Regional diversity and religious change
– Late Viking Age burial and commemoration on Öland and Gotland

Introduction

The transition from a Viking Age society to a medieval culture of Continental character constituted a protracted process with considerable regional diversity. The archaeological record from Öland as well as Gotland, with numerous silver hoards, late runestones and conservative burial customs, demonstrates that older traditions lingered for a considerable period of time on the large islands of the Baltic. As stressed throughout this volume, the Baltic Sea was never a barrier. Instead, it connected regions as waterways comprised the most important means of communication. In this context the islands functioned as communicative and cultural nodes, where traditions melted and blended. At the same time the islanders developed a strong local identity expressed through a distinctive material culture (Raffield, Papmehl-Dufay, and Gustafsson this volume).

Despite acting as nodes in trade networks and catalysts for cultural exchange, both Öland and Gotland were almost definitely conceived of as peripheral areas from the viewpoint of the emerging central power on mainland Sweden during the late Viking Age and early medieval period (Ljung 2016a:243–247). Thus, centrality is a matter of perspective; or perhaps more specifically the extent of different social networks and the scope of their influence. One of the most important cultural encounters of the period was that with Christianity. The Christianisation process and the establishment of an ecclesiastical organisation in central Sweden was closely connected with social structures, where power-relations and elite networks played a crucial role (Ljung 2016a; 2019). The special position of Öland and Gotland, which can be considered as being both central and peripheral at the same time, certainly affected the conversion of the islands. In this article I will discuss the local response to the Christianisation process on Öland and Gotland based on runestones, late picture stones and changing burial traditions.
Stone monuments and conversion period burial on Öland and Gotland

The Christianisation process on Öland and Gotland exhibit both similarities and differences regarding transformations of mortuary and commemorative practises. The Ölandic archaeological record shows that a significant shift in mortuary customs takes place around the turn of the new millennium, in 1000 AD or a little earlier. Cremation burial ceased altogether, and north-south orientated inhumation graves were replaced by burials facing east-west, with the head of the dead positioned in the west. The buried individuals were often placed in wooden coffins. At the same time, there was a drop in the number of grave goods and the composition of artefacts changed (Svanberg 2003:64–75). The introduction of new mortuary practices correlates with the beginning of the late Viking Age runestone period on Öland (Ljung 2016a:145). In around the middle of the 11th century the runestone tradition transformed as both the function and design of stone memorials altered, which can be linked to a shift in spatial context. A close examination of the Ölandic runestone corpus has revealed differences between a group of stones found in their original position in landscapes and at churches on one hand, and a group of stones that almost exclusively originate from ecclesiastical contexts on the other. Runestones in a landscape setting consist mainly of undressed boulders of irregular shape, often of monumental size, with incised ornamentation. The churchyard group by contrast is characterised by upright stones of minute size, with geometrical shapes, hewn edges and ornamentation in relief (Ljung 2016a:132–138) (Fig. 1).

There are structural similarities between Öland and mainland Sweden in that the runestone tradition changed when it was transferred from a landscape setting to a churchyard context. The resulting form of monuments, however, varied geographically. Rune-carved grave monuments in the provinces of Östergötland, Västergötland, Södermanland, Närke and Småland mainly comprise cist monuments or recumbent slabs with or without head- or foot-stones; commonly referred to as early Christian grave monuments or Eskilstuna cists (Ljung 2016a). As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the Ölandic group of minute upright stones in churchyard contexts functioned in the same way as the mainland monuments; as grave markers (Ljung
However, the islanders chose to give their churchyard memorials a distinctively different design from that of the mainland. Rune–carved funerary monuments have hitherto been found at seven church sites on Öland. Their design mainly comprises a zoomorphic form of ornamentation that stylistically belongs to the second half of the 11th century, thereby providing an indirect date for the formation of churchyards on the island. It cannot be ruled out that churchyard burial precedes the erection of memorials (Ljung 2016a:138–144). However, there are some indications that the production of funerary monuments might have started slightly earlier in Köpingsvik, where almost two thirds of the total Ölandic corpus (77 out of 123 slabs and fragments) have been found (Ljung 2016a:138–141; 2016b). The significant number of funerary monuments must be seen in the light of the special
Viking Age settlement in Köpingvik (see Johnson & Schulze 1990; Schulze 2004), as well as the remarkably large Late Iron Age cemetery (see Svanberg 2003:252–257) (Fig. 2). The cultural layers have been dated from the early 10th century to around 1200, with a main activity phase in the period c. 1050–1125/50 (Johnson & Schulze 1990:52–54; Schulze 2004:40–47). Thus, it is interesting to note that the introduction of rune-carved funerary monuments concurs with the period of increased activity. Moreover, the horizontal stratigraphy suggests that the establishment of the churchyard in Köpingsvik can be understood as a continued extension of the large burial ground (Schulze 1987:37, 136). Köpingsvik kept its function as a major cemetery throughout the conversion period and evolved into what was probably the most important ecclesiastical site on Öland during the Early Middle Ages. The vast number of grave monuments indicates that people from a wide-ranging area chose to bury and commemorate their dead at the early churchyard (see Ljung 2016a:193–196). The marked size of the churchyard (almost 13,000 m², which is four times bigger than an average Ölandic churchyard) provides further evidence of this (Boström 2007:97 with references). The first stone church, which was probably built as early as c. 1100, had the dimensions of a cathedral and was equivalent in size to the contemporary 12th-century monastic church in Vreta and the cathedral in Linköping, both in Östergötland (Boström 2007:97–100). It is clear, therefore, that the structure was designed to become a major ecclesiastical foundation.

