

# The cremation cemeteries under flat ground – a representative of what?

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## Zusammenfassung

*In diesem Beitrag werden Brandgräberfelder ohne Überbauten besprochen, die dominante Bestattungsweise in Finnland, Estland und in Karelia in Rußland während der mittleren und späten Eisenzeit (300-1100 n. Chr.). Diese Friedhöfe wurden teilweise über längere Zeit, ca. 400-500 Jahre, benutzt und erstrecken sich oft über mehrere hundert Quadratmeter Fläche. Eine typische Eigenschaft dieser Friedhöfe ist, dass sie an der Erdoberfläche nicht zu erkennen sind und sich spurlos in die Landschaft einfügen. Gewöhnlich kennzeichnen sie sich durch eine unregelmäßige Pflasterung aus Granitblöcken unterschiedlicher Größe. Diese ausgedehnten Steinpflasterungen sind üblicherweise 1-4 Schichten stark und liegen unter einer dünnen Deckschicht aus Erde unter der modernen Oberfläche. Die Bestattung ist eine Kollektivbestattung, Leichenbrand, Beigaben und Kohle sind relativ weit verstreut, Fragmente eines Gegenstands finden sich manchmal verteilt über eine Fläche mit bis zu fünf Metern Durchmesser. Nur Waffengräber der Merowingerzeit (550 - 800 n. Chr.) können als Einzelbestattungen gedeutet werden. In der Wikingerzeit sind aber auch wieder die Waffen, wie die anderen Funde auch, über die Friedhofsareale verstreut. Verschiedene Interpretationsmöglichkeiten für dieses Material und die Rituale, die diesen Bestattungsbefund erzeugt haben könnten, werden besprochen.*

## Abstract

*This article discusses cremation cemeteries under flat ground which are the most dominant burial form in Finland, Estonia and Karelian Isthmus in Russia during the Middle and Late Iron Age (AD 300-1100). These cemeteries have been used over considerable periods of ca. 400-500 years and they are often several hundred square meters in size. A significant feature of these cemeteries is that they are not visible above ground which makes them disappear into the landscape. They consist of larger and smaller granite stones that seem to be placed in an irregular structure. The extensive pavement of stones is 1-4 layers thick and covered by only grass and turf. The burial form is collective, the burned bones, artifacts, pottery and the charcoal have been strewn over a large area, in a way that pieces from one artifact can be found in an area of 5 meters. Only the Merovingian Period (AD 550-800) weapon graves are interpreted as individual burials. In the Viking Age also the weapons are scattered into the cemetery along with the other artifacts. The article discusses different ways to interpret this material and the rituals behind the burials.*

## 1. Introduction

The Finnish Iron Age starts around 500 BC, ending around AD 1155 in the western part of the country with the first Crusade, while it continues in the eastern part of the country to the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Cremation is the prevailing burial form in Finland throughout the Iron Age until the end of the Viking Age. The earliest inhumation burials date to the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, but all of those are located in a quite restricted area of Western Finland. Inhumation cemeteries become the dominant burial form from the Crusade period onwards, starting from the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. (Hirviluoto 1958: 44; Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982a: 7)

### 1.1. Dating

The earliest cremation cemeteries under flat ground date back to the Roman Iron Age (AD 200-300) but they become the main cemetery type, along with the earth-mixed cairns, during the beginning of the Merovingian Period (AD 600). The burial form is dominant during the whole Late Iron Age (AD 600-1100). (Keskitalo 1979: 134-5; Söyrinki-Harmo 1996: 102-3)

During the end of Viking Age and the beginning of the Crusade Period, the first inhumations appear in the cremation cemeteries under flat ground, often placed either at the outer limits or in the middle of the cemetery. These inhumation burials have traditionally been considered as the last heathen burials before the Christianization process (Aroalho 1978: 73). There are only a few in each cemetery, which has been interpreted as evidence for the people who used to bury their dead at these places moving the cemetery to a new location in this period, maybe to the first churches (Edgren 1993: 250-2).

### 1.2. Study Area

Until quite recently it was believed that the cremation cemeteries under flat ground were a specifically Finnish type of burial, with the centre of its distribution in SW-Finland (Kivikoski 1971: 71; Aroalho 1978: 5; Edgren 1993: 196). However, since this burial type also is quite

frequently found in Estonia, this seems to no longer be a sustainable position. Maybe the different use of stone material has misled the researchers: Granite is quite rare in Estonia so the building material over there has been mainly limestone, giving them a slightly different appearance. The same cemeteries are also found on the western shore of Lake Ladoga on the Karelian Isthmus in Russia (fig.1). The phenomenon is thus much wider, spreading in the north to Finnish Ostrobothnia, Lake Ladoga in the east, and Estonia in the south (Mägi 2002; Uino 1997; Huurre 1983; Kriiska, Tvauri 2002).

