

Cremation: Transdisciplinary Perspectives

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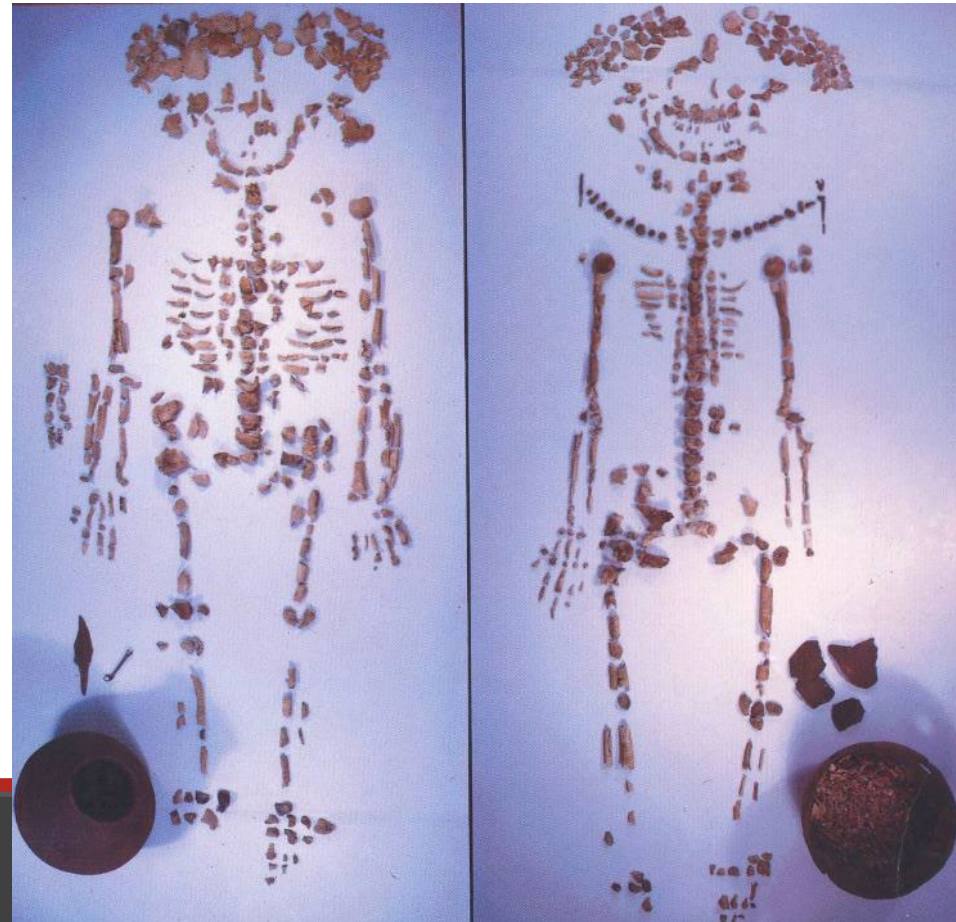
3 sections to the talk

1. Rethinking early medieval cremation practices
2. Early medieval cremation practices as public archaeology and contemporary practice
3. Early medieval cremation in contemporary popular culture

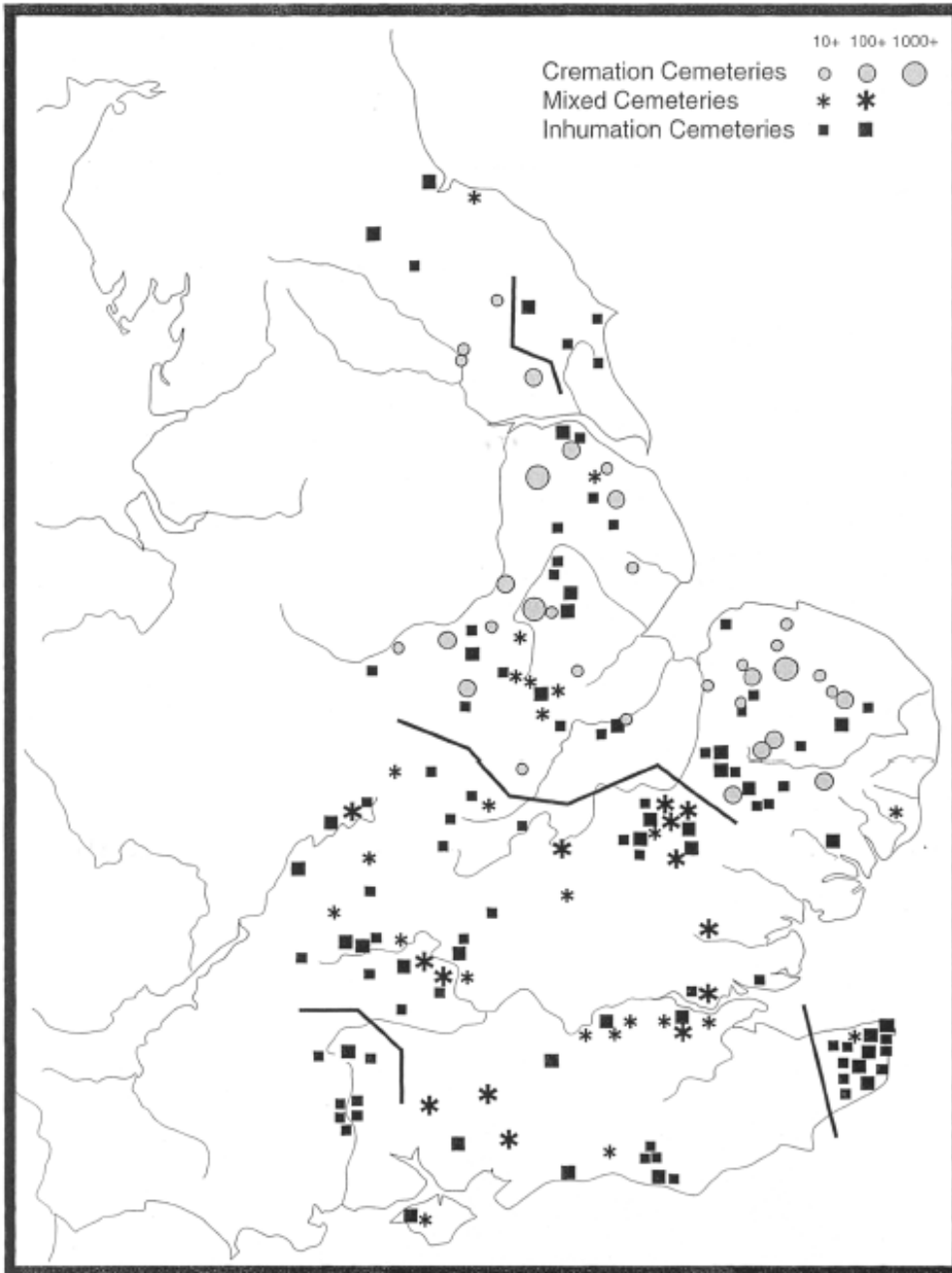
1. Rethinking early medieval cremation practices

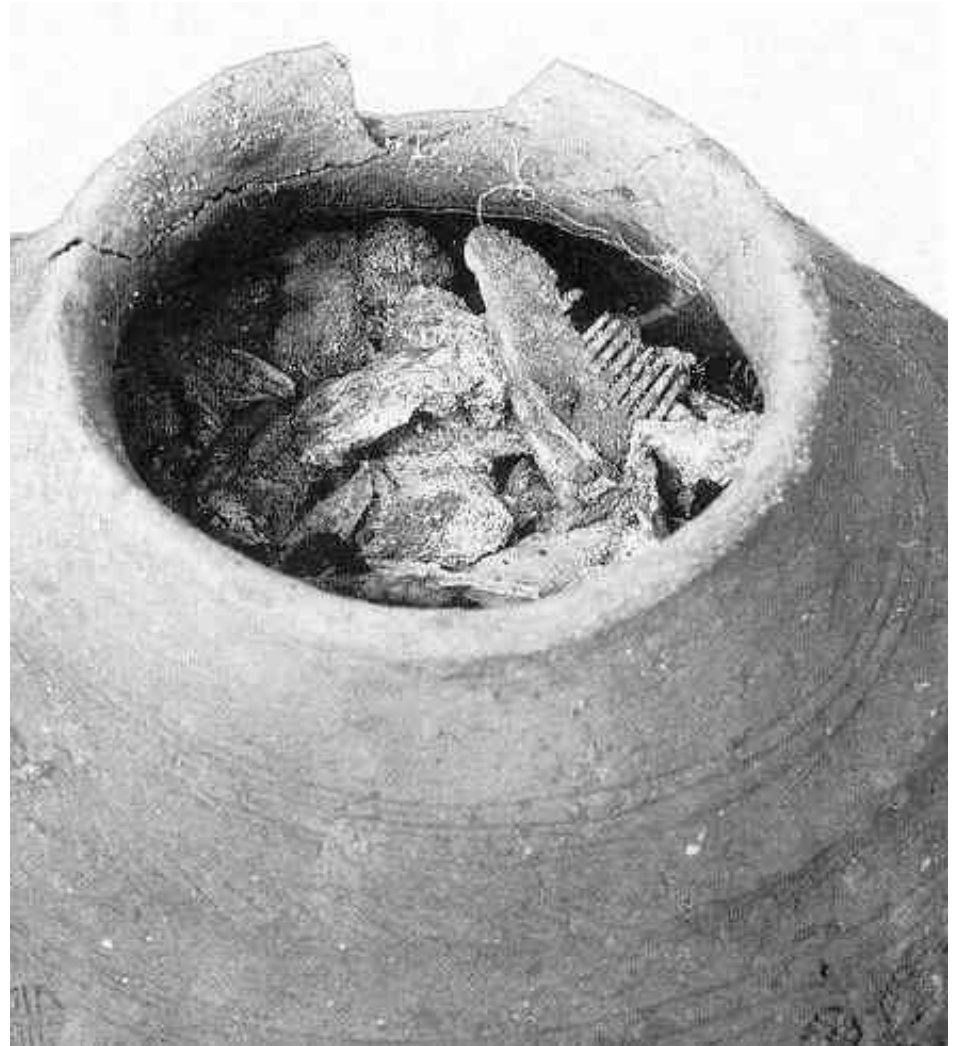
5th–11th centuries CE in Britain and
NW Europe

Cremation in the Early Anglo-Saxon period

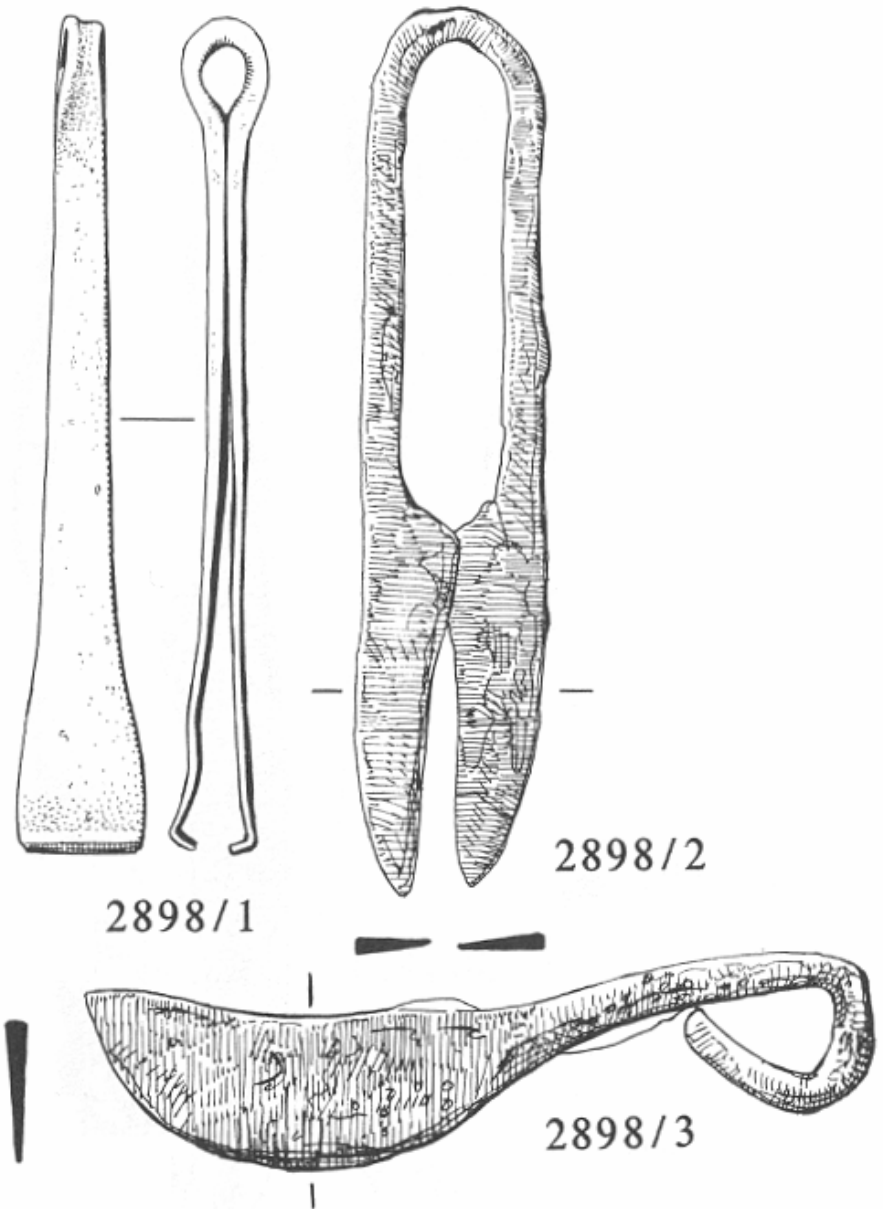


Cremation and inhumation in early Anglo-Saxon England





- Remembering & forgetting through transformation of artefacts & the body
- Grave goods have mnemonic agency
- Catalysts and transformers of memory
- Creating new corporeality for the dead



