

Sticks and Stones

Weighing them down

This is a reconstruction of a stone filled grave of a richly furnished female burial, Gloucester, England, dating from mid to late 5th to 7th century CE, early Anglo-Saxon England, Grave 18 at Lechlade.



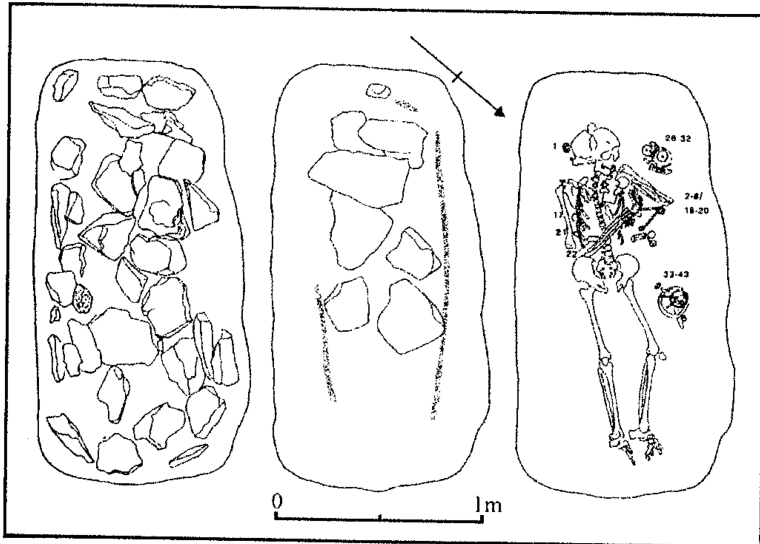
This is a burial of a young female, who was interred with many objects including jewelry and amulets. The grave was tightly packed with large stones.

Based on the grave goods, the woman fits the criteria for a cunning woman, or a witch.

Witches were considered at risk for becoming revenants, and their burials are known for apotropaic measures, not limited to stoning. Witches were known to be decapitated, staked, burned, or pinned down in bogs, or buried at cross roads.

This burial, though treats the deceased with respect, was located at the edge of the main cemetery, which is consistent with liminal location.

The placement of stones in graves presented a physical impediment to the dead rising. Bodies weighed down with stones, either across the chest, throat, or entire bodies, or found in graves filled with large rocks, are found throughout Europe.



In the environments where large stones are not available, such as in bogs or forests, large sticks, branches, or logs were used, but the stone mounds are better preserved. The custom of placing small stones on the grave of one's loved ones in some cultures may be a remnant of the same superstition.

Related to this is the custom of placing stones on roadside cairns, which often housed the bodies of the dead travellers found by the side of the road or criminals buried in liminal places. While it is still considered good luck to add a stone to the pile, in period the luck was more literal, as it was definitely lucky not be followed by a murderous revenant as one travels.

LICENSE: This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>. If utilizing this work the author humbly requests a notification. Additionally, commercial licenses are available. Please contact the author at (lucetadicosimo@yahoo.com).



(the image above is of Grave 18 at Lachlade, from 1998 article by Boyle *et al*, reproduced in Reynolds' *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*)

(the image to the left is from Farrell's *Prone, Stoned, and Losing the Head* article)

The custom seems to be persistent throughout Europe. This is an example of a medieval Irish grave, completely filled with stones.

Occasionally, there is filling of the entire grave with small stones or pebbles, especially quartz or flint. Sometimes, these have to be brought from far away. These serve a dual function: weighing down the corpse and having a magical apotropaic function.



Later, weighing the body down with stones is more symbolic, than literal, only a few stones maybe placed on the abdomen, chest or throat of the corpse.

In the example on the left, from late 16th-early 17th c. Poland, only a few stones were placed on the throat of the corpse.

(this image is from Barrowclough's *Time to Slay Vampire Burials* article)

References:

- Lecouteux, Claude. *The Return of the Dead : Ghosts, Ancestors, and the Transparent Veil of the Pagan Mind*. 1st U.S. ed. Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2009.
- Farrell, Maura. "Prone, Stoned, and Losing the Head: Deviant Burials in Early Medieval Ireland in the 5th to 12th Centuries." *Trowel* (2012): 56.
- Glob, P. V. *The Bog People; Iron Age Man Preserved*. Ithaca, N.Y.,: Cornell University Press, 1969.
- Zelenin, D. K., Tolstoy Nikita, and E. E. Levkieskaya. *Essays on Russian Mythology : People Who Met a Violent Death and Mermaids : Selected Works (Ocherki Russkoy Mifologii: Umershie Neestestvennoi Smertyu I Rusalki: Isbrannyye Trudy)*. Traditsionnaia Dukhovnaia Kultura Slavian Moskva: "INDRIK", 1995.
- Reynolds, Andrew. *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Barber, Paul. *Vampires, Burial, and Death : Folklore and Reality*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.
- Verberg, Susan. "Pin Down Your Dead! Or, How to Protect against Zombies and the Evil Eye ". *Aethelmeare gazette* (2017).
- Barrowclough, David. "Time to Slay Vampire Burials? The Archaeological and Historical Evidence for Vampires in Europe." Cambridge: Red Dagger Press, 2004.–10 p.–Electronic source: <https://www.academia.edu>

LICENSE: This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>. If utilizing this work the author humbly requests a notification. Additionally, commercial licenses are available. Please contact the author at (lucetadicosimo@yahoo.com).