

Looking for individuals among archaeological burial data: an interim model for the relationship between life and death

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Let the dead bury their dead (Math. 8:22)

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In order to develop working methods to distinguish between individuals in burial material, the author establishes a «pyramid of death». This theoretical model is then applied in a discussion of the usefulness of burial data from the Iron Age cemetery on Kvasshheim, Jæren to give information of past life patterns.

While examining burial data from the Iron Age cemetery at Kvasshheim, Hå, Rogaland, I noticed an interesting discrepancy in the way researchers treat archaeological data in speech and in writing. At least in this country archaeologists tend to *talk* about *men*, but *write* about *things*. Only in popular publications addressing a wider audience is another form perceived where «pictures» of Man in past settings are accepted. When addressing a professional audience is this approach considered speculative and thus forbidden? The most distinctive dimension of archaeology is not its new methods and techniques, however important, but the concept of Man – women and men over thousands of years – as a creative human being. I am not convinced that we *have* to consider Man apart; I feel I must take this as a challenge: I therefore set out to think and to *write* about women, men and children, young and old. I wanted to reach the limits of interpretations in the archaeological remains by starting to understand the relationship between the living and the dead in past societies. I have developed a kind of working model for use in my work at Kvasshheim which I present as a starting-point for further discussion. On the basis of this model I have been able to identify more clearly the boundaries and limitations of the burial data. This also means the limits in reaching for the individual on the basis of archaeological evidence.

The material evidence from the cemetery of Kvasshheim

My research is based on grave-material from a ceme-

tery located on a boulder beach on the shore of Jæren in the southwestern part of Norway (fig. 1). 225 burial constructions were known up to 1974. The area is divided into two parts by the outlet of a stream. The cemetery consists mainly of cairns constructed of

