

Ship grave hall passage – the Oseberg monument as compound meaning

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The ship in the grave from Oseberg is 23 metres long (Brøgger et al. 1917; Christensen et al. 1992). It stands next to a river on its keel on the rollers that made its journey on land possible. A mound covers the ship. Some time after the construction of the monument, perhaps a hundred years or so, someone made a an impressive straight cut into the mound, broke through the roof of the grave-chamber, smashed most of the equipment and took out the remains of the two women buried there. It is doubtful whether this disturbance was primarily a matter of plundering the grave or a matter of destroying the grave chamber and moving at least one of the deceased to a more suitable situation (cf. Brøgger 1945; Myhre 1992, pp. 280 ff.; Krogh 1993). During the excavation in 1904, the excavators found several skeletal remains of the older of the two buried women on what must have been the floor of the trench used by those who broke in and removed the deceased. Given the fact that only a few bones remained in the chamber we can conclude that the deceased themselves were among the prime objects for those who first opened the mound. Oseberg is thus not only a burial

and its monument is also an opening.

The ship in Oseberg does not give the impression of a ship sailing the sea—moored, as it is, to its bollard stone—but it *does* give the impression of a ship loaded and ready to take off. The overall installation is organised in a way similar to most boat- and ship-graves. One part consists of slaughtered horses and other animals outside the boat, the other makes up the installation in the ship. This installation too falls into two parts. One part is the old ship itself, made ready to take off. There are fresh oars, anchor, mast, a neat gangway and all kinds of ropes all over the ship. The other part is the representation of the rooms.

The grave chamber is the only room proper, but being set approximately in the middle of the ship, a division into three rooms is easy to detect. The installation in Valsgårde, Grave 8 (Herschend 1999) represented one end of a hall building consisting of a chamber and the upper part of the hall room. It is tempting to compare this layout to that of the hall, e.g. the one in Lejre. Making the connection Valsgårde–Lejre is no doubt a tentative interpretation, inasmuch as we have little exact knowledge about room function in large halls. Nonetheless, there is a point in making the connection since it would seem that we can compare also the design of the Oseberg burial to that of the hall in Lejre. This comparison is even more speculative than the one including the Valsgårde grave. Nonetheless, if one end of the Lejre hall formed a pattern for the Valsgårde grave, the opposite end of the same hall would fit the room sequence of the Oseberg ship: kitchen, chamber and storage, Fig. 1. If we try to imagine the funerals in Valsgårde and Oseberg, it will become apparent that the audiences in front of the boats were situated in what would, metaphorically speaking, have been the lower, public, part of the hall, i.e., the part where the less prominent guests belong.

There is a point, moreover, in my opinion, in seeing the storage as a barrier between a male and a female part of the hall building. Seeing the storage as a barrier, would make it a passage and the kind of room which Hroðgar and Wealhtheow would pass through when they left the hall for her room, i.e. for her *brydbur*. It would also qualify as the room through which the *medostig*, i.e. the one-way mead-path, which they used when they returned to the hall, could have passed. Despite the opinion of most authors, the description in the poem does not make it obvious, from an architectural point of view, that the King and the Queen or their attendants went outdoors to reach the hall by the mead-path (*Beowulf* PART I vv, 920b-927). On the contrary, the mead-path could well be a poetic metaphor for the path running from the kitchen, through chamber and passage, into the hall, i.e. the path upon which the Queen carried the mead into the hall-room. Analysing the Oseberg grave, there is a point, therefore, in starting in the kitchen and proceeding down the path.

THE KITCHEN is the most clearly structured part of the ship, befitting the rationality of that kind of room, although there are objects difficult for us to

interpret. However, the slaughtered cow represents the meat in the diet and the millstone the cereals. The caldrons, the tripod and the chain represent the fireplace and a number of other objects represent the work involved in cooking. In Oseberg, food-preparation is large-scale and that is reasonable inasmuch as managing the kitchen on the large aristocratic or royal farm, takes professional skills. It is the point in the representation of the kitchen in Oseberg that it should be rational and significant. We can see this kitchen as the symbol of a narrow gender role, but also accept the responsibility and accept the powerful role of rationally managing the household, as something positive, and take the simplicity of the room to be a sign of quality.

