

HAZEL RODS IN GRAVES¹

In the summer of 1988, an archaeological excavation was performed in parts of the Heddal Stave Church Rectory grounds in Telemark, Norway. At this site thirty graves were excavated, but dating them posed problems. Several factors contributed to this – the grave's directional placement, the shape of the coffin, and the position of the corpse's arms. In addition to this sticks, or wooden rods made from the tree species hazel, were also found in some of the graves (Brendalsmo et al. 1989:31ff). Hazel rods placed in graves can be traced back to pre-Christian times, but this practice has mostly been associated with the early Christian period, i.e. 11th century (see e.g. Krogh 1965:14; Eide 1974:230; Mårtensson 1980:57). However, it was eventually possible to determine, through archival studies and written source material, that the graves and the hazel rods in Heddal originated from the early 19th century (Nøstberg 1993:30ff). Although this may give clues about continuity, I shall not pursue or thematize that here. Instead, I will ask the question; why were hazel rods placed in graves, or in other words, what was the justification for placing them in the graves?

Burial rods are not exclusively found in Heddal or in Norway, but also in Sweden, Denmark, England, Germany and France (see e.g. Mårtensson 1980:56ff; Krogh 1965:13ff; Daniell 1997:167; Gilchrist & Sloane 2005:171ff; Hägg 1997:120f; Doppelfeld 1964:11f). However, in this article, I have chosen to refine the study to the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish burial-rod material.

This choice has been made partly on the basis of the fact that according to the literature, these three countries offer the most comprehensive finds of burial rods, and partly on the basis of a methodological consideration, as there should be a defined geographical correspondence between the burial-rod material and the source material available to discuss the rationale.

In the following, I will first offer a description and analysis of the present burial-rod material from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Then, on the basis of the results from the description and analysis of the rod material, I shall discuss the reasoning for placing these rods in the graves.

Description and Analysis

The burial rods are essentially revealed through archaeological excavations of older, abandoned cemeteries. The scope of the investigations ranges from the excavation of a few dozen graves to over 2100 graves (cf. Brendalmo 1989:24; Brendalmo et al. 1989:45; Mårtensson 1980:25 and 65). It should also be noted that in general, the cemeteries have not been totally excavated. In some places, like for example Heddal, only some of the graves have been archaeologically investigated (see e.g. Brendalmo et al 1989:30, Anderson & Göthberg 1986:1f; Cinthio 2002:235). Furthermore, there are some critical aspects related to the source material. First of all, the rods may have rotted after lying in the soil for hundreds of years, and secondly, the weather conditions during the excavations, such as precipitation and rain, may have contributed to the rods being difficult or impossible to detect (cf. Brendalmo et al. 1989:18). These circumstances though, will have hardly any particular impact on the result of this study.



Excavation sites for burial rods in Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

This map was created by Executive Officer Trond Lerstang, University College of Southeast Norway.

In Norway burial rods have been found at the following locations: St. Clement's Church, Oslo, St. Gregory's Church and St. Olav's Church, Trondheim, St. Peter's Church, Tønsberg, Heddal Stave Church, Telemark and at the Guddal Church in Sogn og Fjordane (Eide 1974:205 and 230; Long 1975:16, Christophersen & Nordeide 1994:108f; Anderson & Göthberg 1986:12f; Brendalsmo 1989:23 and 26; Brendalsmo et al. 1989:16f; BMKS Christie 1970:2; cf. Müller 1984:71). In Sweden burial rods have been found at St. Stephen's Church, Kattesund Church, the Holy Trinity Church and Lund Cathedral, Lund, and at Skara Cathedral, Skara (Mårtensson 1980:56ff; Cinthio 2002:83; Welin 1889:122; cf. Müller 1984:71f). In Denmark rods have been found at the Trans Church and Hørning Church, Jutland, and at the

Franciscan Monastery in Svendborg on Funen (Krogh 1965:13ff; Kristensen 1994:94; cf. Müller 1984:72). Most of these sites were archaeologically excavated in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

I will not claim that this list of finds is complete and exhaustive. But the amount of available excavated burial-rod material is so extensive that it provides a sufficient basis for discussing the formulated questions.

The number of Graves with Rods

The number of excavated graves with rods vary considerably between excavation sites.

Table 1 – The number of graves at each of the churches and with the proportion of graves containing rods

Excavation site	Number of graves with rod finds	The total number of excavated graves	Percentage of graves containing rods	Source
Norway:				
St. Clement's Church, Oslo	3	152	2,0	Eide 1974:198 and 205
St. Gregory's Church, Trondheim	21	253	8,3	Christophersen and Nordeide 1994:108f
St. Olav's Church, Trondheim	3	389	0,8	Anderson and Göthberg 1986:1 and 12; cf. Christophersen og Nordeide 1994:97 and 108
St. Peter's Church, Tønsberg	3	24	12,5	Brendalsmo 1989:23 and 26
Heddal Stave Church, Telemark	4	34	11,8	Brendalsmo et al.1990: 16f
Guddal Church, Sogn og Fjordane	1	?	?	BMKS Christie 1970:2
Sweden:				
St. Stephen's Church, Lund	52	Ca. 2140	Ca. 2,4	Mårtensson 1980:25, 56, 65 and 107; Jonsson 2009:271ff
Kattesund Church, Lund	139	332	41,9	Jonsson 2009:275ff; Mårtensson 1980:57f
Holy Trinity Church, Lund	111	1103	10,1	Cinthio 2002:88f
Lund Cathedral, Lund	?	?	?	Mårtensson 1980:58
Skara Cathedral, Skara	2	?	?	Welin 1889:122
Denmark:				
Trans Church, Jutland	Several findings, but any exact number is unavailable	?	?	Krogh 1965:13
Hørning Church, Jutland	Minimum 1	?	?	Krogh 1965:14
Franciscan Monastery Svendborg, Funen – layman's cemetery	3	144	2,1	Kristensen 1994:85 and 94

The table demonstrates that most graves with rods are found in Lund in Sweden. In the three cemeteries of St. Stephen's Church, Kattesund Church and the Holy Trinity Church, rods were found in respectively 52, 139 and 111 graves. In Norway, however, the number is significantly lower. Most graves with rods are found at the St. Gregory's Church in Trondheim with 21 finds, followed by the Heddal Stave Church with four finds, whereas in a total of three sites; the St. Clement's Church, Oslo, the St. Olav's Church, Trondheim, and the St Peter's Church, Tønsberg, rods were found in only three graves. At the Guddal Church in Sogn og Fjordane only a single excavated grave contained a rod. Also in Denmark it appears that there are particularly few graves where rods were found. Three burial rods were found at the Franciscan Monastery in Svendborg. Beyond this, there is only uncertain information about the seemingly few number of finds at the remaining two Danish cemeteries.