## 2. Typical Features

### 2.1. Size

As cemeteries have been used over considerable periods of ca. 400-500 years, they seem to have gradually grown in size, often to several hundred square meters. One of the biggest cemeteries, Kalmumäki cemetery in Kalanti, in SW-Finland, of which 1500 square meters have been excavated (Vanhatalo 1991), is estimated by the National Board of Antiquities in Helsinki to cover another ca. 1080 square meters left unexcavated (Bergström 1983). These sizes also match well with those of the Estonian cemeteries. Madi cemetery in central Estonia was estimated to have covered 1890 square meters before it was first excavated (Konsa 2003: 124).

The amount of completely excavated cemeteries is unfortunately rather low in Finland. The excavations are often too small to enable theories concerning the cemeteries formation or structure. The reasons for this might be lack of time, money or interest to excavate the whole cemetery since it would burden the limited resources too much. The famous cemeteries that have been excavated over a long period of time are difficult to study since the collections of finds have become quite vast while only a few studies have been published. The inconsistencies in the quality of the documentation have also played an important part, making it difficult to perform a spatial analysis of the bones and finds. Therefore, the focus has until recent years been on typological studies of the material, while the bigger picture has been impossible to draw. This is of course a challenge for the ongoing research.

## 2.2. Hidden in the Landscape

A significant feature of these cemeteries is that they are not visible above ground. This makes them disappear into the landscape. This may well even have been intentional. These cemeteries are therefore quite hard to find during surveys, and are unfortunately frequently found by accident during land use (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1984: 281-2). Often located in an agrarian landscape, on small moraines or hills that rise above the surroundings (fig.2), these cemeteries are often preserved, since they are located in spaces that have not been suitable for cultivation due to the high amount of stones and their height.

The cemeteries consist of larger and smaller granite stones that seem to be placed in an irregular structure. The extensive pavement of stones is 1-4 layers thick and covered by only grass and turf. In this pavement, sometimes only 5 cm under the turf are the remains of the funeral pyre. The burned bones, artifacts, pottery and the charcoal have been strewn over a large area either on top of the stones, under them, or between them. The majority of the finds have been damaged on purpose either before or after being laid on the pyre. The same custom is known also from Scandinavia and the Baltics. The pieces from one single artifact can sometimes be found several meters from each other, but there can also be clusters of artifacts in the cemetery, suggesting single burials (Edgren 1993: 195-6; Söyrinki-Harmo 1996: 102-3; Mägi 2002: 130; Konsa 2003: 124-7).

Some cemeteries have also been erected either partly or completely on top of cliffs, with the burials situated in the cracks of the bedrock (Lehtosalo-Hilander 1984: 282). This feature is especially significant for the middle and the eastern part of Finland. In some areas of the country there are also cemeteries lacking the stone setting completely, or having just one layer of stones. (Aroalho 1978: 5; Söyrinki-Harmo 1996: 103; Kivikoski 1964: 171)

How did these cemeteries look like during the Iron Age? Were they free from grass and turf so that both the stones and the black sooty soil were visible to everyone? If this were the case, it would have been easy for contemporary grave-robbers to plunder them, since the artifacts would have been right at the surface. Excavations have, on the other hand, shown that the

cemeteries become overgrown by grass only some months after the excavation, making them invisible quite soon.

It is unknown whether the graves have originally been marked in any way. It is possible that some graves have been distinguished from each other by a small stone heap or a tree pole, but that is difficult to prove with archaeological methods. The borders of the cemetery may also have been marked, for instance with a willow fence, to stop wild animals and dogs from digging in the cemetery, but these kind of light structures would not leave any traces either. It is also debatable if these hills have been treeless during their time of use. This would have made the mound more visible in the landscape and it would have made it easier for the people to distinguish the cemetery from the surrounding forests.

