Cremation, Corpses and Cannibalism

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Comparative Cosmologies and Centuries of Cosmic Consumption

By

Anders Kaliff and Terje Oestigaard

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The idea behind this book was to develop interpretative approaches that we previously put forward and make a more coherent theoretical and narrative analysis based on selected archaeological cases studies, primarily from Scandinavian Bronze and Iron Age sites. The analysis is partly based on material from our earlier work, which we have synthesized and reanalysed within a broader and more coherent context with the aim of identifying new approaches and providing research directions for the future. Moreover, many new archaeological contexts have been added, in particular new empirical finds. Besides returning to some of the classical sites in Bronze Age Scandinavia, we have incorporated the results of several large archaeological excavations that were carried out at important ritual sites over recent years and that have subsequently been described in published books. In particular, this applies to two of Sweden's largest and best-documented ritual sites from the Bronze Age and early Iron Age: Nibble in Tillinge parish, excavated in 2007, and Skeke in Rasbo parish, both in the province of Uppland.

We have both extensively studied cremation rituals and cosmologies in prehistoric Scandinavia and other cultural contexts, past and present. Our perspectives on these topics are similar, though also divergent on certain points. However, constant dialogue during the writing process has allowed us to challenge our ideas and helped us to frame new approaches. In addition, we drew valuable inspiration from continuous discussions with colleagues on the interpretation of cremation as different types of sacrifice, which in recent years has become an increasingly vibrant area for archaeological studies. We have therefore attempted to synthesize various old and new approaches and highlight avenues for future cremation studies in one book. Although this a challenging task, we hope to have made a modest contribution.

Obviously, we are solely responsible for any errors and for the interpretations we put forward in this book, knowing that the theme is not necessarily to everyone's taste. Given that both the geographical area and time depth are vast and the comparative material is huge, we have tried to minimize the number of references as the literature is almost unlimited. We have, however, made an effort to include the most relevant studies in

this analysis. With regards to illustrations, all the photos are taken by the authors unless otherwise stated.

We would like to express special thanks to a number of people who have helped and inspired us over the years: Joakim Goldhahn and Terje Gansum, both of whom have been stimulating conversation partners on the topic of cremation and cosmologies; Magnus Artursson, Niklas Björck and Fredrik Larsson, who invited us as discussants on two major recent archaeological excavations, Skeke and Björkgärdet in Rasbo parish in Uppland. We drew important inspiration for new interpretations from these sites. We would also like to thank Gunnel Ekroth, who invited us to participate in the archaeological experiment with cremations undertaken in Gamla Uppsala in 2013 and 2014, which we also used as a source of inspiration for some sections of the book. Finally, we would like to thank Francesca de Châtel for commenting upon the language.

Anders Kaliff & Terje Oestigaard
Uppsala, 20 February 2017

CHAPTER ONE

LIKE AND UNLIKE

Consuming human flesh

Cannibalism is much discussed and reviled, but it is also a misunderstood practice. For instance, in *Savage Africa* (1864) Winwood Reade wrote – probably with a twist of irony: "A cannibal is not necessarily ferocious. He eats his fellow-creatures, not because he hates them, but because he likes them."[1] Today, it is generally agreed that "proper" cannibalism does not exist – and never has. William Arens in his influential book, *The Man-Eating Myth. Anthropology & Anthropophagy* (1979), says: "I am dubious about the actual existence of this act as an accepted practice for any time or place. Recourse to cannibalism under survival conditions or as a rare instance of anti-social behaviour is not denied for any culture. But whenever it occurs this is considered a regrettable act rather than custom."[2] After scrutinizing a vast array of sources, Arens concludes that apart from madmen and extreme circumstances, "the people in question are *not* cannibals". He adds: "This conclusion is based on the fact, excluding survival documentation, I have been unable to uncover adequate documentation of cannibalism as a custom in any form for any society."[3] In his *Cannibal Talk. The Man-Eating Myth and Human Sacrifice in the South Seas*, Gananath Obeyesekere (2005) also argues that, apart from sporadic evidences of ritual cannibalism in some specific cultural contexts worldwide, man-eating is a myth. Myths about cannibalism are, however, found in many places, and they are powerful constructions of the Other. Moreover, as numerous studies have shown, cannibal talks were largely a Western construct of the others, Africans included, although similar perceptions are also prevalent in African witchcraft discourses today.[4]

Hence, many researchers and archaeologists refrain from analysing and acknowledging cannibalism as an actual ritual practice apart from narrative mythologies and derogatory designations of others. As historic and contemporary evidence for different types of cannibalism are at best

scant and dubious, identifying such practices in prehistory, where the evidences are even more scant and difficult to interpret, may seem like an arduous and futile task.

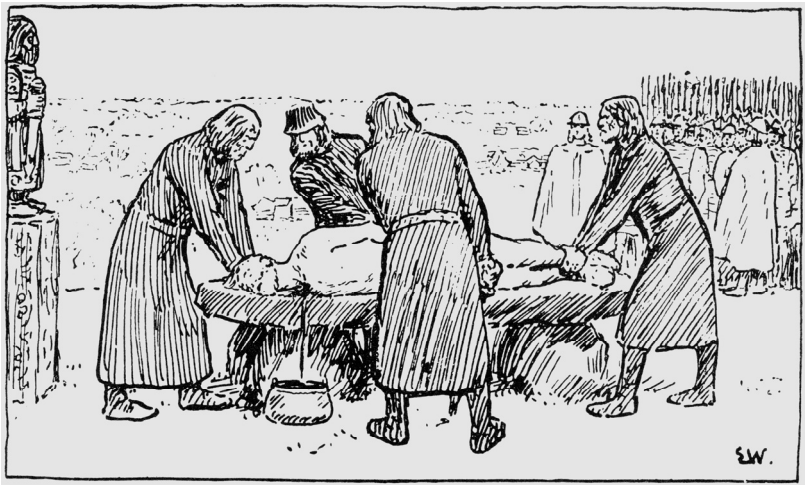

Fig. 1.1. The sacrifice of King Domalde at Old Uppsala where the throat is slit open and the blood collected in a cauldron. Source: Snorre (1995:25).

