"From bones to behaviour": ritual practice at Helgö and beyond.

Introduction

The main aim of my PhD project is to investigate the ritualization of animals in Middle Iron Age Sweden (c. 200-700 AD). As most studies have hitherto focused on either “ritual” or “mundane” interpretations of animal bone assemblages, this study hopes to offer a more comprehensive approach by implementing the concepts of social zooarchaeology and contextual taphonomy. The site of Helgö, situated on an island in Lake Mälaren, has been chosen as the main site of investigation as its offers favorable preconditions. Helgö is a closed context that held high religious and economic importance and offers an abundant animal bone assemblage from various contexts. Since the start of excavations in 1954, Helgö has been subject to extensive research. Its main period of use stretches from the Roman Iron Age to the Viking Period (c. 200-1050 AD). The site flourished in the late 5th century and maintained the character of a supra-regional central place until the early Vendel Period (c. AD 600). During the late Migration Period high quality objects in precious metals were produced in large quantities. In the 6th century the character of Helgö seemed to change. The craft in precious metals decreased while the production of everyday items in iron or steel increased (Clarke and Lamm 2017: 59). Cemeteries were established on earlier building groups and a cult hall was constructed. Helgö seems to degrade to a regional centre. The rise of power of the elite at Gamla Uppsala and the 536/37 event have been suggested as possible reasons (Arrhenius 2013, Clarke and Lamm 2017).

Helgö has been investigated through various material categories, however, the animal bones have mainly been neglected. Hence, at the same time as this study is trying to trace and untangle ritual activities, it also hopes to shed light on the zooarchaeology of Helgö and to demonstrate its potential to contribute to social interpretations of human behaviour at the site, that we so often wistfully seek in archaeology.

Theoretical framework

Ritual is a complex phenomenon to work with and my theoretical framework still needs refinement. At the moment I am working with a practice-based ritual theory, viewing ritualization primarily as a social behaviour. In order to study this behaviour I need to conceptualize it, which has two important implications. Firstly, it makes the dichotomy between ritual and mundane irrelevant, as ritualization remains to be a social behaviour among others. Secondly, a concrete, context specific definition is needed to demarcate and identify the concept and behaviour of ritualization among others. The following definition, modified from Magnell (2012), is suggested in this study: Ritualization is indicated when the selection, killing, treatment or deposition of animals is suspected to have had “a specific meaning and purpose beyond subsistence and simply transforming an animal into food” or other products. How exactly ritualization manifests itself, cannot be decided beforehand, but can only be the results of context specific analyses and in relation to other types of behaviour.

Methodological framework

Social zooarchaeology is a framework for both theory and method in this study. It is defined by Russell (2014) as "The study of animal bones from archaeological sites in order to learn about human behaviour.” With human behaviour and what people were
**Implementing the taphonomic approach**

An important realization from this study has been that not all parts of the taphonomic process need to have been ritualized. Animals may for example have been “ritually” deposited, without being “ritually” processed or they may have been “ritually” processed but not “ritually” discarded. The planned papers have been designed to untangle the ritualization of animals by systematically looking into what people did within every step of the taphonomic process. (see Table 1). At the same time, the papers cover topics that are typically connected to the religious sphere of the Iron Age, such as the use of fire, ritual slaughter and the deposition and display of animal crania.

**Table 1. Overview over planned papers and status of publication.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traceable steps</th>
<th>Papers</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>Contextualizing mortality profiles</td>
<td>In progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>“Ritual killing”</td>
<td>Mentioned in paper below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing/Utilization</td>
<td>“Ritual slaughter”</td>
<td>Published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contextualizing burned bones</td>
<td>In progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deposition</td>
<td>The use of contextual taphonomy to investigate “ritual space”</td>
<td>Submitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contextualizing the deposition of crania</td>
<td>Autumn 2021</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Challenges**

Three major challenges have arisen during the study. The first one regards the lack of datings for many contexts under investigation. The second challenge is finding suitable analogies that offer the level of detail required for contextual comparisons of this type. Connected to this, the third challenge is to identify the process of ritualization among a large range of seemingly “new” behaviours that the level of detail in this study has incited.
Papers

Published:

Ritual Slaughter Through the Eyes of the Butcher: Perspectives on a Complex Practice

Abstract
Ritual slaughter has long been recognised as a significant custom in the archaeological record of Iron Age Scandinavia, but the practice itself has often been treated hastily. This paper aims for a more thorough approach by focusing on the butcher as a craftsperson. It draws on evidence from literary sources and implement use, as well as the zooarchaeological record, which shows specific butchery practices in ritual contexts. The results suggest that ritual slaughter needs to be understood as a collective undertaking with multiple stages. The role of the chieftain as potential performer should be toned down. Instead, the process probably incorporated skilled people from various segments of society.

For complete paper:

Submitted:

Iron Age transitions and deposition of faunal remains on Terrace IV at Helgö in light of contextual taphonomy

Conclusions
The objective of this study has been to investigate patterns of deposition and transition through the faunal remains recovered from Terrace IV, Building group 2 at Helgö. The long continuity of use of Terrace IV becomes evident in the complexity of its formation. The present investigation has been able to nuance the use of space, demonstrating important patterns of deposition for the faunal remains. The study confirms the overall integrity of the stratigraphy on the terrace. It is clear that the material on T IV is linked to and reflects periods of change at Helgö. It has, however, been proved difficult to link the layers to specific events, such as the AD 536/37 event, as the selection, processing and deposition of animal remains demonstrates a noteworthy stability, only marginally impacted by religious and economic changes that seem to happen in the Mälaren valley.