A Bronze Age Perception of Identity

Ideology and Landscape Organization in a South-Western Swedish River Valley

BY TORE ARTELIUS

Abstract

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This paper deals with the relationship between natural and cultural landscapes. The archaeological example and region of interest is the southern part of the valley of the River Ätran, situated in southwest Sweden. The material discussed primarily consists of Bronze Age grave monuments from a broad chronological perspective, but also includes settlements, which are recognized as the combined essence of a farm with associated and ideologically suitable spots for grave monuments. It is argued that the topography characteristic of the valley constituted the development of a specific physical organization of settlements, and consequently of grave monuments as well. The monuments were repeatedly located in specific parts of the landscape. The ideology of society was expressed through grave architecture and in the distribution of monuments in the landscape. It is argued that the monuments, barrows, cairns and stone-settings were each ascribed a separate ideological identity within the regional societal structure. The formation of a visible ideological landscape, which can be determined as the combined essence of nature and cosmology, provided the necessary means for regeneration of social structure and organization over time. A starting point is that local traditions of monument construction and burials were one of the main ritual forums through which a population displayed their myths, social structure and historical identity in relation to a certain place and landscape.

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Introduction to a natural cultural landscape

The focus of this paper is the ideological organization of Bronze Age society, and more specifically the nature of the relation between the ideology of society and nature. A proposal is put forward concerning the social transformation of ideology into a physically visible landscape of grave monuments and material culture, thus creating a socio-cultural pattern and a visible connection between ideology and the landscape,

nature itself. In this case the landscape consists of a remote Nordic Bronze Age river valley and the material discussed is grave monuments, barrows, cairns and stone-settings. A starting point is that culture and nature, in a prehistoric context, were understood and reflected upon as one entity.

The complex ideology that was expressed in burial traditions and monument construction
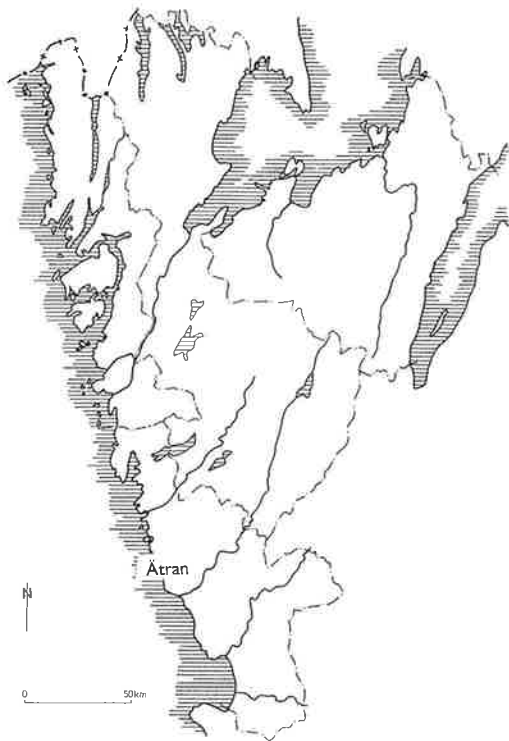
Fig. 1. The province of Halland. The valley of the Ätran is indicated.

was basically formed and generated through nature. Nature provided the sacred ritual as well as the everyday life with symbols. Ritual thus basically became a reflection of the natural landscape, and through the specific qualities of a landscape the transcendent order of nature was revealed and visualized. In this sense social organization and its specific structures were eventually confirmed in the combined essence of mythology and nature, the overall ideology.

As the title states, my interest is in the Bronze Age context around the River Ätran in Halland. This means that the proposed model concerning the ideological organization of monuments in the landscape probably has limitations as regards its general validity. The validity, however, lies in the almost self-evident postulation that the characteristics of a landscape always had a massive impact on the development of local social organization and ideology. It is plausible that the different types of monuments in the

valley, the barrows, cairns and stone-settings, as groups, were each identified in a separate tradition within the social organization and the overall ideology. Since the categories of monuments occur in the whole of southern Scandinavia, it is likely that this variation in identification also existed in other regions.

I will not specifically use the terms symbolic or ritual landscapes. If we strive towards a remote understanding of a prehistoric population's ideas of the landscape they inhabited, it is essential that we primarily reflect upon archaeological contexts such as graves, votive depositions and petroglyph panels, that is, contexts that intentionally carried complex symbolism and meaning. It is correct to assume that spectacular and particular topographic features in the landscape carried their specific symbolic meaning within local/regional mythology. But when concepts of natural landscapes are brought into the analysis of ritualized behaviour, there should be a distinction in the interpretation of such features that surely contained intentional symbolical meaning and those features which might have obtained such meaning (Bradley 1991, 1993; Tilley 1994, 1996).