Archaeology does, however, have one advantage: the bone material of dead people. If such rituals have been conducted in the contemporary era – and we will discuss a number of possible cases – they would most likely have been performed in utmost secrecy, and it would be difficult to verify the stories of anyone claiming to have consumed human flesh. Whether true or not, it would be part of mythmaking, and in most traditional cultures, such myths have flourished. Archaeologically, however, bone remains may in some cases tell different stories, and there is no doubt that cremated remains in particular show traces of ritual practices that have no parallels in written or contemporary history. As Obeyesekere comments: "I can also accept what is sometimes called 'ritual anthropophagy' or 'ritual cannibalism', though I retranslate this phenomenon as one associated with a widely dispersed and variable institution shared by both savagism and civilization, namely, human sacrifice."[5] Thus, the type of cannibalism we are discussing is closely related to and in many cases identical to human sacrifices at both individual, societal and cosmic levels (Fig. 1.1). But in the past, there were probably also bodily preparations of people who died naturally and were not killed as part of a human sacrifice.

Given that archaeological interpretations are based on material remains, we must immediately point out that it is impossible to say anything conclusive and absolute about the actual consumption of human flesh in the past, as such hard evidence would require one to observe people physically devouring the dead, and time machines do not exist. Still, there are records of ritual practices in which both the bones and the flesh were used for various purposes, which strongly suggests consumption in one way or another. Methodologically, we will therefore also put forward alternative hypotheses when the archaeological material enables interpretations of different forms of cannibalism.

Although Arens has been criticised for being more a sensation-hungry journalist than an exact historian,[6] his analytical frameworks of cannibalism are useful as a point of departure. Arens discusses the most commonly used taxonomy of cannibalism, since there are different forms of using and consuming human flesh. First, there is *endo-cannibalism*, referring to eating a member of one's own group. Second, there is *exo-cannibalism*, where outsiders are consumed, and third, *auto-cannibalism*, which involves consuming parts of one's own body. In the latter case, if the individual is forced to eat his own flesh, he becomes a cannibal and a victim at the same time. But there may also be voluntary instances of such practices, as well as many "borderline" cases. Blood and other body fluids are matters within an overall body consumption practice, although they transcend the mere focus on human flesh and "classical cannibalism". Arens also presents a classification based on the motives of cannibalism. First, there is what has been called "gastronomic cannibalism", where human flesh is eaten for its taste and nutritional value. Second, there is ritual cannibalism where the consumption of human flesh is believed to transfer and mediate the spiritual essence of the deceased, and, finally, there is survival cannibalism.[7]

Based on these typologies, one may delimit, specify but also extend the notion of cannibalism to different spheres. In the popular media and mind, the typical cannibal belongs to the least likely category, namely "gastronomic cannibalism". The prototype of this cannibal lends itself perfectly to horror movies and, more importantly, to mythmaking of the Others. But as all studies have shown, this type of cannibalism has never existed, which will be elaborated below. Human flesh, particularly from corpses, is a substance unlike anything other, which certainly does not satisfy human dietary needs or provide the necessary calories. Survival cannibalism has existed and will continue to do so in extreme cases, but it is an absolute deviation from social and cultural norms and takes place only when the alternative is one's own death. Thus, while scholars like

Arens and Obeyesekere have largely dismissed cannibalism as a phenomenon, they do acknowledge that ritual cannibalism has taken place, and, as Obeyesekere points out, it is often a form of human sacrifice. This is an important observation that helps to demarcate the field of cannibalism: firstly, it is not about lunatics or survival and, secondly, "gastronomic cannibalism" has never existed (Figs 1.2 & 1.3).

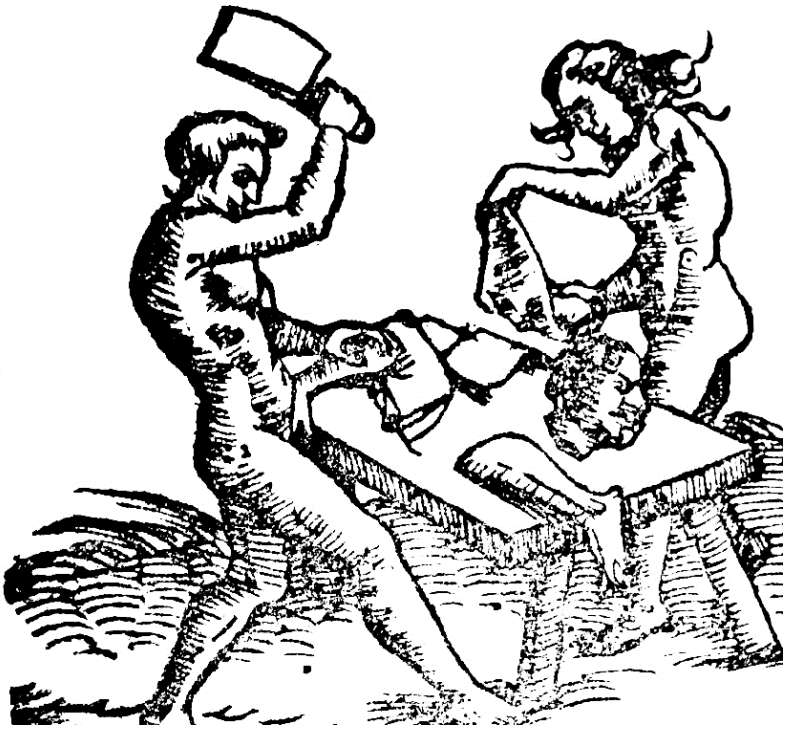

Fig. 1.2. Perception of cannibals at work. Woodcut from Basel, 1554. From Wikimedia Commons.