Alwalton, Cambridgeshire

- Mixed-Rite Cemetery
- 33 inhumation graves
- 28 urned and 2 unurned cremation burials
- 19/27 (70%) had grave goods
- 16 with combs (59%) – 5 double-sided, 11 triangular
- 13 combs were ‘token’ end-fragments
- Only 1 comb burnt
- 2 with tweezers
- 1 toilet set with hone – male burial
- Mortuary symbolism – cremation & dissolution + allowed family connections between the living and the dead

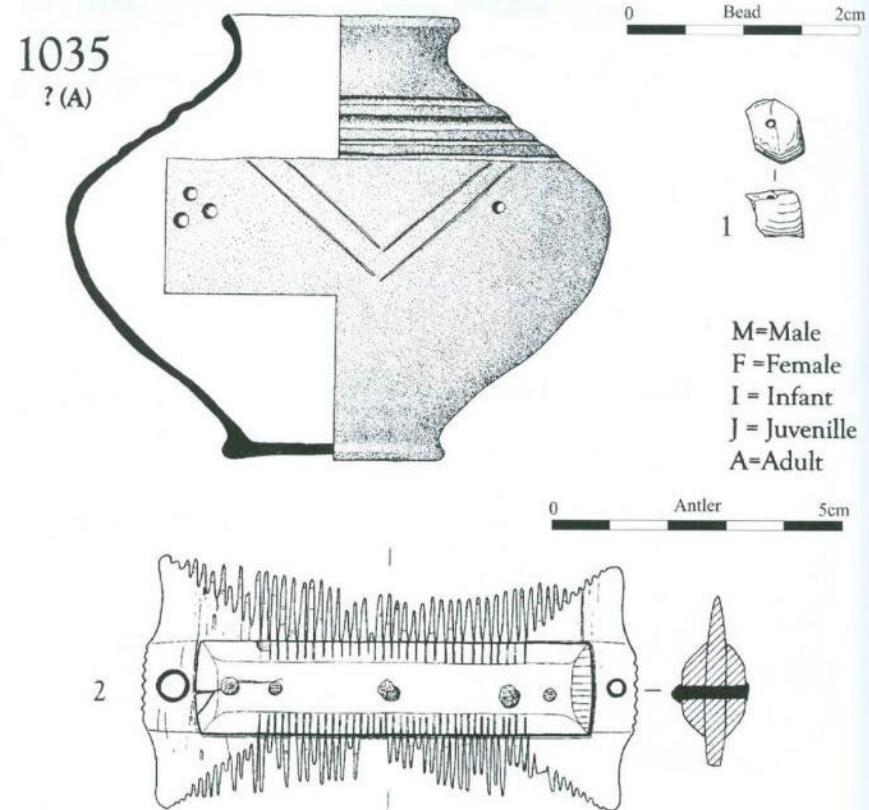
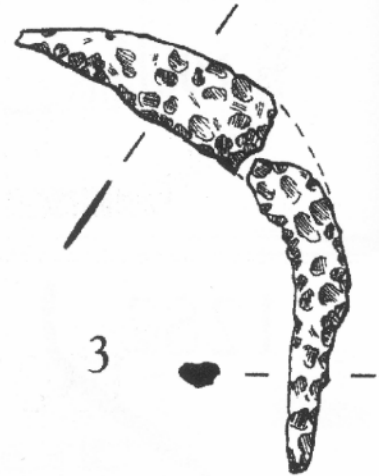
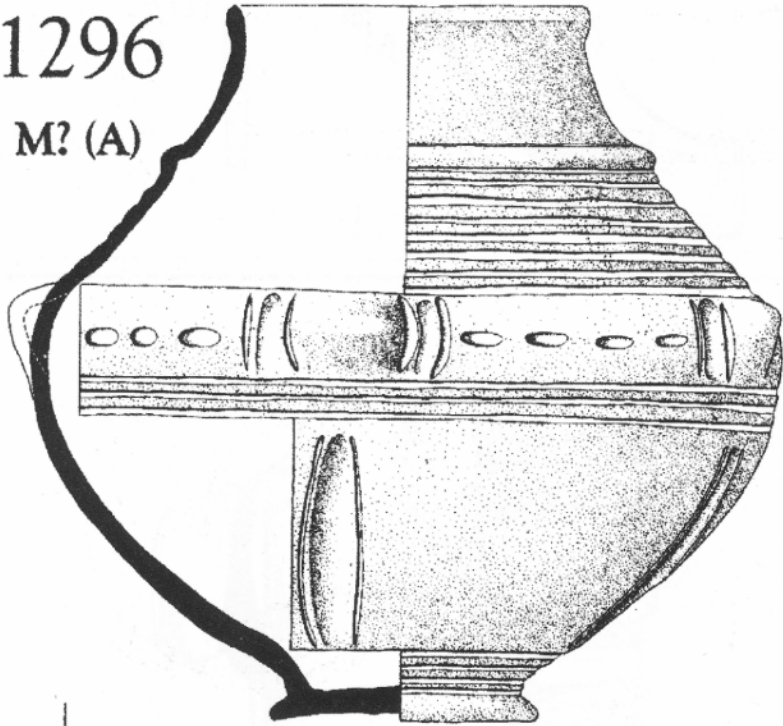


Figure 31. Grave goods from cremation burials 1011 and 1035

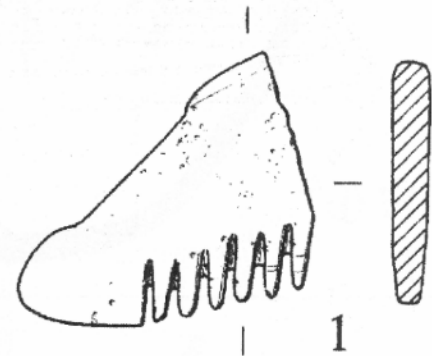
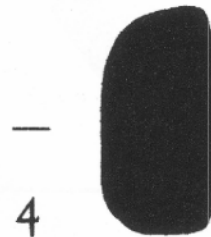
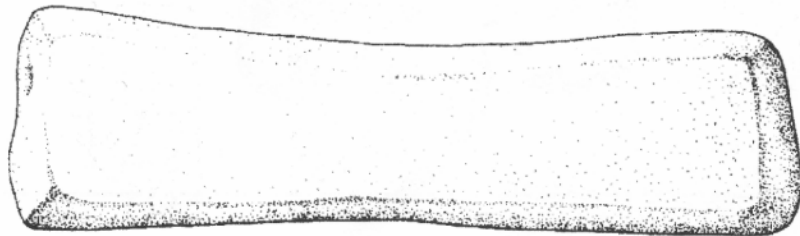
Alwalton

1296

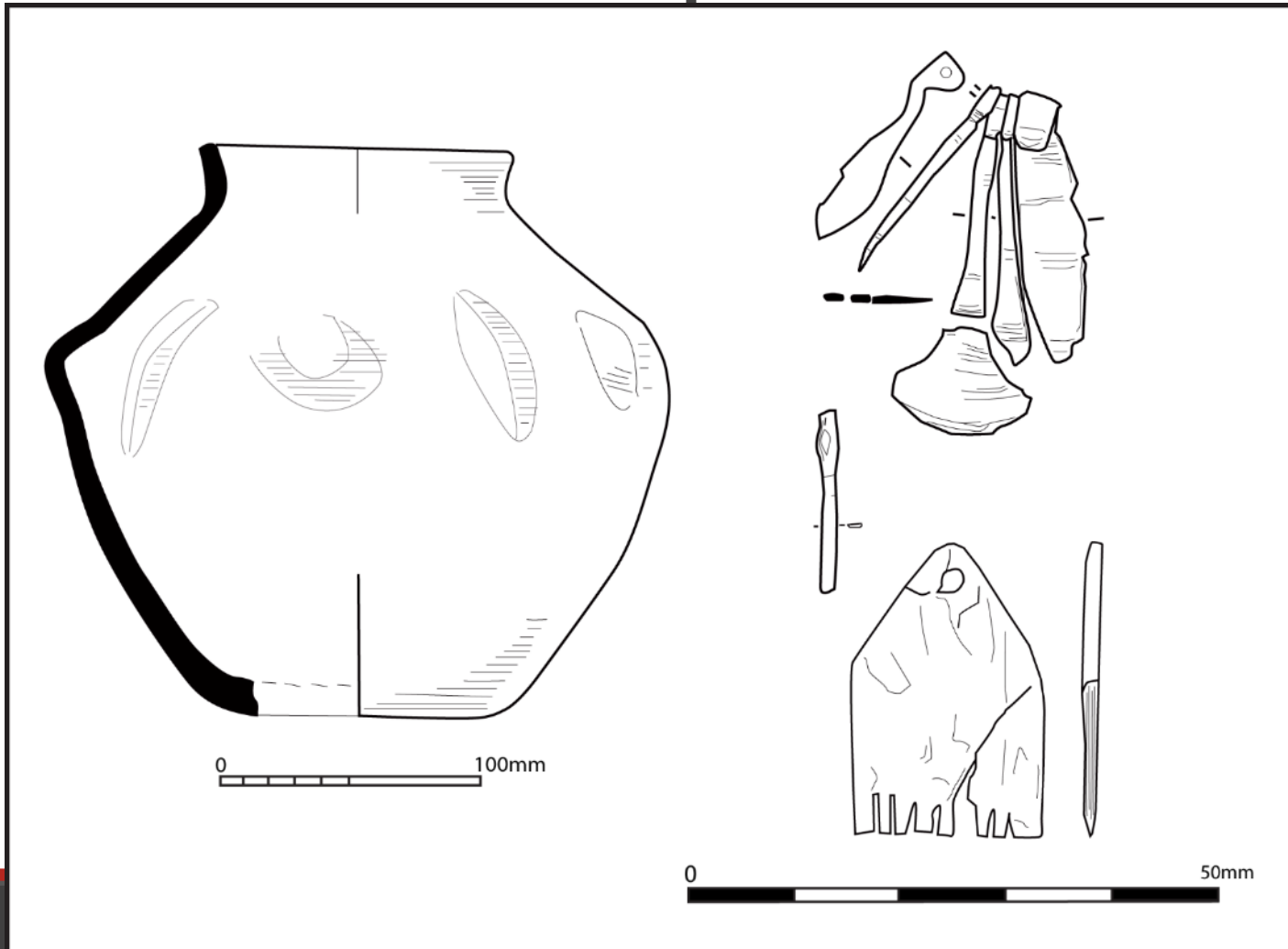
M? (A)



