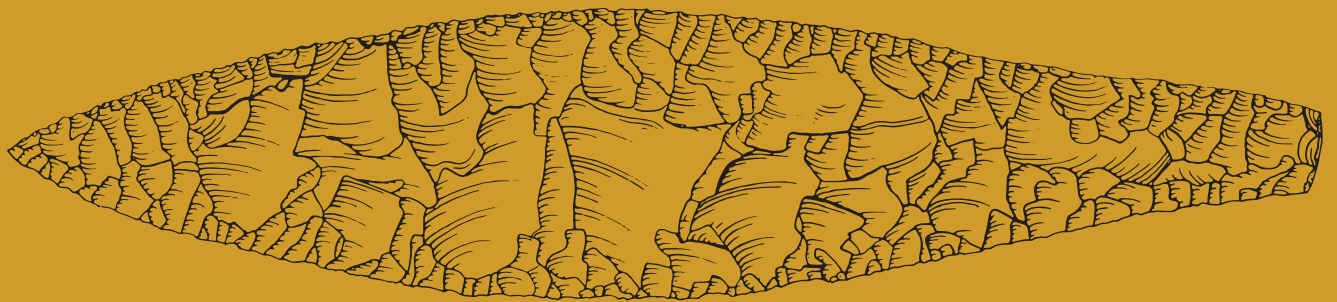


# Offa



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# A Völva's Grave at Roskilde, Denmark?

By Jens Ulriksen

## Introduction

Studying Viking Age graves it soon becomes clear that funeral rites not only varied in time and from one Scandinavian region to the other but within the same cemetery as well. Thus, one could get the impression that the burial rites were random or at least not fixed in an obvious cosmological framework. However, a closer study of the furnishing of the graves and the treatment of the interred indicates quite complex burial rituals some elements of which can be identified throughout Southern Scandinavia<sup>1</sup>.

Among the remarkable features is the presence of more than one individual in a grave, either as a double or triple burial or as a secondary burial. Furthermore, except for the interred a grave can contain parts of additional individuals, for example a hand or a skull of both children and adults. Burials with more than one person are not exceptional in Viking Age Scandinavia. A recent study has pointed out 38 cemeteries within the borders of present day Denmark where eleven cemeteries cluster

in Northeast Zealand (CHRISTENSEN 2013, 53). Evidence from two Viking Age burial grounds, Kirke Hyllinge Kirkebakke and Trekroner-Grydehøj, both from the area around Roskilde Fjord and excavated in the 2000s, shows that 14 % and 22 % of the graves respectively enclosed two or three persons and adding graves with parts of extra individuals the number augments to around 29 % (ULRIKSEN 2011). This particular practice does not mean that the graves are similar. On the contrary, they prove to be as diverse in the treatment of the deceased and the furnishing of the grave as the single graves.

The complex and enigmatic ritualized furnishing of a multiple grave was revealed during an excavation at Trekroner-Grydehøj. Amongst other things the burial A 505 contained two women, half a man, a stallion, a dog cut in two halves, a foetus of a sheep, a small menhir and large boulders, all covered with a carpet of stone.

## The Necropolis at Trekroner-Grydehøj, Roskilde

Grydehøj is the name of a small hill in the now developed area of Trekroner some 4 km east of the town centre of Roskilde, Denmark<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1). The hill has been a necropolis for more than 3,000 years. Beginning in the Late Neolithic Period (c. 2000–1700 BC) three stone cists covered with one or more mounds were situated on the summit. In the Early Bronze Age (c. 1700–1100 BC) a mound was built

in short distance to the west of the stone cists. Later this mound was expanded to facilitate a new Early Bronze Age grave and a ditch was dug around the eastward foot of the mound, in order to make it appear larger in contrast to the neighbouring Neolithic mounds. In the Late Bronze Age or in the beginning of the Pre-Roman Iron Age (c. 600–400 BC) three urn graves were buried at the western foot of

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a presentation of the traces of rituals in Danish Viking Age inhumation graves and published in the Danish periodical *Kuml* 2011 (see ULRIKSEN 2011). I am grateful to Roskilde Museum for the permission to use excavation plans and photographs in the article.

<sup>2</sup> Since the city council of Roskilde in the late 1990s began developing more than 70 hectares of farming land east of the town centre, the local archaeological museum successively

went ahead digging many kilometres of trial trenches before the construction of roads and main sewers began. During this process several single farms of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age were excavated. Then, in 2005 the necropolis was found, and during spring 2007 the excavation took place. The excavation was carried out by Roskilde Museum and conducted by the author.



Fig. 1. The Viking Age burial ground Trekroner-Grydehøj is marked with a black dot.

the hill. Then more than a thousand years passed until the late 8th or early 9th century AD when a Viking Age burial ground was established. The 27 inhumations were primarily found on the western slope of the hill with the old cluster of mounds as a point of departure (Fig. 2).

Of the 27 graves 20 % were oriented E-W, some with a slight deviation towards N-W, while 80 % had a N-S to NW-SE orientation. Not all the graves had preserved skeletal remains. All together 23 skeletons were registered, 13 in a supine position, and ten placed in a crouched position. Two single graves enclosed additional burned human skeletal material, while five graves contained two persons. In four of these burials even parts of at least one more individual were present. The graves with two individuals could be separated in two groups: double burials, where the bodies have been interred at the same time in the same pit, and primary/secondary burials characterized by a primary grave with one individual and a secondary grave dug within the limits of the first one.