One may argue that ritual cannibalism is the only proper form of cannibalism, because if and when such acts of consumption take place – and although in most cases fellow believers and commoners consider them to be disgusting deviations from social norms and a violation of the worst taboos – they lie at the epicentre of the culture and cosmology in question.

There are a number of reasons why we will only focus on ritual cannibalism. As indicated, this form of cannibalism may be the only

proper form of cannibalism, and indeed, apart from survival cannibalism and lunatics, the only form of cannibalism that has ever existed. The ritual practices we will discuss are exclusive and limited; not everyone is in a cosmological position to consume human flesh. The centrality of the power of flesh when incorporated into one's own body points to the spiritual and divine powers imbued in the flesh.

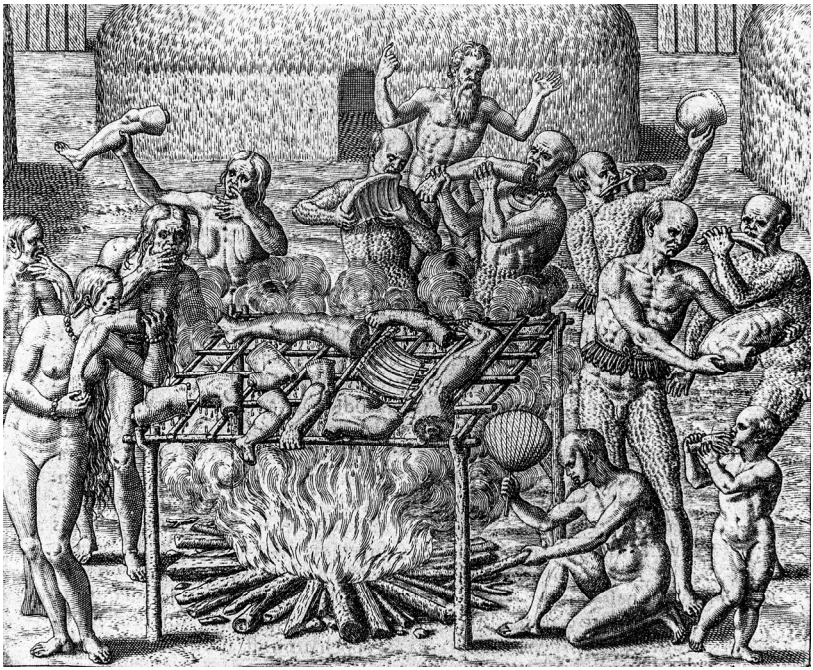

Fig. 1.3. Perception of cannibalism in Brazil in 1557. Gravure de Théodore de Bry, 1562. Private collection in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. From Wikimedia Commons.

As with all divine engagements, only a very select group within the community are granted access to these powers. In all known cultures, there are grave taboos on the consumption of human flesh. It is seen as an absolute line that should never be crossed, except in specific circumstances and by people entitled to this transgression. The cases we will discuss are extreme and exceptional, but the exceptional may teach one a lot about a culture and about everyday life therein. The reversion or inversion of social life defines social structures; normality is often constituted and legitimated by ritually abnormal behavior.[8] The

ethnographic, historic and archaeological cases that will be discussed reveal the cosmic centrality of the actors, whether they are of high or low status, whether they are the elite or stand on the margins of a culture.

With regards to the question of who is eaten – or, rather, consumed, as in all cases only very small quantities of flesh are involved – one can identify empirical examples of both endo-cannibalism, exo-cannibalism and auto-cannibalism. Endo-cannibalism – consumption of members of one's own group – appears to be the most common form, though there are also examples of exo-cannibalism and, in very rare cases, auto-cannibalism. Given that we will combine ethnographic examples with archaeological studies, it will generally be difficult to distinguish between endo- and exo-cannibalism since it is impossible to make any conclusive statements with regards to prehistoric practices.

Robert Hertz has argued that endo-cannibalism takes place among the various practices observed in order to lay bare the bones in the intermediary period between death and the final funeral rites.[9] If descendants consume the deceased as part of that ritual, one would expect that the majority of the small minority that such rituals represent would be a type of endo-cannibalism. With a focus on cremation as a means of preparing the dead, as will be discussed later, in many cases it seems that the defleshing is a preliminary part of larger rituals in which the use of the bones is the main objective. In such cases, the ritual handling of the flesh of the deceased may not be a type of cannibalism, but a ritual purification ensuring that the powers of the bones are available for use in other contexts.

Moreover, in many archaeological contexts there are multiple human remains, some of which have clearly been sacrificed, in which case the funeral rituals transcend the individual deceased. Sacrificed humans may be from within or beyond the group of relatives. Hence if the sacrificed are externals and part of a ritual meal for instance, this would be a type of exo-cannibalism.

One may also distinguish between human sacrifices and the consumption of those already deceased from natural causes, like family members who are consumed by their descendants as part of the funerals. Incorporating the naturally deceased and kinsmen – in very small portions and quanta – is in most cases distinctly different than sacrificing humans for specific purposes, and then consuming their powers. Human sacrifices complicate the picture, but also direct attention to the gods and divinities for whom the sacrifice is conducted. By definition, a human sacrifice includes the divine realms; otherwise it would be mere manslaughter. Moreover, it also involves and represents the community at large; human

sacrifices are generally not conducted on an individual basis, but on behalf of society, often represented by the chief or the king.