The different statistics concerning finds can partly be explained by the scope of each of the archaeological excavations. Whereas, in Norway, from a few dozen and up to about 250 gravesites are excavated, in the abandoned cemeteries of Lund, Sweden, 332, 1103 and approximately 2140 graves are excavated.

Although the total number excavated graves containing rods are interesting, the percentages, i.e. the percentage of the total examined graves containing rods, is even more interesting. With the exception of material from Kattesund Church in Lund, variation between the proportions of 0.8 percent and 12.5 percent exists in those cases where there is sufficient data for calculations. At the sites St. Clement's Church in Oslo, St. Olav's Church in Trondheim, St. Stephen's Church in Lund and the Franciscan Monastery in Svendborg, the proportions are between 0.8 percent and ca. 2.4 percent. Whereas at St. Gregory's Church in Trondheim, St. Peter's Church in Tønsberg, Heddal Stave Church in Telemark, and the Holy Trinity Church in Lund, the range is between 8.3 percent and 12.5 percent. In other words, it was on these sites a predominant minority of graves contained rods. In relation to this result, the proportions from Kattesund Church differ significantly by 41.9 percent, though this ratio remains well below half of the graves.

The Number of Rods in the Graves and their Placement

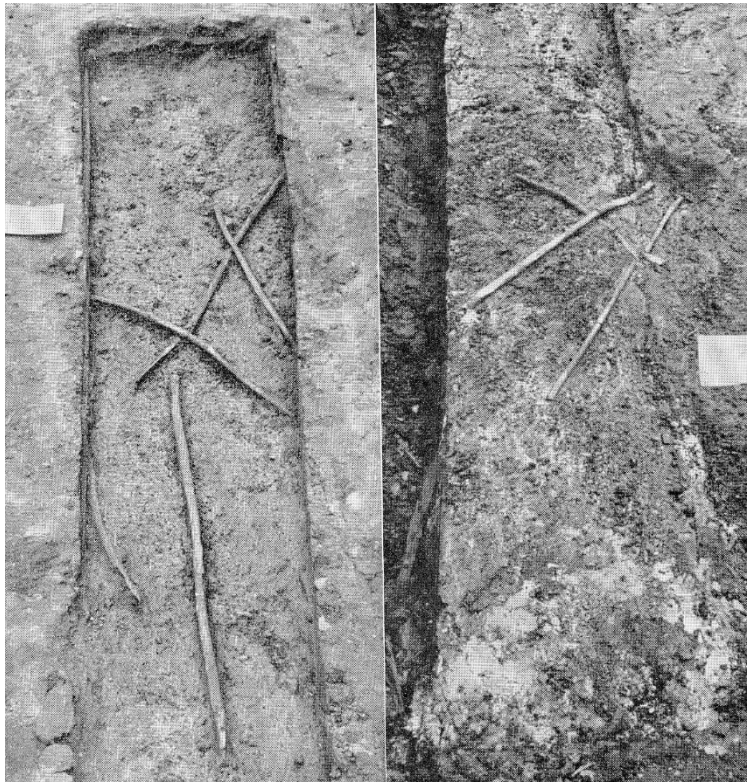
The number of rods in the graves vary, but 1-2 rods seem to have been the most common. Even 3 rods were not unusual. 4, 5, 6 or 7 rods also occurred in some graves. Furthermore,

rods were found in both graves without coffins and in graves with coffins. The rods were of varying lengths and often lay individually, though sometimes also in bundles.

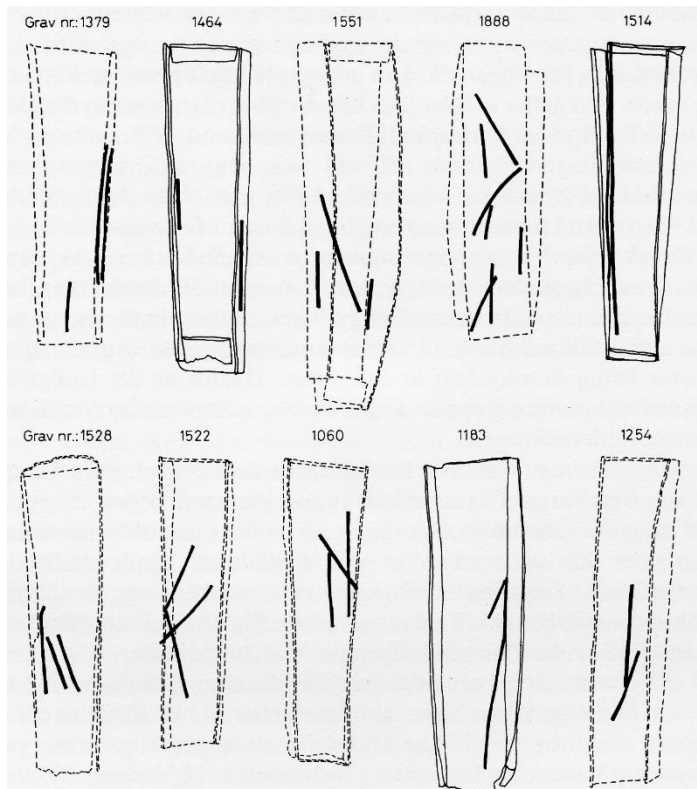
The rods lay in different places and in varying positions within the grave, as well as in varying relationships to the skeleton. The placements from grave to grave have varied greatly. In graves with coffins the rods have been placed both under the coffin, in the coffin, or on top of the coffin. In graves without coffins, the rods have been placed under, on top of, or next to the deceased. The rods lay sometimes on the right side of the skeleton, sometimes on the left, and they could be placed on or by the upper body, or on or by the feet (Eide 1974:205; Jonsson 2009:271ff; Anderson and Göthberg 1986:12; Brendalmo 1989:23; Brendalmo et al. 1990:16f; Mårtensson 1963a:48ff and 55ff; Mårtensson 1963b:92ff; Mårtensson 1976:105ff; Mårtensson 1980:56f; Krogh 1965:13ff). In the Heddal graves most rods lay on top of the dead who held them under their forearms, pressing the rods close to their chests. One of these graves however stands out from the others; the deceased was found gripping the rod with both hands (Brendalmo et al. 1990: 16).