The close connection between the settlement sites and the cemeteries has played an important role in the Iron Age. In the Finno-Ugric worldview the dead continued to live at the cemetery, making the cemetery their home (Purhonen 1996: 125-6). It is very likely that these sacred hills would have been visible to the people at their farmsteads. The relationship between the cemeteries and settlements has not only had a religious and ideological meaning. It is possible that they also had a legal content demonstrating ownership of the land (Zachrisson 1994: 220). Whether or not the cemeteries were marked, the people probably knew exactly where their ancestors were buried as long as it was of importance for them. The memory could have survived for centuries. (Nilsson Stutz 2004: 88, 94; Artelius 2004: 107; Mägi 2002: 128-30)

## 2.3. The Treatment of the Human Bones

Hardly any funeral pyres have been found at the cremation cemeteries (Söyrinki-Harmo 1996: 118; Mägi 2002: 130). With the pyre probably located some distance away from the cemetery, the funeral attendants would have brought the remains from the pyre to the cemetery. This would also explain the low amount of bones recovered at these sites. Had the pyre been directly at the cemetery, a higher amount of bones, both quantitatively and qualitatively, would have to be expected (Mägi 2002: 129; Iregren 1972: 66-9).

We can assume that there was a belief that during

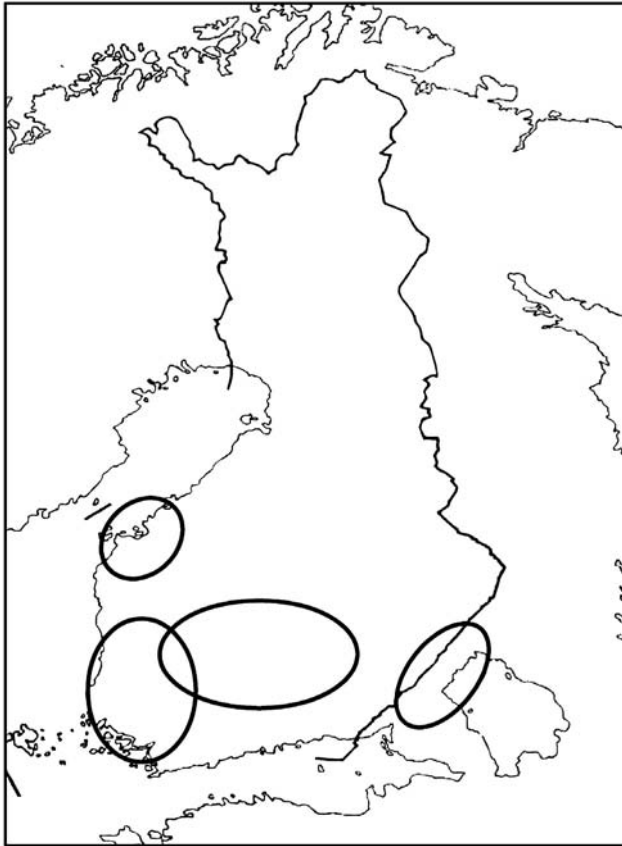


Fig. 1.:  
The distribution of the cremation cemeteries under flat ground in Finland and on the Karelian Isthmus in Russia during Late Iron Age (AD 550-1155).

the cremation process, body and soul became separated from each other. While the body was transformed in the fire, it also got de-humanized (Ström 1985: 19-20; Nilsson Stutz 2004: 91-3). After the cremation the bones and the artifacts were collected, probably into a ceramic or organic vessel. The collection seems to have been quite rough though, because the whole individual is never recovered in these cemeteries. A lot of the bones are missing, which makes it evident that the bones were picked up from the pyre with some sort of rules.

It is also possible that the bones were crushed after the cremation. Finds of grinding stones and stone cubes found from cemetery contexts are often thought to have fulfilled another function than just grinding grain. They might have functioned as bone crushers, symbolizing fertility ideas. Grain found in cemetery context

has been seen as a symbol for re-birth and new life. (Söyrinki-Harmo 1996: 70-1; Purhonen 1996: 120-2, 124; Kaliff 1997: 88-90). This also fits with the Finnish situation, since the bone size is traditionally very small. Maybe it was not even necessary for the ritual to bury the whole person (Kaliff 1992: 121-2; Mägi 2002: 131; Iregren 1972: 73).

However, it should be pointed out here, that the preservation of organic material in Finland is very low due to acid soils. Unburnt bones, in form of complete skeletons, are hardly ever found in prehistoric contexts. The preservation is, hence, depending on the soils, the quality and the extent of the cremation. In addition, due to our long winters, the freeze-thaw might be a damaging factor for the preservation of organic material. It has even been discussed how much the freeze and thaw can transport an artifact at the site leading to postdepositional distortion (Hilton 2003).