Humans sacrificed and offered to divinities represent a challenge when it comes to terminology. In many cases they are presented as consumed and devoured by the divinities, and the mythologies are rich in stories about divine consumption of humans, changing flows of life forces and how humans become semi-gods or spirits. Analytically, this "divine devouring" is a form of cannibalism, and perhaps a term like "cosmic cannibalism" may better capture the processes at work. There are also numerous stories of humans sacrificed to, for instance, mighty river spirits, where the blood of the victim is given directly to the flowing waters for the divinity to taste. Although healers are believed to be involved and conduct the sacrifices, this "dining and divining" represents a particular form of human sacrifice and is clearly a borderline case in a discussion about when the word cannibalism is appropriate, although it is believed that the gods devour the blood.[10] In short, is cannibalism only human consumption of human flesh, or does it include human consumption of divine bodily substances as well as divine consumption of both human and divine matters?

If one takes divine ontology seriously – the belief that gods and divinities exist and that they are also thirsty and hungry for human blood and flesh – this type of cosmic cannibalism can help explain why humans have been sacrificed to gods and divinities. While it may be a provocative example, the divine qualities of spirituality embodied in the flesh may work the other way as well. The Eucharist may serve as an example. Jesus was sacrificed on behalf of humanity, and during the communion believers may erase their sins because of the spiritual powers immanent in the bread and wine. The difference in Catholic and Protestant interpretation of the relationship between the substances working on their own or alongside the Word is not relevant here, but this Christian practice may point to structural premises for understanding ritual cannibalism as a phenomenon.

Good Christians are probably repulsed and offended by the very idea of relating "cannibalism" to the most venerated rite in Christianity, but it illustrates several points. It clearly shows that the idea of "cannibalism" is exclusively restricted to the Others, whoever they are, and that those consuming human or divine flesh do not see themselves as cannibals. Nobody performing such a ritual will label themselves cannibals, precisely because this represents the most supreme veneration and engagement with divine substances and embodiments of power. Moreover, it testifies to the fact that cannibalism as a phenomenon is difficult to dissociate from the stereotypes of the lunatic "gastronomic cannibal". Also, it shows the

extreme taboos of consuming human flesh: it transgresses all norms and customs. Finally, while the consumption of divinities – by humans or gods – represents one of the most defining forms of ritual cannibalism, it is to a large extent excluded from the discourse on cannibalism despite the fact that it is the most "common" type. Thus, importantly, while we will discuss cannibalism as a ritual practice, this does not imply that all prehistoric people were cannibals, and certainly they do not correspond to the popular stereotype. The centrality of the powers of human or divine flesh from a religious perspective, or the divine essence of the Eucharist for instance, is namely that it is not only more than mere flesh, but it is always invested with cosmic powers in one way or another.

The Eucharist may also be used as an example to illustrate other processes at work: the essence of holiness. Symbolic or not, it only involves a small sip of the blood (wine) and a small piece of the body (bread). If it is holy, it works – in a similar vein as using holy water from the River Ganges; a single drop is enough. In Christianity, the Eucharist is not more effective if one drinks the whole bottle of wine and eats a whole loaf: small portions work. This is similar with most forms of ritual cannibalism and stands in stark contrast to the image of the "gastronomic cannibal" feeding on humans. A small piece is more than enough, and as will be shown, even a tiny portion of cremated ashes may be enough to transfer the powers of the deceased. In short, we are not talking about quantities, but qualities, which leads us to human flesh and its imbued and embodied qualities.

From another perspective, devouring divine flesh or substances may not qualify as "cannibalism", as Obeyesekere points out. One may reject the simplistic view of the Eucharist as a form of cannibalism, on the grounds that there are multiple forms of the Eucharist and that God has to become a human before being sacrificed and consumed.[11] Moreover, labelling a highly venerated rite in equally highly derogatory terms is perhaps ethically dubious, but then how should we define related practices in other cultures and religions where cosmic consumption takes place? Divine substances differ fundamentally from human substances, but ritual consumption puts the emphasis on the qualities of the flesh. Hence, ritual cannibalism as a phenomenon in whatever form always represents a borderline case, since it is a specific from of divine interaction and the flesh or the bodily substances are not merely human in essence.

Corpses and human flesh

Human flesh is not like any other flesh or meat for obvious reasons. Consuming this flesh is a transgression of common norms because the body was a human being. Moreover, human flesh is seen as pure only in highly exceptional cases; as a rule, it is considered impure. The most polluting and disgusting form of any flesh is the decaying corpse. Thus, there is an inherent paradox in cannibalism. On the one hand, in most cultures, the flesh of a corpse is the most polluted and impure substance imaginable, which justifies the need for elaborate cleansing rituals that may take years or never end (Fig. 1.4). On the other hand, it may also be the most precious and divinely embodied substance or religious engagement, not only transgressing other social taboos and boundaries, but also defining them by being at the centre of cosmic constitution and regeneration. Human flesh has an ambivalent character that defines both what a human is and is not. Starting with the living body, the world and our existence are always structured around the body, and all perceptions of spatiality and temporality are anchored in the body.[12]

Fig. 1.4. Decaying corpse at Nire Ghat, Western Nepal.

"The flesh… is the coherent ensemble of my powers and non-powers. Around this system of carnal possibilities the world unfolds itself as a set

of rebellious or docile potential utensils, a set of permissions and obstacles."[13] Descartes described flesh as the "third substance", a medium bridging the gap between space and thought. Descartes is known for articulating the Western dichotomy of mind and matter, but this can be challenged, even in Western traditions. Lakoff and Johnson argue for a philosophy in the flesh because reason is not disembodied following the Cartesian tradition. As a consequence, the dualistic Cartesian person, in whom mind and matter are separate entities, does not exist. The mind is inherently embodied, and, as a result, reason is shaped by the body, but in very specific ways.[14] This directs the attention to the body or flesh of corpses – dead people. At the outset there are at least two characteristics regarding conceptions of corpses.