IN THE DAMAGED CHAMBER, it was still possible for the excavators to realise that the deceased had been lying on beds in a decorated room. The excavators found a few glass beads, but no precious jewellery and they saw the lack of jewellery, together with smashed boxes, as a proof of the plundering of the grave. Other aristocratic or royal graves, like the one from Valsgårde 8, show that if we are laid to rest in a bed then we are dressed accordingly in our night-clothes without our jewellery, which in the Oseberg case may or may not have been in the box. Researchers believe that one of the women had a high social status, the other a low one. If they had different social status, one being a queen the other her maid, only the latter was probably fully and plainly dressed and the few beads found in the chamber were probably hers. She was an old woman and the bones from her corpse were the ones scattered all over trench. The other woman, the younger of the two, was the high-ranking owner of the chamber. Of her skeleton, only a few, albeit significant bones, remained.

Based upon Brøgger (1917a, pp. 21 ff.), and the papers in Christensen et al. (1992), not least Ingstad (1992a, pp. 209 ff.), we can venture to say that the two beds stood with their upper short ends against the northern wall of the chamber. Due to the triangular shape of this wall and the height of the beds, they must have been standing next to each other. Along the southern wall mostly looms and weaving utensils were placed, but between the beds and the looms there would have been an open space where one could stand upright. The beds, the shape of the boat and the tent-like superstructure of the chamber made it difficult to access the equipment placed along the long walls of the chamber, especially in its northern part where the beds stood. On the western side there were a few objects next to the bed, but on the eastern side, not least in the north-eastern corner, next to the head of the young woman's bed, there were several objects. There is an obvious difference between the objects on the western and eastern side of the chamber. On the western side we find the kind of objects a servant would normally occupy herself with, such as cloth for a tent or a sail, buckets, boxes and a larder. These are simple, but good-quality objects. On the eastern side, however, the equipment is markedly lavish and also more personal.

If we imagine ourselves in the position of the intruders, wishing among other things to bring out the skeletal remains of the high-ranking woman, we

face a problem when we jump down on the open space next to the foot of the beds. The young and high-ranking woman is bedded down in the eastern bed, but her bones are difficult to collect. It can hardly be done from the foot of the bed, and due to the western bed standing in our way, it is impossible also from the side. The intruders solved the problem by throwing out the remains of the old woman and her bed, scattering them on the floor of the trench. Then they collected the remains of the young woman from the side of her bed without missing much. They started by throwing most of the bedding into an empty spot along the eastern wall and having collected the bones they proceeded to break down the bed and throw most of it out into the trench. This gave them access to the caskets in the corner behind the bed. They opened them, found the woman's shawl, probably among other things, and took whatever they took.

By and large the intruders seem to have been a mixture of openly smashing and collecting marauders, rather than secret robbers. Especially the fact that they succeeded in collecting and removing almost every bone of the young woman's skeleton gives the impression that she was their prime object—she and perhaps some of her most personal belongings in one of the caskets. Generally speaking, the intruders' pattern of behavior fits the idea of a Christian ritual conquering a pagan queen before reburying her, an interpretation suggested by Knud Krogh (1993). Also Björn Myhre's idea (1992, pp. 282 f.) that we should see a political context behind the opening of the monumental graves, as well as behind the monuments themselves, is fruitful. So fruitful in fact, that it ought to be taken one step further in order to clarify its implications for the transition from a pagan to a Christian society. Myhre suggests that Danish demand upon Vestfold gave rise to political manifestations and struggle for power. This seems so plausible that we ought tentatively to combine the ambition of Harald Bluetooth, and his habit of reburying prominent persons, with the opening of the Oseberg grave. It would fit this champion of Christianity, engineering and personal political ambition to organise the opening of the grave and the reburial of the high-ranking woman as part of launching a campaign of pious oppression.