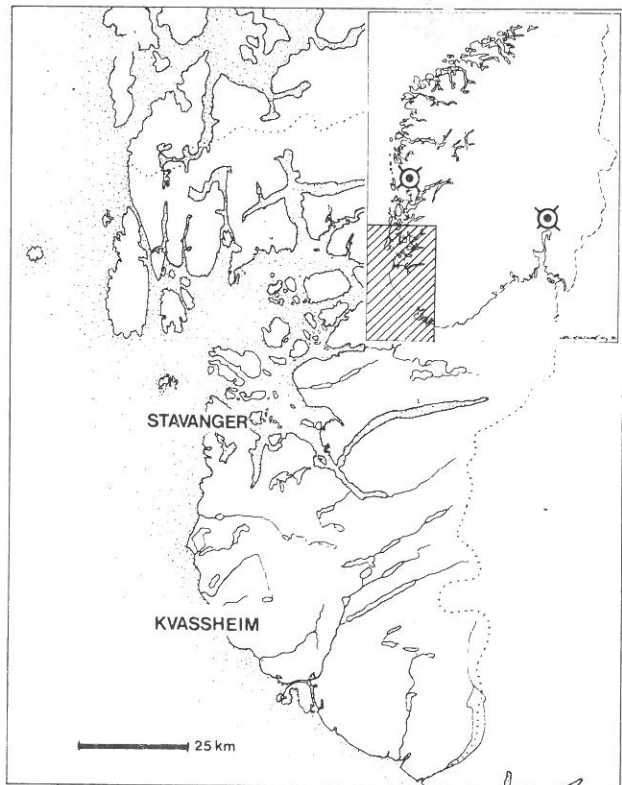
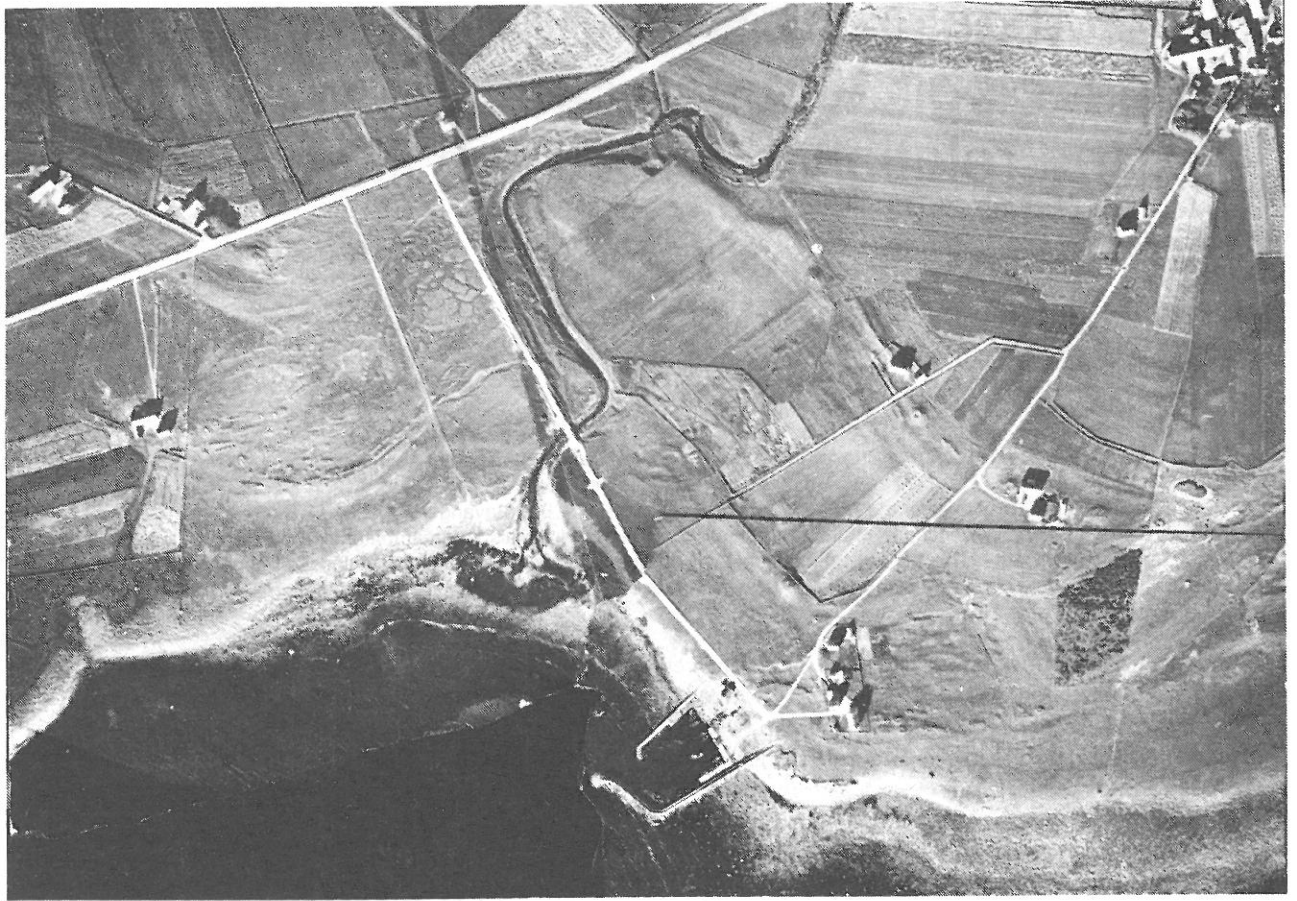


Fig. 1: Map of Rogaland county, showing the coastal position of the Kvasshheim farm. (Map by A.H. Berg, Archaeological Museum i Stavanger.)




 75 m

NORDLIGE OG SYDLIGE GRAVFELT
 KVASSHEIM, HA ROGALAND

113

Fig. 2: The Kvasheim cemeteries are situated on the beach and terraces close to the beach to both sides of the stream. (Photo: Archaeological museum in Stavanger.)

local stone. The cairns are placed in rows following the prehistoric coastlines (fig. 2). The mortuary remains are formal burials mainly in long, oval or round barrows; mostly inhumations in stone cists with relatively few grave goods. The main phase of burial is dated to the Migration period, but the cemetery goes back to the end of Pre-Roman times. Only one Viking Age (Early Medieval period) burial has been found. The material is particularly significant because of its geographical and chronological unity. The study of local burial traditions between geographically separate but adjacent localities would seem a fruitful line of approach in understanding the society involved. The general appearance of the material also makes this approach suitable. But a more thorough examination of data reveals several obstacles not at first apparent. First there is the character of the data and record to hand. Second there is the question of the connection with contemporary settlement in the area.

The burial finds from Kvasheim are the result of research excavations during the 1890's led by the late professor G. Gustafson, afterwards the excavator of the Oseberg Ship Burial. Being an excellent archaeologist of his time, one of his aims was to work out the chronology and the development of Early Iron Age settlement in the Jæren region, and one of his main research areas was to be the Kvasheim cemetery which were looked upon as the key to solving several chronological problems. But the excavator never completed the task after cataloguing the first portion of finds, as the Oseberg Ship took up most of his time.