Despite the emergence of an ecclesiastical landscape on Öland from at least the mid-11th century, the traditional burial grounds stayed in use for a substantial period of time, probably well into the 12th century (Svanberg 2003:77; Ljung 2016a:177–178). Interestingly, there is also a considerable period of temporal overlap between traditional runestones in a landscape setting and rune-carved grave monuments at churchyards (Ljung 2016a:145). Consequently, different forms of burial practices existed side by side at both rural cemeteries and churchyards. Similarly, there is a parallel use of runic monuments in diverse spatial settings. The inscription on the Bjärby runestone, Öl 36, underlines this diversity in practice (see Fig. 1). The stone was raised in memory of Fastulf who was buried in the church, a very honourable position indicating that he was probably its founder. Stylistically the runestone
can be dated to the mid-11th century, and as such it is contemporary with the rune-carved grave monuments (Ljung 2016a:146–148). Compared with 11th-century Öland, diversity in burial and commemorative practices is even greater on Gotland. Whereas the runestone tradition is homogenous across Öland, and changes in burial customs seem to influence the whole island equally, there are apparent regional differences within Gotland. Picture stones were erected on Gotland for almost a millennium (Widerström 2012), but significant changes occur in the last phase (classified as type E-stones by Sune Lindqvist) – a group that comprises large mushroom-shaped stones, so-called ‘dwarf’ stones with the same shape, and cist-stones (Lindqvist 1941:52–61). These diverse monuments have different distributions; dwarf and cist stones were primarily erected on southern Gotland, whereas large stones are mainly found in the northern part of the island (Lindqvist

Fig. 2. The settlement area and cemetery area in Köpingsvik in relation to the churchyard. Reconstruction by Fredrik Svanberg based on a map by C. G. Hilfeling from 1796 and map 9 in Johnson & Schulze 1990. After Svanberg 2003:255 Fig. 107 with permission.
The E–stones were dated by Lindqvist to the 11th century (1941:122–123), but some researchers have suggested a continuity into the 12th century (Andrén 1989:291; Lager 2002:92–95; Snædal 2002:66, 93–100; cf. Westphal 2004). The late picture stones have not gained as much scholarly interest as the iconic, earlier stones with their enigmatic imagery (see however Westphal 2004; Kitzler Åhfeldt 2019), though in my mind they constitute an important key to understand changes in 11th-century Gotlandic society.

The picture stone custom changed during the 11th century with the introduction of a new type of imagery; zoomorphic ornamentation and large crosses, together with an enhanced emphasis on the runic inscriptions. Several scholars have observed an influence from the Upplandic runestone tradition in terms of linguistics and stylistic design, as well as in craftsmanship techniques (Lindqvist 1941:52–53; Jansson 1945:147–149; Snædal 2002:100–102; Oehrl 2019:15–16; Kitzler Åhfeldt 2019). By these alterations a several hundred-year-old tradition rooted in pagan society became part of the Christian culture (Varenius 2012:43). Despite this, the shape of the monuments alludes to older traditions. Moreover, the phrasings of the runic inscriptions are unique to the island and the classic runestone ornamentation was adjusted to local taste, thus giving the memorials a specific Gotlandic design (Snædal 2002:100). In addition, monuments with figurative motifs rooted in the older tradition were still produced on the southern part of the island (Westphal 2004; Oehrl 2019:16, 20).