The monuments of the Bronze Age were continually being created during a period of over 1000 years. The landscape of monuments sprung from, and was transformed from, a legacy of Neolithic ideas about death and traditions of burial as well as monument construction. This means that the monuments during this vast period of time must have been ascribed a large set of varying everyday values and assumptions. Everyday life was literally performed in the shadow of this monumental landscape of large cairns and barrows. Ideological landscapes in that sense can primarily be apprehended as formalizations of "social landscapes of daily life" (Richards 1996, p. 206).

Monumental architectural representations within landscapes can be understood in levels of quality, where the specifics of a natural landscape can best be understood as the stage on which large graves were built, rituals performed

Fig. 2. Cairn at Trustorp in Ljungby parish. Demarcating the valley, large cairns and shallow stone-settings were built in carefully chosen topographic and geographic positions in the landscape. The cairn covered a period III burial in a ship-formed stone-setting. Photo Robert Hernek, National Heritage Board (Hernek 1994).

and social strategies projected. The river and its surroundings served as an arena which through its unique characteristics provided the means for the establishment of a certain ideology. In the Bronze Age, variation in the distribution and architecture of the three main categories of grave monuments developed into a pattern of traditions that reflected a historical identity in this specific topographical space. In this way the combination of monuments and nature ultimately became a formalized and visible representation of ideology.

In this article I will suggest how different concepts of identity – local, regional, individual and collective – were intentionally exposed in burial tradition and within the construction of a fixed variety of monuments. The monuments in the valley, not only in a distributional sense, reflected the settlement system, but the burials were conducted, and the monuments con-

structed, in such a way that local identity and tradition were underlined. Each of the different categories of Bronze Age monuments – cairns, barrows, stone-settings – in my opinion, comprised a diverse variety of symbolic meaning. The monuments actually contained, pronounced and exhibited the social and ideological identity of those who were buried in them.

The river is one of the major watercourses in south-western Sweden and it is surrounded by a wide valley with hundreds of characteristic natural formations which during prehistory, as well as in present times, embodied specific symbolic meanings. In the open and almost fully cultivated landscape near the coast, the river runs through very fertile and wet lowland. About a couple of hundred metres away from the river the topography turns into hilly terrain with slopes, and this is where Bronze Age settlements have been found. Graves are located on the
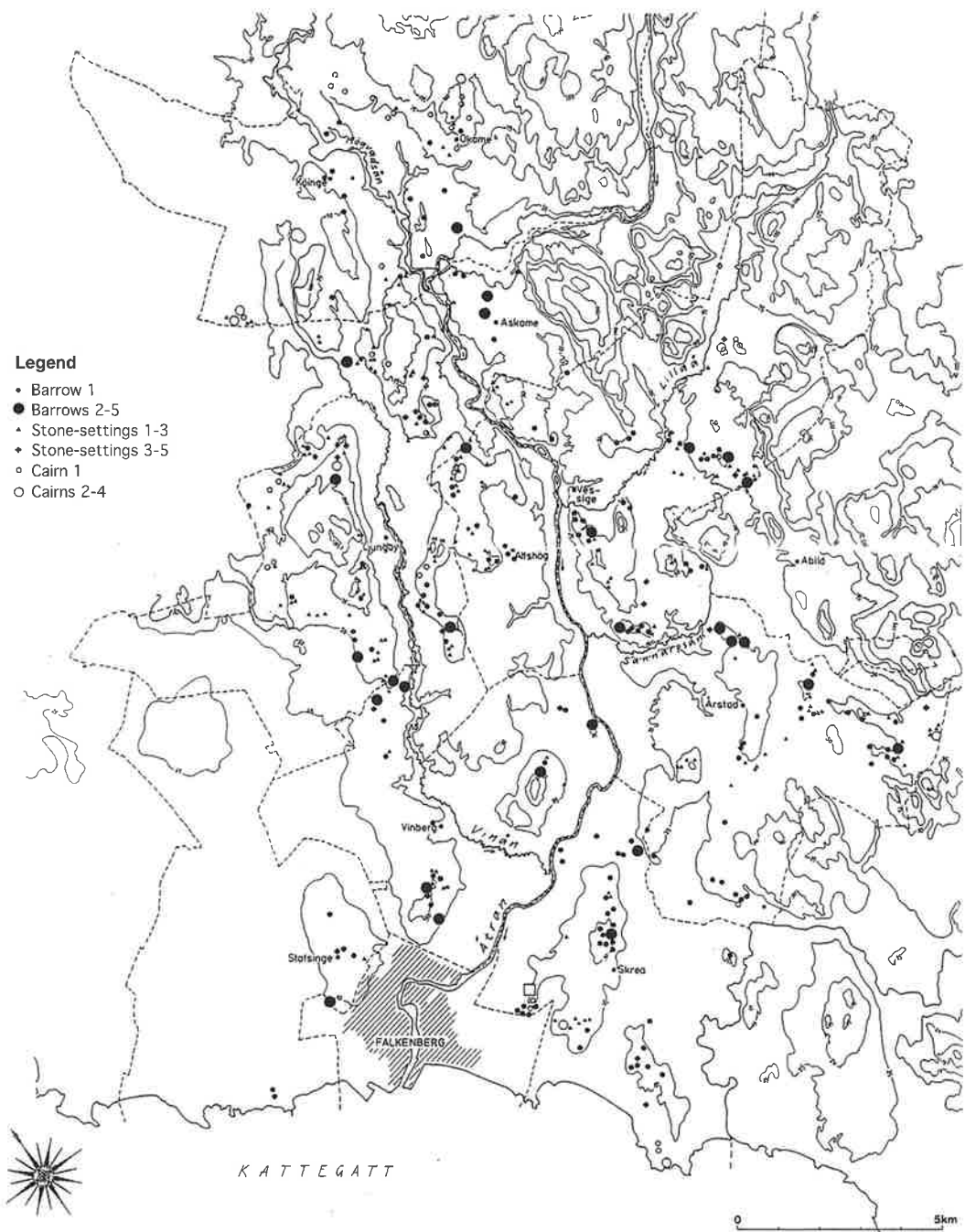
Fig. 3. The topographic map of the region, the southernmost parts of the Ätran Valley with the three main categories of grave monuments indicated. The concentration of monuments along the river and its tributaries is clear, and from a regional Hallandic perspective Ätran appears to have been one of the main settlement areas in the Bronze Age.

