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ABNORMAL, ATYPICAL, DEVIANT – UNUSUAL BURIALS IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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This study examines the interpretative possibilities of unusual burials appearing in Migration Period cemeteries in the Carpathian Basin, with particular emphasis on distinguishing post-burial interventions from ritual elements that diverge from normative funerary practice. The results demonstrate that the interpretation of anatomical disorder, body manipulation, removal of skulls and body parts, and irregular grave structures is only possible through a complex archaeological and bioarchaeological analysis in which these factors are studied together with local ritual customs and those practised in a wider cultural context. The paper emphasizes that atypical burials cannot be regarded as a homogeneous category: the ideas underlying them range from social stigmatization and punitive practices to apotropaic motivations. An examination of ethnographic and historical parallels reveals that interaction with the corpse functioned as an integral part of the ritual practice in many societies. Overall, atypical burials represent archaeological imprints of dynamic changes in social norms, concepts of death, and communal identity, and their interpretation can only lead to valid conclusions when embedded within a broader cultural framework.

Keywords: atypical burial; deviance; grave reopening; manipulation; archaeothanatology

BURIAL RITES AND DEVIANCE

Burial rites and funerary customs are indicators of a society's cultural and symbolic worldview: they reflect the community's relationship with death, the body, and afterlife, and indirectly express the system of values and belief structures of the living. Migration Period cemeteries of the Carpathian Basin hold archaeological imprints of a dynamic historical era, during which each community followed a defined burial rite and a preset pattern in grave construction, the deposition of grave goods, and other ritual elements. Despite this, excavations frequently reveal burials that deviate in some way from the norms observed within a given community (Tsaliki 2008, 1).

The interpretation of such burials is difficult; without a complex, context-sensitive analysis, it is often challenging to determine whether the remains belong to an individual from a different community or cultural background or whether they represent a member of the same community who, for some reason, received a non-normative burial. Particularly problematic are graves in which direct interaction with the corpse occurred shortly after burial, whether through the manipulation of the body or the grave or through looting. In such cases, the action must have taken place soon after burial, when decomposition had not yet begun or was in a very early stage. Accordingly, the phenomenon can only be interpreted through a detailed examination of the archaeological context and the burial environment.

Archaeothanatology – the archaeology of death – provides essential methodological support for the research of this topic. Its aim, to reconstruct burial practices and actions undertaken after the funeral, is achieved by examining human remains, grave goods, and the spatial organisation of the grave. Based on skeletal position, taphonomic processes, and the positions of objects, conclusions can be drawn on the elements of the burial practice and the related community's view of and approach to death (Blaizot 2022, 24).

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between two phenomena: post-burial disturbance and deviant burial. The line separating the two is often blurred, as it is often difficult to determine when and under what circumstances the remains ended up in an atypical position.

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Fig. 1. Grave 36 of Hegykő–Mező Street, a Lombard cemetery. While the grave differs from the rest of the cemetery, it cannot be interpreted as an obviously deviant burial because the body position may be the result of that the mourners had dropped the coffin or the corpse moved into its bottom part during putrefaction (HNM–Public Collection Centre Data Archive, Inv. no. 5517)

DEFINING ATYPICAL AND DEVIANT BURIALS

The collective term *deviant*, *atypical*, or *unusual burial* involves all cases in which the burial method, body position, or grave structure deviates from the norms of the given community (Aspöck 2008, 17). Numerous factors may underlie such abnormalities, reflecting the beliefs, social structure, and concepts of death within that society.

Classifying a burial as atypical cannot be based on a single anomalous feature. Although unusual grave depth, the absence of grave goods, or an atypical body position may be striking, these features alone are insufficient to establish deviance (*Figs. 1–2*). Interpretation requires the combined analysis of multiple interrelated criteria: the spatial location of the grave, ritual deviations, anthropological markers (such as mutilation or physical restraint), and contextual comparison with the community's normative burial pattern (Tsaliki 2008, 3; Reynolds 2009, 63). Atypical burials are therefore not merely archaeological anomalies but reflections of cultural and social processes that provide insight into a community's normative system, beliefs, and social structure.