Firstly, a corpse will soon start to rot and the flesh will deteriorate. In all cultures irrespective of religion, rotten corpses are seen as unclean. Apart from the mere physical and practical aspects of rotting corpses, corpses are not like other organic rotting material; it has been a human, a loved one, a relative or a respected member of society. A being that was precious has become foul matter; not only socially dangerous, but also contaminated from a biological point of view.

The idea that purity indicates completeness and impurity incompleteness[15] is particularly apt when it comes to corpses and conceptions of humans and humanity. As Turner says: "[T]hey are at once no longer classified and not yet classified."[16] That which is unclear in a society is unclean. Transitional persons are particularly polluting and such transitions are controlled by concepts of pollution and taboo.[17] The decaying flesh of a corpse is highly polluting and can affect descendants over a period of days, years or even for the rest of their life. In the transitional period before the funeral is concluded, the materiality of the flesh of the deceased is the most dangerous and polluted materiality in existence. Usually only a select few in the successor generation can take care of this polluted and embodied matter, in practice often one of the sons or a ritual specialist. The flesh of corpses is heavily imbued with culture and cosmology, not only for the descendants and the relatives, but also, importantly for the deceased him/herself who is preparing for a next life in otherworldly spheres.

Secondly, while the flesh of dead bodies soon starts to rot and attains highly ambivalent and polluting qualities, it may maintain the overall cosmic qualities acquired over the person's lifetime, directly affecting his/her future destiny in the afterworld or in other incarnations. Although it is difficult to fully understand how such conceptions were conceived in prehistory, examples from Hinduism and Christianity with long historic

and archaeological trajectories may give ideas of the role and perceptions of the flesh in culture and cosmology: *sin* is embodied in the flesh. In most world religions, it is the body which is sinful – sins are embodied – and bodies are what separate the souls from eternal and divine realms.

In Zoroastrianism in prehistoric Iran, existence was dualistic, divided into good/pure and evil/impure. The body was considered impure by nature, and this applied especially to a dead body, which was not allowed to defile either fire or earth. Neither cremation nor inhumation were practised. The body was instead supposed to be consumed by vultures and beasts of prey. Funeral rituals in Zoroastrianism were intended to dispose of the corpse in such a way that the living were not harmed by its impurity, and to ease the passage of the soul from this world to the next.[18] The Zoroastrian tradition gradually developed into a refined mortuary method which culminated in the construction of a special type of building usually referred to as "the tower of silence". On a platform in the tower, the body was eaten by birds and the remains were left to dry (Fig. 1.5). The bones were thrown into the interior of the tower, where slaked lime completed the disintegration of the bones to powder, which rainwater carried through a cleansing filter of sand and charcoal. After this process, the impurity of the body was considered to have been removed and the soul was liberated.[19]

Fig. 1.5. Inside a tower of silence, Bombay. Photo: Pay-Sergeant Wade of the Royal Scots Greys. The photo is probably taken in the 1920s.

According to Hindu beliefs, where cremation is central, the more sinful a person has been, the longer the cremation rite takes, since the time it takes to burn the body depends upon the embodied sins of the deceased. In Varanasi, a mourner commented that the pyre of a sinner could burn for at least six hours whereas a normal cremation usually took only a couple of hours.[20] As a striking example, when the chief minister of India's Bihar Province was cremated in Varanasi in 1983, the corpse hardly burnt despite the size of the pyre. Observers ascribed this to the enormous burden of sins the man had accumulated through his corrupt earnings.[21]

The extreme pollution of the corpse – rotten flesh – is a problem all cultures have faced through history. Humans have hardly ever ritually consumed rotten flesh, as it not only represents death itself, but may also kill the living. Foul matter is unfit for consumption by either humans or gods. Ritual consumption of human flesh is an extreme exception; in most cultures one does not even touch the corpse. But as Robert Hertz argued with regards to cases in which this did take place, endo-cannibalism or ritual consumption of the deceased's flesh by his relatives was a most honourable sepulchre or cosmic rite. This points to the cultural and cosmological centrality of such practices, since in most cases and under normal circumstances, it is a horrific practice that is universally abhorred and reviled. By understanding why, how and under which circumstances the most horrific becomes the most honourable, one may approach cosmologies in the making.

Funeral archaeology

This directly relates to cremation, because one obvious way to comprehend such practices is that the body and human flesh need to be pure. Preparation by fire is one of the most obvious ways to do this, directing the attention to cremation and the role of fire as not necessarily burning the flesh of the deceased, but consuming, purifying and annihilating the polluted substances of the corpses. A central argument throughout this book is that *cremation is not one, but many funeral practices that can be ritually conducted with a great variation*.[22] The preparation of the flesh and soft tissues (the defleshing and parting of the corpse for example) and the use of different temperatures, not to mention the complex and varied use of the burnt bones after cremation are some of the ways cremation rituals have been conducted.

Similarities and continuity in funerals in a given culture and time period are often taken for granted while differences and change are seen as anomalies that need to be explained. This premise is not self-evident,

however – rather the contrary. The relationship between what is similar and different in itself can highlight important religious and social structures and processes. Notions of existence, human origins and ultimate destiny are fundamental parts of what it means to be human. To seek a meaning behind the course of everyday life is something deeply human and cultural, and absence of reflection on existential issues is even difficult to imagine. Questions of human existence and origin, the meaning of life and death, and life after death, are embedded in cosmology, myths, rituals and religious teachings. Therefore one fundamental question is: why are some answers to the grand cosmic questions found in human flesh?

While reconstructing prehistoric cosmologies based on material culture is an immense and challenging task, archaeology has one advantage. In all cultures through history, the human care of the dead, or concern and fear of death, has always been fundamental, though in highly varied ways. The mere physicality of decaying corpses makes death material, leaving innumerable archaeological traces, and even with intensive use of fire, death does not disappear; it leaves new traces for us to analyse and understand. The flames digesting and dissolving the flesh of the deceased do not destroy the dead, but enable the entry to other cosmologies that unite the deceased, descendants and divinities.