Rods lying in a coffin, which in this case is a wooden trough. The photograph is from the cemetery at the Holy Trinity Church in Lund (from: Cinthio 2002:III).

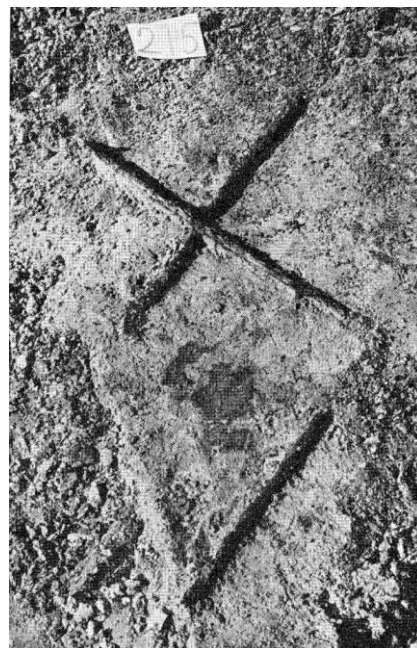
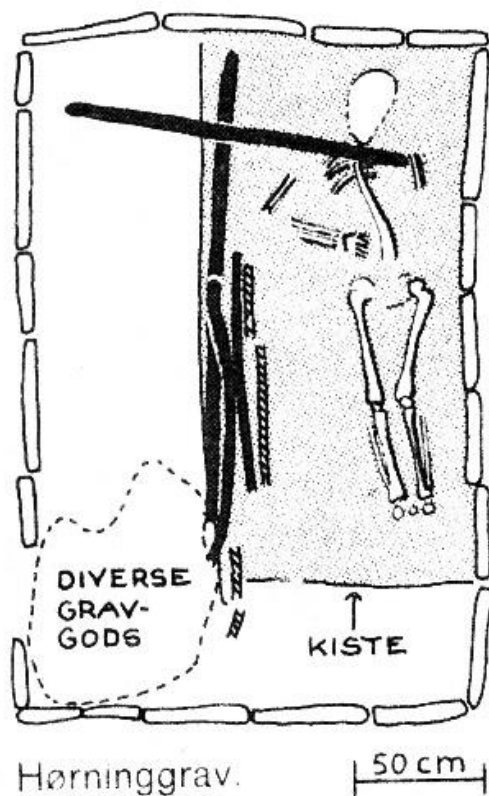


Examples of how hazel rods lay under the coffin. The photographs are from archaeological excavations in Lund. Photo by Anders W. Mårtensson (from: Mårtensson 1963a:55).



Sketches illustrating how rods were placed in 10 of the graves at St. Stephen's Church in Lund. Drawn by Maria Cinthio (from: Mårtensson 1980:57).

Sometimes the burial rods were placed in a cross formation. This was the case for two rods found in a grave at Hørning Church, Jutland (Krogh 1965:14). Also at excavation sites in Lund, several graves revealed such crossed rods (Mårtensson 1963a:48f and 51f). In two graves – one at Lund and one at St. Clement's Church in Oslo – the rods lay in cross formation on the deceased's legs. Whereas in a grave in Lund the rods were found lying over the deceased's thigh and shin (Mårtensson 1963a:49), in a grave at St. Clement's Church in Oslo, the rods lay over the deceased's feet (Eide 1974:205).



A diagram and photo showing graves with rods in a cross formation. The diagram on the left shows the grave from Hørning Church, Jutland, and the photo on the right shows the grave from Lund where the crossed rods lay under the skeleton. The diagram and the photo are taken from respectively: Krogh 1965:15 and Mårtensson 1963b:95. The photo from Lund is by Anders W. Mårtensson.

Based on these descriptions, it is difficult to determine with complete certainty if the cross formations are the result of a deliberate act. There is a possibility that these cross formations happened randomly. But based on the present information about the context of the findings, several of the rods may have been placed in a cross formation on purpose at the time of the burial. In some cases, the rods lay inside the coffin, in other cases, at the

bottom of the grave, i.e. under the corpse (Krogh 1965:14, Mårtensson 1963a:48f and 51f, Eide 1974:205).

Wood Species

As mentioned initially the rods found in Heddal, Telemark, were made from the hazel tree. Also rods from the other excavation sites in Norway, Sweden and Denmark are consistently made from hazel (Eide 1974:205; Long 1975:16; BMKS Christie 1970:2; Mårtensson 1980:57 and 138; Bartholin 1976:164; Krogh 1965:13f; Kristensen 1994:94). From 132 samples of rods with identifiable tree species, taken from the Lund excavations, 83.3 percent of them turned out to be hazel rods. The others were of oak, birch, linden, viburnum, rowan, euonymus, ash or willow, but the occurrence of these wood species were very few (Bartholin 1976:164). Furthermore, according to Norwegian sources, a rod of pine was found, and from Swedish sources, one of juniper (Eide 1974:205; Welin 1889:122). Though not all burial rods are made of hazel, it is without doubt the wood species that strongly dominates.

Dating Methods

Burial rods are mainly dated by the dating of the graves. In most cases they are dated on the basis of archaeological criteria, but also by using C-14-dating. For the dating in Heddal, Telemark, written sources were also used.