0 Iron 5cm



Worthy Park, Kingsworthy, Hampshire



Animal stamp decoration from Spong Hill



SG45



SG44



SG44

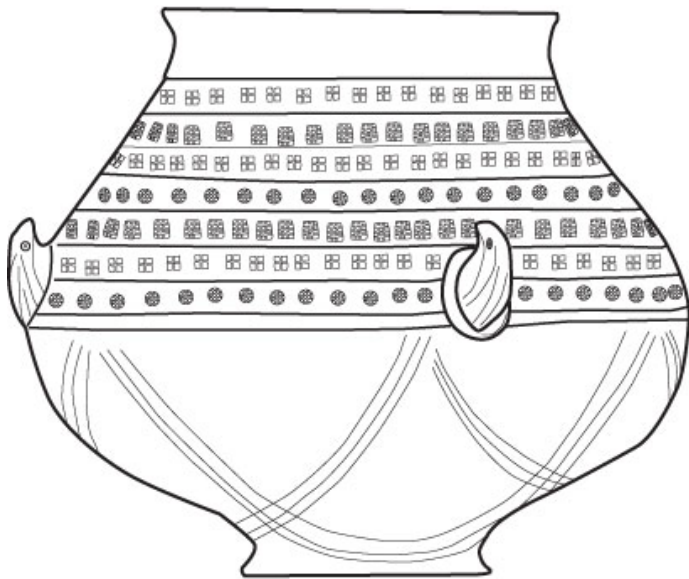


SG44

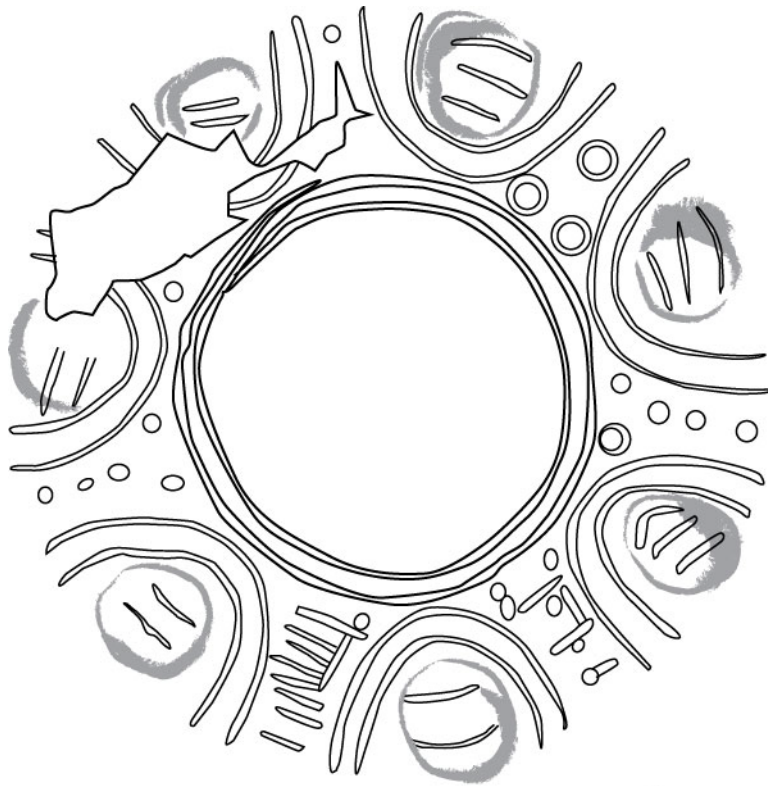


SG45

Animal bosses



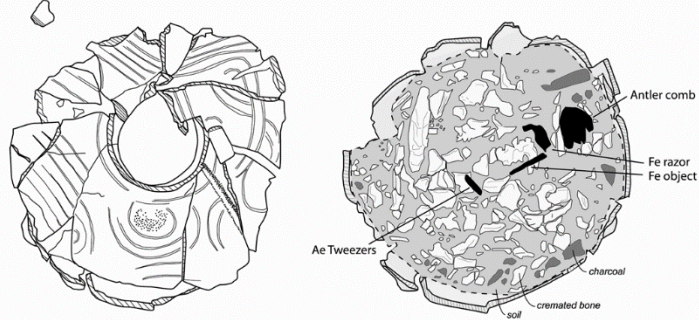
Occular urns?



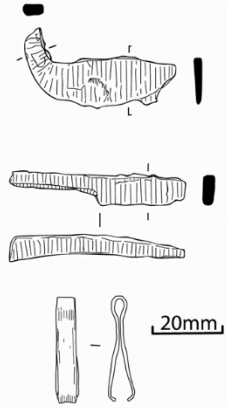


Urn with intact lid
from Spong Hill

Sancton, East Yorkshire

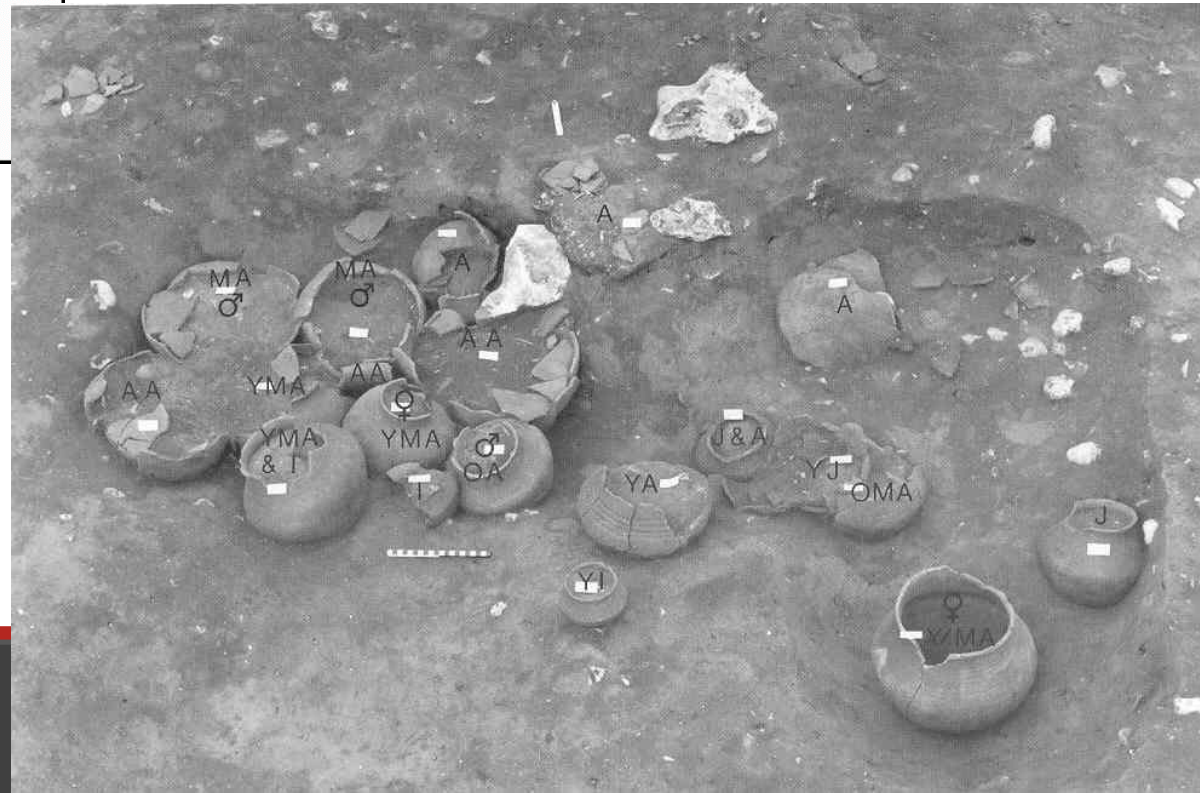


100 mm

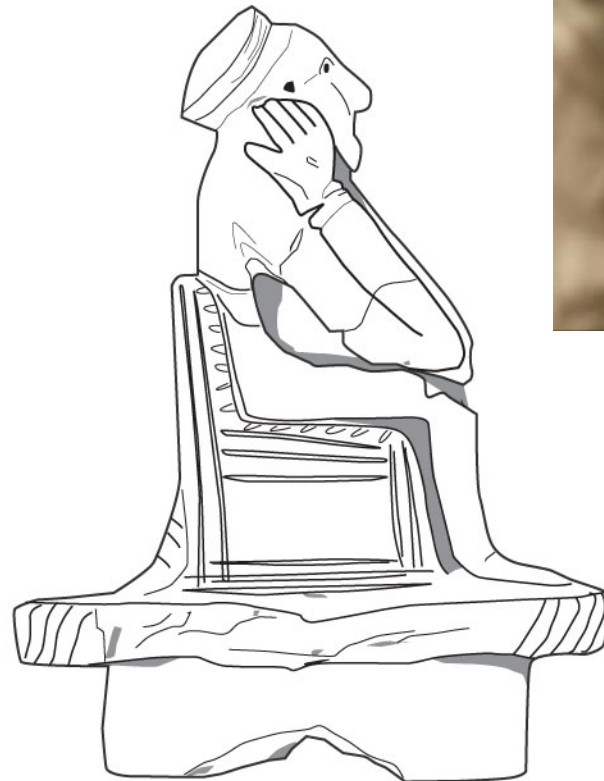
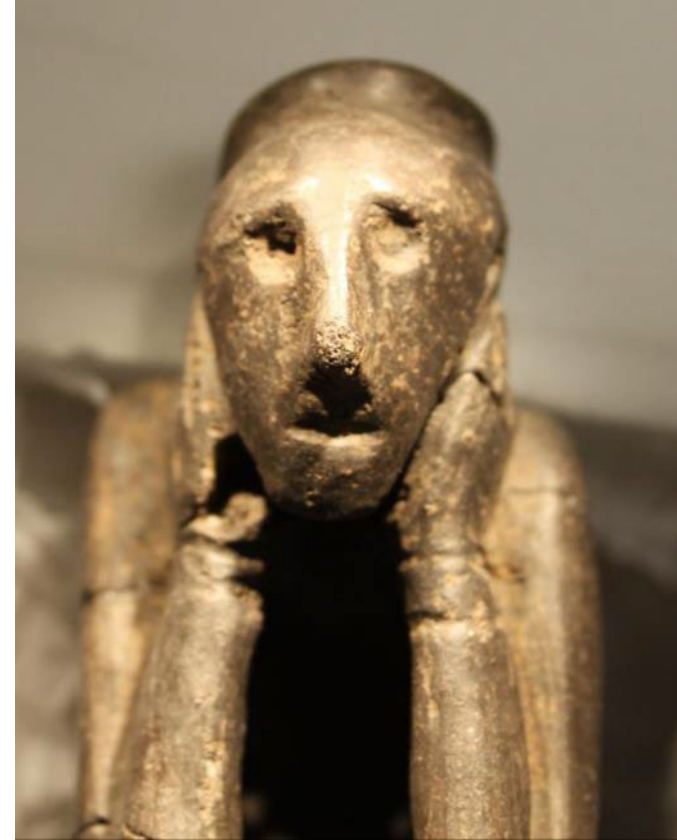