Some concepts archaeologists use in the interpretation of these remains are *cosmology, religion* and *ritual.* An initial definition of the terms can be important: *Cosmology* can be defined as a comprehensive theory of the world and the universe; time, space and how they relate in this world and beyond. It represents an overall worldview of how people in a society believe that life is structured; how it originated and how the world and cosmos are linked and maintained. As such, cosmology should not be construed as a description of the world "out there" isolated from humans and their lives, but rather the opposite. It represents a network of concepts, relationships and identities where the human condition in the world are perceived as central, though intimately part of greater and divine worlds. As Barth proposes, the most fruitful way to approach cosmology is to perceive it as "as a living tradition of knowledge – not as a set of abstract ideas enshrined in collective representations".[23]

Cosmology can therefore affect and structure both religion and ideology. On the other hand, religion is also a similar and inclusive term that can be used and understood in different ways. Sometimes religion is used as a synonym for cosmology in the sense that a religious world view can define a cosmology, and there are innumerable definitions of "religion". Religion can also be understood as a narrower concept that usually includes concepts of one or several divinities, which are revered as

the creators or rulers of existence. A religion also includes rules, rituals and different traditions based on these ideas.[24]

Today, *ritual* as a concept has a prominent place in the humanities and social studies, archaeology included. This is quite a change from the position of ritual studies during much of the 20th century when there was a reluctant trend to see ritual as a fundamental part of human culture.[25] By definition, rituals can be both secular and religious in nature, or (more commonly) a mixture of both. Although the concept is basically neutral, it is often used to infer a religious element and hence to describe *religious rituals*.[26] Not only does this relate to the discussion and relation between the holy and the profane, but all religious rituals take place in wider contexts which are not holy or religious.

Studies of graves and funeral practices have played a central role in archaeology. As a matter of fact, as long as archaeology has existed as a scientific discipline, it has been concerned with death and the remains from funerals.[27] The empirical material and basis for archaeology has historically been closely associated to death and what the descendants have done with their deceased. Although other find categories have gained prominence in archaeology over the past 50 years, prehistoric peoples built huge mortuary monuments, which attracted archaeologists from the 19th century onwards.

Moreover, much of the archaeological material comes from graves, although many of these artefacts were everyday tools and objects not specifically made for death. Graves, besides sacrifices and other deposited materials, also contain deliberately abandoned remains; the objects are not accidentally lost or remains of unconscious actions or everyday life and work. These material remains were intended to be left as they had been deposited – at least for the foreseeable future as there is also evidence of graves that were intentionally reopened, not by grave robbers, but for ritual and religious purposes. Death and funerals are thus unique in archaeology; graves are like time capsules that show how people of the past closed their rituals. *They* chose to conduct a certain type of funeral and build a given monument, and they chose to complete it the way they believed was appropriate (Fig. 1.6). Although innumerable cases have been identified in which things did not go entirely to plan or even where rituals were not carried out in the proper way, graves and funerals nevertheless offer a unique entry point for the study of religious rituals and cosmologies as conducted and perceived by prehistoric people themselves.

As death, through the remains of funerals and the dead, has such a central and prominent role in archaeology, it is important for archaeologists to analyse death based on its own terms in order to get a better understanding

Fig. 1.6. Skogskyrkogården or the Woodland Cemetery, an Unesco World Heritage site in Stockholm, Sweden.

of the prehistoric peoples and their cosmologies. Moreover, we must also have a continuous discussion about the theoretical approaches we as archaeologists use when interpreting death and cosmological beliefs based on material culture. Still, while we will inevitably need to use concepts such as cosmology, religion and ritual as analytical tools in archaeological analyses of death, we will not enter into further theoretical discussions of these definitions, which are debated in depth elsewhere.[28]

On the other hand, we will open up a space for the discussion of ritual practices and possible entry points to understanding cosmologies by focusing on the archaeological material itself. In archaeology, there are generally three broad categories of material culture directly linked to the sphere of death.

First, *the preparation and modes of deposition of the corpse's flesh*. Besides the absence of life, a corpse is first and foremost characterised by decaying human flesh. All funerals must somehow address this problem. In the Norse tradition, inhumation and cremation are the two most common methods of treating dead bodies. The flesh can be buried underground to decompose naturally or the fire may digest it. There are, however, indications of other types of corpse preparations in prehistoric Scandinavia. Water burials (lowering the corpse in lakes or rivers) are an example. Human remains found in marshes and wetlands may under certain circumstances be interpreted as water burials regardless of whether the deceased was intentionally killed or died a natural death. Although air burials (whereby the corpse is laid out to be eaten by animals or destroyed by the weather) may have taken place, this is difficult to identify in the archaeological material given the nature of this type of funeral. If the myth of Odin – who hangs himself – refers to any real practice, this could represent some kind of air burial. Suspended from a tree, the corpse remains in the air until it decays or is eaten by vultures. Analyses of the temperatures to which bones were exposed during cremations suggests that the bodies of the deceased were cooked, smoked, toasted or fried.[29] We will elaborate on this later. Mummification is another classic way to deal with dead bodies whereby the flesh is ideally preserved for eternity (Fig. 1.7). Other body preparations may also have occurred, and ethnographically there are evidences that the dead have for instance been stored in jars as pickles. Thus, the descendants had a great variety of options to choose from when disposing of a corpse, but for largely unknown reasons only one of these was perceived as the most auspicious. Hence, we must stress that multiple body preparations exist at the same time within a culture and cosmology at a given time. This is an important

entry point for a deeper understanding of cosmology, since cremation never exists in isolation from other types of funerals. It also raises the question of why a particular body preparation was perceived as most appropriate in certain circumstances and relates to another absence-presence challenge in funerals.