The organisation of the chamber is visible despite the damage made when the first excavators broke in. It is a woman's chamber and she can choose to sleep or spend her day working in it. The work done in the chamber centres on textiles and this domain seems to be protective and emblematic of emancipated womanhood. The question whether working with textiles indicates a suppressed or emancipated position in life is debated, but the handicraft at least is considered a professional one (cf. Andersson 1999; Arvill-Nordbladh 1998; Einersstam 1997; Gräslund 1998; 1999a; Hjørungdal; 1995 Nordström 1997). In my opinion the Oseberg Grave is an indication of the emancipatory force of textiles inasmuch as it creates a room of one's own.

There is a conspicuous lack of jewellery in the chamber and if we could trust jewellery to have been removed from the casket at the western wall, the

chamber would have been an even more private room. Splendid jewellery is part of the interface between the private and public life of a high-ranking woman and if the woman were buried exposing her jewellery, it would no doubt have created a public expression similar to a *lit de parade*. If, on the other hand, the jewellery were stored away in the casket it would have added to the impression of privacy. The latter is probably the case in Oseberg, while in the male boat-graves, e.g. from Valsgårde, the opposite is demonstrated: visible insignia, sword and drinking vessel, on and next to the bed. Male installation shows us seclusion among objects (eventually icons) signalling notoriety, the installation in Oseberg shows us seclusion among objects signalling anonymity. It is tempting to see the difference as gender-based and to suggest that in their Oseberg privacy high-ranking women pay the price of their emancipation. It is a within-family emancipation—too much a room of one’s own, so to speak. It seems correct to say that the Oseberg chamber expresses the private sphere as that in which a woman can emancipate herself fulfilling a positive role while working. Her interface with the public is no doubt the hall, but in the large hall an essential part of her social life is a matter of managing the household. Kitchen and chamber represent two sides of womanhood and similar to the simple verse on the 11th century rune-stone from Hassmyra (VS24) the elaborate installation in Oseberg points out womanhood in relation to the same main aspects. Verse and ship-grave draw attention to the passage, but also to the order and the housewife governing the farm:

kumbr hifrøya til Hasvimyra
æigi bætri þan byi raðr

To Hasvimyra no better housewife comes than she who rules the farm.

THE PROW is the most complicated of the three rooms. On top of everything, i.e. outside the ship in the first fill of the mound, we find the slaughtered animals. Below them, i.e. inside the ship, there are mainly two kinds of objects: those belonging to the ship and those belonging to the room. Although the function of many things is obscure, most, but not all of the items belonging to the room, are containers of a kind. It is only fair to count all these things among the personal belongings of the high-ranking woman in the chamber and to see them as part of a load of equipment.

The impression of ‘loaded for travel’, typifies the whole of the Oseberg installation. Since the installation surrounds a high-ranking woman, it becomes reasonable to connect the installation with the typical upper-class female journey: the passage from a snowy mountain area, through wilderness, into the cultivated and civilised landscape, up to the farm and into the marriage bed of a spring wedding (cf. Steinsland 1991; Herschend 1998, pp. 94 ff.). The woman in Oseberg seems to have been one of the women who undertook this passage inasmuch as the contents of the room in the prow signify that passage, from wilderness to civilisation, which made her woman and wife rather than child.

There are sledges, for the snow in the mountains, a stretcher possible to sit on when carried down the steep hillsides, a ship for the skerries, a wagon for the roads of the civilised landscape, tents and beds for journey nights and indeed, a marriage bed or a bed of state. It is worth noting that the bride travels with her own marriage bed on the passage. The offered skull of a cow or heifer points out the bed in an over-explicit way. If the storage in the prow signifies her passage, chamber and the kitchen mark out her stationary life as a housewife and possibly a female leader or sovereign. Passage and station — storage, and kitchen and chamber — structure the life of the high-ranking woman. Seen in the hall perspective, i.e., fitting the rooms of the ship-grave into the hall building, the actual passage from the male to the female part of the hall signify the passage performed by the bride as well as the passage performed by the wife. Her walking to and from chamber and hall room, through the prow or storage, amounts to performing the passage as a part of everyday life.