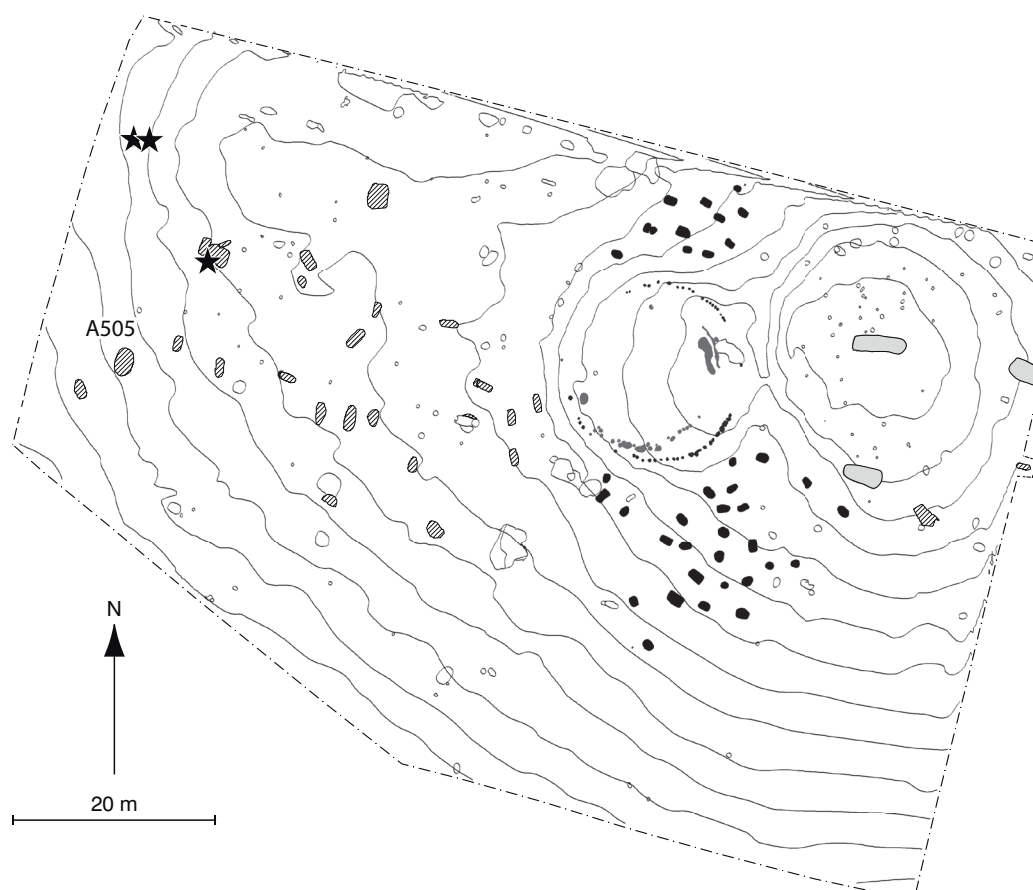


Fig. 2. Trekroner-Grydehøj. The lay-out of the prehistoric necropolis, excavated area with contour lines at 0.25 m intervals at the level of the excavated surface. Light grey: Late Neolithic stone cists; dark grey: the stone lined perimeter of the Early Bronze Age mound in two phases; black: cooking pits connected with the mound; stars: Late Bronze Age/Early Pre-Roman Iron Age urns; hatched: Viking Age inhumations. Illustration by author.



Two women, half a man, a stallion and  
a dog in two parts

The most complex feature among the burials was grave A 505. When unearthed it had an oblong shape, 182 × 280 cm, oriented N-S. In the top fill there were stones and flint with white cortex in sizes around 10–15 cm. One of the stones was scorched and another had a partly polished surface, probably a piece of a quern stone. Among the stones lay a few pieces of bones of varying size, some being from a dog. Along the eastern side and to the north three large boulders were visible (Fig. 3). Some 10–15 cm into the grave the pit was narrowed to 140 × 240 cm and an oblong patch of dark brown soil (c. 55 × 175 cm, 25 cm deep) packed with stones of flint, chalk and granite became visible. The dark patch was limited by two large boulders to the east, one large boulder to the north and a smaller boulder to the west. In the patch the remains of two humans were found (Fig. 4).

*Individual I* was a woman, her head in the north and legs towards south, 35–40 years of age, the remains being parts of the skull, ribs, a shoulder blade, a forearm, pelvis, lower extremities and a knee cap<sup>3</sup>. Both hip joints were severely affected by rheumatism and she has had a gumboil by the front teeth in the lower jawbone. The skeletal remains were very fragmented and were not found in strict anatomical order. The skull was partly covered by a heavy boulder and was turned 180 degrees, so that the top of the head pointed to the south. Underneath the skull lay fragments of a shoulder blade, ribs and a forearm. Whether the turning of the skull is due to post-depositional movements because of decomposition or whether the head was cut off before the burial is not clear. No cervical vertebrae were preserved to be examined for cut marks. The lower jaw bone was more or less in the correct position in relation to the skull, so if the displacement of the woman's head is due to the mechanics of decomposition this happened while the ligaments of the jaw were intact.