Table 2 - Dating of burial rods from each church

Excavation Site	Dating	Source
Norway:		
St. Clement's Church, Oslo	Early 11 th century	Eide 1974:230
St. Gregory's Church, Trondheim	Probably 14 th century	Jonsson 2009:109
St. Olav's Church, Trondheim	Ca. 1175–1275	Christoffersen og Nordeide 1994:97 and 108
St. Peter's Church, Tønsberg	Ca. 940–1265	Brendalsmo 1989:23 and 25
Heddal Stave Church, Telemark	After 1808, probably from the period 1809–1835	Nøstberg 1993:30 and 33f
Guddal Church, Sogn og Fjordane	Ca. 960–1020	Vedeler 2007:82 and 156
Sweden:		
St. Stephen's Church, Lund	Most of the finds are from ca. 1050–1100, two cases from 1300–1536	Jonsson 2009:119; cf. Mårtensson 1980:57
Kattesund Church, Lund	Ca. 1050–1100	Jonsson 2009:118; cf. Mårtensson 1980:57f

Holy Trinity Church, Lund	Ca. 990 – ca. 1050	Cinthio 2002:88f
Lund Cathedral, Lund	?	
Skara Cathedral, Skara	Probably 12 th century	Welin 1889:122 and 125
Denmark:		
Trans Church, Jutland	Before ca. 1200	Krogh 1965:13
Hørning Church, Jutland	Probably 10 th century	Krogh & Voss 1960:14
The Franciscan Monastery Svendborg, Funen – The layman's cemetery	Late Medieval, one of the rods is dated to 1410 ± 65	Kristensen 1994:94

As mentioned in the introduction, hazel rods have long been associated with the earliest Christian period and especially from the 11th century. But this assumption has since proven not to be quite so clear-cut. True enough, many burial rods originate from this early Christian period. Hazel rods from Hørning Church on Jutland are dated to possibly the 10th century, while rods from St. Clement's Church, Guddal Church, Kattesund Church, the Holy Trinity Church, and with the highest numbers from St. Stephen's Church, are dated to the late 10th or 11th century. The remaining rod material, however, is younger. Burial rods from Skara Cathedral probably originate from the 12th century, and the rods from Trans Church on Jutland from roughly before the year 1200. Among the Norwegian material, burial rods have been found from around a similar time. Rods from St. Peter's Church in Tønsberg have been given a generous dating from the timespan of ca. 940–1265, while rods from St. Olav's Church in Trondheim are dated to around 1175–1275. However, among this material are also burial rods from after the end of the High Middle Ages. Two of the rods from St. Stephen's Church in Lund are dated to the Late Middle Ages, i.e. from 1300 to 1536. Furthermore, all 21 burial rods from St. Gregory's Church in Trondheim are dated to probably the 14th century. Also one of the rods from the Franciscan Monastery in Svendborg derives from the Late Middle Ages. After these occurrences, there is a jump forward in time to the beginning of the 19th century, where the hazel rods from Heddal in Telemark originated. This dating review clearly shows that the burial-rod custom is not solely connected within the timespan of the earliest Christian period. We can instead follow the burial-rod custom from the whole Middle Ages until it petered out in the early 19th century. The lack of burial-rod evidence though, from after the Reformation, may simply be related to lack of archaeological investigations of cemeteries from recent times.

Summary

This review of burial-rod material demonstrates that with one exception, a relatively small percentage of graves have contained rods. This exception is the Kattesund Church in Lund with its 41.9 percent. Most burial rods are made of the tree species hazel. The number of rods placed in graves have varied, but 1-2 has been most common. Moreover, the rods had no established or standardized placement in graves, but were instead, placed in graves with great variation. When it comes to dating, most rods originate from the early Christian period. But burial rods also occurs in both the High Middle Ages and in the Late Middle Ages and with offshoots into the early 19th century.

Discussion of the Rationale

The Danish archaeologist Knud Krogh suggests hazel rods in graves symbolize rebirth. The reasoning behind this is that the hazel trees and the hazel nuts in medieval allegories of Southern Europe were venerated as a symbol of rebirth (Krogh 1965:14). "Den er den kerne, hvoraf det uddøde liv stedse spirer frem påny; i det grønne æg ligger borgen for et nyt liv" (Ibid.). ("From the kernel, extinct life will continuously sprout anew; in the green egg lies the castle of a new life.") This suggests Krogh connects hazel rods to a religious context. But this explanation involves a methodological problem and weakness. It is by no means obvious that symbolic meanings from two different areas, with large geographical distances such as Southern Europe and Scandinavia may be equivalent.

Others have suggested that burial rods may have been walking canes, or real or symbolic pilgrimage canes (Hodder 1991:111ff, cf. Daniell 1997:167). These two explanations, however, have two or three issues associated with them. Firstly, the rods show no traces of use or wear, secondly, they are for the most consistently thin, and thirdly, undermining such a proposal, in many cases several rods have been found in one grave (Gilchrist & Sloane 2005:174; Kieffer-Olsen 1993:165).

The Swedish archaeologist Maria Cinthio has studied burial-rod material from the Holy Trinity Church in Lund. Based on depictions of funeral processions in which some of the participants carry ceremonial rods, batons, or wands, as ceremonial insignia – such as the Bayeux Tapestry from the late 11th century, Cinthio believes that burial rods are such ceremonial batons, placed with the dead in their grave. Furthermore, she claims that the rods may have had a dual function in that tree sort hazel symbolized a new life through

death (Cinthio 2002:84ff). This explanation on burial rods is weakly substantiated, and in the least can be associated with the same methodological weakness as that of Krogh's explanation by relying heavily on the French Bayeux Tapestry to explain a cultural phenomenon in Scandinavia.