More than half of the known mounds were excavated. Of these over two thirds were excavated in what today would be classified as the «trench» or «crater» method. The remainder were excavated in a similar way but were less well recorded. The methods of excavation were chosen partly because of the background of the excavator and the working hypotheses he set up, and partly because it was the traditional excavation method of the time.

The difficulties of drawing conclusions from the excavation results are due to the limitations of the archaeological record available. By asking why the material is this way, it is possible to explain the character of data and recording. It involves a critical analysis of the material e.g. state of preservation, the curating of finds and documentation, the method of excavation and recording etc.

Since the excavation, parts of the site record have gone missing. The material has at various times also been the subject of archaeological research.

The critical analysis of the data shows clearly the problems to be encountered in its use. Some features have been more interesting to investigate while other

have been totally overlooked, e.g. not excavated or documented. The concentration by the excavator on single features makes it clear that burial constructions and artifacts have been favoured more than other features. Documentation of factors such as the outer features of the graves, whether they were disturbed or not, single or double graves, mixed or not mixed, etc. is unsatisfactory or completely lacking. Therefore the analysis of the data reveals a corpus of material which excludes several features, such as a nearly total lack of organic material, which make later research difficult and interpretation uncertain.

Because of the excavator's selection of data, the lack of information on several aspects of the mortuary practice makes it difficult to collect data even on elements vital to a modern classification. By examining the information from the excavation material and record it is also possible to compare the research problems of the excavator and those of the modern worker. The subject of the archaeological research differs in this case from past to present. So does the information extracted from the excavated burial data.

The results of the critical examination of the data and record are vitally important to the method of any study as «nightmarish» as that of mortuary practices (Tainter 1978:108-109). The examination reveals that information in the excavation record is available to answer only the questions originally posed by the excavator. Other questions can only be answered in a very general manner. Similarly the material from Kvasheim also demonstrates problems present in most grave material from this country. It first concerns its relationship to a settlement but also to standard of material flow in society.

Farm structures from the Iron Age in the Jæren region usually include dwellings and graves which are permanent parts of a settlement (Lillehammer 1974, Myhre 1978). Very few barrows have been excavated on these farms; because of the burial practice involved the excavated examples yielded few datable objects (Petersen 1933), the interrelationship between grave and settlement has been discussed little (Hagen 1953: 46-47, Vinsrygg 1974:37-50).

Dwellings from this period are completely absent at Kvasheim and at other similar beach cemeteries in Jæren, despite attempts to find them. Therefore only part of a larger settlement pattern is known from the area. The situation is not unique. Until recently most cemeteries and barrows in this country have not been found with other settlement structures.

The list of grave finds spanning the same period from the region is extensive (Slomann 1972:29-35). It clearly demonstrates material flow of artifacts into burials. The general flow is mainly restricted to settlements, isolated burials and also hoards (Slomann

1971, Bøe 1920/21:28-40). The Norwegian Iron Age does not have the supplementary evidence from bog sites, such as those in Denmark.

The major disadvantage of the evidence from settlement sites is its non-deliberate deposition of rubbish. In this respect we must take a different approach to questions of material flow from that in burials, hoards and bog deposits.

The evidence of hoards and bog deposits could throw light upon the composition of grave deposits as these categories may represent a material standard and pattern of equipment during a short time of period. Regrettably the supply of information in Danish bog deposits is mainly restricted to one sex and to one aspect of life, that is to men and warlike equipment.

It is in my opinion difficult at this stage of the discussion to form a general impression of the pattern of material flow into burials at Kvasseheim on the basis of this evidence. Reconstructions of the quality of material between grave and settlement for the region during the period have not been the general interest of research. Attempts at determining patterns of burial are therefore hampered.

Approaching the «nightmarish» variability of burial data

The supposition of universal variability in mortuary practices is central to my work with the archaeological burial data at Kvasseheim. I have assumed that the data which shows the largest variability of mortuary practices are on the level of the individual burial (e.g. body, grave goods). Higher levels of the mortuary structure (e.g. cist, shape of the mound etc.) are in the same way supposed to have less variability and to be more commonly distributed among the burial data. Deaths, past and present, are essential social events involving two different groups – the living and the dead (Aries 1977). My attempts are aimed at using ideas of death and mortuary practices not to provide general background to society but as constructive and dynamic research tools into the nature of the society. Ideas of death are the vital qualifications for the data analyses, and burial data are the products of living societies giving meaning and values to the relationship between life and death.

