

AIA Lecture: "Vikings and Death: Concepts of the Afterlife and Burial Monuments in Late Iron Age Scandinavia"

Thursday, Mar 6th 2008

07:30pm – 09:00pm

John C. Paulus Great Hall, Collins Legal Center

Free

Archaeological Institute of America

Speaker: Dr. Eva Thäte, University of Reading, United Kingdom

Title: "Vikings and Death: Concepts of the Afterlife and Burial Monuments in Late Iron Age Scandinavia"

Abstract: Viking Age burials: Almost instantly there is this picture in our mind of a Viking dragon boat that sails slowly down the river, all enwrapped in blazing flames, and carries the deceased to the sea...

However, Viking Age burial rites are very diverse (a Danish archaeologist called them 'kaleidoscopic') as were people's choices of places for burial grounds. In the Late Iron Age which is the period between AD 500 and 1000, people in Denmark, Sweden and Norway buried their deceased on high ground, in ancient burial mounds, in houses, close to water sites (e.g., rivers or coastal areas) and near roads or boundaries. The diversity of the evidence poses the question of why the ancient Scandinavians chose a particular place for burial or if the burial sites were just randomly selected.

Whilst the custom of re-using ancient monuments for the dead may have had to do with hereditary rights to property in the first place, the historical sources show that the placing of cemeteries elsewhere in the landscape matches ideas of the afterlife. Were some features more important than others? Do we deal with some kind of 'competitive topographies'? A comparison with modern studies on near-death-experiences demonstrates that the aforementioned landscape features match archetypes with a liminal meaning. The theory is put forward that people chose sites that covered as many of these topographical features as possible in order to be prepared for the transition to the otherworld.