The most founded explanation has been delivered by the Swedish archaeologist Kristin Jonsson. Her hypothesis is that at least some of burial rods were used to measure the body of the deceased or the coffin in connection with digging the grave. Jonsson bases her argument on the publication, *Festial* from 1483 by the English Augustinian author John Mirk. In the publication he refers to a measuring rod in connection with funeral rituals. Furthermore, she supports this hypothesis by combining a Nordic tradition dictating the use of a rod for measuring the coffin of the deceased, with the practice that everything that had been in contact with the deceased should be avoided, burned or buried. To test this hypothesis, Jonsson compared the length of the burial-rod material from four selected archaeological investigations – the Holy Trinity Church, St. Stephen's Church and Kattesund Church in Lund and St. Gregory's Church in Trondheim – with the sizes of the graves they were found in. She points out that there are certain source-critical problems related to such comparisons, as the exact measurements of both the rods and the graves are difficult to determine on the basis of field drawings. To compensate for this, she allowed a deviation of 15 cm. The result of her investigation demonstrates that of the 200 graves where the rods and the graves were preserved sufficiently enough to make measurements, 36 percent of the graves contained rods that fit the length of the grave or the skeleton. Furthermore, 16 percent of the graves contained short rods that corresponded with the width of the grave, and 15 percent had rods which were half of the grave's length. Though 12 percent exceeded the length of the grave, in several cases the collected length of the rods coincided with grave length and width. In 21 percent of the cases, the rods neither corresponded with the grave's length or width (Jonsson 2009:113ff).

One objection to Jonsson's investigation is that she accepts such a huge discrepancy as 15 cm when comparing the length of the rods, and the size of the graves they were found in. This may have led to a larger percentage of consistency than there is in reality. Nevertheless, Jonsson's argumentation and explanation in many ways remain plausible. I will therefore not exclude that her hypothesis may explain the presence of some of the rods found in graves. But Jonsson's analysis and explanation does not take into consideration the

wood species of the rods, i.e. that the vast majority of them are made from hazel. Moreover, she does not problematize that only some of the graves contained rods. In the following discussion, I will therefore take a closer look at these considerations. By examining the use of hazel and the beliefs attached to it, one may be able to get another step further in explaining why rods were placed in graves.

As an introduction to the discussion I will refer to a tradition from southern Sweden where hazel rods were used as a protection against ghosts or the dead who returned to haunt. Stories about privateer captain Lars Gathenhielm, or Lasse i Gatan as he was called, from Onsala in Halland tells that his corpse lay buried under a stone mound, on an island in the Kloster Fjord, just north of Varberg, Sweden. But there were many ghosts resulting from the drowned sailors that bothered him terribly. He then wrote to his surviving wife Ingela about sending him forty hazel rods "för gasterna ä så svåra här". ("because the ghosts are so difficult here.") He would use the hazel rods in the fight against them (DAG: IFGH 1786:52f). Also a legend from Bottnafjorden in Båhuslen, Sweden, tells about a giant who would "flog" or whip, ghosts or spirits with hazel rods (DAG: IFGH 1598:5f). But the reason for placing hazel rods in graves can hardly be for the dead to whip and fight with ghosts. But perhaps there may be another link between the wood sort hazel and spirits who return to haunt.

Belief in ghosts, or spirits in other words the dead who haunt, returning to show themselves for the living, is well documented in the Norse world of literature. In the the *Soga om Svarvdølane*, for instance, which probably stems from the mid 13th century (Kristjánsson 1972:468), we hear about a man called Klauve, who was fatally stabbed with a sword. After his wife had gone to bed, he appeared at her bedside. She then summoned some men who cut off Klauve's head and then lay it down at his feet (*Svarfdæla saga* 1956:174). The short saga *Þorstein þáttr bæjarmagns* tells of a man called Torstein who settled at Gnipalund after Earl Agdi had returned from the dead as a ghost, and destroyed the farm. One night Torstein saw Agdi wandering about, as he continued to haunt the farm. Agdi did not dare to go through gates and doorways since there were crosses on all of them. Torstein went into his burial mound and fetched the drinking horn *Hvitinga*. When Agdi also arrived inside the mound, Torstein ran out and passed by him, and placed a cross above the doorway. The burial mound then closed, and since then nothing has ever been seen of Agdi (*Saga af Þorsteini Bæarmagni* 1827:197f).

Also in newer tradition, notions about haunting are well documented. Legends about this phenomenon occur in all three Scandinavian countries. From Bø in Telemark, the neighboring village to Heddal, it is told that once upon a time there was:

ein som laut av stad nottes tider å hente jordmora, som i den tida budde på Bergane og heitte Inger. Da dei kom til kyrkja, var det nottes tider, men noko måneljost, so dei såg seg fyre. Da kom det ein høg, myrk mann ut frå kyrkjegarden og gjenom kyrkjeporten og gav seg i fylgje med dei, gjekk ved sida. Det var so ljost at dei såg han vel og kjende han godt. Det var ein som var død. Skyskaren slo på hesten, men hin fylgde, køyrekaren jaga på enda fortare, men det mona ikkje, hin heldt fylgje. Det var ein uhyggeleg fylgjesvein å ha midt på natta. Men dei blei ikkje kvitt han korleis dei køyrde. Han var stødt ved sida. Da dei kom til ein gard som låg ved vegen, gjekk han inn der og blei borte. Da blei dei kvitt han (Nordbø 1945:84).

(someone who left in the night to fetch the midwife. In those days she lived in Bergane and was called Inger. When they came to the church, it was night time, but because of some moonlight, they could see their way. A tall dark man appeared from out of the cemetery, came towards them through church gate, and began walking by their side. It was so light that they both saw and recognized him well. He was someone who was dead. The carriage driver whipped his horse, but the man still followed, the carriage driver pushed his horse even faster, but without results, he still kept following. It was a grim companion to have in the middle of the night. But they could not get rid of him no matter how fast they drove. He was solidly by their side. When they arrived at a farm situated by the roadside, he went in there and was gone. Then they were rid of him.)

In his *Hiterdals Beskrivelse* – Hiterdal is an older term for Heddal – Chr. Glükstad claims:

"Endnu troes der meget paa 'Gjengang' efter Døden, og Mange paastaa at have seet Gjengangere, [...]" (Glükstad 1878:64). ("There is still a strong belief that 'people return' after death, and many claim to have seen such ghosts or spirits, [...].")

Ghosts could also be directly violent. In Björksta in Västmanland, Sweden, there was once a ghost, who ran after a man several times. Finally, the ghost got a hold of him and beat him to death (Hagberg 1937:565). In traditional material we also find a recurring belief in notions such as *utburden*, *mylingen*, *deildegasten*, *draugen*, *lyktgubben*, *Åsgårdsreia*, and ghosts or the dead attending a church service.