Accordingly my approach aims at bringing the archaeological burial data out of its isolated «deadland» into direct confrontation with the practising society and the individual being buried. Burial remains reflect behaviour which corresponds to ideas of death and mortuary practices shared by the practising group towards deceased persons. These practises point to those values which members of society share in com-

mon or hold as individuals. Those values are significant for the practising group as a community, and to the deceased as an individual *and* as part of the group. Does this approach also lead to information on the living society practising burial? The following proposition is a starting point in dealing with these questions: The dead do not bury their dead. The burying is done by the living society practising burial. The proposition may well seem simplistic. But by observing the composition and interpreting the function of the body of excavated burial data, the archaeological evidence is recognized to have a special characteristic. It is *not* a random deposit, but is a relic of intentional activity by societies which go on living after the funeral (What to do with the corpse? Why bury it?). These explanations are important for the following questions on whether society is burying their dead according to standards representing

1. the individual being buried (the dead individual)
2. the burying group (the living society)
3. an interrelationship between the individual being buried and the practising society.

How do archaeologists positively know that material remains from burial finds reflect patterns of the buried as living individuals? By looking at these matters we approach more closely the dialogue between the living and the dead.

The classification of the individual

In order to answer these questions I have looked closer into the concept of the individual as reflected in the evidence from excavated burials. I start by dealing with material remains of the individual and how the person is characterized using burial data. The first step is to ask how burial data generally is classified.

One way is by listing elements which are recognizable in various parts of the grave. This results in the classification of the corpse of the individual only in terms of form, position and dimension of the cist etc. To turn the corpse into a once living individual and a product of a society requires a far more complex observation, not only in the burial, but beyond. Analyses of the corpse deal with treatment of the corpse by distinguishing between cremation and inhumation along with observations of the position of the corpse by classifying its orientation, noting whether crouched or extended etc. When analyses of burials are restricted to grave goods, in the absence of a surviving body, the concentration on grave goods can often result in the original association between body and grave goods and its meaning being overlooked. It is therefore possible that this method of classification does not find information which is important to understanding the complexity and variability of burials;

classification based on this kind of observation results in misleadingly simple analyses. In addition the field of data which deals with the body also has a more complex dimension which is different from that representing the classification of its material remains. By concentrating throughout on the information available on the characteristics of the body (e.g. sex, age, etc.), even in the absence of skeletal remains, the analyses of the burial as a whole will tell more about the buried person as an individual. I deal with the individual by classifying its characteristics in four stages representing the process: living, dead, buried, burial find. The lists of characteristics or attributes have at most 7 variables. Each stage is represented by various groups of attributes which distinguish it from other stages. The stages are dealt with in two sections: A 1 & 2 (Table 1), B 3 & 4 (Table 2).

Section A starts with the individual as she/he is before death and continues with the individual once dead. Classification lists of the attributes of deceased individuals have been presented elsewhere (Binford 1979). It is however essential to draw attention to the situation which characterizes the deceased before death. Therefore two lists are put forward, one for the living individual and one for the dead.

Table 1: List of attributes used to classify the individual as a living person and at death.

Section A	
1. The living individual	2. The individual at death
sex	sex
age	age
social position and affiliation	social position and affiliation
residence	place of death
life-span	time of death
	season of death
	cause of death

Table 2: List of attributes used to classify the individual as a buried individual and as an archaeological entity.

Section B	
3. The buried individual	4. The burial of the individual as excavated
sex	sex
age	age
social position and affiliation	?
place of burial	?
time of burial	place of burial
season of burial	?
cause of burial	?

The living individual is characterized by five attributes. These represent factors which are innate (sex and age), those acquired at birth and achieved during life (social position and affiliation) in accordance to the social organization of the society together with the place of habitation (residence) and the span of life for the individual (life-span). The dead individual has in the same manner 7 characteristics. Three of these are the variables for sex and age together with social position and affiliation as in A: 1. These are attributes which the individual brings with her into death. The effect of social position and affiliation after death is uncertain. The last four variables on the list are those conditioned by the circumstance of death.