The diversity of 11th-century monuments on Gotland is striking and there is no easy way to explain this variety; but it is most likely dependent both on chronological differences and local traditions on the island (see also Snædal 2002:230). Another aspect that must be taken into consideration is the spatial location of the monument. It has been noted that smaller stones within the late picture stone tradition have more-frequently been found in ecclesiastical contexts and consequently they have been interpreted as churchyard memorials (Lindqvist 1941:124; SRI 11, 49–50; cf. Johansen 1997:215–222). There are clear similarities between this Gotlandic group of dwarf stones and the group of rune-carved grave monuments on Öland. Both comprise notably small upright stones, with hewn edges and ornamentation cut in relief (Ljung 2016a:159–160) (Fig. 3). Moreover, two Gotlandic
mushroom-shaped slabs recovered at Köpingsvik on Öland constitute a more direct link between the islands (see Köping 1 and 9; Ljung 2016b). The stones were brought from Gotland and functioned as gable slabs at each end of a now lost recumbent slab in a churchyard memorial (Ljung 2016a:135–136). Thus, it is tempting to interpret the dwarf stones on Gotland in a similar manner to the Ölandic material. However, not all dwarf-stones originate from church sites and the connec-
tion between different types of stone monuments and their landscape contexts on Gotland is complex. An analysis of this issue is beyond the scope of the present paper, but I would like to stress the fact that the diversity within the late picture stone tradition is mirrored in a diversity in late Viking Age mortuary practices on island.

It is not possible to distinguish a distinct shift in mortuary customs on Gotland, when overtly pagan burials ended. In northern Gotland the abandonment of older grave fields took place in the first part of the 11th century, somewhat earlier than in the southern part of the island, where the same process dates to the late 11th- and early 12th century (Staecker 1997:66). The so-called churchyard finds, cemeteries with east-west orientated inhumations where burials were strictly segregated according to sex, with women in the north and men in the south, demonstrate the existence of churchyard burials on Gotland during the 11th century (Trotzig 1969; Thunmark-Nylén 1989; 1995; Staecker 1997). Similar divisions occur occasionally in early churchyards in the Nordic region (see Staecker 2001; Mejsholm 2017), but specific to Gotland is the custom of burying the dead in their clothes together with dress ornaments and personal items (Trotzig 1969; Thunmark-Nylén 1989; 1995). The same type of objects occur in graves on traditional burial grounds located away from church sites, together with weaponry, food vessels and animal bones – finds that are otherwise absent in a churchyard context (Trotzig 1969). Contrary to churchyards, the traditional burial grounds are gender-mixed, with inhumation graves mainly orientated north-south together with sporadic cremation graves (Thunmark-Nylén 1989:214; Rundkvist 2003:75). Thus, both churchyard burial and lingering pagan mortuary traditions existed on 11th-century Gotland, but their interrelationship at a local level is debated (see Staecker 2001:236–244). It is uncertain whether there is a long period of contemporaneity (Thunmark-Nylén 1989:213, 223; 1995:162–166), or whether there was a successive development from the use of burial grounds to that of churchyards within each settlement area (Carlsson 1990). Likewise, there seems to be no consensus on how to understand the relation between shifting burial practices and late picture stones. Both Ola Kylberg (1991:169–169) and Birgitta Johansen (1997:208, 220–222) stress that there is a negative correspondence between churchyard finds and late picture stones; parishes with conversion period memo-
rials and furnished burials at churchyards exclude each other. Jörn Stackeir’s (2001:236–247) study of mortuary practices on Gotland on the other hand suggests a more complex situation, where late picture stones occur both in parishes with pagan burial grounds and churchyard finds (see also Rundkvist 2003:78–81). The diversity within the late picture stone tradition suggests that not all memorials were erected for the same purpose. A comprehensive survey that takes into consideration both the spatial context of the monuments and their materiality is sorely needed in order to better understand the relationship between burials and commemorative practices on the island.

