

In the Landscape and Between Worlds. Bronze Age Sacrificial Sites in the Lake Mälaren Area.

I landskapet och mellan världarna. Bronsålderns offerplatser i Mälaronrådet.

Project plan, first draft 19 March 2008, by Martin Rundkvist.

Goals

The project has two main goals:

1. Study the landscape situation of Bronze Age sacrificial sites in the Lake Mälaren area to identify recurring relationships to coeval settlement, burial and rock-art sites, and to the local topography.
2. Apply the resulting model in the field in an attempt to locate new sacrificial deposits and excavate them under controlled conditions.

Previous Work

L. Larsson (1998) offers a general overview of prehistoric wetland sites in Sweden. The fundamental catalogues of Bronze Age small finds in Sweden, including sacrificial finds, are Baudou 1960 and Oldeberg 1974-76. The latest major work touching on this find group in the Lake Mälaren area is T.B. Larsson's 1986 dissertation. He analysed Baudou's and Oldeberg's data, covering all of southern Sweden on a high scale-level and performing no fieldwork at sacrificial sites. Since then, J. Coles (2001) has published a ten-page preliminary study outlining a project with goals similar to that of the one proposed here, though intended to cover all of Northern Europe and concentrating on bronze finds and rock art. Photocopied MA theses on similar subjects have

also been issued by Swedish university departments (Hoffman 1995; Ekengren 1999; Widdegård 2005).

Project Overview and Execution

Theory

The main theoretical background to the project lies in a body of thought known as landscape archaeology (Aston & Rowley 1974; Wagstaff 1987; Bowden 1999; Anglert & Thomasson 2003; Chapman 2006). Its central concept is the intermediate scale of analysis, residing between the micro-perspective of the individual site and the macro-perspective of distribution maps covering entire provinces or more. Landscape archaeology looks at the relationship between site patterns and topography on a landscape level, and thus shares many concerns with the retrospective part of human or cultural geography as it is practised in Sweden.

In addition, the category of the sacrificial site is not entirely self-evident, nor is its functional and social interpretation a simple matter. Bradley (1990; 1998) and Karsten (1994) offer illuminating discussions of these matters, both in principle and in the specific North European context. While evidence of small-scale sacrifice has been found at all types of Bronze Age sites in the region, the proposed project focuses on dedicated sacrificial sites. They were

linking points between this world and others, and the sacrifices themselves should be seen as acts of communication both in social terms, speaking to the human onlookers, and in religious ones, speaking to the gods.

Methods

Methods, beyond what is common to all field archaeology, include metal-detector surveying on dry-land sacrificial sites and wetland excavation techniques (Van de Noort & O'Sullivan 2006; Barber & Green 2007) on watery sites. Landscape archaeology has developed in intimate connection with the application of geographical information systems (GIS) in the discipline (Chapman 2006). This is now ubiquitous in all field-orientated archaeological work.

Time Schedule and Execution

Starting in September 2009, I will identify sacrificial sites through study of museum records, archives and literature, and analyse their landscape situation. That autumn will see some preliminary test-pitting and metal-detecting. During the fieldwork seasons of 2010 and 2012, I will direct full excavations at promising sites, staffed by students and amateur archaeologists. Finds will be conserved and samples continually sent off for analysis (radiocarbon, palaeobotany). Any particularly remarkable finds will be reported in published notes without delay. In the spring of 2012, smaller-scale supplementary fieldwork will take place. The manuscript of the project publication will be ready for the graphic designer in August 2012.

Importance of the Project

Very few of the Bronze Age sacrificial finds that are currently known from the Lake Mälaren area have been made by archaeologists. Most have come to light during agricultural work and drainage efforts for land reclamation, and their frequency dropped sharply after the Second World War. After this time, land reclamation was no longer undertaken on a large scale, and the switch from draught-horses to tractors meant that farmers could no longer see what their ploughs turned out of the ground. The Lake Mälaren area is rich in forests, and so there has been little need for peat cutting.

Very few wetland excavations have ever been undertaken in the area by archaeologists, with Hallgren's (1997) work at the Neolithic site Skogsmossen being a rare recent example. Wetlands offer exceptional preservation conditions and record unusual activities among prehistoric people. Thus excavations in such environments can shed dramatically new light on prehistoric societies.

During the present decade, all the Bronze Age's major site categories except the sacrificial sites have been the subject of doctoral theses: settlements (Borna-Ahlkvist 2002), rock art (Hauptman Wahlgren 2002) and graves (Thedéen 2004; Victor 2002). The proposed project thus has the opportunity to build on fresh research and use it, along with an innovative fieldwork agenda, in the advancement of a long-neglected field of study: the Bronze Age sacrificial sites of the Lake Mälaren area.

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