Together with the woman lay parts of *Individual II*. The remains present were the right hand, part of the pelvis and left and right femur. Their size and shape suggest that they belong to a man, 35–45 years of age. There were no artefacts in the upper grave, but parts of a medium-sized dog were scattered among the stones above the human remains<sup>4</sup>.

The third *Individual III* rested at the bottom of the grave. The body was arranged in a supine position with the head to the north. The fill around the skeletal parts was pale brown clayish humus and the



Fig. 3. Trekroner-Grydehøj. The top of the unearthened grave A 505 seen from south. Photo Birgitte Borby Hansen, Roskilde Museum.

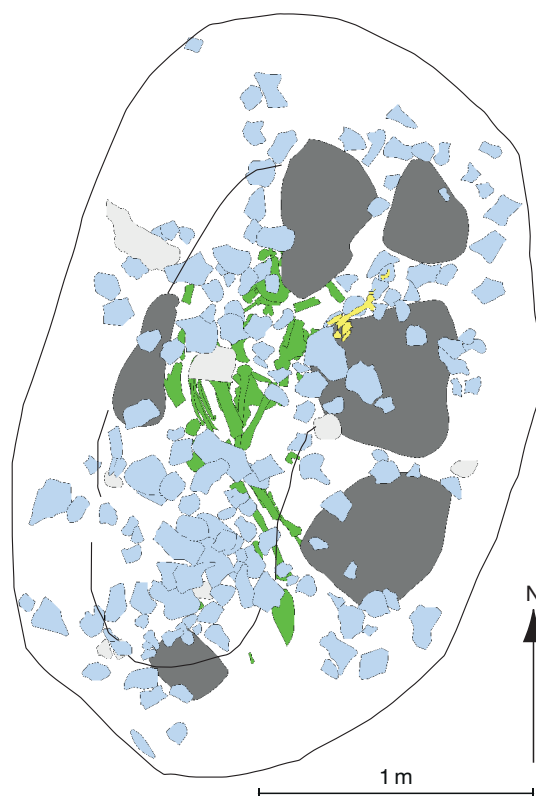


Fig. 4. Trekroner-Grydehøj. Upper level of grave A 505 with skeletal parts from *Individual I* and *Individual II* (green) covered by stones of flint (light blue) and chalk (light grey). Boulders are grey, bones from a dog are yellow. The inner dark patch is marked with a black line. Illustration by author.

<sup>3</sup> The analysis of the human skeletal remains was conducted by Dr. Pia Bennike, Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Copenhagen.

<sup>4</sup> The analysis of the faunal remains was conducted by conservator Kristian M. Gregersen, Natural History Museum of Denmark, University of Copenhagen.



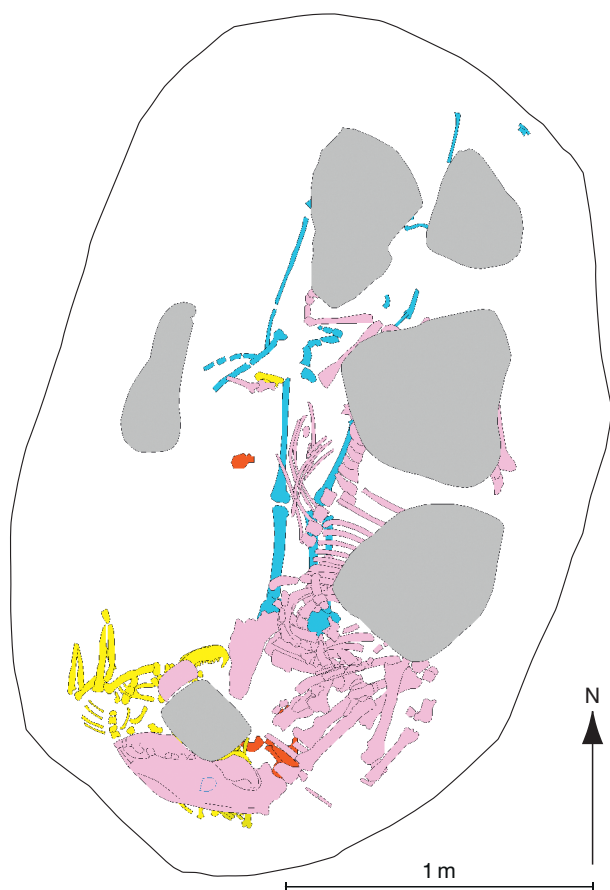


Fig. 5. Trekrøner-Grydehøj. Lower levels of grave A 505. Blue: Individual III; light purple: horse; yellow: dog; red: sheep or goat; grey: boulders. Illustration by author.



Fig. 6. Trekrøner-Grydehøj. Bottom of grave A 505. Blue: Individual III; yellow: dog; red: sheep or goat; black: artefacts; grey: boulder (menhir). Illustration by author.

amount of stones was considerably smaller than in the upper burials. Though the bones were fragmented it could be established that the interred person had been a woman, 166 cm tall and 25–30 years of age when she died. The skull was out of its anatomical correct position and stood upright on the foramen magnum facing west in a ‘nest’ of hand sized stones. A large boulder covered both the skull and parts of the torso (Fig. 5–6). Theoretically the combination of the weight of the boulder and the decomposition of the body may have caused the dislocation of the cranium, but considering its preservation and position in relation to the rest of the skeleton and the boulder it is more likely that the head was removed from the body before or during the burial ceremony.

