

MORALITIES OF DRESS AND THE DRESS OF THE DEAD IN EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF EARLY MEDIEVAL DEATH: DISTINGUISHING PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS

The archaeology of death in early medieval Germanic successor states has long been dominated by efforts to develop criteria to distinguish between the burials of pagans and Christians (e.g. Van Es 1970 and Dierkens 1986; cf. Schülke 1997). Some criteria seem to discriminate between both groups unambiguously: Christians do not cremate their dead and do not bury them with animals which were deliberately killed for the occasion; pagans sometimes, but not always, do. The usefulness, however, of most other criteria is doubted, and this includes practices which will be the focus of this paper: dressing up the dead splendidly or soberly, once thought the general practice of pagans and Christians respectively. Several burials of splendidly dressed persons, some dating well into the seventh century (i.e. more than one hundred years after conversion), are known to be of Christian origin (Young 1986:390). Archaeologists nowadays think most criteria fall short because the late Roman and early medieval church did not develop an encompassing theological-liturgical model for the disposal of the dead (Boullough 1983). The interdiction of some practices – cremation, funerary meals, the sacrifice of animals and the wear and disposal of amulets – was not accompanied by the formulation of precepts concerning how to deal ritually with death and the dead.

It should come as no surprise then that distinguishing between pagans and Christians is not of much concern to contemporary archaeologists studying early medieval cemeteries. Now socio-political interpretations of developments within burial ritual dominate research (e.g. Steuer 1982, Young 1986, Dierkens 1991, Halsall 1995). Consensus about the interpretation of dressing up the dead splendidly or soberly has developed

over the last few years (e.g. Young 1986, Effros 1994). To put it briefly: newly Christianized groups kept on burying their dead splendidly for several generations because it was an important and long-established way – unopposed by the Church – to express the social status of the deceased and his or her surviving next of kin. Royal and noble groups, however, were keen to adopt newly developed Christian ways of display as the burial *ad sanctos*, the raising of stela and the building of burial chapels. This new visualization of status at ground level provided the opportunity to change long-established practices and to conform to a Christian morality of dress and to bury the dead soberly. Eventually, all groups in society followed suit. Of course this interpretation should be preferred to a view which links the continued use of rich burial to Germanic ostentation and social inertia and deems the adoption of sober burial a sign of civilization and progress (e.g. Van Es 1994:88). It is also to be preferred to the long-established interpretation of burial customs, burial gifts and dress in terms of fixed ethnic identities (cf. Theuws and Alkemade in press). This paper, however, aims for a critical examination of the above thesis.

First, one should question the division of ways of doing into those which can be interpreted as religious on the hand and those which can be related to the expression of the status of the deceased and his kin on the other.¹ In this case too Mauss's concept of the total social fact should be taken seriously (Mauss 1923–4). Second, in common with most socio-political interpretations, this thesis emphasizes excessively the functional aspect of ritual and suggests a reductionistic concept of ideology. Burial ritual, so it says, misrepresents and therefore legitimizes existing social relationships (e.g. Effros 1994:101–2 and 151–2). This does not do justice to the fact that ideology is no false consciousness, standing apart from reality, but a connected set of lived-through ideas and practices (Treherne 1995). The societal status of the deceased and his or her kin is certainly most often a determinant of the performance of death rituals but this is of only secondary importance; ritual aims above all to accomplish the transformation of the dead into an ancestor (cf. Bazelmans 1999:190–1). Third, although new ritual forms relating to death and burial in the Merovingian period were probably started off or adopted by elites first (Young 1986), and were therefore of special consequence to the organisation of society and to the socially differentiated access to the supernatural, they gave new shape to the form and content of human self too. In this article I will deal with this latter topic and my aim is to show the fallacy of the dichotomy which dominates contemporary research: that between an older, socio-politically inspired way of dressing up the dead splendidly and a younger, Christian-religiously inspired way of dressing up the dead soberly. In my opinion both ways of dealing with the deceased's body give expression to collective and cosmolo-

gically grounded moralities of dress. Seen from this perspective both ways do indeed form a contrast.

This paper will deal with the (de)construction of human self in the ritual domain of death and burial. Special attention will be given to the body, not as an entity which develops naturally, but as a cultural project. Theoretically I will join those anthropologists who link the constitution at conception and birth, the transformation during life and the dissolution at death of the human person in non-modern societies to the ritual exchange of gifts (Platenkamp 1988, Barraud et al. 1994, Bazelmans 1999:37–68). In these societies the successive life cycle transformations of the person can be considered as the joining together, development and breaking up of different “constituents”. None of these transformations make up an automatic process of a natural kind and they have therefore to be realized by the activation of different relations within the human world and between the human and the supernatural world and through the exchange of gifts with entities in the this-worldly and other-worldly domain. Such perspective shows how subject and object of exchange are commensurable and how the constituent parts of the human being are conceived of as valorized parts of exchange objects (Platenkamp 1998:8). In addition it draws our attention to the fundamental role played within rituals in general and burial ritual in particular by items which feed, intoxicate and dress the body.

CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN/WOMAN?

Before going into early medieval ways of dealing with the living and dead body, it seems helpful to describe contemporary ones for they present at the same time contrasting and, to a certain extent, comparable ways of doing (cf. Shilling 1993). Two related but contrasting sayings can guide my description.