Section B deals with the characteristics of the individual as buried and then as recognized evidence among archaeological burial data (Table 2).

The individual (B: 3) has 7 characteristics at the stage of burial. In addition to the variables of sex, age and social determinants, which I would suggest may also be present at this stage in the process, characteristics distinguishing burial from other stages are put forward. These are the four variables representing the time and the season of burial and the reason for taking the process through the burial. The last list contains the characteristics which seem the most reliable in examining archaeologically the burial of the individual (B: 4). Sex and age are biological variables innate in the buried corpse. In the archaeological find these may also be represented by organic material suitable for identification of sex and age. And of course the place of burial is shown by the find itself. I have on the other hand excluded those attributes which the individual is vested with during life and as member of society, or those activated on the occurrence of death, or on the practising of burial. For these attributes evidence may be found throughout the whole structure of the grave, depending on individual circumstances, but can only be considered in the light of the evidence intimately associated with the body (e.g. the grave goods) and by analogous practices. This is not an easy task.

A comparison of the four lists of attributes reveals that the number of variables increases during the first part of the process (e.g. from living to dead material) and decreases from the time of burial to the archaeological find, where few of the attributes are immediately recognizable. Variables in each list may in some cases be connected. Residence and life-span of the living may be connected with death and burial. Place, time, season and cause of death may also be connected with the characteristics of burial (B: 3).

They are not however marked on the lists of death and burial. The period in which the individual was living and buried has not been considered in the lists

of attributes. I would regard this variable to be of less importance to the characteristics of the individual if the majority of the burials took place in a short period of time. This variable is on the other hand important in analyses of burial data spanning a longer time, the period groups would have to be analysed separately. The variables of the classification of the individual which appear in all 4 stages are sex and age. Together with place of burial, these are regarded as useful in the interpretation of burial data. I regard social attributes as less reliably represented in the excavated data and therefore more difficult to examine.

The pyramid of death

A model is put forward which illustrates death by showing the relationship between the individual and the society in the process from life to death and the archaeological evidence which survives (fig. 3). The pyramid represents status of research for basic ideas on death as I understand it. The base of the triangle represents spiritual concepts at work (see below). The society is represented by physical features of death on the right side while the individual is described by processes of death and burial practices on the left side. The two areas are hatched on the figure. Stages which are related in the process are placed on other sides of the triangle. The stages of the procedure, numbered, on the left side, are those outlined in table 1-2. The stages 1-4, representing the individual, are on each level in the pyramid opposite others having a physical

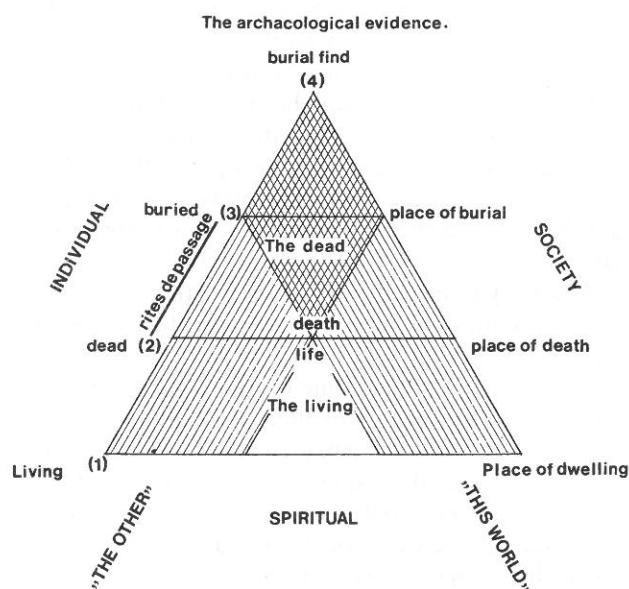


Fig. 3: «The Pyramid of death». Model showing the relationship between individual – society – archaeological evidence in the life – death cycle of the individual.

and a spiritual significance. The model is best explained from the top working from the archaeological evidence back towards the deposition of the deceased, and beyond. The first step is to the buried individual as opposed to physical features of the burial place formed by the living society. The stage is described in B: 3 above. It points at the burial of the individual as a process while the place of burial (and the buried) is a product of this process. The next stage takes us from the action of burial to the situation of the individual at death, and the place of death. The attributes of the individual are given in A: 2. Death is a process of life and the place of death is a product of this process on the occurrence of death. The last step is from the death of the individual to her/his life and the spiritual factors which influence the circumstance of death and mortuary practice. The attributes of the individual at this stage are given in A: 1. In the model spiritual factors of death are represented by the concept of «The Other» and «This World». The first is the concept of «The Other World», as represented by Leach, who defines it as «the inaccessible Other, the not Here» – «other than the land of the living» (Leach 1977:173). It is used here to explain ideas of death seen as an opposite to life. It means that the individual on the occurrence of death is removed from the process of production and reproduction, into the living memory of society. This is regarded of more concern to the dying individual than to the living society.

