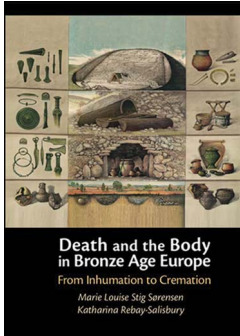


ANTIQUITY 2024 Vol. 98 (397): 275–276  
<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.191>

MARIE LOUISE STIG SØRENSEN & KATHARINA REBAY-SALISBURY. 2023. *Death and the body in Bronze Age Europe: from inhumation to cremation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-009-24739-9 hardback £75.



Even before I was asked to write a review, I had planned on reading the new book by Marie Louise Stig Sørensen and Katharina Rebay-Salisbury. Their 2008 article ‘*The impact of 19th-century ideas on the construction of ‘urnfield’ as a chronological and cultural concept: tales from Northern and Central Europe*’ was once an important point of departure and inspiration for my own research into the funerary practices reflected in urnfield graves. The quoted article points out how urnfield research is encumbered by this historiographical load and how this influences not only the way in which we still tend to look at urnfields but more importantly how the research itself got swamped in questions concerning the relationship

between cultures, peoples and places. Stig Sørensen and Rebay-Salisbury therefore concluded their article with a plea for a new interpretative paradigm. As a fresh-faced PhD student back in those days, I was a bit bewildered and curious at the same time as to what such a new interpretative paradigm should look like.

Their new book *Death and the body in Bronze Age Europe* can be seen as the answer to their own plea. As the title already suggests, the book focuses on changing perceptions of the (corporeal) body in death throughout the Bronze Age in (continental) Europe. The book is thus not so much about urnfields but aims to understand the transition (or ‘transition phase’ as the authors call it) from inhumation to cremation that unfolded in various corners of Europe before the first urnfields emerged. And it does so in a fresh and inspiring way by emphasising the agency of local people in local communities. Agency, as they argue, is not just restricted to the people doing the burial but is as much attributed to the dead body as it both invokes and evokes certain actions and emotions by the mourning community. It needs to be dealt with in a specific way and this specific way is constantly being re-evaluated and renegotiated, not only by new ideas that might come from elsewhere but as much by (collective) memory. Reasoning from such a perspective makes it even more fascinating that in an area stretching from the Carpathians to the North Sea these local renegotiations and reiterations of local values surrounding death and burial would still result in cemeteries we came to know as ‘urnfields’. Stig Sørensen and Rebay-Salisbury do come up with an explanation in their conclusion but let us first focus on how they got there.

After setting out the scope of their book and their position on the subject matter, the authors embark on a historiographical journey on cremations and urnfields in the second chapter followed by a handsomely written theoretical framework on funerary archaeology in the third chapter. I would recommend both chapters to my students when they are interested in either subject because they bring together a wealth of information that otherwise can only be obtained by broad reading. The book’s theoretical framework for funerary

archaeology quickly focuses on the agency of the (dead) body and how in the grave it could be read as an ontological map providing clues about people's perceptions of the world around them. The central approach of the book, which in the authors' words is "fundamentally hermeneutic", flows from this position. By reading funerals as *chaînes opératoires* in which bodies are prepared and graves are constructed, and activities carried out, decisions made in connection to the dead body can be distilled. In the next chapters, Stig Sørensen and Rebay-Salisbury then take the reader along to showcase examples from various core areas in continental Europe that function as so-called 'thinking platforms' for their approach. For each area, the transition phase from inhumation to cremation is explored to establish how the body itself was treated, how the place of burial and/or container for the body was crafted and if/how interaction with the dead after burial took place. The conclusion shows an overall trend throughout the transition phase where at the start there still seems to have been a general concern with the human form and size reflected in the way in which cremation graves were shaped. Through time, the size of graves decreases and their containment in urns can finally be seen as a last dramatic departure from the body having physicality and being reduced to material that could be collected in an urn.

My brief review cannot fully reflect the careful argument crafted by Stig Sørensen and Rebay-Salisbury. I therefore recommend reading the book. One could argue that the evidence provided is rather anecdotal and pays little attention to land(scape) and the relationality of the dead (Brück & Fontijn 2013; Brück 2019), but this was never the aim of the book—as is clearly stated in the Introduction. The (renewed) focus on the agency of the (dead) body is refreshing indeed and I think that Stig Sørensen and Rebay-Salisbury have taken an important step towards a new interpretative paradigm. This has been achieved by not only attributing agency to the dead body but, in my view, even more so by attributing agency to local communities by *not* just seeing them as the passive recipients of new ideas coming from elsewhere. It will be interesting to use their book as a thinking platform in its own right for more detailed and comparative research in the years to come.

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ARJAN LOUWEN

Department of Archaeological Heritage and Society  
Leiden University, The Netherlands

✉ [a.j.louwen@arch.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:a.j.louwen@arch.leidenuniv.nl)