Far from all the dead became ghosts, in fact very few were. According to beliefs some vicious people or demonic people became ghosts after their death (Ström 1960:252). The Swedish historian of religion, Solveig Almquist has categorized ghosts or spirits in five groups:

1. Dead without status, i.e. dead who had not received a funeral in accordance with tradition and normal practice, or who had not been properly outfitted, and therefore were not taken up in the society of the dead. Among the dead without status were people who had died a "bad death" and had been buried in special ways – such as no coffin, no ceremonies, within the north side of the church, or that they had not been buried at all.
2. Those who during their lifetime consciously had committed violations, for example, murderers, thieves, those who broke oaths and those who committed suicide. The punishment for these violations was to return again to the living.
3. Those who were troubled about something, dissatisfied with something, or wanted revenge after being badly treated while they were still alive, or after they had been murdered.
4. Those who died an early death, - before the destined day of their death.
5. Those who unknowingly committed violations in their life, or a violation was committed by a survivor after his or her death (Almquist 1984:25ff).

As shown in the descriptions above, ghosts could be bothersome, create fear, and even kill. Furthermore, they could inflict the living with disease, and commit damaging activities of various kinds (Ström 1960:252). It was therefore important to try to protect or guard oneself against them.

The two previous references to sagas, not only depict ghost activity, but also indicate protection against them. In the first case, the head of the corpse was cut off and placed by his feet, in the second case a Christian cross was used. But the sagas also contain several other safety precautions against haunting spirits, for example, that the body could be thrown into water or be burned, or that high walls could be built around the grave. Candles or fire are also mentioned (Boberg 1966:97f). In recent tradition other safety precautions are mentioned. Some of these precautions include misleading the deceased when leaving home, such as taking the dead out through a hole in the wall (Hodne 1980:102). Other advice was to tie the big-toes of the deceased together or stick pins into the deceased's feet (Ibid.:63; cf. Kragh 2003:42). But some of the advice included putting objects in the coffin or in the grave. From Sweden it is known that one could throw a knife in the grave, but also salt, grains, or seeds were placed in the coffin (Hagberg 1937:622f and 627). In particular, flaxseed has been placed in coffins or graves, and this has been documented in Norway,

Sweden and Denmark (Ibid.:626 and 628; Hodne 1980:63). The question is whether or not hazel rods have had a similar anti-evil or anti-demonic effect?

There is a considerable amount of tradition about hazel (see e.g. Brøndegaard 1987:256ff; Tillhagen 1995:129ff), but it falls outside the framework of this article to go into all the details. I will therefore only concentrate on traditions that may shed light on this last question.

Information about the use of hazel rods occur in several places in the sagas. Egils saga, which is dated to the 13th century (Sigfússon 1958:522), tells about a council at the Gulatinget:

þar er domrin var settr var vaullr slétr. En settar niðr hesliss stengr i vaullin i hring. En laugð um snøri utan allt um huerfis. Voro þat kailloð ueband. En fyr inan i hringinum sátu domendrnir .xii. or Firða fylki. oc .xii. or Sygna fylki .xii. or Harða fylki. Þer þrenar tylftir manna skylldo þar dōma um mál mana (Egils saga 2001:94).

(Where the court was seated, was a smooth mound, and standing hazel-poles were set in a ring around the embankment and with a taut rope round about. This was called a “vebånd”. Inside the ring sat the judges, twelve from Firda county, twelve from Sygna county, and twelve from Horda county. These three groups of twelve men were to judge in matters between people.)

Why where exactly hazel rods used to mark the area for the jury, is not explained in this saga. But along with the rope they formed a *vebånd*, i.e. an enclosure that marked a place of truce (Fritzner 1973:882). The prefix *vé* denotes, in the Old Norse language a sanctuary or sacred place (Ibid.). This implies that hazel rods or hazel poles were used in a juridical-religious context, and may have been attributed magical-religious characteristics.

To *hasla vøll*, i.e. to mark a spot with hazel poles, is also mentioned in other sagas, but with a different purpose. In i.a. *Kormaks saga* and *Sagaen om Olav Tryggvason*, we hear about battle arenas marked with hazel poles (*Kormáks saga* 1939:237; *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* 1958:102 og 217)

Tradition from all three countries, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, states that one can use a hazel stick to keep snakes away or cause them to die (Bang 1901–1902:259; Törner 1946:98; Brøndegaard 1987:266). This suggests that hazel has been assigned properties that offer protection from evil. Explicitly, this is reflected in one of Eva Wigström’s Swedish writings: “Hasselkvistar nedstuckna I åkrar en viss dag skydda den växande grödan mot

mycket ont" (Wigström 1898-1914:436, cf. Wigström 1896:14). ("Hazel cuttings thrust into the fields on a certain day protect the growing crop against great evil.") Furthermore, there is a tradition of using hazel branches on horse harnesses to protect against witchcraft from fairies and evil spirits (Nedkvitne & Gjerdåker 1999:132). A very interesting piece of information is that hazel batons can be used to expel both *Lygtemænd og Troldkjæringer* (Schübeler 1886:514). This clearly shows that hazel rods could be used as protection against evil spirits and ghosts. In Swedish tradition *lyktemenn* or *lyktgubbar* are spirits of surveyors who had measured with error in their lifetime, or farmers who had moved boundary stones (Hagberg 1937:571). According to Germanic continental tradition, hazel wood gave protection against angry supernatural beings (*Handwörterbuch*, vol. 3:1528). These referred to records of tradition, demonstrate that hazel rods have been used as protection against evil beings, spirits, and ghosts.

Based on the above, there must be a reasonable inference that hazel rods were placed in graves to prevent the dead from returning – to haunt - to harass the living. This conclusion is built on a reasoning that has so far not been supported by an explicit source. However, there is such evidence among the Danish folklore collector Evald Tang Kristensen's collections. "Lægger man en kjæp ved siden af ligkisten, efter at den er sat i graven, går den døde ikke igjen" (Tang Kristensen 1897:261). ("If one places a rod beside the coffin, after it is put in the grave, then the dead will not return again to the living.")