20mm

Cinerary urns, Spong Hill, Norfolk



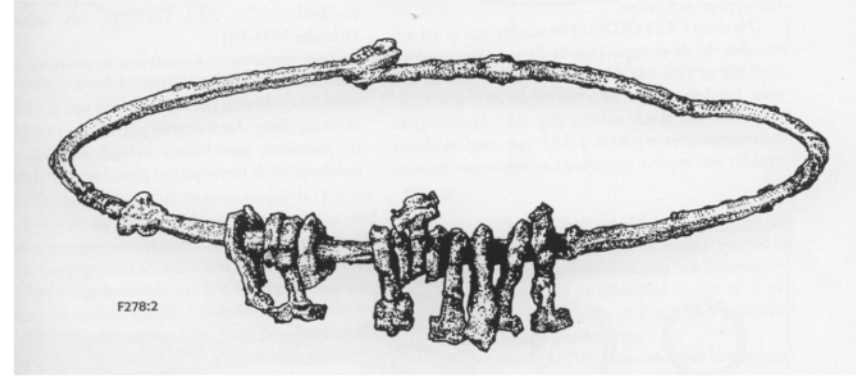
The Spong Hill chairperson



0

100mm

Thor hammer-rings central Sweden



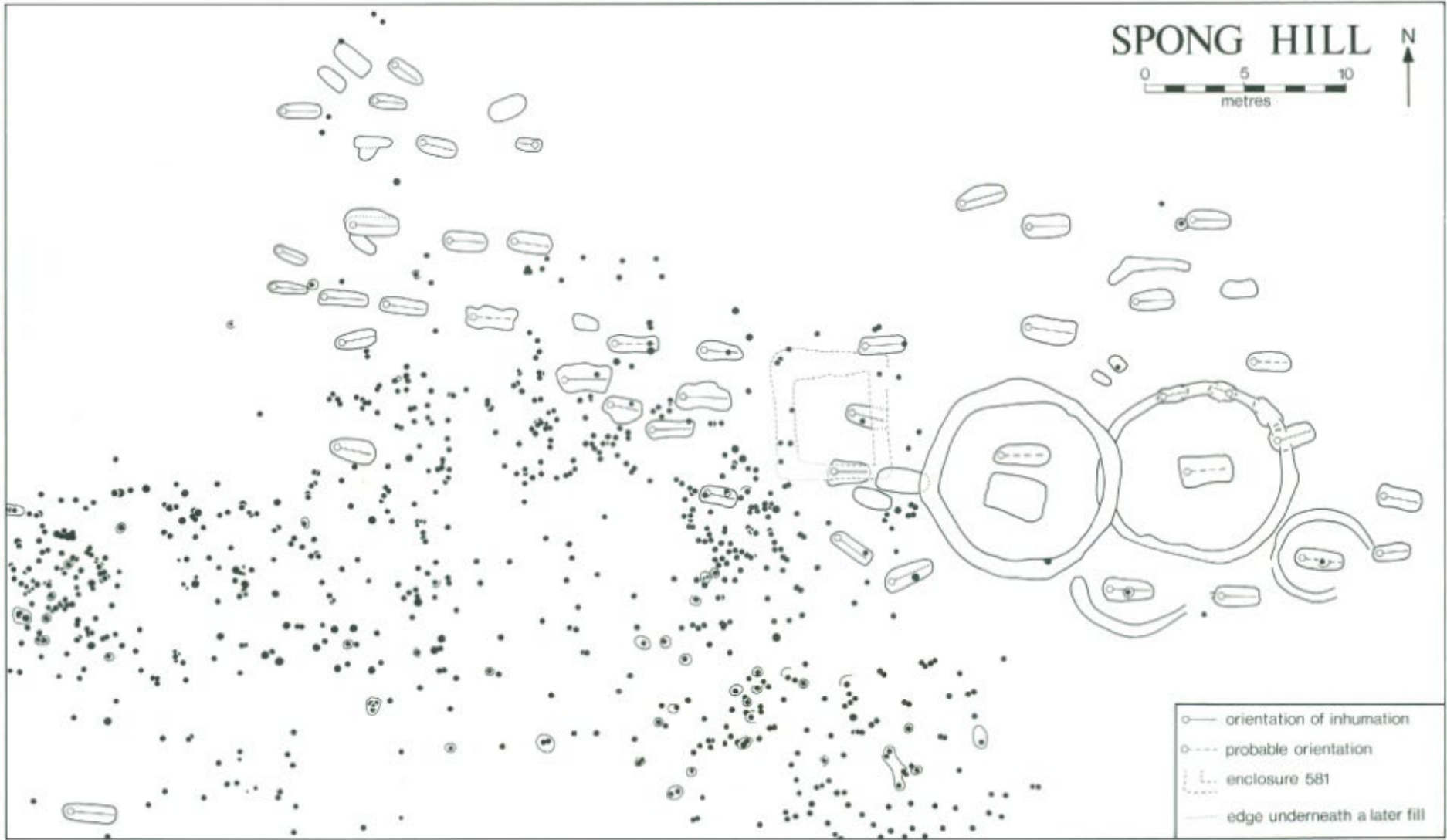
Åland Islands



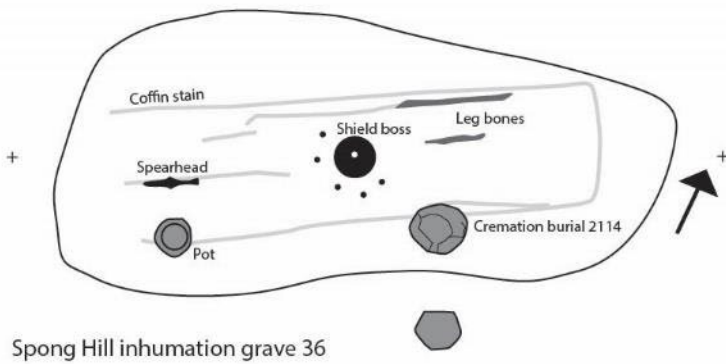
Vittene - Västragötland



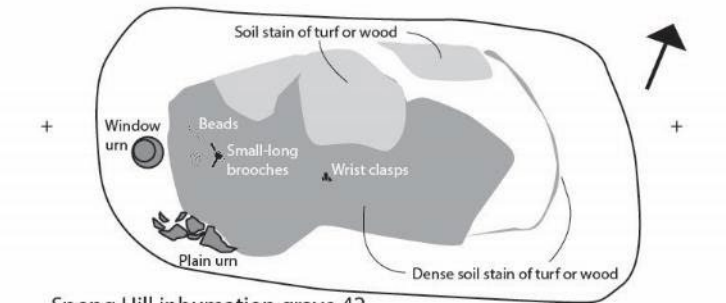
Northern sector of the Spong Hill cemetery (after Hills et al 1984) showing the inhumation burial zone



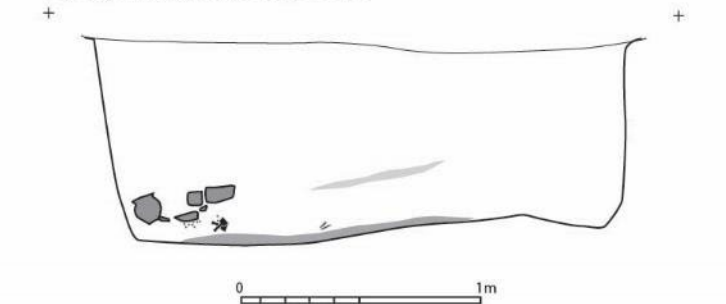
Relationships between cremation and inhumation



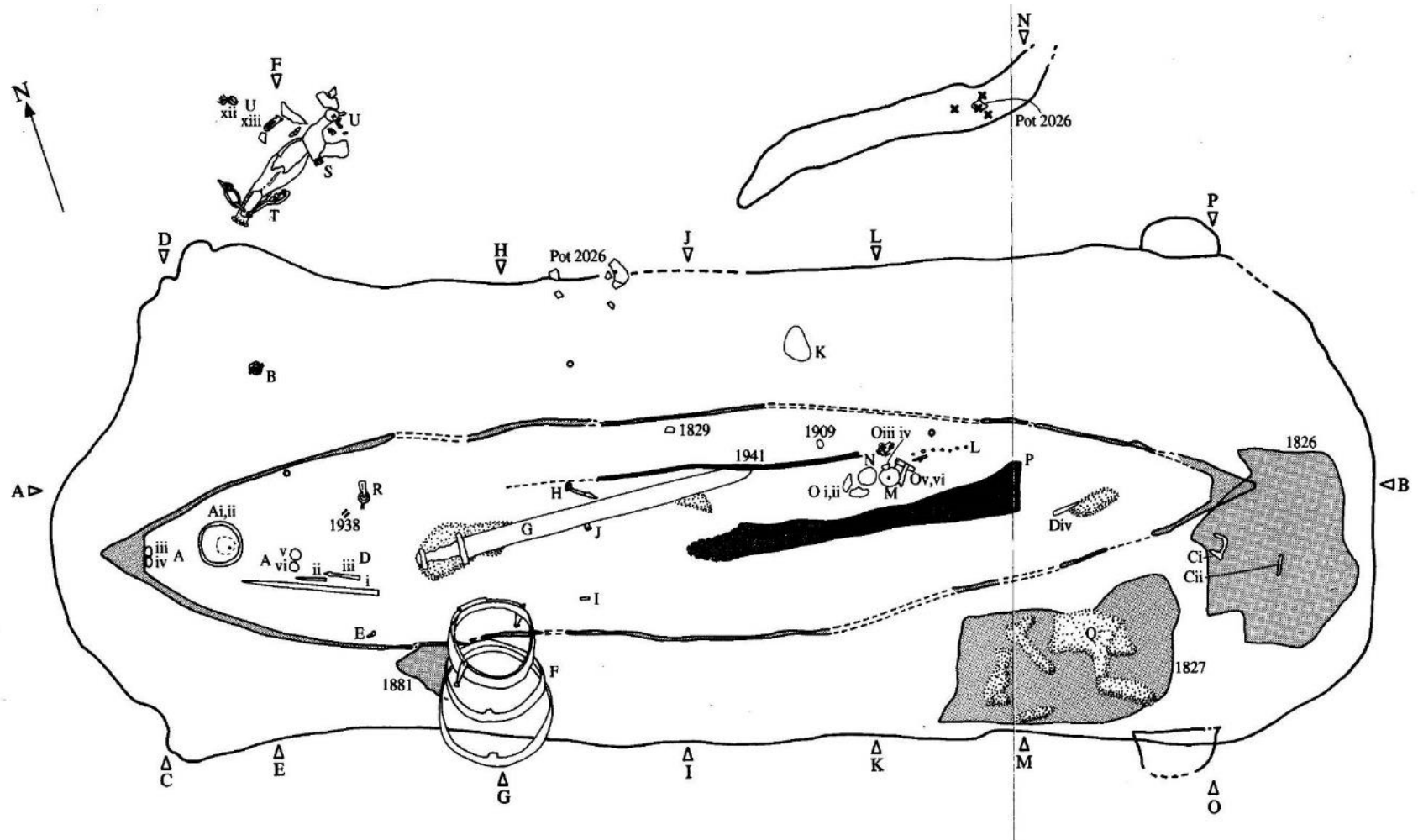
Spong Hill inhumation grave 36

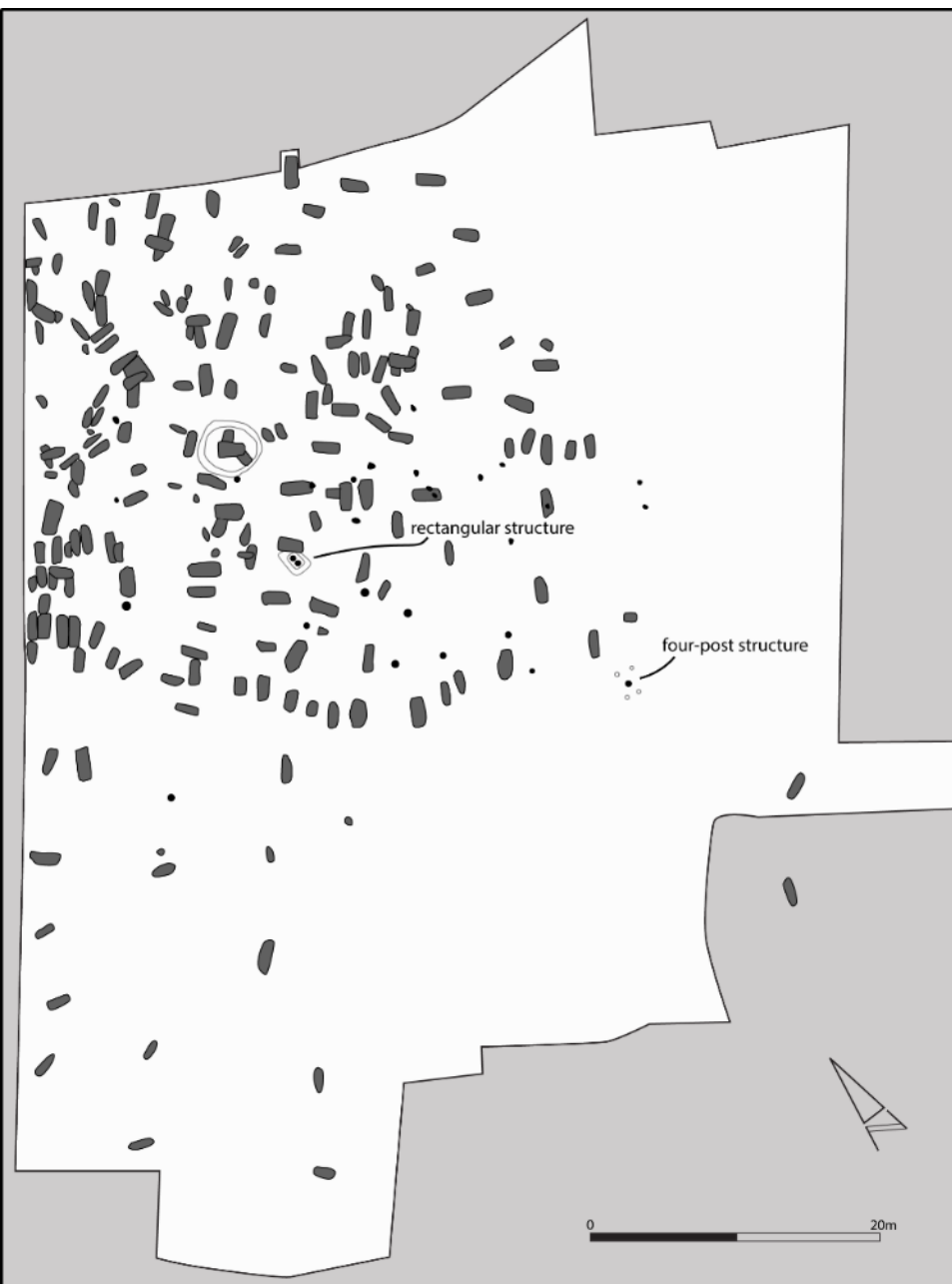


Spong Hill inhumation grave 42



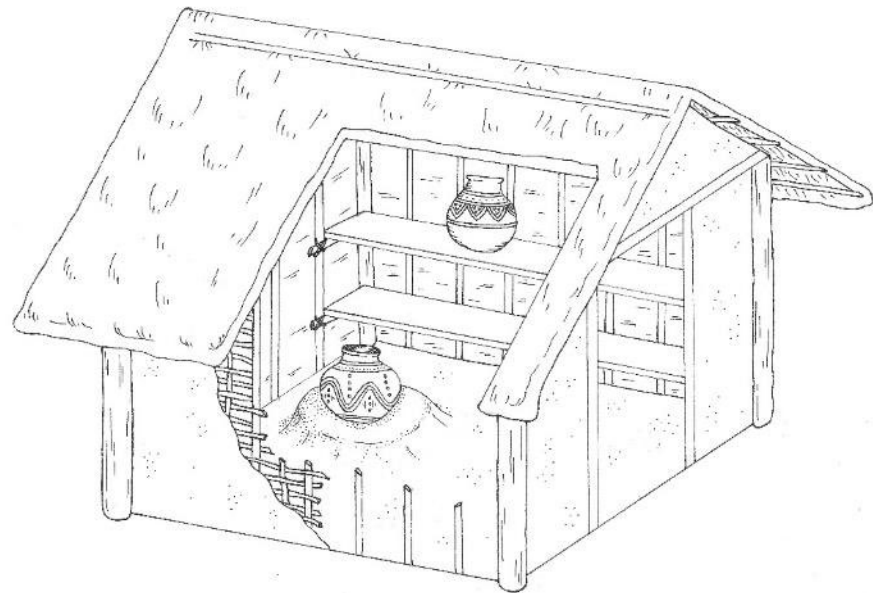
Snape, Suffolk, Grave 47 – Filmer-Sankey & Pestell 2001