Deviation from burial norms may, in many cases, indicate social discrimination (Shay 1985). The unusual character of a grave may be linked to the fact that the deceased had violated the rules of the community during their life or after their death. This category may have included those who committed suicide, as well as prostitutes, criminals, murderers,

Fig. 2. Gyirmót–Homokdomb, Grave 3. The unusual body position is probably the result of post-burial manipulation rather than reflecting the way the deceased was buried (HNM–Public Collection Centre Data Archive, Inv. no. 16370)

or individuals considered to be witches, who might therefore have been denied formal burial. These graves were often placed at the periphery of cemeteries or beyond them, expressing social exclusion via spatial separation (Tsaliki 2008, 3; Hope 2010, 37–38).

However, deviation from the normative burial practice could also result from the special status of the deceased. Individuals with magical or spiritual roles, such as shamans or healers, may have received distinct rites due to their social position (Tsaliki 2008, 3).

It cannot be presumed in every case that individuals considered deviant in life were also treated as such in death (Tsaliki 2008, 3–4). At the site of Sükösd-Ságod, the remains of a young woman were found, whose skeleton showed evidence of severe, advanced tuberculosis. The osteological symptoms included serious spinal deformation, collapsed vertebrae, and thinned leg bones, indicating immobility. Despite her condition, she was cared for by her community and buried with dignity (Spekker et al. 2020).

PUNISHMENT, EXPOSURE, AND POST-MORTEM TREATMENT

In the most heavily stigmatised cases, such as executions, the bodies of the deceased were often not buried but simply left at the execution site. Since these locations were frequently situated along major routes, at the edge of the settlement, or near public spaces, the corpses were exposed to public view. Discolouration of the skeletal remains, bone fragmentation, and gnaw marks made by animals indicate that the bodies lay exposed for extended periods before internment (Hope 2010, 37–38; Devlin 2015, 67–68; Kováts 2017, 167–191). Public display of the body reinforced not only the physical aspect of punishment but also served as a tool of social humiliation and stigmatisation.

If such remains were buried later, likely for reasons of environmental hygiene rather than ritual observance, the bodies would already have been in an advanced state of decomposition. It is plausible that those who buried them did not restore anatomical order. Disarticulation, anatomical incoherence, deficiencies in grave structure, and hasty burial may all seem like evidence of grave disturbance or looting. While this interpretation may be valid in some cases, the reality is generally more complex (Klevnäs 2013; 2020).

When graves contain incomplete skeletons or only a few bones, which nonetheless are in an anatomical order, grave disturbance alone cannot serve as an explanation. Such burials may have been intentionally arranged in this manner, for example, to 'clean up' the remains, but it is equally possible that the buried person was beheaded or that certain body parts were preserved as relics. Such practices are relatively common in the archaeological record of the Avar Period (László 1955; Bóna 1957; Kovrig 1963; Nagy 1973; 1998), though they also occur in earlier and later historical periods. In these graves, the body often appears undisturbed, yet the skull is missing or found in an un-anatomical position (*Fig. 3*).

Fig. 3. Mosonszentjános–Kavicsbánya, Grave 27. The grave was reopened, and the skull was placed atop the upper part of the coffin. The coffin must have been in a rather good condition at the time, but the body was likely in an advanced stage of decomposition (HNM–Public Collection Centre Data Archive, Inv. no. 8643)

DECAPITATION, MANIPULATION, AND FEAR OF THE DEAD

From interpretation's point of view, it is crucial to determine whether the removal of the head was associated with the circumstances of death or resulted from post-burial intervention. The absence of the skull may indicate execution or decapitation (Stadler & Wiltschke-Schrotta 2005, 58–64; Reynolds 2009, 76–85; Montgomery & Knüsel 2011; Gardeła 2013; Jensen 2016; Mattison 2016; Eriksen 2020; Wiseman, Neil & Mazzilli 2021). However, when no cut marks are present, yet the head is displaced or absent, ritual post-burial intervention may be inferred (Naumann et al. 2014). Such actions may have served apotropaic or symbolic purposes.