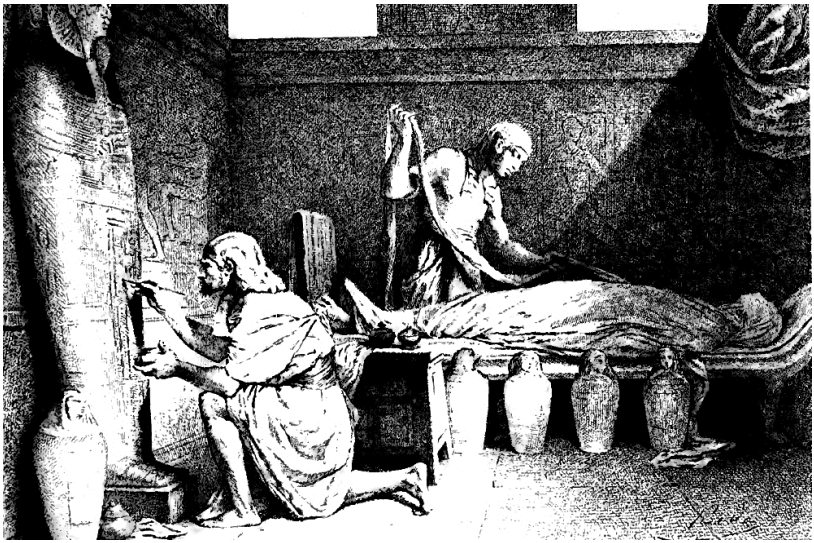

Fig. 1.7. A mummy factory in ancient Egypt. From Maspero 1903-1904. Folio after p. 118.

Second, *grave goods.* It is still not clear why there are grave goods in some graves and not in others, though there are many interpretations. One dominant approach emphasises eschatological explanations. "Grave goods" is a more neutral term, but grave gift is also commonly used. While a "gift" in the Western understanding represents a specific cultural mode of exchange, Marcel Mauss developed an elaborate gift exchange theory which Godelier extended to the divine realms.[30] From the latter perspective, the grave goods and even the dead body itself may be seen as gifts to the divinities or to the otherworld representing reciprocal but asymmetrical relationships. In any case, grave goods are often regarded as objects which the dead may need in the existence beyond the grave and this world, or as offerings to deities or to the dead man himself.[31] Another dominant tradition of interpretation is to see the objects in the graves primarily as an expression of social position and identity, a reflection of

the status and wealth of the deceased.[32] Alternatively, one may shift the emphasis from the dead to the living by arguing that death rituals were the reconstitution of society, which the recreation of the social positions of the deceased was of vital importance to the descendants. From this perspective, grave goods given to the dead in the presence of others may have changed and legitimated social structures among the living.[33] There is not necessarily any contradiction between these approaches, although they are sometimes portrayed as diametrically opposed perspectives. A single object may fulfil all these functions; it may have been integral to the status of the deceased during his lifetime, it may create new social relations among the living when deposited during the funeral, and it may be important in the afterlife for the dead. The question remains, however, that if grave goods were so important to the dead and the living (and indeed many extraordinarily rich graves have been uncovered), then why are there also monumental graves with no or hardly any grave goods?

Third, *mortuary monuments.* Interpretations regarding the absence or presence of monuments represent a similar type of challenge as rich or poor grave goods. Large mounds or cairns have often been interpreted as representing people with wealth, power and high social status. Such interpretations are obviously correct when it comes to the classic graves in prehistoric Scandinavia, including the Viking Age burial mounds of Oseberg and Gokstad (Fig. 1.8), in which whole ships and other lavish grave goods were deposited, as well Hågahögen outside Uppsala and several of the Danish Bronze Age mounds with well-preserved burials in oak coffins. However, some of the largest burial mounds, like Raknehaugen in Norway with a diameter of 90 m and a height of 15 m, contain few or no grave goods. In fact, in many cases the large mounds were apparently not built with the aim of creating a grave monument.

Although it may have related to death in broad terms, the deceased seems not to have been the prime focus.[34] On the other hand, seemingly unmarked graves without visible surface structures but with rich grave goods indicate that during certain periods high status (of the dead or the living) was not linked to major monuments.

There is huge variation in the material culture associated with death and funeral rituals.[35] The modes of disposing off the flesh of the deceased, the grave goods and the monuments are three relatively distinct though related, parameters. These three parameters in various combinations represent a highly flexible repertoire of ritual possibilities, and the challenge is how to relate and integrate them into a coherent whole that enables a better understanding of the ideas and beliefs behind these practices. To complicate the matter further, the complexity of the rituals

surrounding the deceased as a corpse (the funeral and mortuary monuments), as it is expressed in the material culture, can nevertheless only be presumed to constitute a subset of the total cultural sphere surrounding death. In many cultures and religions, death rituals do not stop with the grave; it is where they start – and continue. Therefore, it is of empirical and analytical value to distinguish between an overall and often never-ending death ritual linked to the dead, including for example ancestral cults that can be practised in various contexts and at different times, from the funeral itself. In the following chapters, we will therefore separate death rituals from funerals. The latter can primarily be defined and characterized by the three parameters or variables described above.[36]

Fig. 1.8. The excavation of the Oseberg ship. Unknown photographer. Source: The Viking Ship Museum, Oslo, Norway.

In this book we will focus on cremation not as one single type of funeral, but as many funerary practices in which fire is the transformative medium. It will become clear that cremations take place not only at funerals or as isolated events, but that they are also part of much wider and distinct death rituals in various periods of prehistoric Scandinavia. While

the burning of the flesh of the deceased is of utmost importance in the funeral as such, the use of the burnt bones in a number of different contexts after the funeral seems in many cases to have been the most important rationale for choosing cremation as opposed to other types of body depositions, like inhumation. Moreover, through their use of fire, Bronze and Iron Age cremation show clear links to other ritual spheres, such as human and animal sacrifice.[37] While cremation rituals in themselves represent a distinct and well-defined area of investigation in archaeology,[38] the interpretations of cremation as a practice need to be approached from wider and comparative perspectives to understand their uniqueness in relation to other funerary practices, as well as different eschatological and cosmological beliefs.

