

Vortrag auf Einladung des AK Mittelalter

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## **The role of representation in Early Medieval Europe.**

am Donnerstag, 10.12.2015, 18:00 c.t.

im HS 7 des Instituts für Urgeschichte und Historische Archäologie

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In my presentation I would like to highlight three aspects of burials. First, a burial is a part of a complex, far-reaching ritual set. Death is a liminary state: the dead is no longer considered a member of the community, or at least not the same member he or she had been before. However, the deceased also needs help to find its place in the afterlife; so all communities created rituals – namely funerary rituals – to solve these situations safely.

Secondly, the different roles and identities of the participants define the way a burial takes place. Graves are created by the living for the dead and for the living community as well. Burial is a form of communication where on one end stands the deceased and the group of people – family, colleagues and fellows in sorrow – responsible for the burial, on the other end the whole community witnessing the act. It gives an opportunity to express ideas and identities that define the way certain situations should be handled, as well as the place of the individual in the system. They are created and assigned by the community, ergo almost all of the identities are situational constructs. As every man has several defining identities during the life, either one of these is so influential that it will overwhelm the others, or the identities merge and they all play their parts in the burial.

The third aspect is that a burial is a presentation, a show. A way to represent ourselves, our community. It is not necessarily about the representation of the dead, but to control its picture. Burial is social and political act, and it is more and more so if we go higher. Every death is a stress for the community as it creates an empty role that has to be filled. It creates competition among the living even today, as it provides an opportunity to renegotiate what is lost, to restore the fabric of networks.

Burials during the 6th century are therefore results of a complex process. To fulfil their roles in defining the place of a person, a family or a group in the local or even the regional community, they had to be easy to understand, at least for the audience present, even if we have understandable difficulties deciphering their meanings today. As a burial is a performance, it is one of the most important ways of representation, where different groups can express their forms of identities, distinguish themselves from others sometimes even at the expense of the dead. As identities defined everyday life, they also gave access to special resources (economical benefit, political power, advantageous legal situation or social connections), therefore they have become coveted and important. They were both the reason and the aim of power struggles in the ever-changing world of Early Medieval Europe, and some of the „battles” did not take place on the battlefield but at funerals.



Representation is not constant, it is ever-changing, it is always a reaction, a response to events that impact the community. Chronological and geographical differences can be distinguished not only in the „degree” of representation (a need to express difference) but in the ways of doing so as well. I would like to present how representation changed between the 5-8th centuries by examples from Bohemia, Moravia, Lower Austria, Transdanubia and Northern Italy.