Until quite recently, the field documentation was not done with a total station. As a matter of fact, it is not even self-explanatory today to document the bones with accuracy. While many of our largest cemeteries under flat ground have been excavated a long time ago, the poor documentation done today is hard to explain in any other way than with the dismissive attitude many archaeologists have towards this burial form. As long as the field work is done in this style we have no chance to get the needed answers concerning the questions surrounding the collective burial form. The acute need for osteological analyses is also pointless as long as the documentation is not done with accuracy. The fundamental questions concerning both the nature of the burial rituals and the people who were buried inside of these cemeteries can therefore not be answered.

### 3. Possibilities of Interpretation

Until the 1980's archaeologists saw the burials and the mortuary practice strictly as a reflection of the society. The grave was seen as a mirror of life, an expression of the persona and the social position of the deceased (Binford 1972). This view has also been shared by the Finnish research concerning burials. Much effort has been put on the grave goods, their chronology, their typological classification and on the social status of the deceased while the burial rites have either been ignored or explained briefly in just a couple of sentences

(Lehtosalo-Hilander 1982a-b; Aroalho 1978).

With the rise of postprocessual archaeology, the debate has focused more on questions about the society of which the deceased once had been a part. What is emphasized today is the ideological and symbolic nature of the burial data. The ritual context has become more important as a means of interpretation (Hodder 1982; Härke 1997). In Finland these ideas have, nonetheless, not yet been fully accepted and the old views concerning burials are still very much in use. The rather simple interpretations concerning the Iron Age society are also a result of the sad fact that only a few settlement sites have been completely excavated. We just do not have enough information at this point.

### 3.1. Collective burial form

It seems that the bones along with the artifacts have been scattered in the cremation cemeteries giving it a collective nature. In the Merovingian Period cremation cemeteries the only closed finds are weapon graves. Thus, it has been interpreted that only the warriors (read: men) got an individual funeral while the cremated bones and artifacts of women got strewn into the cemetery. Some researchers have even suggested that the bones would have been metaphorically plowed into the cemetery like seeds into the field, implementing fertility ideas (Purhonen 1996: 126-9). While the documentation of these cemeteries has been quite poor and only a few osteological analyses are done, not much can be said to confirm or debate this theory.

The collectivity has not been debated in previous research. It has often been either accepted as a new kind of burial practice or explained by postdepositional processes. No one has asked why it is just the weapon graves of the Merovingian Period that seem to be individual. Were they just dug deeper into the ground, or were they considered to have a special position or role in the society, giving them the right to different treatment?

The collective nature of the cemeteries has dazzled some archaeologists. Especially in older research it is possible to read between the lines how this treatment of the bones has been seen as quite weird behavior. They seem unable to understand why the Iron Age people would treat their beloved ancestors in this disparaging way. The explanation has therefore often been that the

burials have originally been individual but due to grave robbery and later burials the bones have been mixed together by accident (Söyrintki-Harmo 1984, Kivikoski 1966; Edgren 1993).

### 3.2. Individual burial form

The only single burials known are from Merovingian period. In the Viking Age, single burials no longer feature in the archaeological record, and the weapons seem to be spread out in the cemetery in the same way as the other artifacts (Aroalho 1978: 71).

A typical Merovingian weapon grave consists of a sword, 1-3 spears/angos, a knife, a battle knife or seax and a shield buckle. Except from the imported swords the weapons seem to be of domestic origin. Quite often these graves also contain horse bits and riding gear. The sword is always broken or bent several times, and the weapons have frequently been placed inside of the shield buckle. These graves have traditionally been interpreted as warrior graves (Schauman-Lönnqvist 1994: 41-3; 1996a: 60-2).

The intentional destruction of the weapons and other artifacts has been explained as a way of setting free the soul. As the deceased was destroyed and dehumanized in the cremation, it was also important for the artifacts to be freed. Another explanation for this damaging is precaution and fear of the dead rising from the grave to exact revenge for some wrongdoing (Karvonen 1998: 5).

In Scandinavia the horse has been considered to demonstrate aristocracy which has also been implied in the Islandic Sagas (Jennbert 2002: 121; Hyenstrand 1996: 103-7). Riding gear inside the graves has traditionally given the deceased high status, belonging to the horse riding elite. This is also the case in the Finnish cremation cemeteries (Schauman-Lönnqvist 1996b: 130-5; Pihlman 1990). Ironically enough, even if we have artifacts connected to the horse we have no burned horse bones from Iron Age cemeteries in Finland. The only osteological material known from horse are unburned horse teeth that sometimes occur in the cemeteries. These teeth probably derive from later sacrifice. It is believed that a complete horse would have been too expensive to offer, so the teeth would have functioned as *pars pro toto* (Purhonen 1996: 125).

