BEYOND URNFIELDS

New Perspectives on Late Bronze Age – Early Iron Age Funerary Practices in Northwest Europe

Edited by
Helene Agerskov Rose, Lisbeth Christensen
and Arjan Louwen

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Beyond urnfields – an introduction

Helene Agerskov Rose, Arjan Louwen and Lisbeth Christensen

Our cultural landscape contains traces of our past, some more visible than others, but they all tell stories of past human lives and experiences. Though widely distributed across the European continent, the urnfields of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age are among the more unassuming physical legacies of the late prehistoric landscape (Fig. 1). The urnfield graves contain the remains of women, men and children from a period when cremation was the dominant funerary practice, leaving behind a very fragmented archaeological record. Coupled with a general lack of conspicuous burial goods this has left the funerary phenomenon somewhat underappreciated. Recent advances in archaeological theory, excavation methods and scientific methods are however making it increasingly clear how much there is still to gain from this inconspicuous funerary phenomenon.



Fig. 1. A lonely sheep grazing on top of an urnfield barrow at Birkelev Plantage, southern Jutland (photo: L. Christensen).

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The urnfield funerary phenomenon has a long research history in Schleswig-Holstein and Denmark (see Abegg-Wigg; Rose/Poulsen, this volume). It was clear from the beginning that the small and anonymous urnfield graves were part of the same phenomenon, but for mainly political reasons, research into these remained largely nationally focussed. The URNFIELD network project was established specifically to remedy this national divide and shed light on the similarities and differences of the urnfield funerary practices in the German-Danish border region. The urnfields are part of a larger European phenomenon and the project invited archaeologists and researchers from northwestern Europe to present and discuss what forms the urnfield funerary phenomenon took in their specific region. This edited volume is the result of these discussions and will hopefully form the foundation for future research into the urnfield phenomenon. The discussions considered the archaeological material, the research history and provided an understanding of the nuances contained within the funerary practices. The chronological frameworks differ across the study area and readers are referred to references within the respective chapters or recent overviews presented by Louwen (2021, fig. 3.9) and Sørensen/Rebay-Salisbury (2023, fig. 4.1).

A spectrum of terms is used for the wide variety of cremation graves presented in this volume, each in accordance with the respective research traditions. One re-occurring topic of discussion during the preparation of this volume was the term 'urnfield': What funerary practices and grave forms are included by this term and perhaps more importantly, what are not? In the present context the term only refers to a funerary phenomenon, without any chronological or cultural connotations (for a discussion of the research history of the 'urnfield' term we refer to Sørensen/Rebay 2008). Regardless, 'urnfield' remains an ambiguous term and we recommend that future studies consider the applicability of the so-called 'urnfield package' recently presented by Cavazzutti et al. (2022). They list a series of essential and selective traits related to the funerary ritual but recognise that adoption of the urnfield package is a dynamic and selective process at the local level, resulting in the adoption of some traits but exclusion of others. The essential criteria include the use of a container for the cremated remains, placement of the container in a pit, frequent reduction/exclusion of grave goods (particularly weapons) and a general tendency for the cemeteries to be largely representative of the once living population. Most of the wide variety of cremation graves presented in the present volume can be defined as urnfields following these criteria, but without a further set of criteria the definition is too broad to be very useful. The optional criteria include washing/selective collection of cremated remains from the funeral pyre, depositing the cremated remains in 'anatomical order' within the container and the presence of distinct burial groups at the cemeteries. These criteria are all discussed in this volume, but the criteria fail to recognise the distinct sub-categories of burials. We propose features relating to burial architecture, e.g. stone settings, stone circles, stone pavements, earthen mounds and circular ditches might be more useful for the purpose of identifying the distribution of specific funerary traditions and the possible meaning of these.