The second is the concept of «This World». Leach explains it as the binary opposition of «The Other World» (Leach 1977), that is ideas of life, fertility and continuity (production – reproduction) shared by the living society and which I regard to be a major field of interest for the living society in dealing with death. To fill this area in the model with ideas that matter is in reality an impossible task. For practical reasons it is also necessary for the society to get rid of the corpse, in one way or another. The individual undergoes *rites de passage* from dead to buried. This transitional process is not specifically demonstrated in the model but it takes place in stages 2 and 3, death and burial. The *rites de passage* are important in the eventual archaeological evidence. They lead to behaviour effected on the corpse of the individual (e.g. inhumation versus cremation) and the society (e.g. the place and time of burial). The position of this process in the central part of the model clearly demonstrates the importance in the complex structure. There the interests of the living and the dead cross the boundaries of life and death. Researchers in archaeology must concentrate more on understanding the impact of these *rites de passage* on the archaeological burial data.

The model demonstrates that the relation between life and death is at work on every level of interpret-

ation. The interests of the society lie on the right side («This World») while the interests of the individual lie on the left side («The Other») of the model. The further one proceeds up the pyramid from the living, into death and then to relics of burials, the more these two fields of interest narrow and cross until they join completely at the top of the model. Here the interests of the individual and society seem to the modern excavator to merge, at the stage of death these fields are only partly joined. The top stage is not identical with the archaeological find. The archaeological evidence is situated on the very point of the pyramid and thus on the very extreme edge of the model. To examine death on the basis of archaeological evidence is therefore very difficult. From the top of the model inferences on life in past societies are drawn through the analysis of the archaeological burial find. In the archaeological evidence we have the relics of the buried individual where the interests between the living (the society, «This World») and the dead (the individual, «The Other») appear to us to be entirely merged. Proceeding downwards to the stage of death we see the same cross-hatched area as at the top stage of the model. This area covers the central part of the stage representing death and is pointed downwards to the open area, the stage of life, representing a link between what we find and the individual at death. On the last step from death to life the cross-hatched area stops and the central part of the model is left open. The individual and society seem to have different interests. Here inferences on life in past societies on the basis of archaeological burial evidence meet a barrier. How do we fill this entirely open space with data representing burial practices when the process of interpretation on the basis of burial evidence seems to fail us? How do we regard the interests of the individual from society on behalf of the material evidence? Throughout the model the importance of the concept of life, both of the individual and of society, has been stressed; to understand death we must understand life in the society. The model shows the difficulties in analysing archaeological burial data; inferences on life in past societies drawn through archaeological evidence have to cross the boundaries of death.

The classification of the material evidence

Archaeological evidence differs in some ways from that in other disciplines: we deal with activities observable in the archaeological evidence and also those which do not appear there. Unobserved events exist only in the memory of persons performing the mortuary practices. One activity may change or destroy

