age and the golden gaming pieces he essentially inverts the meaning of the board-gaming motif; in *Völuspá* it is a motif of violence and conflict. Both mentions prefigure conflict, first with the giants and then with the reappearance of the serpent in the new world. Just as golden treasure is deceitful and not to be trusted so play and merriness cannot last. This is consistent with the poem's sense of decay and destruction,

embedded in the moment of creation of the universe.

This cosmological reflex may not have been restricted to the funerary/afterlife arena: Pennick (1984: 10) interprets the Ballinderry gaming board, with its carved head handle, as a possible depiction of the giant Ymir from whose broken body the world was fashioned. This would make the central, defined king point of the board the navel. So when board games are included in burials it is not inconceivable that they are citing a pastime in life that can articulate remembrance but also perhaps an awareness that the afterlife will not be a time of relaxation only and that fate is still to be contended with. The inclusion of gaming equipment may signal the loss of one game but suggest other games — for the deceased and for the living — are about to begin.

CONCLUSION

This case study of performance through the citation of living to aid living-on in social and individual memory as well as in some kind of believed-in (and lived-in?) afterlife (see Williams 2001, 2006, 2013) has explored the link between board games and boat burials in the Viking Age and the preceding Migration period. The practitioners were part of an organic enterprise that developed a social, public realm which sought continuity between past and present; in other words, fashioning the present to give meaning to the past and the future. Burial with gaming pieces is a persistent phenomenon across time and culture and this is partly a question of non-linear diffusion, partly of reference or citation. The gaming equipment cites the playing of games as a gesture of entertainment and status and it cites the cultural contexts in which the play takes place — at home, on board ship, and in the hall of

the gods. The placing of gaming equipment in the grave mirrors the two worlds of the living and the dead, representing both with pragmatism in the manner of a *document-vérité*, metaphor, and poetic licence. To extend Carver's metaphor (2000, 2005) — that the furnishing of a grave is a form of poem — then the playing of a game is a stanza in one version of that poem. Stanza though may be a limiting trope to express this and we may do better to think of the gaming kit as providing the structuring rhythm of an enacted poem, and the board as a microcosm of carefully positioned movements articulating by degrees skill, strategy, victory, loss, triumph, and a desire to see and control the future. Cosmology and the quotidian are entangled in death as in life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Versions of this paper were presented at the European Association of Archaeologists Annual Meeting, Pilsen, 2013, and the Nordic TAG Conference, Stockholm, 2014. I am grateful to The Strathmartine Trust, the Hunter Archaeological Trust and the Society for Medieval Archaeology (Sudreys Fund) for grants for attending the Stockholm conference. I am grateful to the following colleagues for useful criticism and further examples: Nanouschka Myrberg Burström, Mats Burström, Howard Williams, Alison Klevnäs, Anemarieke Willemsen, Matthias Teichert, Neil Price, Frands Herschend, Stephen Driscoll, Hans Skov, Erki Russow, Helge Sørheim, Roger Wikell, Bergljot Solberg, Jan Kindberg Jacobsen, Anne Sørensen, and Volker Hilberg. Four anonymous referees added further useful criticism and nuances of interpretation for which I am grateful. I would be delighted to hear of further examples of boat burials with board games.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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Jeux de société: jeu et performance dans les pratiques funéraires de l'époque des grandes migrations et de l'époque viking

Cet article a pour but d'explorer un aspect des sépultures à bateaux de la seconde moitié du premier millénaire apr. J.-C. en Europe septentrionale, et plus particulièrement les tombes à navires qui contenaient des éléments de jeux de société (conservés sous forme de plateaux et de pièces à jouer, de pièces à jouer seules, ou de dés et de pièces à jouer). L'examen porte sur les aspects du jeu qui entremêlent des notions d'identité, de genre, de cosmogonie, de performance et de commémoration dans un cadre formé par les références culturelles et les liens entre la mort et le jeu. L'idée essentielle derrière l'usage de ces références consiste à invoquer la vie dans la mort pour servir le mort tout autant que ceux qui désirent le commémorer, et ces notions se concrétisent autour des divers usages auxquels on a pu soumettre des objets apparemment tout simples. Translation by Madeleine Hummler

Mots-clés: période des grandes migrations, époque viking, au-delà, jeux de société, sépultures à bateaux, tombes à navires, performance, jeu, commémoration

Brettspiele in Schiffsbestattungen: Spiel und Aufführung in den Grabsitten der Völkerwanderungszeit und der Wikingerzeit

Dieser Artikel versucht, einen Aspekt der Schiffsbestattungen der zweiten Hälfte des ersten Jahrtausends n.Chr. in Nordeuropa zu untersuchen, namentlich die Bootbestattungen, die Elemente von Brettspielen (verschiedentlich als Spielbretter mit Spielsteinen, nur als Spielsteine oder als Würfel und Spielsteine erhalten) enthielten.

Stichworte: Völkerwanderungszeit, Wikingerzeit, Jenseits, Brettspiele, Schiffsbestattungen, Bootbestattungen, Aufführung, Spiel, Erinnerung