To summarise, this overview demonstrates that it is possible to discern structural similarities between Öland and Gotland in that traditional burial grounds continued in use for a long period of time, alongside that of newly established churchyards. Equally, conversion-period stone monuments were erected in different spatial contexts. Yet, pagan burial rituals were practiced for a longer period on Gotland than on Öland. The situation on 11th-century Öland and Gotland resembles that in Uppland and north-east Södermanland, as well as the district of Möre west of Kalmar strait, where different forms of mortuary and commemorative practices existed side by side for a considerable period of time (Ljung 2016a:131, 155-163, 178). People who buried their dead at cemeteries on Öland during the late 11th century, or dressed in clothes with ornaments at early churchyards on Gotland, most likely considered themselves as Christians. Nonetheless, neither the use of traditional burial grounds nor furnished churchyard burials were in accordance with a stricter Christian burial doctrine (see Nilsson 1996:365–374; 2010; Staecker 2001:234), which raises questions regarding how ecclesiastical life was organised on the large islands in the Baltic.

Conversion in centre and periphery – islands and the mainland

The encounter with Christianity on Öland and Gotland was not remarkably late, but the islander’s response towards religious change differed from that of mainland Sweden. What sets the situation fundamentally apart is that different mortuary and commemorative customs remained in use long–after the emergence of an ecclesiastical landscape. The requirement that burial should take place solely at churchyards was not enforced until a fairly late date on Öland as well
as Gotland. In the core areas of Sweden (Uppland and north-east Södermanland excluded), the old burial grounds seem to have been abandoned at an early stage, followed by the introduction of a more uniform Christian burial praxis. This correlates with a short runestone period, centred on the late 10th century and the beginning of the 11th century, together with a swift transformation of the runestone custom when it was transferred from a landscape to a churchyard context. Moreover, it is only possible to detect a short period of contemporaneity between traditional runestones in a landscape setting and early Christian grave monuments; thus, the churchyard had already become the only arena for burial and commemoration of the dead by the 11th century (Ljung 2016a:177–180). Hence, the most crucial difference between Öland and Gotland on the one hand and the mainland on the other is that of homogeneity and diversity. These regional differences should not necessarily be interpreted as indicative of varying levels or degrees of Christianity in the sense of faith and religious conviction; instead, it reflects differences in the way Christian life was organised, and whether it was centrally controlled or more decentralised with opportunities for choices based on family or household locality (Ljung 2016a:244). The implementation of a uniform Christian burial custom in mainland Sweden, restricted to churchyards only, required both secular and ecclesiastical authority that could impose and maintain these major transformations (Ljung 2016a:220–222 with references).

Several circumstances indicate that the lack of uniform mortuary and commemorative practices on Öland and Gotland had its background in a fragmented landownership and/or in the absence of a strong central power during the late Viking Age and early medieval period. This probably made it difficult for the Church to gain a more permanent foothold (Ljung 2016a:244–247).

The diversity in ritual practice on 11th-century Gotland indicates that the decision to convert to Christianity was made at many different times by smaller units, probably reflecting estates or groups of farms (Rundkvist 2003:82–83; Andrén 2009:46). Anders Andrén (2009) argues that the first wooden churches were most likely built as part of individual initiatives at aristocratic estates, but contrary to the core areas in mainland Sweden Gotland lacked a social elite whose power emanated from large-scale landholdings. Consequently, there is
an absence of central control. Furthermore, Jörn Staecker (1997; 2001) observes that furnished churchyard burials occur in areas with a social and political structure that differed from the prevailing norms of the period, arguing that the Gotlandic churchyard finds should be understood in the light of a Russian/Byzantine missionary influence. It is therefore no coincidence that Adam of Bremen made no mention of Gotland in his history of the see of Hamburg-Bremen; the island did not form part of the western ecclesiastical organisation at that time (Staecker 1997:80–81; 2001:251). Furthermore, the authority of both the Swedish king and the Bishop of Linköping was very restricted on Gotland during the medieval period (Lindkvist 1983:281–282).

Contrary to Gotland, which upheld an independent position into the Middle Ages, Öland was probably absorbed into the Swedish realm by force. There is no trace of the domestic Viking Age aristocracy, made visible by large farms, silver hoards and runic monuments during the Middle Ages. Instead, the local nobility was both politically and economically insignificant, and by the end of the medieval period, around 40% of the arable land was owned by persons and institutions residing outside of the island; the crown, the church and the mainland nobility. This strongly suggests that a dramatic shift in land ownership had taken place at some point in the early Middle Ages. The crown and its allies were probably responsible for this radical transformation (Fallgren 2006:175, 181). Moreover, the fact that Öland most likely is not mentioned in the Florence list – a register of the Roman church provinces in Scandinavia dated to 1104/1120 – indicates that the island, like Gotland, did not form part of the early Church administration (see Tunberg 1913; Kumlien 1962; Tagesson 2002:66).