the results of other activities earlier in the process. Secondary to these are the processes both of natural and human origin, which take place after the burial; these must be considered separately from the original deposition. Further there are the remains of random human activities in the vicinity of the grave. The result of the operation of these factors is that conclusions are drawn from very incomplete archaeological evidence. We find periods lacking burial remains or having inadequate representation of burials. In the model stage 2 on fig. 3 seems more reliable for use in analysing archaeological burial evidence; others are more difficult to use. *Rites de passage* possibly have a variable impact on the mortuary practices (Huntington and Metcalf 1979) and therefore on the archaeological remains of such practices. Therefore the stage of burial (stage 3 on fig. 3) is less reliable a point at which to interpret burial evidence. The stage representing the living individual as a member of society is similar. The problems of reconstructing patterns within the society pose several questions which cannot be answered by the archaeological evidence alone. The *rites de passage* relate to the values of the living society (Huntington and Metcalf 1979). But the living individual is not completely represented in the grave, only reflected in it. The most significant factors affecting mortuary practice are to be found in stage 2, at the death of the individual. The *rites de passage* also begin at this stage, and end with the completion of the burial process (which might also include prolonged activity at the finished grave). At this stage the body has undergone no transformations. Culturally significant symbols of death will be elaborated during the *rites de passage* by the living towards the dead. At stage 2 and the *rites de passage* we have the closest link in the model between life and death. I would suggest that this stage is of great value to us and should be compared with stages 3 and 4 when interpreting the evidence. How is this stage to be examined through the restricted body of archaeological burial data? There are often obstacles to using the material for analysis, here demonstrated through the grave material from Kvasseim. Lack of organic material frequently rules out the direct determination of sex and age. The body is therefore only indirectly present in the burial data through associated artifacts. The place of burial is often also limited by the method of excavation and recording, especially when older excavations and discoveries are concerned. However, we are forced by circumstances to concentrate on this attribute. The «place of burial» is the location of the mound and the location of the material in the grave, e.g. localizations of components and boundaries at near and far distances to the corpse, particularly the position of the grave goods, structures far from and

close to the body (e.g. mound, cist). A burial may be classified in the following way. The model above shows the opposites, life and death, to be reflected at each stage from dead to burial. The relationship between the living and the dead could be expected to affect every component of the burial. The burial is the major component. We may assume if any visible marker for the burial is constructed, that visible components are of interest to the living society. But what is their significance for the living society and what does it tell us about the dead individual? I would suggest that visible components (e.g. shape, size etc.) are examined in relation to biological and social attributes in lists 2-4 (sex, age, social position and affiliation). Areas which are close to the corpse are often shut off and hidden from the living (e.g. by a construction of a mound). We could therefore assume that this area relates more closely to the dead than to the living society. In the area made inaccessible the most important component is the body itself. Further classification of the burial beyond the locational factors depend on the type of burial evidence. Next are the objects associated with the dead individual. What do these objects tell us about the interests of the living and the dead? These objects, which very often provide the greatest amount of evidence and have the greatest variability, may be classified into 1) objects contributed by the society, and 2) objects belonging to the dead, or 3) a contribution of the two, an expression of a two-sided relationship. A starting point for further discussion is the total composition of the burial and its structures in being an attribute to death. It is also a manifestation of the living society, the product of what it can contribute to the individual at the time of death. The distinction of possessions from gifts is a major problem of interpretation, not helped by some workers in the field who use the two terms indiscriminately. The consideration of the matter is now close to the boundaries of interpretation which some may see as close to speculation. It clearly demonstrates the complications in interpreting mortuary practices. I will however try. Jewellery, garments and their fittings are provided to furnish and protect

the body. The objects probably also have great variety of functions dependent on culture (Alexander 1973, Bovin 1979). Is it possible that these have different functions in the transformation process which the body undergoes after death (Leach 1977)? Do the jewellery, garments and fittings have a greater variety of functions which reflect also the dress of the living? The more distant grave goods in the burial (tools, weapons and vessels) are frequently selected for burial in accordance to the prevailing cultural norms of death and burial practice. Do these also have crossing functions in the transformation of the individual? Further does this mean that the presentation of the individual in the grave is different, changed or even idealized compared to life? If this could be the case, it influences the interpretation of archaeological burial data. The individual in the grave could be an idealized reflection of life.

Questions about the flow of artifactual material in graves lead to more general ones about the status and function of artifacts in each part of the burial. It also demonstrates a way of approaching death of prehistoric societies by looking into a two-sided field of interpretation. Four things must be done to allow these questions to be answered:

1. the function of equipment in the wider society, and the flow of artifacts to graves must be examined,
2. the position and relationship of artifacts with burial structures must be more precisely recorded, examined and interpreted,
3. the equipment in graves in relation to biological and social attributes of the individual in lists 2-4 must be examined, the biological attributes being best based on results from human osteological analysis to prevent a circling argumentation,
4. written sources which can throw light upon the relationship between life and death in early societies, and especially the *rites de passage*, either the account of the societies on themselves or classic reports on prehistoric societies must be examined.

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A comprehensive study of the Kvasheim cemetery is forthcoming in *Arkeologisk museum i Stavanger, Skrifter.* Strandgravfeltene på Jæren, b 1 og 2. Kvasheim-gravfeltet. Død og Grav. The last few paragraphs of this paper have been adjusted to incorporate some conclusions developed here.