The first saying, “one should not judge from appearances” suggests that one’s inner self is considered to be of greater importance in comparison to the natural or dressed body. Although this saying has its roots in Christian theological thinking, it reminds us of Descartes’ famous phrase *cogito ergo sum* which relates human self-consciousness to the human mind and not to the body.² Since the Enlightenment the human self is defined as an inner self: individual, inner reflections form the basis of human knowledge and morality. Enlightenment thinkers do sometimes address the body, but this is the naked, natural body, not the dressed, intoxicated and adorned body. It is the objectified body of autopsy which was central to seventeenth and eighteenth century natural science (cf. Sawday 1997). New discoveries concerning the heart and blood circulation provided philosophers and later

on the general public with the imagery of the body as a machine (cf. Verbeek 1996:101–18). The successive life cycle transformations of the body began to be conceptualised as a natural, that is as an automatic and autonomous process. The importance of food was narrowed down to a physiological necessity.

The second saying, “clothes make the man/woman”, is, as we will see below, deeply rooted in European (pre-)history and could be put forward as an example of Latour’s thesis that *nous n’avons jamais été modernes* [we have never been modern] (Latour 1991). On first sight it seems to be the antithesis of the first “modernist” saying because it points to the fact that in modern societies the body has not been reduced to a natural embodiment pure and simple as Enlightenment-derived thinking among philosophers and in modern society wants us to believe. Here too, the awareness of self is inextricably linked up with the coming about of the dressed and adorned body. On closer inspection, however, both do not seem to be unrelated. In a way the second saying has acquired in recent decades a meaning which carries with it a radicalization of notions underlying the first. Therefore, we could call it “hyper-modern”. First, sociologists have pointed out in contemporary society an enhanced preoccupation with health, sex, physique and the dressed body – the body as a project – but this is linked with new and far-ranging techniques, medical and cosmetic to change the body – the body as machine (Shilling 1993). Second, people do not think of the construction of the body as something inherently social but as a project depending on one’s own creativity and which is aimed at the expression of one’s individuality. Commodities in the life style market, including of course clothing and adornments but also healthy or exotic food and drugs, are individually bought and used to give shape to one’s self. Third, the bodily project lacks an other-worldly underpinning. A young, healthy and sexy body is considered to be an ideal and collective representations and modes of doing related to aging and death are not well-developed. The dead body therefore is dressed up most often as a living person.

So, contemporary thinking on human self-awareness can be described in two, partly contrasting ways. On the one hand self is seen as a valued and value-generating, individualized, immaterial subject which contrasts with a value-less, objectified and commodified body. In this view that which feeds, intoxicates or dresses man is irrelevant for the human self. It is either functional or dysfunctional to the maintenance of the natural body. On the other hand man is a this-worldly, individualized but embodied subject which comes about in a capitalist arena of consumers.³ Here food, drugs, dress and adornments are of prime importance to the construction of self.

THE CHRISTIAN BODY

Modern and hyper-modern perspectives are not totally unrelated; their marked contrast with a Christian perspective on self brings them even closer together. The body, and the way it is fed and dressed, plays an important part too in catholicism to which I will confine myself. Significantly the church is defined as the body of Christ. In this phrase "body" is not only used as a convenient and most obvious metaphor for the unity of the Christian community. It is more than that because the sacrificed physical body of Christ is the source of human salvation and human salvation is thought of as a mystical unity with Christ's physical body. This unity is brought about in a spiritual sense by baptism ("in one spirit to one body") and in a physical sense by the celebration of the Eucharist, "the one bread", the true body of Christ (cf. Bynum 1995: plate 1). This Christian relationship between man and that which feeds him ritually contrasts markedly with the modern distinction between body and mind. The true presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and after consumption of the host also in the worshipper, provides us with a striking example of the above-mentioned commensurability of subject and object in non-modern societies. I will dwell on this below. In addition the complex exchange at mass and the sacraments shows the development of the spiritual and physical body to be more than a natural and automatic process. One could call it a project too, but not of an individual, consumptive kind; the participation of others, clergy and other worshippers, and exchange with the supernatural is compulsory. In addition, the project is grounded in a collective god-given morality and is therefore not directed towards life but the hereafter.

Above I have dealt with the relationship between the Christian body and that which feeds the worshipper at ritual. Christian morality does specify certain preferences too regarding the dressing of the body in rituals and in daily life. Indeed Genesis does provide an unambiguous basis for a theology of dress: Adam's violation of God's injunction not to eat the apple of good and evil resulted in the opening of men's eyes and the subsequent perception of men's nakedness. God's bliss no longer enfolded Adam and Eve and they had to cover their shame. The Old Testament narrative on the expulsion from paradise was used, especially by Eastern Church fathers to formulate precepts concerning the care and the clothing of the body. Women got special attention because Eve was particularly to blame for the Fall (Coon 1997, Miles 1992). It was the idle use of dress, adornment and cosmetics, so the Church fathers said, that was to be condemned, not use in itself. According to John Chrysostom, dressing up splendidly was motivated by a vain desire for the most transitory of human qualities, honour. Splendid dress was not able to hide the nakedness of the sinful soul. In contrast, the beauty

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