It is needless to point out that these weapon graves





Fig. 2.:  
The moraine hill of stora näset cremation cemetery in Karjaa,  
South Finland. Photo: Anna Wickholm

have, without any questioning, been labeled as male graves, even if the biological sex has not been determined by skeletal sexing (Schauman-Lönnqvist 1994: 48-9; Salmo 1943: 23-7). Typical for the Merovingian period (AD 550-800) is the strong increase in the amount of weapons inside the burials. The wide spread assumption that these warrior graves are remains from a highly violent and turbulent time has recently been debated. The rich weapon burials could also be reminders of a symbolic capital (Wickholm, Raninen 2003; Bordieu 1998: 99).

### 3.3. Mixed due to post-depositional processes

The integrity of the data collected for this type of cemetery has been questioned by archaeologists. The main reason for such doubts is the very different structure those cemeteries seem to have had in comparison with all other types of cemeteries in Scandinavia. The collective and mixed nature of the grave material has dazzled the researchers and led them to believe this is due to later activities having disturbed the original features beyond recognition.

One of the most popular explanations for these cemeteries is that they are actually earth-mixed cairns that have grown together in time. If several cairns are built next to each other over a long period of time, they will step by step become one big cemetery where they can no longer be separated from each other (Kivikoski 1966: 51-2; 1971: 71).

Another common explanation for these cemeteries is that they have been looted. Due to their vulnerable state (no mound/cairn on top of them protecting the burials) they would have been easy to access by blacksmiths who could pick up the valuable bronze and metal objects. Grave looting has been documented already in prehistoric times and some village smiths have continued this habit until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The disorganized nature of these cemeteries is explained by the constant disturbance of these sites by people and trampling animals. The original form of the cemeteries could therefore have looked much different (Taavitsainen 1990: 44-5; 1992: 7-11; Heikkurinen-Montell 1996: 101; Edgren 1993: 196).

But can we really say that *all* the cremation cemeteries under flat ground in Finland are result of plundering? That wild animals or livestock have destroyed the context in such way that there are *no* individual graves left in the whole cemetery except from the Merovingian Period warrior graves? Surely not, the number of cremation cemeteries under flat ground is ca. 200 at this point, it seems unlikely that they all have been destroyed.

## 4. The ritual dimension

As noted above, the funeral rituals performed at a cemetery are quite complex, hard to understand and difficult to interpret (Artelius 2004: 101). This is probably due to other ritual activities that have been performed at these same sites. The sacrifices performed have been connected to fertility and ancestor cult. Here, the farmsteads could perform their individual cult in contrast to the public cult places (Ström 1985; Fabech 1991: 288-300; Honko 1993: 56; Artelius 2004: 101-2; Sundqvist 1996: 71-2).

Much of the pottery and the animal bones are found on the surface of the cemetery, implementing sacrifices or memorial feasts, probably performed after the funeral. The cemetery functioned as a place where one could remember and mourn the dead while sacrificing food and burning fires as part of a commemorative feast (Mägi 2002: 126, 132; Aroaho 1978: 5, 67; Purhonen 1996: 120-1, 127). Eating at the grave is something that is done even today in the Greek orthodox tradition in Russian Karelia in order to stay in contact with the ancestors.

#### 4.1. Settlement debris in the cemetery

During fieldwork the excavation leaders have often mentioned settlement debris in cemetery context. This debris consists of melted Iron slag, ceramics and burned clay daubs. The phenomenon has been explained in both ritualistic and functional terms. The explanations depend on if it is thought that the debris is put there on purpose as part of a burial ritual or if it is there because of earlier or later settlement activities at the cemetery (Burström 1990: 262; Shepherd 1997: 17; Uino 1986: 171-3).

Personally, I think that everything inside of a cemetery is there for a reason, and not dropped there by accident. Instead of looking strictly at the archaeological material through its physical characters one should also look at the symbolic and ideological meanings of the material, especially when working with a grave context (Hodder 2000: 86-7). Material resembling settlement rubbish seen through our eyes has possibly had a completely different meaning for the people of that time.