The urnfield funerary phenomenon

Reoccurring themes in this volume are specific elements of the funerary rites and possible interpretations hereof. One example is the circular ditches around the small barrows that occur in southern Denmark and occasionally in northern Germany and the Netherlands (see chapters in this volume: Abegg-Wigg; Arnoldussen/De Vries; Christensen; Dollar et al.; Frandsen; Louwen; Lütjens; Qvistgaard/Grundvad; Rose/Poulsen; Schaefer-Di Maida/Kneisel). The circular ditches can have several interruptions or entrances to the mound and the number of these are chronologically dependent – with the earliest graves having none and the later graves having more. Frandsen (this volume) proposes that the circular ditches on the one hand carry a magic and symbolic quality,

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forming a physical manifestation of the boundary between life and death, but on the other hand also carry a practical quality as grave markers. Domscheit (this volume) interprets above-ground grave markers such as circular ditches, stone pavings, stone circles and barrows etc. as mnemonic devices that help preserve collective memory over centuries, ensuring that the additions of later graves did not unintentionally destroy earlier monuments, but also retaining the clustering of graves into burial groups and sub-burial communities. Cultural or collective memory evidently played a vital role in the continued importance of specific burial sites over extended periods of time, as observed at Mang de Bargen that were used for approximately two millennia (Schaefer-Di Maida/Kneisel, this volume), or in the frequent re-use of ancient monuments as nuclei for new Iron Age burial sites (Schumann, this volume).

Several chapters demonstrate more complex funerary rites than previously anticipated and how commemoration of the dead can take many forms. Accessory vessels belong to a frequent find category in urnfield graves, and Arnoldussen/De Vries (this volume) suggest besides being personal belongings of the deceased they might be drinking cups used in rites of farewell or commemoration by the mourners. Exhuming graves might be interpreted as a more radical form of commemoration, or perhaps with the opposing purpose of deleting memories of a deceased. Qvistgaard/Grundvad (this volume) discuss possible explanations of such exhumation activities, including the positioning of *pars pro toto* offerings in the urns (e.g. pottery sherds, fragments of human remains and white stones), and suggest they might be linked to the recovery and curation of ancestor bones. The inclusion of possible ancestor bones in urn graves is demonstrated by Snoeck et al. (this volume) using recent advances in strontium isotope analysis and radiocarbon dating of cremated bone, underlining the multifaceted and complex urnfield funerary rites.

A European phenomenon with local roots?

The gradual transition from inhumation to cremation unfolding across the European continent during the Bronze Age (Harding 2000; Sørensen/Rebay-Salisbury 2023) remains a complex process to grasp archaeologically. This 'other' way of dealing with a dead body did not replace the practice of inhumation overnight and must have involved intense and constant (re)negotiations of local values and convictions (Sørensen/Rebay-Salisbury 2023), eventually resulting in the cemeteries we came to know as urnfields. However, in the past the discourse of how the 'urnfield package' spread across the continent almost literally placed our study area at the fringes of the phenomenon, pointing at central Europe as the place of origin (see historiography in Sørensen/Rebay-Salisbury 2023, 23–28), or even as far as the Mediterranean (Childe 1930; 1950; Kimmig 1964). Resemblances between cremation graves across the continent are striking, but as will appear from the various contributions to this volume, the urnfield phenomenon can only really be understood from a local perspective.

This point is evidenced by research carried out by Snoeck et al. (this volume). They extracted strontium isotopes from cremated remains from several early urnfields in Belgium, and the results indicate the buried individuals were local to the area. Though the 'missionary perspective' proposed by Childe (1930) has long since been abandoned, these new techniques finally reject this hypothesis scientifically. The same point can be observed in the contribution by Pankau (this volume), who investigates the widespread distribution of ceremonial wagon elements (bronzes) across Europe. Though the earliest examples are found in the Carpathian basin and southern central Europe where they feature in lavish elite graves, the more marginal finds from northern Europe are likely imports incorporated in hoards or indirectly evidenced in the form of rock art. These latter observations might on the one hand indicate how foreign and exotic objects were incorporated in local practices (cf. Fontijn/Fokkens 2007) but can on the other hand also indicate how certain local styles were being incorporated in practices that are shared over vast areas, as illustrated by the contributions of Lütjens,

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Klooss and Brandt (all this volume). Another perspective on the importance of local traditions and certain practices associated with urnfields stems from the contribution of Dzięgielewski (this volume). He points at the role transhumance might have played to local communities inhabiting Pomerania and how urnfields would have effectuated a sense of permanence in the landscape. This latter observation is not only relevant as it emphasises how different the motivations behind the widely shared urnfield funerary practices might have been, but also by introducing the form of land(scape) itself as an important and decisive factor.