Along with this woman more objects were found. Close to the head lay the iron handle of a small bucket. At the same spot was a 2 cm long wire nail of iron and at her right arm were the closing device of a wooden

box, a heavily worn knife, the handle of another knife, a slight copper alloy rivet and a substantial iron eye, both with some wood attached. At her right hand lay an 11 cm long and massive copper alloy piece cast together with a short iron blade or point (Fig. 7). In the abdominal area was found a tiny iron nail with a round head and along the left leg were occasional pieces of minute iron rods. Nearby the right thigh lay a poorly preserved cranium from goat or sheep and a dog’s jawbone while an iron hinge was situated alongside the tibia. At the feet of the woman rested a dog the size of a pointer, the body cut in two halves beforehand. By its neck were three links of an iron chain<sup>5</sup>, and partly on top of the hind part of the dog was a small angular menhir. Beside the dog lay a hind limb from a sheep, and by the menhir were two front teeth from a foetus, probably a sheep. After the arrangement of these elements an old stallion has been placed on its belly along the east side of the grave-cut. The

<sup>5</sup> A chain of a similar type was found in grave 944 at Birka (ARBMAN 1940, pl. 30)



Fig. 7. Trekroner-Grydehøj, grave A 505. Copper alloy piece with an iron point. Photo Cille Krause, Roskilde Museum.

stallion's body partly covered the interred woman, while the head rested on the hind part of the dog next to the menhir (Fig. 8). By the horse's neck were two massive eyed pins of iron, most likely used for securing packing on a saddle (COSACK 2005, 424 ff.). None of the artefacts had chronological significance, while an AMS  $^{14}\text{C}$  analysis of a tooth from the stallion suggests a dating between AD 720 and AD 970<sup>6</sup>.

The description above is almost like playing a movie backwards. Step by step the conduct of the burial may have been as follows: The original grave-cut was  $260 \times 157$  cm and dug 42 cm into the subsoil. According to the cross section of the grave-cut it has been filled up with a mix of top soil and subsoil (Fig. 9). It was not possible to find out whether a person, an animal or objects were buried at this point. After a while a re-opening of the grave-cut made way for the body of a woman (Individual III) placed in the mid-axis with her head in the north end, probably cut off before the interment. To her right hand side were a bucket, knives, a wooden box and a wooden staff with a composite metal point. At the southern end of the grave a sacrificed dog cut in two halves, a part of a sheep and a sheep foetus were arranged and partly covered with a 32 cm tall and angular menhir. At this point a stallion has been sacrificed

and placed along the east side of the grave-cut partially covering the woman and the dog. Finally four boulders were placed in the northern half of the grave-cut, two of them resting on top of the horse while a third boulder was placed over the cut off head and torso of the woman. Then the grave was filled.

After an uncertain time span the grave-cut was re-opened once again, 172 cm wide and 32 cm deep, but this time a little displaced to the east. The boulders on top of the woman and the stallion were visible and untouched. The reason for this episode is not clear, but in the central part of the grave the cross section witnessed a disturbed area right to the bottom of the original grave-cut. Studying the section the disturbance was later than the burial of Individual III, but it was impossible to find out to which of the later episodes it belonged. Somewhat later a grave-cut was dug between the large boulders. From top to bottom this secondary grave was filled with a mix of top soil, stones of granite, chalk and flint, the latter dominating in the upper 20 cm of the fill. Between the stones were placed the body of an older woman (Individual I) and above her the pelvis and femur of a man (Individual II) and parts of a medium sized dog. Thereafter the deceased presumably rested in peace.

#### A Black Magic Woman?

A grave of such a complex character with more than one individual, sacrificed animals, a stone carpet and several boulders is not exclusive in Viking Age Denmark. Nevertheless grave A 505 included some attributes that separates it from most other inhumations of that époque. Together these attributes suggest that one or more of the individuals interred were considered out of the ordinary.

Double graves are often interpreted as the master and his/her slave, the latter executed at the time of the funeral to accompany the first (i. e. RAMSKOU 1963–65; SKAARUP 1976, 178; CHRISTENSEN 1981, 26 ff.; 1997, 34; ANDERSEN 1993, 98; SVANBERG 2003, 93 f.; PRICE 2008, 266 f.). However, it has also been suggested that this explanation of the phenomenon – sacrificed slaves – may not be the only one. In his monography,

<sup>6</sup> AAR-10742:  $^{14}\text{C}$  age  $1178 \pm 36$  BP, AD 720–970 ( $2\sigma$ ), AD 770–900 ( $1\sigma$ ).



Fig. 8. Trekroner-Grydehøj. The south part of grave A 505 with the stallion's head in front and its body to the right. The front part of the dog is visible to the left of the menhir. Photo Birgitte Borby Hansen, Roskilde Museum.