The previously cited cases of rods lying in a cross form, also indicate such a purpose for grave rods. Even in such cases where the crosses lay on the deceased's legs or feet. According to tradition, the Christian cross has a strong effect for warding off evil, and as previously referred to, used as protection from ghosts and evil spirits.

That hazel rods should prevent the dead from haunting, explains why - in most cases - only a small percentage of the graves contained rods. As I have stated above, only some individuals were potential ghosts capable of haunting. Thus it should not have been necessary to place hazel rods for protection in all the graves.

A parallel to the placing of hazel rods in graves as protection against evil spirits, can be found in the custom of "offerkast". This custom of sacrificial tossing was, as a rule, along roads or thoroughfares, and was practiced in places where someone had died or been murdered. The sacrificial tossing or sacrifice mounds consisted of branches or stones (Erixon 1988:15). If the mound comprised of only branches, this then could in the Norwegian

tradition be called a *kvistvarp* (i.e. a pile of branches) (see e.g. Grimstad 1948:12). It was believed that those who had lost their lives in these locations came back to haunt. By throwing branches or twigs on these sites, protection was created against the returning spirits (Erixon 1988:16f and Solheim 1973:12).

Let me reflect a bit about why hazel in certain traditions may have gained such evil-warding effects. As mentioned earlier flaxseeds were sometimes placed in the coffin with the dead. Both - hazelnuts and flax - were plants or crops that helped contribute to primary human needs such as food and clothing. Hazelnuts have been used as food both in the Middle Ages and in modern times, and hazelnuts were also found in the Oseberg ship (Høeg 1961:241; Nedkvitne & Gjerdåker 1999:94f). Likewise, the use of flax and linen textiles can be traced far back in time (Hoffmann 1965:579f). Furthermore, within tradition, grain has had an important position. It contributed also as food for the people, and was often called *Gudslånet* (the loan from God) (*Norsk Ordbok*, vol. 4:1026). Grain was also attributed properties for driving away evil, and for example, as a protective agent against an aggressive *utburd* (Bø et al. 1981:257). Based on this information, it appears that tradition has given plants and crops that provided food and clothing, a special status and attributes them anti-demonic properties.

The conclusion I have reached as a results of this discussion, is largely based on traditional material recorded in the 19th century or early 20th century. Although I also include evidence from the 13th century concerning the use of hazel rods, it is still questionable whether the results may have validity back to the late Viking times and Middle Ages. Generally, the chronicled traditional material reflects beliefs and customs in use before the recorded time-frame. In this discussion we have also seen that the notions of spirits and ghosts are documented as early as the Middle Ages. In addition, studies have shown that traditional behavioral patterns can persist for many centuries, at least for 700 to 800 years (Baklid 2015). It is therefore reasonable to assume that the results discussed above are also applicable from the time when the oldest graves with hazel rods originated.

Conclusion

I have found, through the descriptions and analysis of the burial rods, that most of them occurred in graves from the early Christian period, but also in graves from the High Middle Ages, the late Middle Ages and the early 19th century. Most of the grave rods were of the

tree sort hazel, and with 1-2 sticks in a grave as an average. With one exception, hazel rods occurred in a relatively low proportion of graves.

Traditionally, hazel has been assigned properties capable of driving away evil and was used as protection against evil supernatural beings, i.a. ghosts and evil spirits. This information, combined with the Danish tradition that explicitly says that a rod could be laid down in a grave to prevent the dead from returning to haunt, makes it possible for me to claim that many of the hazel rods found in graves were placed there to prevent the spirits of the dead from coming back to haunt. This also explains why only a portion of the graves contained hazel rods, as only some of the dead could be potential ghosts or spirits returning to haunt the living.

SOURCES AND LITERATURE

Archive Material

Dialekt-, namn- och folkminnesarkivet i Göteborg (DAG)
IFGH 1598 og 1756.

Universitetet i Bergen, Bergen Museum – De kulturhistoriske samlinger (BMKS)
Topografisk arkiv, Sogn og Fjordane, Håkon Christie: Rapport fra utgravningen ved
Guddal kirke 1970.

Printed Material

Almquist, Solveig 1984: *Gengångarföreställningar i svensk folktro ur genreanalytisk synpunkt*, Stockholm.

Anderson, Trevor og Hans Göthberg 1986: *Olavskirkens kirkegård. Humanosteologisk analyse og faseinndeling*, Trondheim.

Baklid, Herleik 2015: «*Hundrede Daler, Hest og Sadel [...]» En eksplorativ studie av feste-, benke- og morgengaveskikken i et kontinuitetsperspektiv*. Dr. philos.-avhandling, UiO.

Bang, A. Chr. 1901–1902: *Norske Hexeformularer og Magiske Opskrifter*, Kristiania.

Bartholin, Thomas Seip 1976: Dendrokronologiske og vedanatomiske undersøgelser af træfundene, *Uppgrävt förflutet för PKbanken i Lund. En investering i arkeologi. Archaeologica Ludensia VII*, Lund, s. 145–169.

Boberg, Inger M. 1966: *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, København.

Brendalsmo, A. Jan 1989: *Peterskirken, dens kirkegård og det eldste Tønsberg*, [Tønsberg].

Brendalsmo, A. Jan m. fl. 1989: *Arkeologiske undersøkelser på Heddal prestegård*, Oslo.

Brøndegaard, V.J. 1987: *Folk og flora*, vol. 1, u.st.

Bø, Olav m.fl. 1981: *Norske segner*, Oslo.

Cinthio, Maria 2002: *De första stadsborna. Medeltida gravar och människor i Lund*, Stockholm/Stehag.

Christophersen, Axel og Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide 1994: *Kaupangen ved Nidelva*, [Oslo].

Daniell, Christopher 1997: *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066–1550*, London and New York.

Doppelfeld, Otto 1964: *Das Fränkische Knabengrab unter den Chor des Kölner Domes*, Sonderdruck aus Germania 1964, Jahrgang 42.

Egils saga Skallagrímssonar, vol. 1, Bjarni Einarsson (utg.), København 2001.

Eide, Ole Egil 1974: *De toskippede kirker i Oslo*, 2. opplag, Bergen.