The meaning of head removal depends on timing. If the decapitation occurred at or near the time of death, the resulting phenomenon may be classified as an atypical burial. If the head was removed after burial, it can be interpreted as manipulation, the motives behind which can only be elucidated through a detailed contextual analysis. Nevertheless, the underlying motives may have been similar in both cases;for example, 'neutralising' the dead or preventing their return.

It is possible that a community identified the deceased only later as a source of misfortune, such as a disease or calamity, and responded with exhumation or post-mortem mutilation (Mays et al. 2017). Ethnographic and historical analogies, including medieval 'vampire burials' (Gardeła 2015), demonstrate that such rites directly reflect changes in belief systems.

Anthropological and archaeothanatological analyses are therefore crucial, as they enable the identification of evidence of decapitation or post-mortem manipulation and help determine whether the head was removed at death (peri-mortem) or later (post-mortem), with or without tools, or during the decomposition of the corpse.

Decapitation did not always involve the complete separation of the head from the body. In the cemetery of Wien–Mödling, three decapitated individuals were discovered whose postcranial skeletons lay in an anatomical order (Wiltschke-Schrotta & Stadler 2005, 58–64). The motif of decapitation is well known in Scandinavian mythology: Old Norse sagas describe beheading as a means of preventing the dead from returning and of neutralising malevolent deceased (Gardeła 2013).

Fear of the returning dead thus provides a plausible explanation for such practices. This phenomenon is widely attested in European folklore and can clearly be identified in the archaeological record. Measures taken to prevent the dead from returning extended beyond decapitation and included other physical restraints, such as stone packing and the addition of sickles, shackles, bindings, or nails to the burial (*Fig. 4*; Barrowclough 2014; Gardeła 2015; Quercia & Cazzulo 2016). It also included mutilation of the corpse, such as the removal of skulls or limbs (Geary 1986; Barber 1988; Reynolds 2009, 86–97; Quercia & Cazzulo 2016; Aspöck et al. 2022), and laying the dead in unusual body positions, such as prone, in the grave (Tsaliki 2008;

Fig. 4. Biatorbágy, Grave 257. A grave with stone packing in the Avar Period cemetery (Simon 1993, 157, 11. kép)

Aspöck 2008; Parvanov 2024). These rites are physical manifestations of fear and reflect communal beliefs about death. Ultimately, their purpose was to restore order and protect the world of the living.

DISTURBANCE VERSUS NORMATIVE RITUAL PRACTICE

Not every disturbed grave classifies as a deviant burial. In many cultures, post-burial interaction with the dead was an integral part of the funerary practice and formed part of the community's religious and symbolic system. Ritual returns to the dead occurred through funerary feasts (Lee 2007), bone cleaning (Robb et al. 2015), or other post-burial rites. These practices formed part of normative mortuary cults rather than counting as violations of the integrity of the grave.

Numerous ethnographic and historical parallels from Southeast Asia (Hartaty & Tobing 2025), Madagascar (Graeber 1995), and Mexico (Leticia & Chung 2015) illustrate that periodic or regular interaction with the dead functioned as a natural element of communal identity and ancestor veneration. In such contexts, it was not intervention but its absence that would have been considered atypical, as returning to the dead served as a ritual means of maintaining social order and collective memory.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of non-normative, atypical, or deviant burials in the archaeological record of the Migration Period Carpathian Basin reflects complex social, religious, and ritual processes. Contextual interpretation is fundamental, as similar anomalous features, such as non-anatomical order of the skeleton or its parts, irregularities in the grave construction, or signs of body manipulation, may arise from very different motives. Some indicate social exclusion, punishment, or deviance, while others signal special status or religious and spiritual distinction. Attitudes toward death and interactions with the body thus reflect communal beliefs and relationships with the dead.

The study demonstrates that deviation from burial norms does not always represent deviance: some disturbed graves can be understood as integral elements of communal mortuary cults. Ethnographic parallels show that sustained interaction with the dead did not necessarily represent violation but rather the maintenance of an active relationship between the community of the living and their ancestors. Examination of examples from the Carpathian Basin similarly reveals that grave reopening, body manipulation, and skull removal can only be interpreted within a broader ritual context. Atypical burials are therefore not merely irregular burial practices but archaeological traces of interactions with the dead and of communal concepts of death, often aimed at restoring order and protecting the living.

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