What does this apparent “settlement debris” do in a cemetery? Has it been brought there as a part of a ritual from the settlement site or has it been produced there at the cemetery (Kaliff 1992: 93-8)? The Iron slag and the burned clay could be remains from a small (cult) house or a smithy on the cemetery hill. As early as 1914 did a Finnish archaeologist suggest ritual activity and the possibility of a built structure at the cemetery as an explanation for the daub (Europaes 1914: 37-8). The amount of Iron slag collected from the cemeteries is usually quite high, reaching up to several kilograms (Söyrinki-Harmo 1996: 79). The presence of a smithy may not even be too surprising. Studies show a strong metaphoric connection between the fire and the heated iron in a smithy and the cremation of the human body. The transformation from the iron ore to the final product can be seen as a transformation from something living to something dead. Like the corpse is a bi-product of human life, the slag can be one representation in the long chain of the Iron smelting process (Terje Gansum 2004; Kaliff 1992; Burström 1990; Shepherd 1997). It is possible that the Iron Age cemeteries were seen as “powerful places”, which the local smith tried to take advantage of in his own iron-making (Meinander 1943:46).

Remains from cult houses have been found in Estonia and Sweden. It is believed that the treatment of the human bones has been performed inside these houses. In many cases there are signs of ritual treatment on prehistoric human bones. The bones have either been crushed by stones before or after the cremation. It is possible that the deceased has been placed inside of a house in order to let the body decay so that the bones would be easier to crush before the cremation (Mägi 2000: 48-54).

#### 4.2. The re-use of older sites

Sometimes, the cremation cemeteries reused older cemeteries or settlement sites. But the existence of settlement sites is often explained by the factor of coincidence. If a few pieces of pottery or fragments of quartz or flint are found in the burial context it is often explained by the presence of an older settlement site lying below the cemetery, even if the pottery would be from a clear cemetery context. The possibility of sacrifice is usually excluded by the archaeologists (Shepherd 1997; Meinander 1943: 43, 45-6).

As long as only the cemeteries are excavated, not the possible settlement site under the cemetery and in its surroundings, we can not be sure about whether this is intentional reuse, or just coincidence. So far we can only mention the presence of settlement remains. The possible settlement sites or activity areas should be excavated separately in order to determine whether there is a meaningful relationship between settlement site and burial.

Earlier cemeteries have been harder to dismiss by the archaeologists. Often it has been explained by some kind of continuity so that the earlier burial form has some kind of evolutionary way of developing from each other. Personally, I do not agree with this processual thinking. Many Scandinavian researchers have studied the phenomena on a larger scale and they have come up with new theories concerning, what seems to be, a conscious reuse of earlier places (Zachrisson 1998: 120-2; Artelius 2001: 220; 2004: 99, 106). This is based on the idea that members of the prehistoric society would have been able to “read” the landscape. The people would have understood that grave mounds and cairns, visible in the landscape, had a specific meaning, even if the sacrificial meaning of the site

would have been forgotten. Artifacts taken from these graves had a strong force attributed to them. It may well be that building a new cemetery on top of an older one was an attempt by the Iron Age people to tap into some sort of power attributed to the place, giving them a sense of continuity connecting them to their ancestors. It was a manifestation of the past and the people's memories (Burström 1996: 25; Zachrisson 1998: 120–2; Artelius 2004: 100–1).

## 5. Solutions...

The problematic nature of this type of cemetery makes me wonder what these cemeteries actually represent. Are they just places for burial, or do they have another, wider meaning, too? I think there is need for much more discussion about the meaning of cemeteries and ritual sites. Can we see a difference between them, or are they all just the same thing? Recent excavations in Sweden have implied that the line between a cult site and a cemetery is not easy to draw (Andersson 2004).

To be able to get more answers concerning the Finnish Late Iron Age we will need more studies of not only cemeteries, but also settlement sites in order to be able to compare social representation in both life

and death. I hope that in the future I will no longer be limited to the use of archived materials alone. New excavations have to be carried out, with research questions targeted at analyzing the ritual processes performed at the sites. New and more exact excavation methods should also be tested for this specific kind of burial, supported by scientific analyses. Is it possible to find vertical stratigraphy, some kind of structure, in these cemeteries and are we able to understand how these sites are originally built are just some of the questions I would like to answer during my research. Radiocarbon dating from burned bones is possible nowadays, and bones and macrofossils should be analyzed too, in order to understand the different processes that formed these cemeteries under a long period of time. With these analyses we might be able to distinguish funeral rituals from later activities as for example ancestor cult.

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