Erixon, Sigurd 1988: *Offerkast och bjudhammare*, Stockholm.

Fritzner, Johan 1973: *Ordbog over Det gamle norske Sprog*, vol. 3, 4. utg., Oslo–Bergen–Tromsø.

Gilchrist, Roberta og Barney Sloane 2005: *Requiem. The Medieval Monastic Cemetery in Britan*, London.

Glükstad, Chr. 1878: *Hiterdals Beskrivelse*, Christiania.

Grimstad, Edvard 1948: *Etter gamalt. Folkeminne frå Gudbrandsdalen*, Oslo.

Hagberg, Louise 1937: *När döden gästar*, Stockholm.

Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens, vol. 3, Berlin 1930/1931.

Hodder, M.A. 1991: *Excavations at Sandwell Priory and Hall, 1982–88: A Mesolithic Settlement, Medieval Monastery and Post-Medieval Country House in West Bromwich*, Sandwell.

Hodne, Bjarne 1980: *Å leve med døden*, Oslo.

Hoffmann, Marta 1965: *Lin, Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, vol. 10, Oslo,

sp. 579–580.

Høeg, Ove Arbo 1961: Hassel, *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, vol. 6, Oslo, sp. 240–242.

Hägg, Inga 1997: Grabtextilien und christliche Symbolik am Beispiel der Funde unter dem Schleswiger Rathausmarkt, *Kirche und Gräberfeld des 11.–13. Jahrhunderts unter dem Rathausmarkt von Schleswig*, Neumünster, s. 85–146.

Jonsson, Kristina 2009: *Practices for the Living and the Dead. Medieval and Post-Reformation Burial in Scandinavia*, Stockholm.

Kieffer-Olsen, Jakob 1993: *Grav og gravslik i det middelalderlige Danmark – 8 kirkegårdsudgravninger*, Ph.d. afhandling, Aarhus Universitet.

Kormáks saga, *Íslenskt fornrit*, vol. 8, Reykjavík 1939, s. 201–302.

Kragh, Birgitte 2003: *Til jord skal du blive... Dødens og begravelsens kulturhistorie i Danmark 1780–1990*, Sønderborg.

Kristensen, Evald Tang 1897: *Danske Sagn*, vol. 5, Silkeborg.

Kristensen, Hans Krongaard 1994: *The Franciscan Friary of Svendborg*, Svendborg.

Kristjánsson, Jónas 1972: Svarfdæla saga, *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, vol. 17, Oslo, sp. 468–469.

Krogh, Knud og O. Voss 1960: Kirken på vikingens høj, *Skalk* nr. 4/1960, s. 9–14.

Krogh, Knud 1965: Det grønne æg, *Skalk* nr. 4/1965, s. 13–15.

Long, Clifford D. 1975: Excavation in the Medieval City of Trondheim, Norway, *Medieval Archaeology*, vol. XIX 1975, s. 1–32.

Müller, Inger Helene Vibe 1984: De glemte døde, *Det kgl. Norske videnskabers selskab Museet. Rapport arkeologisk serie 1984:1*, Trondheim, s. 49–79.

Mårtensson, Anders W. 1963a: Gravar kring stavkyrkan. *Thulegravningen 1961. Archaeologica Ludensia II*, Lund, s. 43–66.

Mårtensson, Anders W. 1963b: Gravarna kring S:t Drotten. *Thulegravningen 1961. Archaeologica Ludensia II*, Lund, s. 89–108.

Mårtensson, Anders W. 1976: Gravar och kyrkor, *Uppgrävt förflutet för PKbanken i Lund. En investering i arkeologi. Archaeologica Ludensia VII*, Lund, s. 87–134.

Mårtensson, Anders W. 1980: *S:t Stefan i Lund. Ett monument ur tiden*, Föreningen Gamla

Lund, Årsskrift 62.

Nedkvitne, Knut og Johannes Gjerdåker 1999: *Hegg og hassel i norsk natur og tradisjon*, Elverum.

Nordbø, Olav 1945: *Segner og sogur frå Bøherad*, Oslo.

Norsk Ordbok. Ordbok over det norske folkemålet og det nynorske skriftmålet, vol. 4, Oslo 2002.

Nøstberg, Ingrid 1993: *Kirkegårder og holdninger til de døde. En studie med utgangspunkt i den arkeologisk undersøkte kirkegården i Heddal, Telemark*, Hovedoppgave i historie, UiO.

Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta, vol. 1, Ólafur Halldórsson (utg.), København 1958.

Saga af Þorsteini Bæarmagni, *Fornmanna sögur*, vol. 3, Kaupmannahöfn 1827, s. 175–198.

Schübeler, F.C. 1886: *Viridarium Norvegicum. Norges væxtrige. Et bidrag til Nord-Europas natur- og kulturhistorie*, vol. 1, Christiania.

Sigfússon, Björn 1958: Egils saga, *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, vol. 3, sp. 522–524.

Solheim, Svale 1973: *Kastrøysar, Norge* 16, s. 11–25.

Ström, Folke 1960: Gengångare, *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*, vol. 5, Oslo, sp. 252–253.

Svarfdœla saga, *Íslenzkt fornrit*, vol. 9, Reykjavík 1956, s. 127–208.

Tillhagen, Carl-Herman 1995: *Skogarna och träden. Naturvård i gågna tider*, Stockholm.

Törner, Johan J. 1946: *Samling af widskeppelser*, K. Rob. V. Wikman (utg.), Uppsala.

Vedeler, Marianne 2007: *Klær og formspråk i norsk middelalder*, Dr. art.-avhandling, UiO.

Welin, S. 1889: Nyfunne grafver vid Skara domkyrka, *Kongl. Vitterhets historie och antiqvitets akademis månadsblad*, adertonde årgången, 1889, s. 121–125.

Wigström, Eva 1896: Växtlifvet i folkets tro och diktning, *Ord & bild*, s. 12–19.

Wigström, Eva 1898–1914: *Folketro ock sägner från skilda landskap*, Stockholm.

¹ The article is a lighter adjusted version of the trial lecture, with the self-chosen topic, for the degree of dr.philos. at the University of Oslo, October 1. 2015.