Appledown



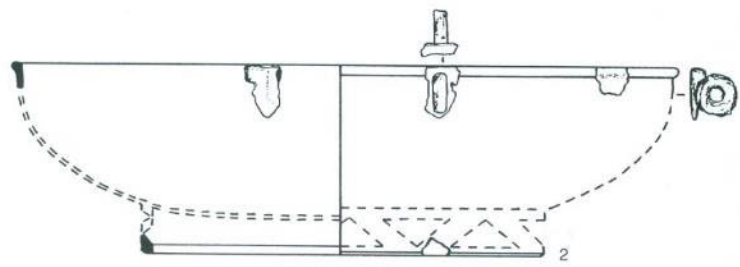
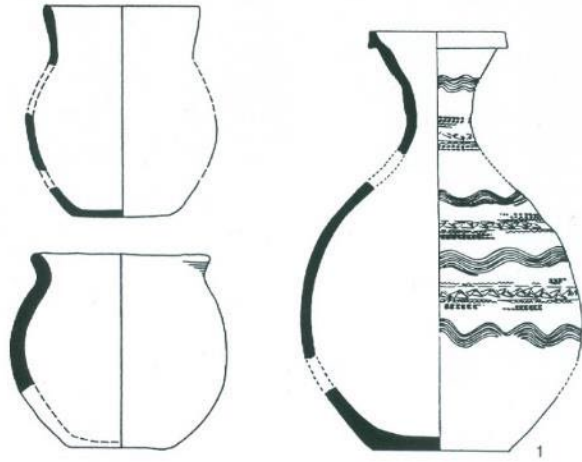


Cremation cemeteries under level ground, Finland

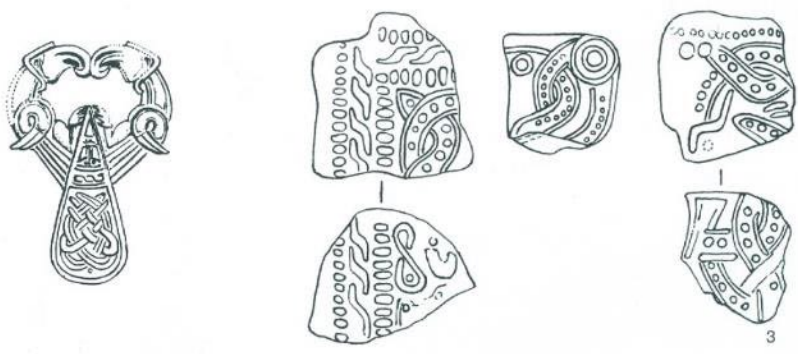


Fig. 66. The central stone with the perimeter of large stones. (One of the stones was removed by mistake in the beginning of the excavation, when the stones used for paving the road were cleared away. The lower parts in excavation layer 8, the upper parts at the right in excavation layer 5, view

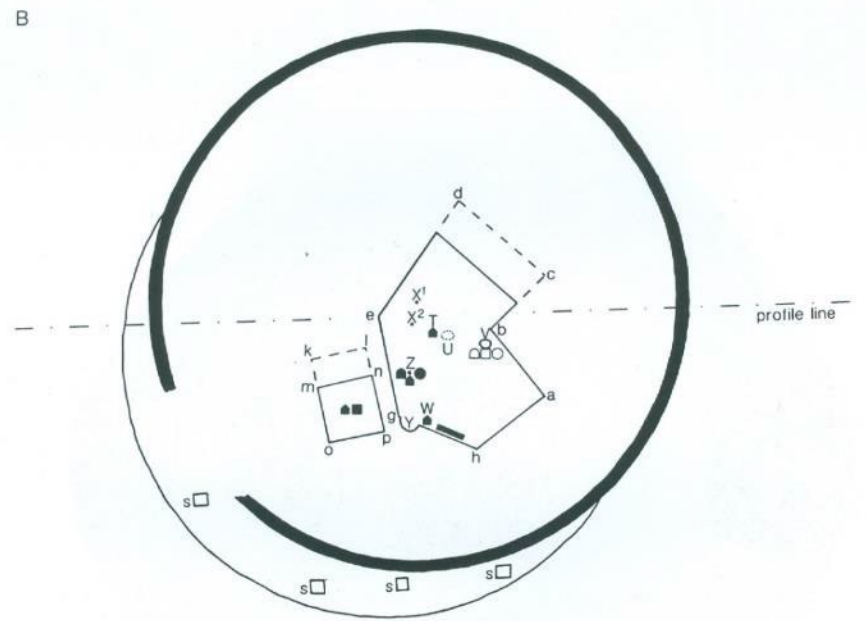
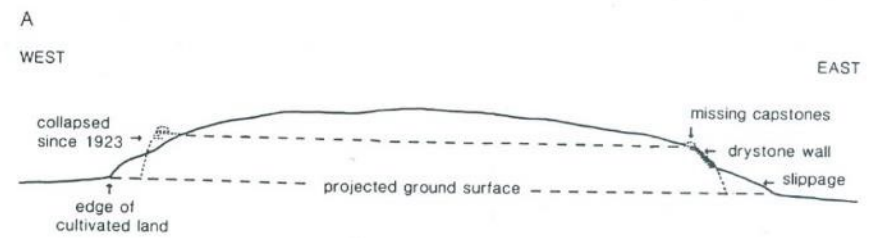
Asthall, Oxfordshire



0 100 mm
1:3



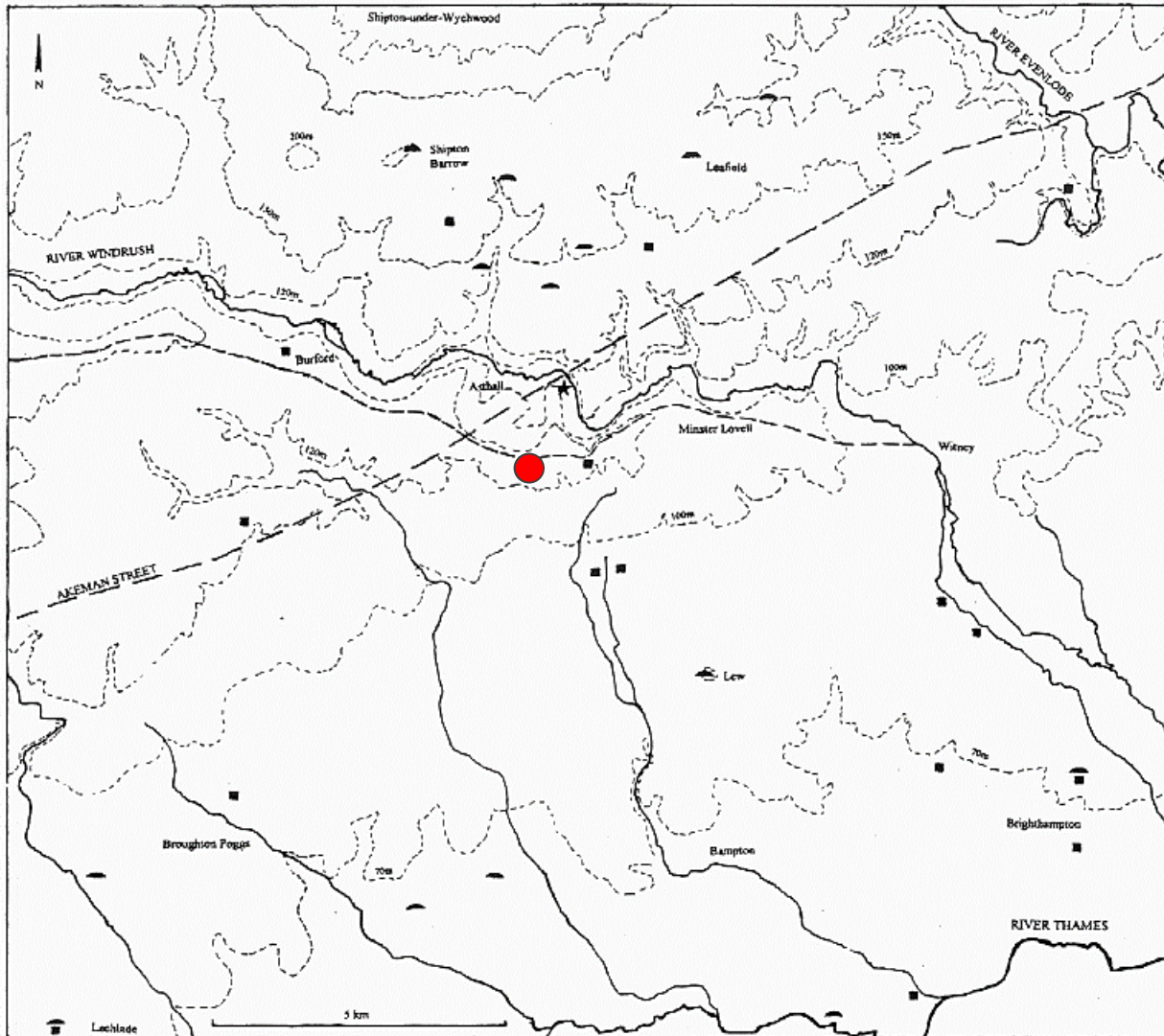
0 100 mm
2:1



0 20 feet
0 5 metres



Asthall barrow in its landscape



The Pillar of Eliseg, near Llangollen, Wales



The Pillar from the west, the scheduled area only protected from farming since 2010