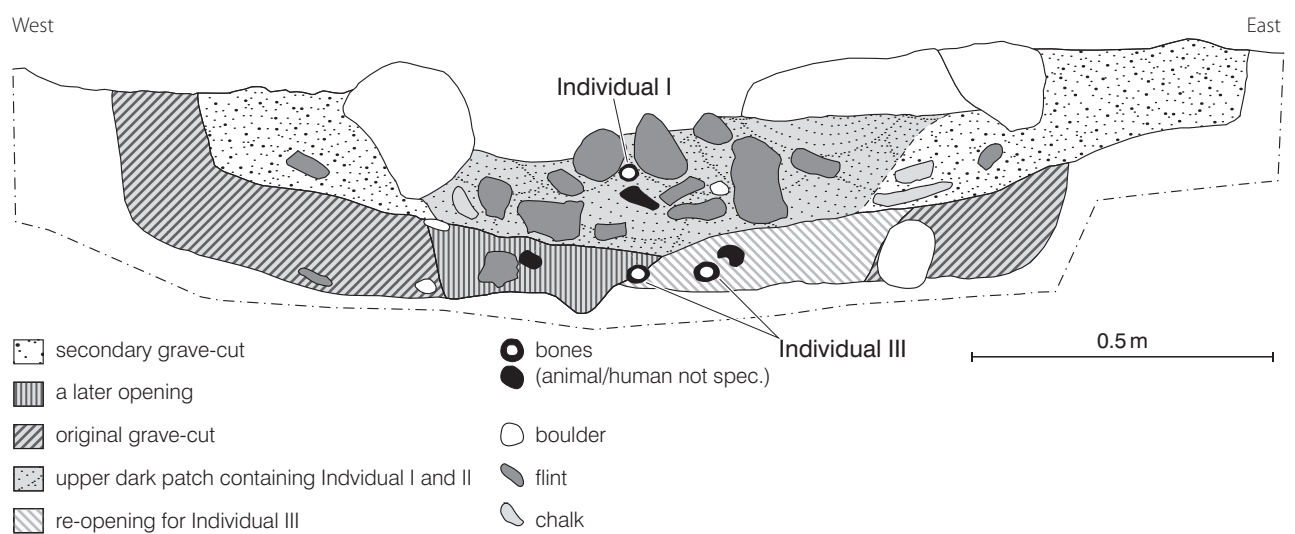


Fig. 9. Trekroner-Grydehøj, cross section of grave A 505.



*The Viking Way* (2002), Neil Price argued that some of the graves with more than one individual could represent a *völva*, i. e. a seeress and sorceress, accompanying a deceased person to the Otherworld. The identification of the *völva* rested on a staff-like object of iron, previously interpreted as either a whip shank (BRØNDSTED 1936, 196), a linear measure (ARBMAN 1943, 320) or as a roasting spit (ROESDAHL 1977, 92). Later, LESZEK GARDEŁA (2009 a) suggested that other types of staff-like objects such as spear heads may be connected to the *völva*. This brings the peculiar metal point in grave A 505 into consideration (cf. Fig. 7).

The copper alloy piece with the iron blade is unique. The rear end has a thorn for a shaft and copper alloy wire curled around it. Altogether the object resembled an arrowhead but it weighs twice as much as an average Viking Age arrow head of iron, and is by no means suited to be used as a projectile<sup>7</sup>. It has been considered that the object was a scalpel, while surgical instruments with iron blades and copper alloy handles are well known in the period of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless no instruments of a similar shape have been found, neither from Roman times nor from the Early Medieval Period (KIRKUP 2006, fig. 26; fig. 234)<sup>8</sup>.

The combination of a brass or bronze body amalgamated with an iron blade is unusual both for a tool and a weapon in a Scandinavian Viking Age context. Instead this pointed object may have been a part of a *seiðr* staff (PRICE 2002, 175 ff.; GARDEŁA 2009 a). In pagan Scandinavian ritual practice of *seiðr* the *völva* played the central role. In Old Norse *völva* (*vǫlva*) means staff-bearer and a staff (Old Norse *vǫlr*) seems to have been the 'insignia' of the *völva*<sup>9</sup>. In Old Norse texts there are references to several different names of staffs, but accurate descriptions of their design and the context in which they played their part are missing (PRICE 2002, 180; GARDEŁA 2009 a). In this particular case the staff may be what an Old Norse term refers to as a *gandr* or *gondull*. No actual description of the object exists, but the *gandr/gondull* may have consisted of a wooden shaft with a sharp point (PRICE 2002, 179; 181). Purpose and handling of this object has been disputed. It may be understood as a stick of magic associated with divination and sexual magic

(ibid. 177 f.). The *gandr/gondull* is also thought to have been used by the *völva* in a phase of ecstasy as a means of travelling for the released soul or spirit (ibid. 178; STEINSLAND 2005, 322). Yet another implication has been suggested concerning the *seiðr* staffs, namely as a symbol of Odin, the master of *seiðr* (MOTZ 1996, 84; GARDEŁA 2009 a, 200; 210 ff.). One of Odin's attributes was a spear, and the staff with the composite point from grave A 505 may well be associated with a symbolic spear.

Besides the assumed pointed staff of magic the presence of the stallion attracts our attention. Intact skeletons or parts of skeletons of sacrificed horses have been recorded in a limited number of Scandinavian Viking Age graves, showing some regional variation regarding frequency and cremations compared to inhumations<sup>10</sup>. In Danish context sacrificed horses are generally found in male graves, often combined with pieces of riding gear, weaponry and other high status objects. Sacrificed horses are less frequent in female graves, where the equipment related to the horse typically will be draught harness. Chronologically, graves with riding gear and/or a sacrificed horse are uncommon before the 10th century (PEDERSEN 1997, 125).

