

The meaning of grave goods

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Grave goods are much more than just things in graves. They are the result of a deliberate act by the mourners and, as such, they are loaded with symbolic and emotional meanings. Potentially, grave goods are very rich in information, containing allusions to the deceased person, the mourners, as well as about their wider cultural context, religion and social system. However, tracing the meaning of ancient grave goods is complicated. Their meaning is seldom unambiguous and there is the danger of overinterpreting them.

I am trying to find a middle ground between two approaches, one of which emphasises the primacy of the object's utility function and the second argues that the meaning of the artefact is arbitrary and entirely dependent on the context.

As a case study, I have chosen one particular type of commodity used as grave good, which clearly have a utilitarian role in everyday life, yet at the same time have throughout the history also had a strong symbolic meaning. In my paper I will discuss the occurrence of keys as grave goods in diachronical and synchronical perspectives. My main focus is on the exploration of the change of the meaning of the artefact in time and space, and on examining how the changes in meaning are related to the changes in the form of the artefact and in burial contexts. I will demonstrate how a single type of artefact may be a symbolic object to several social groups, whereby each group interprets the symbolic meaning of the keys in different ways. At the same time, all of these meanings contain some references to the practical function of a key to open, close and protect.



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