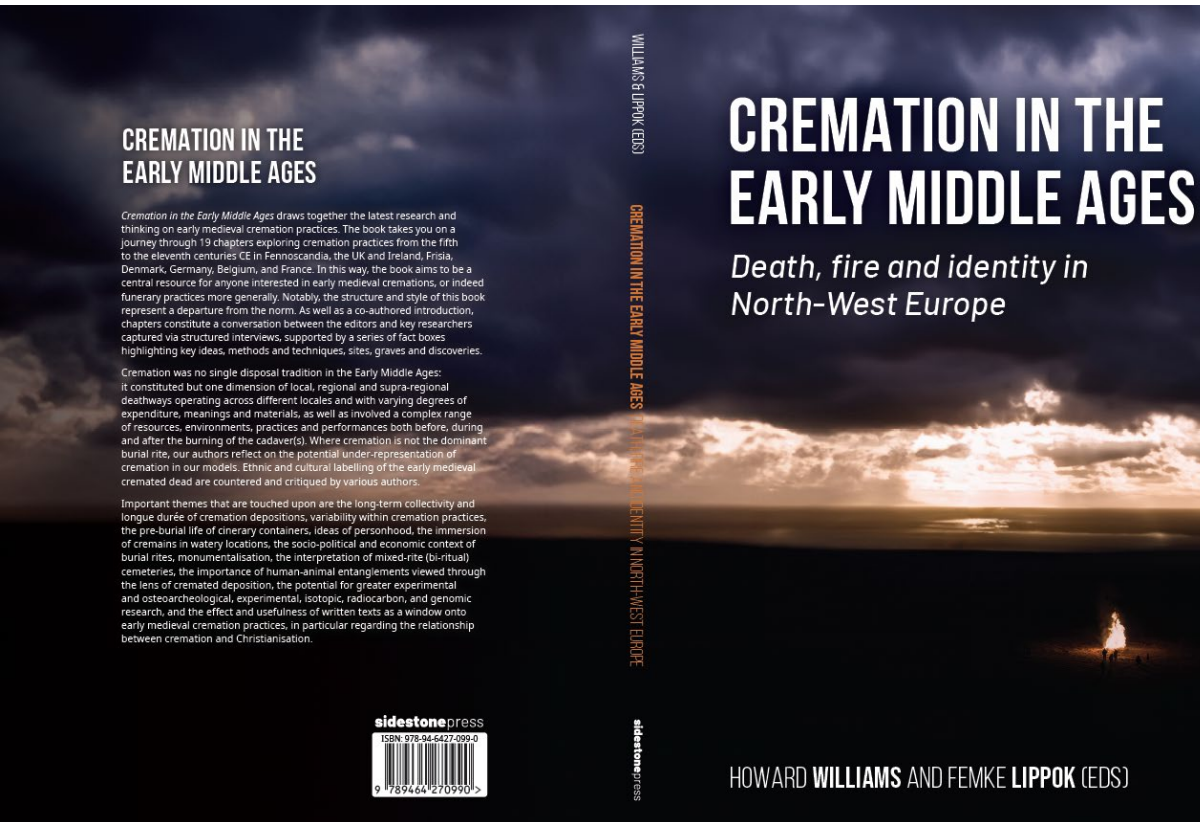


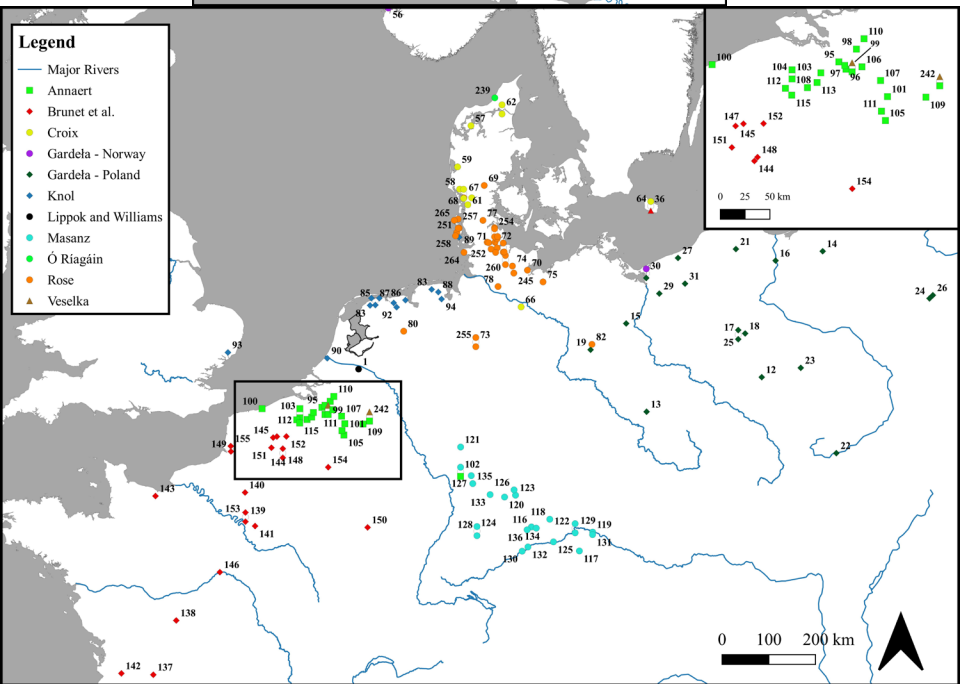
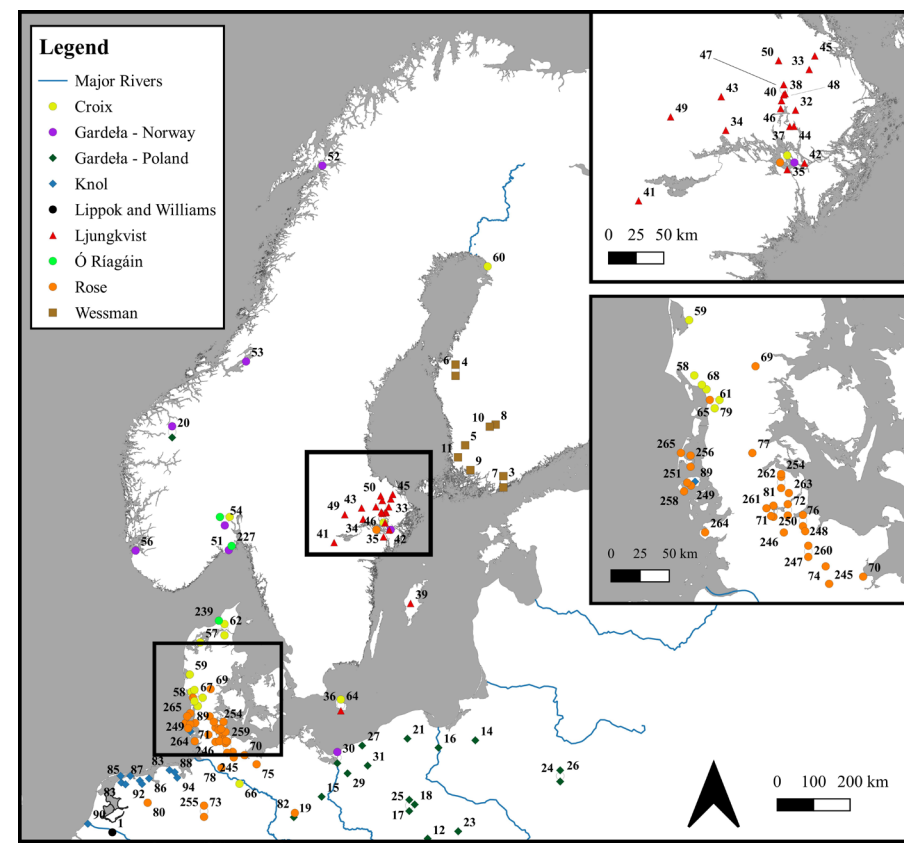
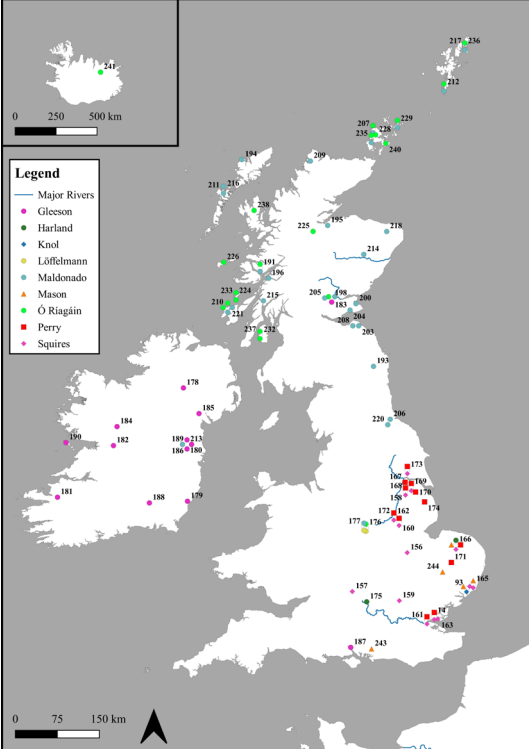
2012 – digging into the cairn on west side



Bronze Age mortuary practices – cists and cremation

Early Medieval Cremation in Context

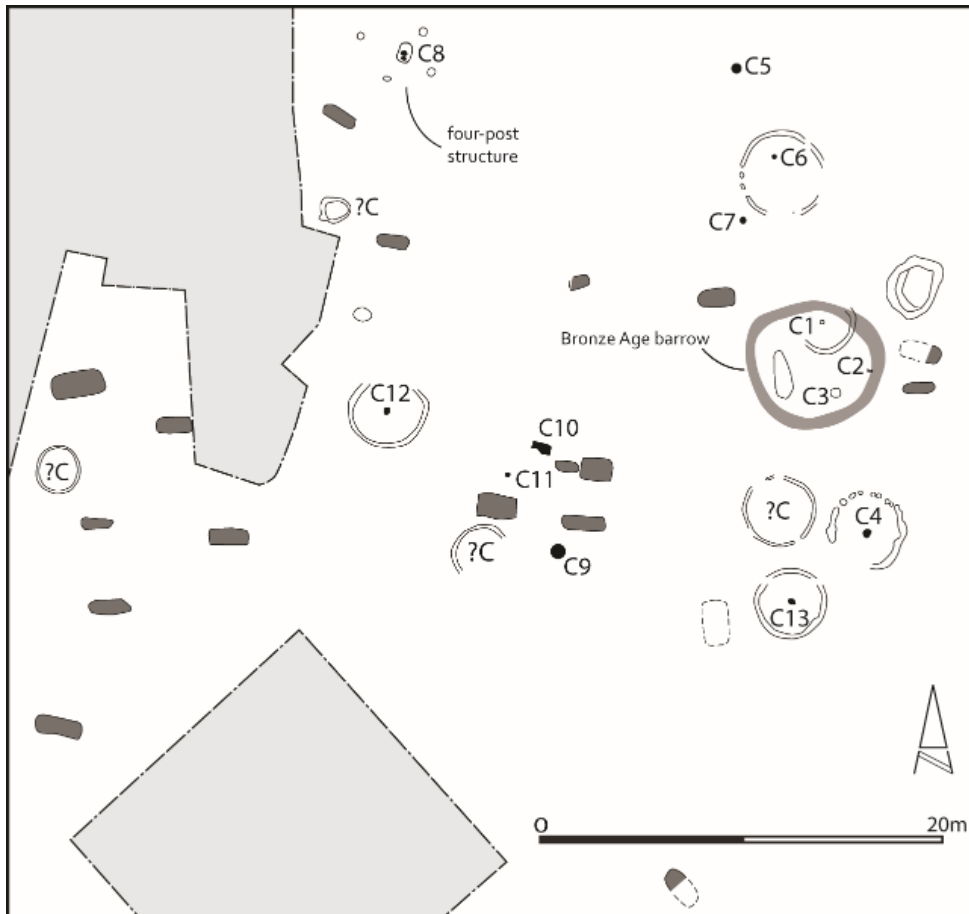




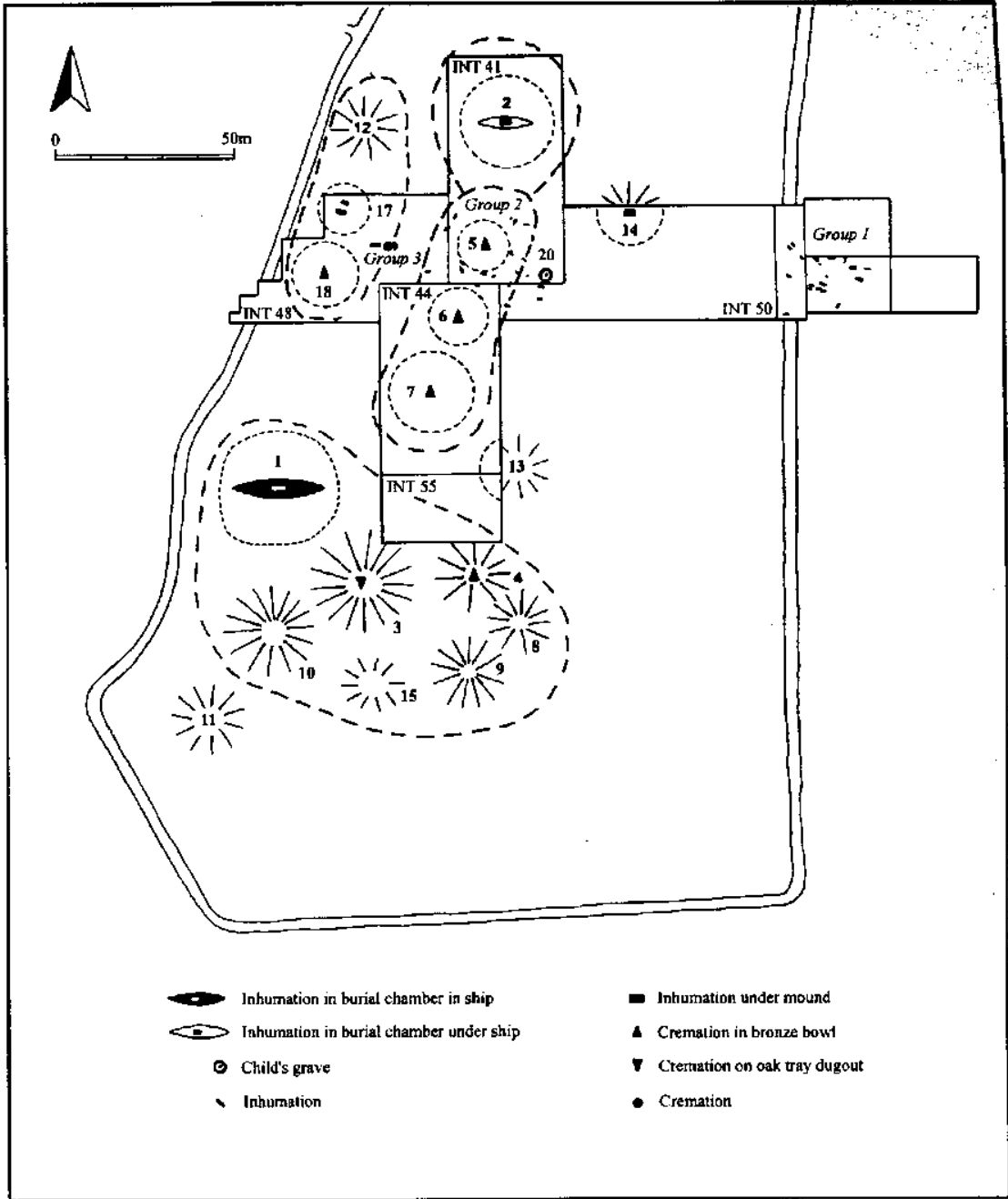
Cremation across early medieval Europe



Tranmer House, Sutton Hoo



Sutton Hoo, Suffolk



Rethinking early medieval cremation practices

- Williams, H and Lippok, F. (eds) 2024. *Cremation in the Early Middle Ages: Death, Fire and Identity in North-West Europe*. Leiden: Sidestone.
- Lippok, F. and Williams, H. 2024. Introduction: Death and Fire in the Early Middle Ages, in F. Lippok and H. Williams (eds) *Cremation in the Early Middle Ages*. Leiden: Sidestone.
- Meyers Emery, K. and Williams, H. 2018. A place to rest your (burnt) bones? Mortuary houses in early Anglo-Saxon England, *Archaeological Journal* 175(1): 55–86.
- Wessman, A. and Williams, H. 2017. Building for the cremated dead, in J.I. Cerezo-Román, A. Wessman and H. Williams (eds) *Cremation and the Archaeology of Death*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 177–98. Williams, H. 2016. Tressed for death in early Anglo-Saxon England, *Internet Archaeology* 42. <http://dx.doi.org/10.11141/ia.42.6.7>
- Williams, H. 2016. Ethnographies for early Anglo-Saxon cremation, in I. Riddler, L. Keys, and J. Soulat (eds) *Le témoignage de la culture matérielle: mélanges offerts au Professeur Vera Evison/ The Evidence of Material Culture: Studies in Honour of Professor Vera Evison*, Europe Médiévale 10, Autun: Éditions Mergoïl, pp. 139–54
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- Williams, H. 2014. A well-urned rest: cremation and inhumation in early Anglo-Saxon England, in I. Kuijt, C.P. Quinn and G. Cooney (eds) *Transformation by Fire: The Archaeology of Cremation in Cultural Context*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, pp. 93-118.
- Williams, H. 2013. Death, memory and material culture: catalytic commemoration and the cremated dead, in S. Tarlow and L. Nilsson Stutz (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 195-208. <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/336963>
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- Williams, H. 2011. Remembering elites: early medieval stone crosses as commemorative technologies, in L. Boye, P. Ethelberg, L. Heidemann Lutz, S. Kleingärtner, P. Kruse, L. Matthes and A. B. Sørensen (eds) *Arkæologi i Slesvig/Archäologie in Schleswig. Sonderband "Det 61. Internationale Sachsensymposium 2010" Haderslev, Denmark*. Neumünster: Wachholtz, pp.13-32.