Grave A 505 is – at least for the time being – one of three inhumation burials with a sacrificed horse on the island of Zealand. In addition to the scarcity of this kind of graves the AMS <sup>14</sup>C dating indicates a 65 % chance that the interment took place between AD 770 and AD 900 (see p. 233 note 6). The horse resting alongside and partly upon the woman was an old stallion of at least 15–16 years of age with a measure of withers of about 124 cm. It is unlikely to have served as a splendid steed by the time of its death<sup>11</sup>. This is emphasized by the lack of objects connected with riding or draught of a wagon. Only the eyed pins of iron may be connected to the horse as tackle for securing luggage to a saddle. Comparable inhumations in other parts of Denmark and in Sweden have the horse placed at the narrow side of the grave-cut, typically at the foot of the grave and combined with either riding gear or harness tackle. Furthermore, where osteological surveys have been conducted the horses had a measure of withers about 127–140 cm and were in

<sup>7</sup> The point weighs 31.6 g, while an average Viking Age arrow head of iron weighs c. 15 g.

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Ralph Jackson, curator of Romano-British Collections, British Museum, London, and specialist in ancient Greek and Roman surgical instruments, has valuated photographs of the object in question. With reservations, because he did not have a close look at the original object, Dr. Jackson stated that it is not a scalpel. I am grateful for his kind support.

<sup>9</sup> *Volve* (modern Danish); *vǫlva* (gen. sing. *vǫlu*, nom. pl. *vǫl(v)ur*, dat. pl. *vǫlum*), derived from *vǫlr*, *stav* (staff), *tryllestav* (magic wand); considering Scandinavian prehistory: *spåkvinde* (fortune teller), see "Ordbog over det danske

sprog" ([www.ordnet.dk/ods/](http://www.ordnet.dk/ods/)). CLIVE TOLLEY (2009, 536 ff.) argued that etymologically *völva* means a seeress and plays down the connection between the word *vǫlva* and staff.

<sup>10</sup> BRØNDSTED 1936; ARBMAN 1943; MÜLLER-WILLE 1976; 1987; GRÄSLUND 1980; KLEIMINGER 1993; EISENSCHMIDT 1994; SVANBERG 2003; BØRSHEIM 2002/03; STYLEGAR 2007.

<sup>11</sup> The determination of the horse's age by the time of its death is an estimation based on the wear of the teeth and the joined centrotarsale 1–5. Pers. comm. conservator Kristian M. Gregersen, Natural History Museum of Denmark, University of Copenhagen.

their prime by the time of death, meaning 4–8 years of age (BRØNDSTED 1936, 154; EISENSCHMIDT 1994, 224 ff.; PRICE 2002, 132)<sup>12</sup>.

Thus, the evidence from grave A 505 differs in several ways from most other inhumations with a person and a horse in Viking Age Denmark. Traditionally horses in burials are taken as a sign of the high status of the person interred. Considering the wooden box, the bucket and the knives, the woman at the bottom level of grave A 505 was not without means compared to other burials of the period. Nevertheless, the position of the sacrificed horse in the grave-cut, the absence of riding gear and draught tackle combined with the assumed staff of magic may point to another kind of high status than the ordinary.

In Old Norse mythology the horses Skinfaxi and Hrímfaxi were dragging the sun and the moon across the sky, and Sleipner, the eight-legged steed, was one of Odin's most renowned attributes, enabling him to travel to the Otherworld. The horse also appears to have had an important role in the *blót*, a ritual practice that could include the sacrifice of a horse, and subsequently the eating of its flesh by the participants as described in Saga *Hákonar góða* (SØRENSEN 1991). It also appears that horse's flesh was taboo as food at any other time (NÄSSTRÖM 1999, 168; 2001, 23 ff.), and the specific ban for Christians to eat the meat of horses, initiated by Pope Gregory III in 732, may very well be related to the special status of the horse in pagan rituals of Northwestern Europe. Thus, the horse served a number of important roles both among humans and Gods, but most important in the present context is that the horse seems to have been a psychopompic animal, that could take the dead spirit to the next world (TOLLEY 2009, 544). This may be the reason for the presence of the stallion in grave A 505: an escort for the woman's spirit more than a means of transportation in a temporal sense.

Furthermore, following the trace of the *völva* the stallion could be symbolizing a connection to Óðin, the master of *seiðr*. Yet, a certain part of a stallion seems to have played a significant role in a *seiðr* ritual known from the poem *Völva þáttr*. The origin and age of the composition of these verses are disputed, but even though the oldest known written account is from the late 14th century Norway, the poem has original elements from the Viking Age concerning ritual performance of *seiðr* (PRICE 2002, 217 ff. with further references). The poem refers to a ritual of fertility performed by the household of a farm, where especially

the women are chanting lyrics of unequivocal sexual character while holding the dried, preserved and linen-wrapped phallus of a slaughtered draught-horse. There are specifically references to female masturbation using the phallic object, and ritualized masturbation seems to have been connected to the *völva*'s performance of *seiðr*. The *völvas*' staffs of magic are actually perceived as phallic symbols, and the *gandr/göndull*, probably the type of staff in grave A 505, may have served as an epithet for 'penis' (ibid. 217).