The prow shows what it takes materially to make a passage similar to that of Brunhild in the poem by Venantius Fortunatus (cf. Herschend 1998). The shift in focus from the panegyric to the installation in the Queen's grave is instructive. Venantius, by means of duke Gogo, swept away Brunhild to Sigibert without further ado. In the grave, on the other hand, we see the expedition aspects of the passage and the things it takes to succeed. It takes a caravan and a ship. Analysing the artefacts in the prow, it becomes apparent that the passage is not just travelling. The traditional work of a housewife, such as cooking and textile production, is also part of the journey; hence the bed of state, the house-shaped tent, the loom and the trough. The passage is a civilised journey, which does not set aside any part of womanhood. From Ingstad (1992b, pp. 224ff.), we can conclude that in the chamber alone there were a sufficient number of elements to connect the high-ranking woman with the divine and semi-divine mythological complex of the Late Iron Age aristocracy. Moreover, part of the female passage itself can be present in the tapestries (cf. Hougen 1940, pp. 114 ff.; Ingstad 1992b, pp. 232 f.). In the Oseberg installation, where the complementary concepts, passage and station, are making up womanhood, it would seem natural if in the most stationary there were things to remind us of the passage. The tapestries next to the Queen do so and so does the tent next to the chambermaid.

It is difficult to say which journey the passage equipment in the prow is reflecting. Is it the first, the one from home to her husband's hall? Or is it the second, the one from this hall to a new home? This dichotomy is probably not at all relevant. The passages could well have built upon each other implying that a woman's life consists of stages of civilisation connected by passages. In effect a woman's life is thus one long journey structured as an interaction between passage and station. This makes it tempting to explain the age and character of the ship with reference to its use during the Queen's first passage from childhood to womanhood some 20 years before her death. Be this as it may,

there is little doubt that the Oseberg installation deepens our insights into the passage motif hinted in Eddic poetry and Venantius' panegyrics.

Still moored, but with oars out to enable the ship to swing out in the current of the river, the installation signals a high-ranking woman on the brink of going off to life in an adjoining world. In the Oseberg case, 'on the brink' means going and staying, being present and absent, at the same time or perhaps moving in and out of our world. If, therefore, the intruders took out the high-ranking woman and passed her on to a Christian grave, they would effectively have split the reflexive and complementary character of station and passage, presence and absence, governing the Oseberg installation.

OSEBERG IS A MARKEDLY PAGAN GRAVE. The offerings and the co-burial are obvious signs. So too are the metaphors for female life. But equally significant is the way symbols are mixed in the same installation. Simultaneously, the installation is grave as well as house and boat and at the same time also a mixture of permanent death and seemingly only temporarily interrupted life or sleep. In this way, the grave is an expression of an ontology governed by complementarity rather than by categorisation characterised by sharp definitions. The grave is an expression of the belief that the unseen is present and indeed, part of the present to such a degree that it must be represented.

In this way the installation corresponds to the periphrase termed *kenning*, but contrary to its counterpart in language, it is much more complex. In language, the *kenning* is a compound such as *eskis afspring*, 'the offspring of the box'. The expression is a periphrase for 'food' since in certain situations what we take, i.e. what comes out of the box, is food. We can nest compounds in each other in order to bring about a greater complexity, and construct a *kenning* such as *fens fúr-Rognir*. *Rognir* is a name for Óðinn, *fúr-Rognir*, 'the fire's Óðinn', a *kenning* for leader or sovereign. The whole: 'the sovereign of the water', consists of two nested compounds, which happen to make up a *kenning* for Sigurðr Jarl—in his capacity as the ceremonial cook of the communal offering meal. In language, we can nest only a few compounds in an extended or *rekin*, i.e. 'driven', *kenning*, without losing their context and meaning completely. In installations, such as graves, our freedom is much greater. In real life, compound constructions are not linear and they need not have any specific direction or nesting. Putting an offspring and a box next to each other does not signify 'the offspring of the box' only. We can illustrate the possibilities and the problems of this in the Oseberg Grave.