2. Early medieval cremation practices as public archaeology and contemporary practice

Spong Hill on display at the Norwich Castle Museum (2010)



The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent

"But death is not easily escaped from by anyone: all of use with soul, earth-dwellers and children of men, must make our way to a destination already ordained where the body, after the banqueting, sleeps on its deathbed."

Extract from Beowulf



Iron spears and shields are often found in Anglo-Saxon burials. They were the battlefield equipment for ordinary Anglo-Saxon warriors, but the elite warriors of the elite.

"...Your piercing eye will dim and darken; and death will arrive, dear warrior, to sweep you away."

Extract from Beowulf

Northampton – ‘urn containing a cremation’

DUSTON – THE ANGLO-SAXON CEMETERY

Finds from an Early Anglo-Saxon cemetery, dating from about 500-600 A.D.

1. Iron spearheads
2. Shield-boss. This was originally set in the middle of a shield of wood and leather.
3. Decorated pot
4. Urn containing a cremation
5. Small bucket
6. Waist-pendant
7. Bronze scoop, needle and tweezers
8. Dress pin
9. Sleeve-clasps
10. Small pot
11. Pieces of amber and beads of glass, amber and crystal



Early Anglo-Saxon cremation – British Museum (2020)



1 Anglo-Saxon cremation

The early Anglo-Saxons practised cremation, in which the dead person was placed on a pyre and burnt along with specially chosen grave goods. The remains were then gathered into an urn like this one, and buried in the ground. Personal grooming equipment like the bone comb, tweezers and razor are often found in these burials, perhaps symbolising the rebuilding of the body after its cremation.

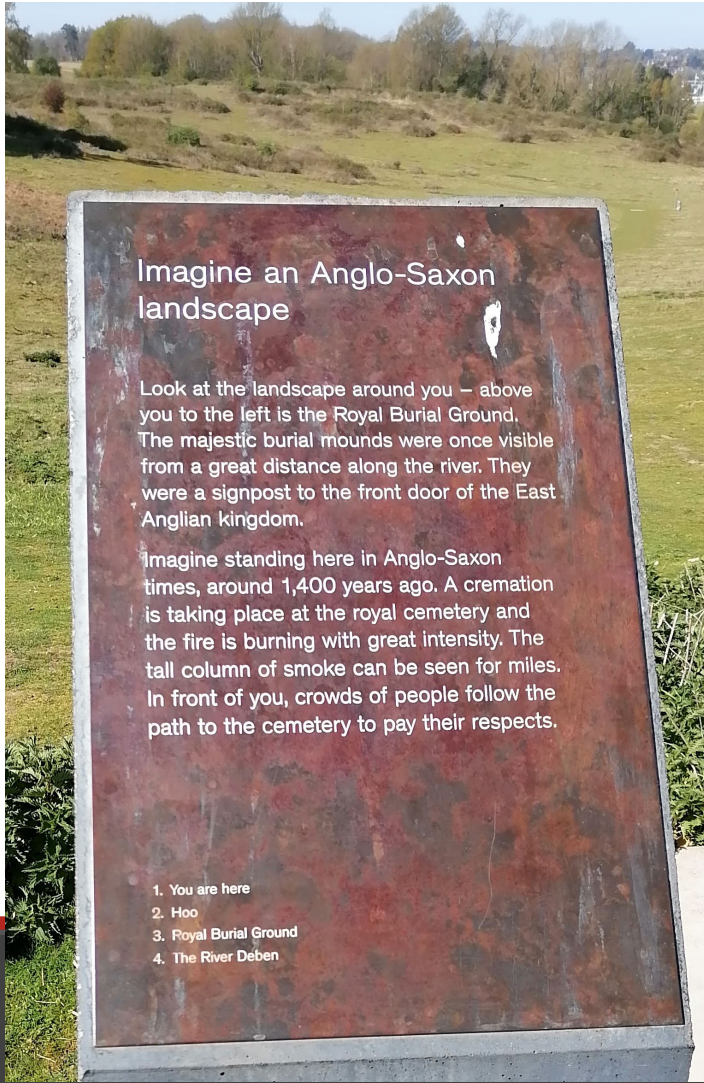


Artist's impression of an Anglo-Saxon funeral pyre during a cremation ritual

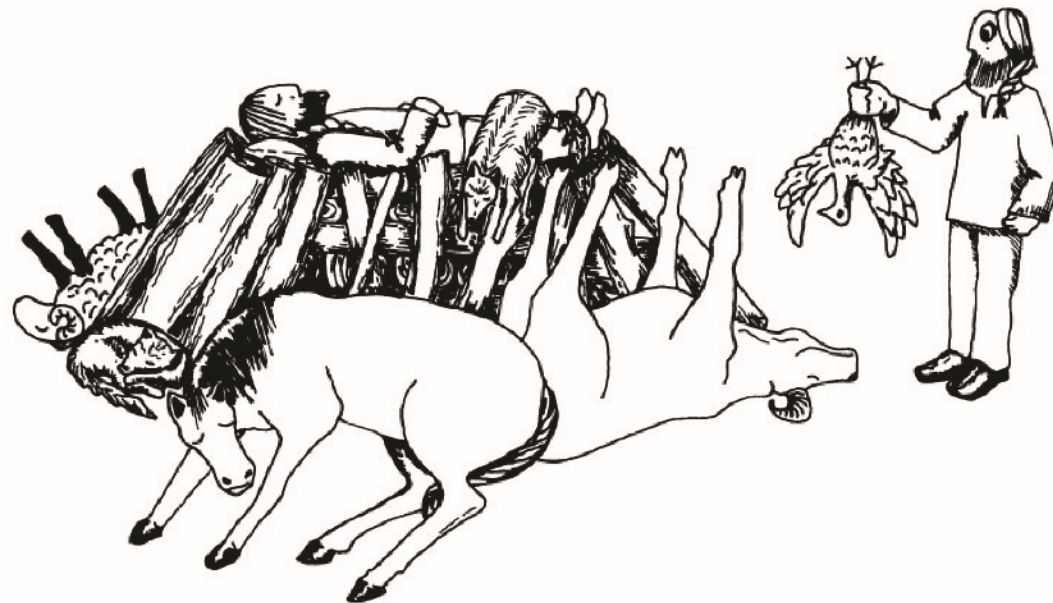
AD 450s–mid AD 600s. Possibly Lancashire, 1852.0429.2.a. Eyn, Suffolk, donated by Sir Thomas Culham, OA.4985. Mucking, Essex, donated by the Trustees of the Estate of F. W. Sumidgo, 1970.0406.1414. Northfleet, Kent, donated by Sir Charles Hercules Read, 1918.1305.1

© British Museum

Sutton Hoo (2022)



After Julie Bond 1996



Mound 6, day of burial:
placing the bowl' by
Victor Ambrus (Carver
2005)



Kate Morton –
pyre at
Tranmer
House, Sutton
Hoo (Fern
2015)



Kelvin Wilson (2017 redraw)



Aaron Watson – 2006/2007





Heysham Viking Festival (2017–2019)



Beowulf at the Barrow
(2021)
with Thegns of Mercia
at Soulton Hall



Källunge, Gotland



Motala cemetery, Östergötland



Early medieval cremation as public archaeology & contemporary practice

- Williams, H. 2024. Towards Public Viking Research, in S. Ellis Nilsson and S. Nyzell (eds) *Viking Heritage and History in Europe: Practices and Recreations*. London: Routledge, pp. 229-243.
- Evans, S. and Williams, H. 2019. Death's diversity: the case of Llangollen Museum, in H. Williams, B. Wills-Eve and J. Osborne and (eds) *The Public Archaeology of Death*, Sheffield: Equinox, pp. 37-54.
- Watson, A. and Williams, H. 2019. Envisioning Cremation: Art and Archaeology, in H. Williams, B. Wills-Eve and J. Osborne (eds) *The Public Archaeology of Death*, Sheffield: Equinox, pp. 113-132.
- Williams, H. 2019. Dead Relevant: Introducing The Public Archaeology of Death, in H. Williams, B. Wills-Eve and J. Osborne (eds) *The Public Archaeology of Death*, Sheffield: Equinox, pp. 1-16.
- Williams, H. 2018. Introduction: public archaeologies of death and memory, in H. Williams and L. Richardson (eds) *Death in the Contemporary World: Perspectives from Public Archaeology*, AP Online Journal of Public Archaeology 8(2) Special Issue 3: 1-24 <http://revistas.jasarqueologia.es/index.php/APJournal/article/view/229>
- Williams, H. 2016. Firing the imagination: cremation in the modern museum, in H. Williams and M. Giles (eds) *Archaeologists and the Dead: Mortuary Archaeology in Contemporary Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 293-332
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- Williams, H. 2012. Ash and antiquity: archaeology and cremation in contemporary Sweden, in A. M. Jones, J. Pollard, M. J. Allen and J. Gardiner (eds) *Image, Memory and Monumentality: Archaeological Engagements with the Material World*, Oxford: Oxbow, pp. 207-217.
- Williams, H. 2011. Cremation and present pasts: a contemporary archaeology of Swedish memory groves, *Mortality* 16(2): 113-30.

3. Early medieval cremation in popular culture

Beowulf – Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary (2008)



THE FUNERAL OF BEOWULF

WIGLAF DID AS BEOWULF ASKED, SO THAT ALL WHO SAW THE BARROW WOULD REMEMBER THE GREAT DEEDS OF THE HERO.

BEOWULF'S LEGEND HAS LASTED DOWN THROUGH THE AGES TO THIS DAY.