Furthermore, it is worth pointing out the extraordinary elements of the treatment of the woman's body. Her head seems to have been intentionally removed from the corpse, probably cut off post mortem and deliberately placed on the foramen magnum facing west. Both in Old Norse texts and in the archaeological evidence from Sweden and Denmark there are a few examples of executions by decapitation or the removal of the head of a buried person by re-entering the grave, the latter presumably to prevent the deceased from haunting the living (GARDELA 2013). This has also been the conviction in Anglo-Saxon England (REYNOLDS 2009, 78). The woman in grave A 505 has no signs on the cervical vertebrae of a decapitation or post mortal beheading, so it is likely that the head has been cut off with a knife prior to the burial. The reason may have been her position as performer of *seiðr*. This has also been suggested as the cause to place large boulders and stones on the deceased, keeping a malicious soul or spirit from leaving the grave (CHRISTENSEN 1981; GARDELA 2009b; REYNOLDS 2009, 93). In all, the precautionary measures against haunting emphasize the supposed magic power of the woman in grave A 505.

NEIL PRICE'S (2002, 127 ff.) study of Scandinavian graves of possible female sorcerers identified a limited number of burials by the presence of a staff-like object. The graves, most of them dated to the 10th century, are not at all alike but nevertheless include comparable elements. Beside the 'staff' a common feature is a rather comprehensive furnishing of the graves with imports, luxury objects, buckets, boxes, amulets and jewellery indicating a high social status<sup>13</sup>.

Comparing the contents of grave A 505 with these burials in order to support the assumed presence of a *völva*'s grave there is no clear answer. Indeed, the supposed 'staff', the bucket and the wooden box are present, while jewellery, amulets, imports or luxury objects are absent. Equally, the dominant features of grave A 505 such as the stallion, the menhir, the boulders and the stone carpet – not to mention the additional

<sup>12</sup> Early Anglo-Saxon and Continental inhumations containing horses and dating from mid 5th to mid 7th century show a similar picture considering the age of the sacrificed animals, primarily stallions with a typical measure of

withers between 130 and 140 cm (FERN 2012, 170).

<sup>13</sup> The graves in question are Birka grave Bj. 660, Bj. 834 and Bj. 845; Klinta grave 53:2 and 53:3; Aska; Fyrkat grave 4 (see PRICE 2002, 127 ff.).



human bodies and the severed dog – are no typical traits of the burials in question. However, even though double burials and sacrificed horses are scarce among the *völvas*' graves under consideration, an intriguing example including both features is grave Bj. 834 from Birka, where a woman was buried sitting on the lap of a warrior resting in a chair and accompanied by two draught horses (ARBMAN 1943, 304 ff.; PRICE 2002, 132 ff.). In another optional *völva*'s grave from Birka, Bj. 660, a woman rested at the bottom of the 1.8 m deep grave-cut with her jewellery, a wooden box, a bucket, a crucifix and a 'staff'. About 60 cm from the top of the grave-fill, corresponding with the roof level of the chamber, a human skull and a bent arrowhead of iron was found (ARBMAN 1943, 231 ff.).

Even though grave A 505 did not contain jewellery, indeed it was abundantly furnished in a local and regional perspective. There were no female graves in the cemetery at Trekroner-Grydehøj that contained jewellery other than occasional beads of glass in limited numbers. As a matter of fact female graves richly supplied with jewellery or imports are infrequent in Zealand, and burials with the almost iconic set of oval brooches, which are found in nearly all of the 'staff-graves', rarely exceed 5 % of the total number of burials at any cemetery in the region, if present at all<sup>14</sup>.

The example of grave A 505 underlines the significance of taking the complexity of the interment into consideration when interpreting its social value. The effort invested in the burial is by no means trivial and without a doubt one or more of the persons interred held an important social position when living.



Fig. 10. Trekroner-Grydehøj. The *völva* in her grave. Reconstructed by Mirosław Kuźma. Illustration copyright Leszek Gardela and Mirosław Kuźma.

## Conclusion

At this point archaeological facts, circumstantial evidence and comparative examples have been presented claiming that grave A 505 contained a Viking Age seeress and sorceress, i.e. a *völva* (Fig. 10). The facts are an extraordinary complex burial ritual including some re-entries into the grave, two presumably decapitated women and half the skeleton of a man, several sacrificed animals all covered with large boulders and a carpet of stones of granite, chalk and flint. Admittedly, complex burials with more individuals, animals, boulders and/or stone carpets are known in the archaeological record without being connected to *völvas*. However, in this particular case some of the features have a twist pointing in the direction of the extraordinary. The old

stallion being way beyond his prime combined with the absence of riding gear or draught harness is peculiar opposed to 'normal' burials with man/woman and a well equipped horse. Add to this the exceptional bronze piece amalgamated with an iron blade and indisputably having been mounted on the end of a shaft or stick. Interpreting the object as part of a *völva*'s 'staff' is indeed circumstantial. Nevertheless, it has proven difficult to establish any comparative profane tool or weapon of the same size and manufacture. Therefore, the combination of the pointed object, the other contents of the grave and the handling of the interred compared with the suggested *völva* graves from Scandinavia, grave A 505 from Trekroner-Grydehøj may very well be one of this kind.