Consequently, several circumstances indicate that Öland and Gotland not only belonged to a social network that differed to that on mainland Sweden, but that they also maintained their independence from the emergent political and ecclesiastical powers of the late Viking Age and Early Middle Ages. As on another large island in the Baltic, namely Bornholm, this had an impact on the Christianisation process. There are apparent structural similarities between the three islands in burial and commemorative customs. A shift in mortuary practices on Bornholm, like on Öland, occurs around 1000 AD. The introduction of a new burial custom with inhumation graves facing east-west, practiced
at different sites than the old cemeteries, indicates a strong Christian influence (Svanberg 2003:125-126). The large sex-segregated Christian cemetery at Grødbygård with furnished inhumation graves, dated to the second part of the 11th century, seems to represent a later phase of conversion (Wagnkilde 1999; Svanberg 2003:126) and brings the Gotlandic churchyard finds to mind. The runestone period of Bornholm dates to c. 1025–1125, indicating that the tradition began concurrently with the introduction of new burial rituals – a time when it was coming to an end in the rest of the Danish area (Imer 2015:172; 2016:300). The composition of the 11th–century hoards on Bornholm implies that the island was not part of the Danish kingdom during the late Viking period, rather it constituted an independent economic and political unit (Ingvardson 2014:329). There was no powerful trading centre on Bornholm during the 11th century, instead the settlement pattern comprised individual farmsteads, indicating that the island had a decentralised social and political structure (Ingvardson 2014).

Contrary to Bornholm, trading centres on Öland and Gotland grew in influence during the 11th century. As already mentioned, activities in Köpingsvik increased around 1050. More advanced harbours seem to have developed on Gotland during the first half of the 11th century. The most important; Visby, Fröjel and Västergarn, are all located on the west coast, presumably along one of the main sea routes from the mainland (Gustafsson this volume). Sven Kalmring (2016) argues that
the larger Viking Age emporia and proto-towns might be understood as special economic and social zones, alien to the region where they were situated. Ny Björn Gustafsson (this volume) suggests that the larger Gotlandic harbours show similar tendencies; something that is mirrored in the development of a material culture that is more un-Gotland than that of inland settlements. Harbours and proto-towns did not only function as centres of production and trade but also as nodes for cultural exchange. It is well known that early urban sites were important for the spread of Christianity in Scandinavia, as they served as bridgeheads for the early Church. It is therefore no coincidence that the largest production of rune carved grave monuments on Öland was located at the harbour and special settlement at Köpingsvik (see Ljung 2016a:202-206), nor that the only 11th-century churchyard memorial on Gotland that can be regarded as a more direct counterpart to the early Christian grave monuments on mainland Sweden originates from Visby (G 343 from St. Hans church ruin). Hailgair was buried beneath a recumbent slab (G 343) with an ornamental layout similar to that of mainland monuments (Ljung 2016a:168–169) (Fig. 4). Contrary to other contemporary stone monuments on Gotland, whose shape alludes to the older picture stone tradition, the choice of a recumbent grave slab for Hailgair’s memorial was a novelty. Thus, it might be understood as a reflection of what Gustafsson identifies as a development of a somewhat un-Gotland material culture in Visby and other harbour sites compared to Gotland at large. According to the Guta Saga the first church on Gotland was built by Botair from Akebäck in Kulstäde. However, this church was burnt down by the islanders, and Botair built a second church below the cliff at Vi (Guta saga ch. 3). The location of the second church to Visby and the fact that it unlike its predecessor was allowed to stand, should be understood in the light of the special status of the site, being something different than its hinterlands. Moreover, Halgair’s grave slab was most likely placed at this very churchyard (Andrén 2011:98–100; Ljung 2016a:168–169). Altogether this suggests that the main harbours and coastal settlements that grew in influence during the 11th century, especially Köpingsvik and Visby, played a crucial role for the early church and its establishment on Öland and Gotland.
References


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