Beowulf – Monster Slayer

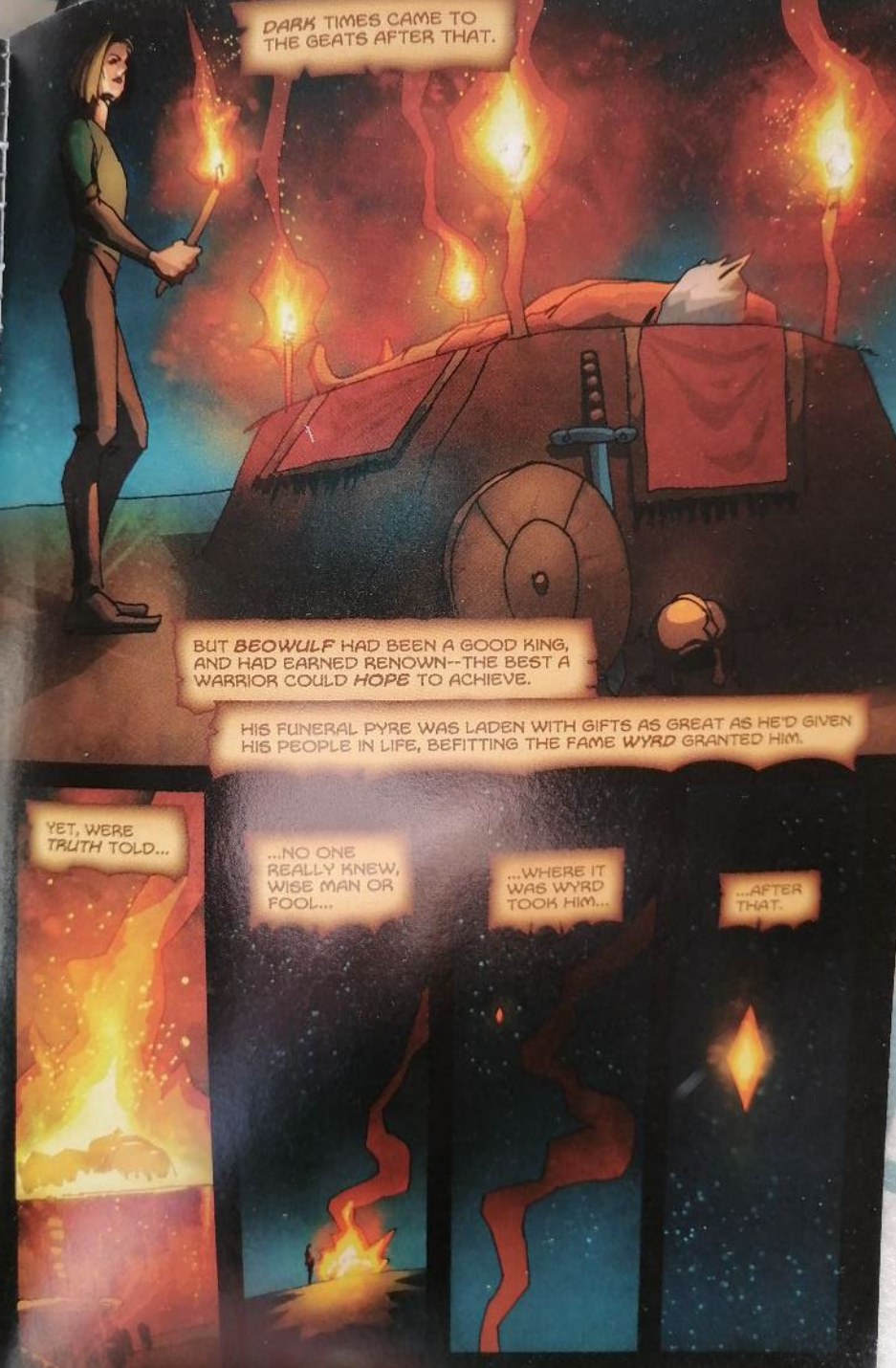
–

Paul D
Storrie and
Ron Randall



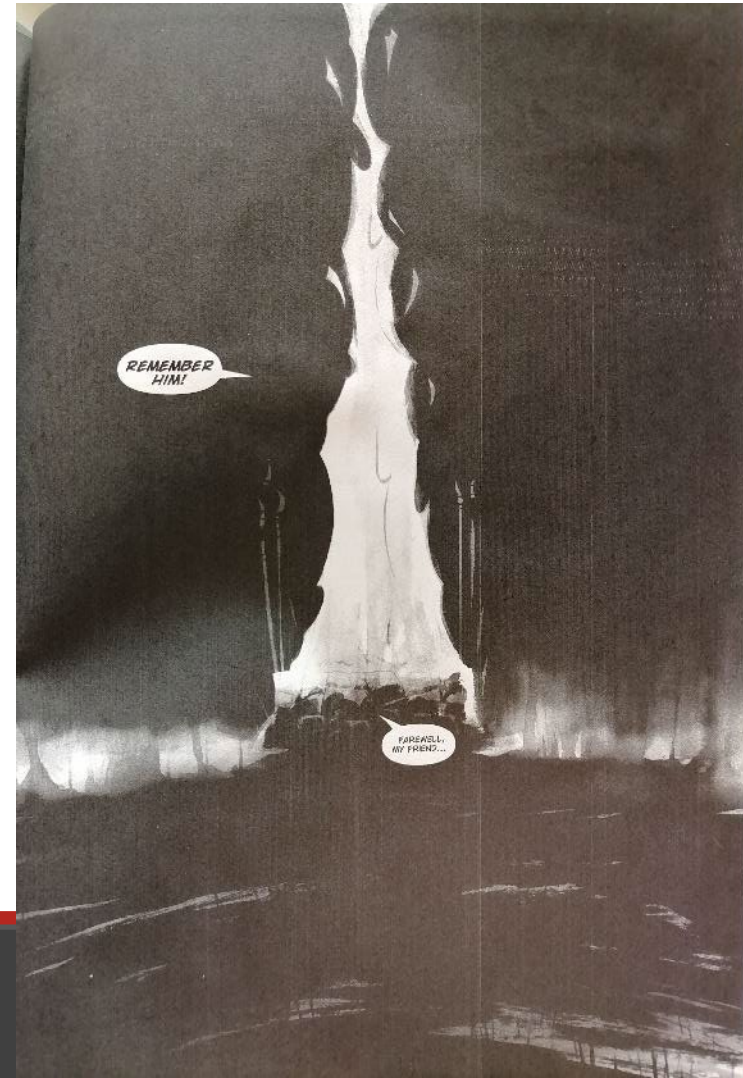
Beowulf –
 Santiago Garcia
 and David Rubin
 (2016)





Beowulf – Stefan Petrucha and Kody Chamberlain (2007)

Beowulf – the Graphic Novel –
Stephen L. Stern, Christopher Steininger and
Chris Studabaker (2007)



Fantasy Cremation

Game of Thrones





Vikings Season 1, Episode 6



Season 1,
Episode 9



Season 2 Episode 9



Season 4(1), Episode 6



Season 5(2),
Episode 4

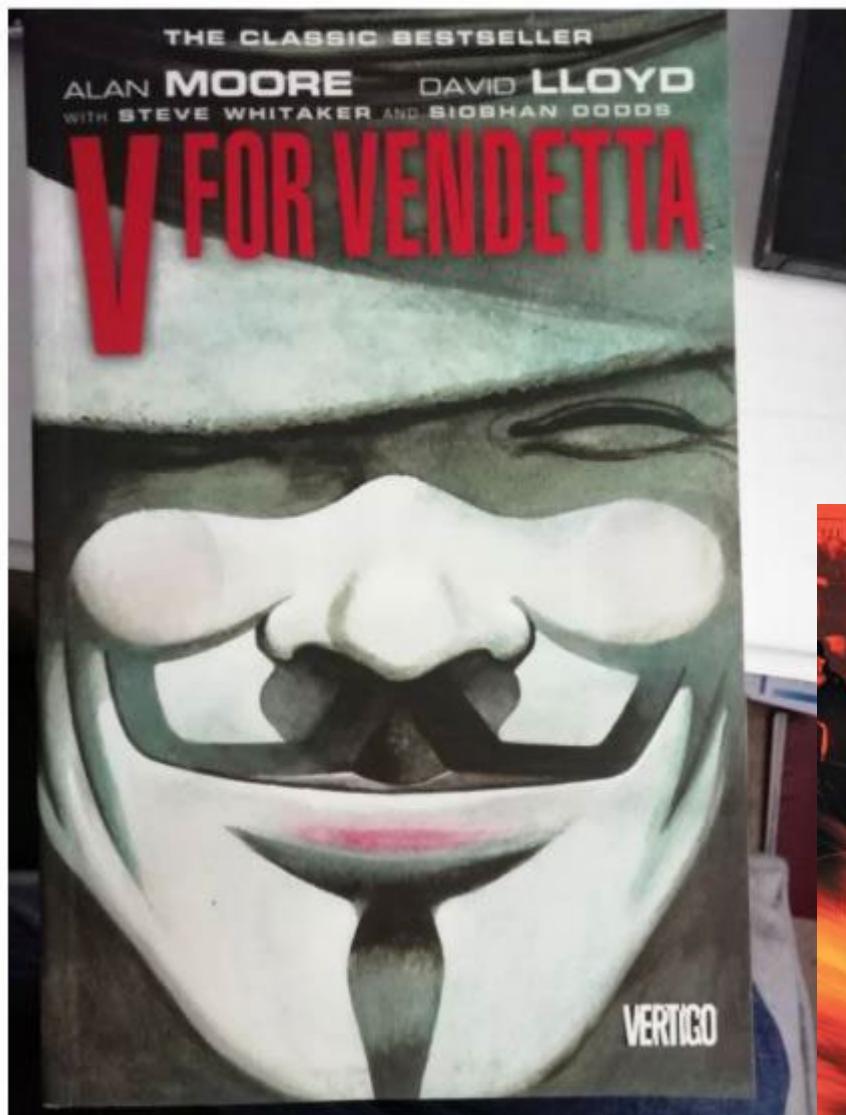


Season 6(1), Episode 7



VIKING ARCHAEOLOGY

V for Viking: Fighting Norsefire with Fire



CATEGORIES

Select Category

ARCHIVES

Select Month

ARCHAEODEATH ON SOCIAL MEDIA:
FACEBOOK, TWITTER & YOUTUBE



ARCHAEODEATH ON TIKTOK



V for Viking

Archaeodeath
blog-post,
16 April 2019





V for Vendetta,
by Alan Moore
and David Lloyd
(1982-1989)

V for Vendetta
(2005, dir. James
McTeigue)



From V to Evie



Williams, H. 2023. V for Viking, in C. Kennan and E.J. Wells (eds) *What is Medieval? Decoding Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism in the 21st century*. NEO 2, Turnhout: Brepols. DOI 10.1484/M.NEO-EB.5.133383, pp. 269-286.

3. Early medieval cremation in popular culture

- Williams, H. forthcoming. Necro-Vikingisms, in A. Klevnäs and C. Ljung (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Death and Burial in the Viking Age*. London: Routledge.
- Williams, H. 2023. V for Viking, in Claire Kennan and Emma J. Wells (eds) *What is Medieval? Decoding Approaches to the Medieval and Medievalism in the 21st century*. NEO 2, Turnhout: Brepols. DOI 10.1484/M.NEO-EB.5.133383, pp. 269–286.
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- Williams, H. and Klevnäs, A. 2019. Dialogues with the dead in *Vikings*, in P. Hardwick and K. Lister (eds) *Vikings and the Vikings: The Norse World(s) of the History Channel Series*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press. 128-152.
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Sensational stories past and present

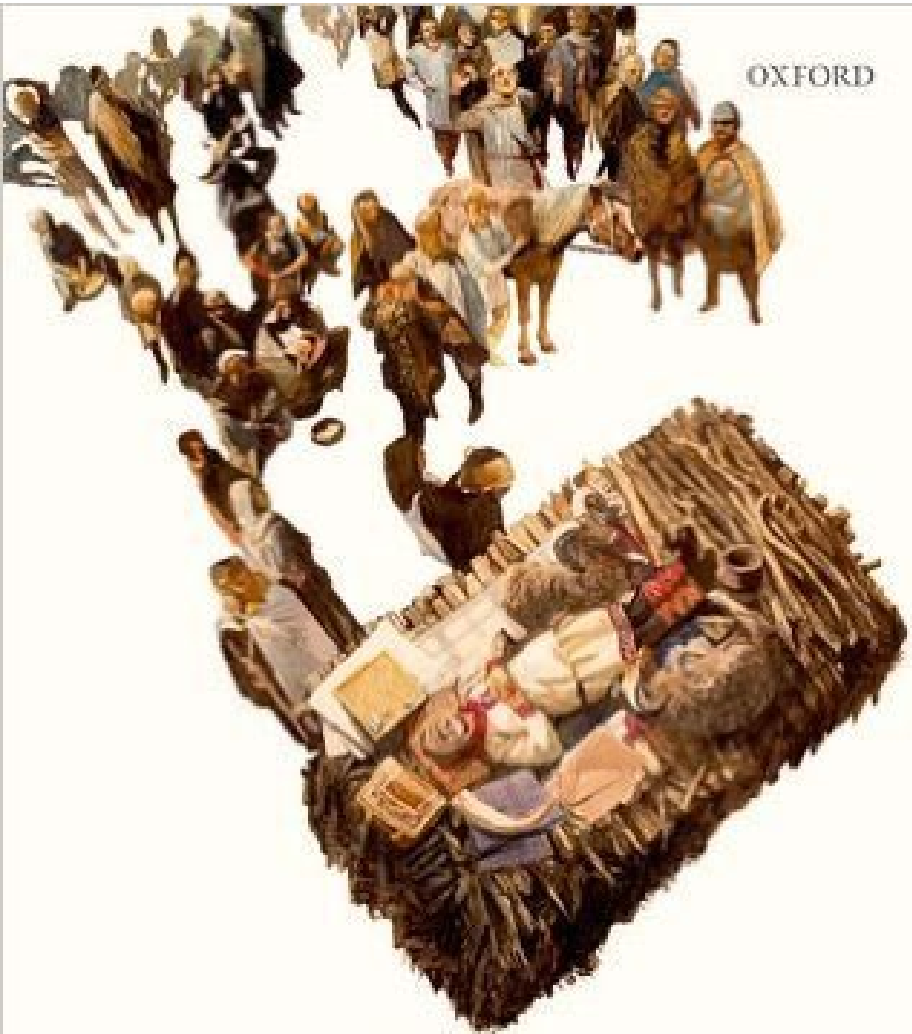


‘There had been almost no changes in how the dead were burned from the earliest times until the 1870s.’

Thomas W. Lacquer: *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (2015).

Rethinking Death and Fire in Early Medieval Europe

- Such a rich and varied set of archaeological data, transforming our understanding of early medieval societies (Lippok and Williams forthcoming)
- Broader challenge of heritage interpretation and public engagement
- Broader still responsibility to engage with broader popular culture manifestations of early medieval cremation



OXFORD

Cremation and the Archaeology of Death

Edited by Jessica I. Cerezo-Román,
Anna Wessman,
& Howard Williams

Cremation and the Archaeology of Death

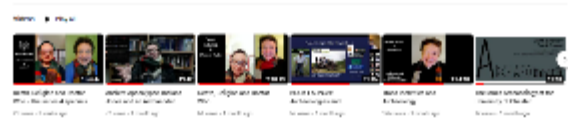
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Archaeodeath on WordPress, YouTube & TikTok

ARCHAEO death

ARCHAEO death
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