In the aft there are some gates that could have formed a compartment or box in which the cow could have stood before it was taken out to become, indeed, an offspring of a kind of box, and food. Cow and gates can be said to form a compound. At the same time, the slaughtered cow forms compounds with the rest of the kitchen equipment and that enforces its status as food rather than animal. In the stem, there was a bovine skull in the bed of state. That

reminds us of the purpose of the passage inasmuch as offering the head of an animal is an offer for the sake of reproduction. The compound, head and bed, can therefore symbolise fertility as well as the task of the married woman. The juxtaposed position of the cow as foodstuff in the ordered aft and as offering in the rather disorderly prow, is enough to form a new compound. This new constellation could signify the woman who administrates the food in the kitchen and the woman who remembers that in food there is satisfaction as well as a promise of ability to take care of an 'offspring'. If for a moment, we refrain from seeing life from a personal point of view and expand it to something that continues from one form to another, the compounds of the grave will generate new meanings. The passage from this reality to another one becomes a counterpart to the passage from maidenhood to womanhood, but also a counterpart to the passage performed by the cow when it was slaughtered. We can continue in this way, producing more or less likely or intelligible compounds of the constellations in the grave.

Interpretation is a matter of preference and intellectual satisfaction; more interesting if shared, than not. Interpretation is, nonetheless, of little importance compared to the general structure of the grave, which encourages us to form an understanding based on the complementary character of the compounds that we detect. The boat-graves present us with a universe or a theatre in which a dramatic journey will take place. We understand the main principles, but since the point is to allow a number similar stories to take place in the setting, we would have appreciated some guidance. Not, as it were, to detect the correct story, which is not there, but to see the ones that people saw.

We can think poets or their poems as the missing guides, as well as we could have hoped to talk to those who made the installations. That would of course have been worthwhile, but still not enough, while the job of both was to construct complexity rather than the opinion of the common man. Eddic poems are less complex and more comprehensible than the installation in the grave, but they can never tell the definite story. They are too much an expression of a view upon ontology, rather than an answer to the question: 'What is it I see'? Whether we like it or not, there are no single-minded informants, expressing their immediate feelings, left to do research upon: only sources which will allow us to form a view upon an ontology of complementarity rather than one of categorisation.

THE OSEBERG INSTALLATION can be seen as a piece of literary criticism. Understanding the installation is a matter of fitting items, which may or may not have a symbolic value, into a narrative. To the Late Iron Age upper classes, journeys happen to constitute a suitable narrative space and compound-making a narrative method. This method makes it possible for an item to take part in several complementary stories within the given space. In the Oseberg installation, passage and station make up an overriding complementary pair, which governs the core of the narratives linked to the installation. The items,

therefore, do not support passage and station as topoi signifying either passage or station. On the contrary, they support narrative and complementary narrative as in itself a mind broadening technique. For that reason they are also category-breaking and topos-denying inasmuch as they change partners and take part in several, albeit complementary narratives. The idea of founding a never-ending story based upon items forming and reforming compounds with each other cannot survive medieval Christianity. However, understanding medieval saga and medieval editing of Eddic poetry will lead astray if we are unable to catch the echoes of a narrative technique linked to a once floating notion of reality.

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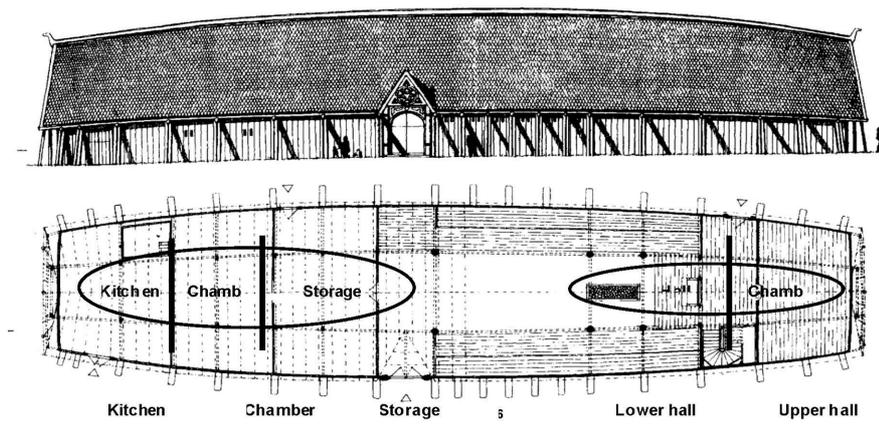


Fig. 1 The lay-out of Oseberg and Valsgårde, boat-grave 8, fitted into the lay-out of the hall in Lejre (Based on Draiby and Komber 1999).