Ancestral landscapes

For obvious reasons, urnfields cannot simply be studied as an isolated phenomenon if we want to understand the role of these cemeteries in the broader social and cultural landscape. Linking urnfields to contemporary settlements possibly used by the same populations (Dollar et al. this volume; Van Beek/Louwen 2012; 2013) and reconstructing the paleoenvironmental landscape of the urnfields (Ślusarska, this volume) are essential tools to this end. The urnfields were also linked to the past as testified by their proximity to other funerary monuments present in the landscape for centuries already (Louwen; Schumann; Ślusarska; Schaefer-Di Maida/Kneisel; Rose/Poulsen; Christensen, this volume). These practices not only show the awareness of the people that inhabited the land(scape) even long before them, but also indicate the active roles attributed to the (ancient) dead in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (Louwen 2021; this volume). The apparent importance of ancestors in socially binding these communities to the local landscape again emphasises that the emergence of urnfields in northwest Europe cannot be understood without considering the local traditions of these communities.

Beyond urnfields

We hope to remove the urnfields of northwest Europe from their previous obscurity and demonstrate their potential for unravelling the social fabric of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age landscape in this part of the continent. The volume title 'Beyond Urnfields' was chosen to spark a discussion of what the 'urnfield' term exactly entails and whether it is still a viable construct in the study of Late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age funerary practices (cf. Sørensen/Rebay 2008). As the various contributions in this volume show, the 'urnfield package' (Cavazzutti et al. 2022) varies greatly in northwest Europe during the Late Bronze Age-Early Iron Age. We question the usefulness of viewing cremation grave cemeteries across Europe through the same cultural lens and instead start contextualising the funerary phenomenon *beyond urnfields*.

Although time has been hard on the small monuments dotting the northwest European landscape it is now possible to re-examine and ask new research questions of material from old excavations by applying new scientific methods, as demonstrated by Snoeck et al. (this volume) through the application of strontium isotope analysis and by improving existing methodologies in for example osteology. Recent advances in radiocarbon dating of cremated bone are also making it possible to test and revise chronological frameworks which have historically been based on typo-chronological studies of urnfield artefact assemblages (e.g. De Mulder et al. 2014; Rose/Meadows in review).

As editors, we are grateful to all the contributors to the volume and to everyone that took part in the productive scientific discussions at EAA 2021 and the URNFIELD symposium. We send special thanks to our colleagues at Landesmuseen Schleswig-Holstein, Zentrum für Baltische und Skandinavische Archäologie and Museum Sønderjylland: Without your support this volume would not have been possible.

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Helene Agerskov Rose
University of Gothenburg
Department of Historical Studies
Gothenburg
Sweden
helene.agerskov.rose@gu.se

Lisbeth Christensen
Museum Sønderjylland, Arkæologi Haderslev
Haderslev
Danmark
lich@msj.dk

Arjan Louwen
Leiden University
Faculty of Archaeology
Leiden
The Netherlands
a.j.louwen@arch.leidenuniv.nl

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This volume presents the results of an international network project on Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age urnfields from northwest Europe.
Individual chapters present the archaeological material and its research history within a local, regional, or supra-regional context, demonstrating the wide range of nuances contained by the funerary phenomenon. The volume provides the first comprehensive overview of the urnfield funerary phenomenon in northwest Europe and forms the foundation for future research across national and disciplinary boundaries.
This volume successfully demonstrates that the inconspicuous urnfields of northwest Europe are not as anonymous as previously assumed but hold valuable information about life and death in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age.

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