<sup>14</sup> In this survey Viking Age cemeteries from Zealand with more than 20 burials including graves containing oval brooches are Tollemosegård, Græse Parish: 4 %; Snubbekorsgård, Sengeløse Parish: 2 %; Trelleborg, Hejninge Parish: 1 % (NØRLUND 1948); Ottestrup, Ottestrup Parish: 2 % (ERIKSEN 1991); Lejre, Allerslev Parish: 2 % (ANDERSEN 1993); Trekroner-Grydehøj:

none (ULRIKSEN 2011); Kirke Hyllinge Kirkebakke, Kirke Hyllinge Parish: none (ibid.); Forlev, Vemmeløv Parish: none (BRØNDSTED 1936). Considering Snubbekorsgård and Tollemosegård, I thank museum's curator Lotte Reedtz Sparrevohn and Dr. Søren A. Sørensen respectively for the permission to use the unpublished data from their excavations.

## Summary

In a period of increased focus on combining Norse mythology, cosmology and archaeology a complex burial from the Viking Age was excavated at Trekroner-Grydehøj in the outskirts of present day Roskilde, Denmark. Grave A 505 was an inhumation demonstrating a ritualized furnishing. Amongst other things the burial A 505 contained two women, half a man, a stallion, a dog cut in two halves, a foetus of a sheep, a small menhir and large boulders, all with a stone covering of granite, flint and chalk.

Double graves are often interpreted as the master and his/her slave, the latter executed at the time of the funeral to accompany the first. However, it has also been suggested that some graves with more than one individual could represent a *völva*, i.e. a seeress and sorceress, accompanying a deceased person to the Otherworld. The identification of a *völva* rested on a staff-like object of iron. This brings a peculiar metal point of bronze and iron from grave A 505 into consideration. It is suggested that the point is a part of a magic wand and consequently identifies the woman interred as a *völva*. Besides the pointed staff of magic the presence of an old stallion attracts the

attention. There were no riding gear or draught tackle and in the present context the horse may have been a psychopompic animal that could take the dead spirit to the next world.

The treatment of the woman's body also witnesses extraordinary elements. Her head seems to have been cut off post mortem and deliberately placed on the *foramen magnum*. Both in Old Norse texts and in the archaeological evidence there are a few examples of executions by decapitation or the removal of the head of a buried person by re-entering the grave, the latter presumably to prevent the deceased from haunting the living. The reason may have been her position as performer of *seiðr*. This has also been suggested as a reason to place large boulders and stones on the deceased, keeping a malicious soul or spirit from leaving the grave.

So considering the pointed object and the other contents of the grave as well as the handling of the interred, in comparison with the suggested *völvas'* graves from Scandinavia the deceased in grave A 505 from Trekroner-Grydehøj may very well have been a female shaman and seer.

## Zusammenfassung

In einer Zeit, in der vermehrt ein Schwerpunkt auf der gemeinsamen Betrachtung von nordischer Mythologie, Kosmologie und Archäologie liegt, ist das wikingerzeitliche Grab von Trekroner-Grydehøj in der Nähe von Roskilde, Dänemark, ausgegraben worden. Das Körpergrab A 505 zeigt eine rituelle Ausstattung, unter anderem enthielt es zwei Frauen, die Hälfte des Skeletts eines Mannes, einen Hengst, einen in zwei Hälften zerlegten Hund, den Fötus eines Schafes, einen kleinen aufrecht stehenden Stein und große Steinblöcke – alles bedeckt mit einem Steinmantel aus Granit, Flint und Kreide.

Doppelgräber werden häufig als Bestattung von Herrin/Herr und Sklavin/Sklave angesehen, wobei die/der Bedienstete getötet wurde, um Herrin/Herr in das Jenseits zu begleiten. Es wird allerdings auch vermutet, dass in einigen Gräbern mit mehr als einem Individuum eine *völva* – eine Seherin und Zauberin – bestattet wurde, um die/den Toten in das Jenseits zu begleiten. Die Identifizierung als *völva* beruht auf einem stabähnlichen Objekt aus Eisen. Ein derartiges Stück fand sich auch in Grab A 505: Die Spitze wird als Teil eines Zauberstabs angesehen und identifiziert somit die Bestattete als *völva*. Auch

der alte Hengst, bei dem sich kein Reit- oder Fahrzeubehör fand, weist in spirituelle Richtung: Er könnte die Aufgabe gehabt haben, die Seele der Verstorbenen in das Jenseits zu bringen.

Die Behandlung des Körpers der Toten ist ebenfalls außergewöhnlich. Ihr Kopf ist offenbar nach dem Tod vom Körper abgetrennt und bewusst auf dem *Foramen magnum* abgesetzt worden. Sowohl altnordische Texte als auch archäologische Befunde liefern einige Beispiele für Exekutionen durch Enthauptung oder die Verlagerung des Kopfes eines Bestatteten bei einer erneuten Graböffnung. Letzteres erfolgte vermutlich, um zu verhindern, dass Tote die Lebenden heimsuchen. Der Grund könnte in ihrer Stellung als Ausführende des *seiðr* sein. Vermutlich führte dies wiederum dazu, dass große Felsblöcke und Steine auf den Verstorbenen platziert wurden, um böswillige Seelen oder den bösen Geist nicht aus dem Grab entkommen zu lassen.

Verglichen mit den beschriebenen Gräbern von *völvas* in Skandinavien lässt das stabähnliche Objekt in Grab A 505 und der weitere Inhalt sowie die Behandlung der Bestatteten von Trekroner-Grydehøj vermuten, dass hier das Grab einer *völva* vorliegt.



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