Cremation and cosmic flows

Cremation is not only about corpses and cannibalism, descendants and divinities, but also about consumption from another perspective, namely through the use of fire. The role and qualities of different forms of fire will be a central theme throughout the analysis. In modern crematoriums fire has a technical and destructive role in the sense that it is neutral and hardly any religious associations are connected with the flames as such. The fire does what fire does in nature; burn and annihilate, and in this case burn the flesh that would otherwise have rotted. In religious worlds, this process is imbued with meaning, and in many cases the fire and the flames have agencies that represent divinities or that serve as mediators between humans and the divine realms. The cremation fire does not merely destroy the flesh, but consumes – and transforms – it. Cross-culturally, this process is often seen as a purifying process since the flesh of decaying corpses is highly impure and polluting. The purification through annihilation and transformation links human and divinities and has enabled great mythologies of fire as a consumptive agent that directs and creates flows of cosmos.

This is where cremation also opens up new entrances to understanding cosmogony and necrophagy. As Marshall Sahlins once said: "Something like cannibalism or the Eucharist can thus become anthropologically intelligible even if it is not to everyone's taste."[39] The dead body – the corpse – is consumed by the fire on the pyre and the smoke raises the soul to the celestial spheres and becomes part of wider flows of cosmos. Thus, if the flesh is prepared and consumed, it directs other flows of cosmos back to people and society. Hence, in religious worldviews and cosmogonies in which there is an active engagement between humans and

gods, the central focus is the flow of energies and forces between and among humans, ancestors, divinities and gods. The human corpse – the truly liminal stage between life and death and the living and the dead – is such a cosmic vehicle that directs forces and through which forces are directed. Therefore, the flesh and bones of the dead are the main point of departure of this book. As cosmic rituals, the stakes involved are considerable: it determines the maintenance and continuity of cosmos and society, the links and interactions between humans and gods, and the well-being of humans and their descendants. Through a comparative archaeological, historical and ethnographic approach, the aim is therefore to shed new light on a previously little-investigated theme: cosmic consumption of the dead whether conducted by descendants and divinities.

Contexts and contents

The case studies will primarily be from two distinct areas, traditions and religions in time and space, namely Scandinavian Bronze and Iron-Age and past and present Hinduism, although other comparative examples will also be used. There are several reasons for the selection of these case studies. On the one hand, Scandinavian prehistory is the main field we have been working on and the overall aim is to shed new light on past cremation practices and hence society and cosmology in Scandinavian Bronze and Iron-Age. On the other hand, knowledge production does not take place in isolation, and all archaeological interpretations are dependent upon analogies. As we have argued previously, also based on fieldwork on the sub-Indian continent, there are some curious and striking similarities between cremations in Scandinavian prehistory and the ancient Hindu/Vedic texts. This relates to the Indo-European problem, which will not be a central theme here since it has been discussed elsewhere, but it is useful to think about comparative and contrasting examples while spinning webs of significance and broadening the horizon of understanding to interpret past cremation practices. Lastly, since there have been many misconceptions about cannibalism based on notions of "gastronomic cannibalism", examples from Hindu traditions will be presented because there still exist specific religious practices which could be labelled ritual cannibalism. These will be discussed, because they are probably most apt to illuminate the processes that take place at the structural (not cultural) level of the phenomenon we are discussing. It is not a matter of quantity but the quality of the flesh; only very small portions are consumed, most often in a symbolic form. And while it is abhorrent to fellow believers, it is not disconnected from the culture and cosmology, but at its very centre.

In summary, the premises for the following analysis are: on the one hand, a central theme is the great variation of cremations as funerals. In most cases, each cremation is different, and the structural similarities and patterns can mainly be found in the governing cosmologies describing "death myths" where each individual funeral was designed and conducted for specific purposes and reasons. From this perspective, the variation in itself can help understand ritual and religious practices, as well as the uniqueness of many of the cremations within an overall frame of consumption and cosmic flows, or transformations of powers and transgressions of social norms. On the other hand, this may include various forms of cannibalism, which we may not necessarily like, but the way in which the flesh has been handled was most likely central to the constitution of prehistoric cosmologies.

As a point of departure, we will start with a minimalist and tentative definition of a funeral "as 'at least a ritual preparation of the flesh of the deceased' whether this preparation is consumption by fire or preservation of the flesh. The differences in body preparation methods are invested with cosmological meanings, which combine and define microcosm and macrocosm."[40] A funeral includes many other ritual practices, but archaeologically the advantage of such a definition is that, on the one hand, it focuses on what can be traced in the archaeological remains, and on the other, the flesh is so highly potent and invested with meaning that what is done with the flesh also reflects central cosmological conceptions. It also leads us to cremation as a ritual practice, which is the most efficient way of solving the problem of the flesh of the deceased and the preparation of the bones. Following Obeyesekere again: "In this form bones and dried organs and sometimes the flesh of dead relatives are ground and consumed as part of the mourning complex. As 'mortuary anthrophagy', the consumption of human remains has been reported for several societies…" Importantly, "what is difficult to prove from the archaeological record is the context or motivation for the consumption of humans, a theory or interpretation, if you will, that will help us to explain or understand the data, outside of the obvious fact of the existence of anthropophagy."[41] In a modest attempt, this is what we will try to do.

It also relates to current and future trends in cremation studies. As Cerezo-Román and Williams write: "'Cremation' is a complex set of funerary procedures in which the burning of the body is but one element."[42] In their conclusion, they propose six avenues for future research in the archaeology of cremation: integrating science and theory in cremation research; cremation in theory and history; cremation as *rites de passage*; cremation as technology; cremation variability; and the