brows of the ridges and on the mountains that demarcate the valley. The valley was surrounded, and still is, by large deciduous forests and systems of connected lakes, which provided possibilities for an almost endless colonization of new territories in the higher inlands throughout the Bronze Age and Pre-Roman Iron Age – a colonization that is now under intense archaeological exploration (Furingsten 1985; Connelid *et al.* 1993; Weiler 1994). The river itself, and the large systems of roads and paths closely connected to it, has also, since the Stone Age, served as one of the main routes of communication in an interregional perspective, mediating the exchange of ideas, trade-goods and prestige items. The river was also certainly an entrance for hostile armies and diseases.

In the moraine slopes we find large erratic boulders with cup marks, and in the forest there are small bogs, and in some of those, Bronze Age hoards have been found. In a valley like this there were of course hundreds of different localities that carried their specific meaning in the past. The valley can, as a whole, be looked upon as a very large set of localities, each one of them containing ritual meaning, and the complex relationship between these localities constituted a local ideological landscape. The area can be perceived as an assembly of ritual and social values that in combination formed an identity of regional ideological representation.

The concept and material formation of prehistoric "ritual landscapes" have frequently been discussed in post-processual and contextual archaeological tradition during the past ten years, and far-reaching hypotheses concerning constructions of mental and physical entities within natural landscapes have been put forward (Bradley 1993; Tilley 1994). Not only are archaeological sites analysed in symbolical clusters, but the constantly changing topographic nature itself is from a present-day perspective under exploration in holistic terms (Tilley 1996). Emanating from a body of old and modern research traditions and theories developed in sociology, religion, psychology and anthropol-

ogy (cf. Durkheim 1915; Moller 1996; Baumann 1992; Napier 1992), complex theories on social space and ritual behaviour have been applied in contextual case-studies of culturally remote prehistoric landscapes (Barrett 1990, 1994). In a broad sense, these studies have contributed to a widened recognition of landscapes as archaeological concepts.

Ideology operated and influenced all actions and beliefs at an individual as well as collective level in Bronze Age society. Ideological organization can thus in a broad sense be regarded almost as synonymous with, and as a reflection of, mythology. It was essential to transform these structures into material culture. It was in ritual action, in collective performances, such as burials and offerings, that the social norms embedded in myths were exposed – thus ideology was transformed into graspable understanding at an individual as well as collective level, and the necessary means to identify or alter the social organization was provided. As an indirect result, the ideological structure and organization of society also determined how rituals, in this case monument construction, were traditionally designed in the landscape.

The landscape within nature

Excavations in the valley make it fair to accept that settlements were primarily organized in a system of single farms. Material evidence of larger and more complex settlements from the Late Bronze Age is still lacking, although artefacts originally deposited in bogs, streams and on mountain tops, such as ceremonial axes, swords and daggers, make it evident that the region, already in period II, took some part in an interregional exchange network of prestige goods. From a regional perspective there is a concentration of prestige objects from the whole period in the valley, but the artefacts are not primarily related to burials (Montelius 1869, 1917; Oldeberg 1974; Baudou 1960; Larsson 1984). The quantity of graves and cup marks shows an even more significant concentration in the main

Fig. 4. Bronze Age barrows at Sanna-gård in the parish of Vinberg. Barrows are primarily located within the present-day cultivated areas of the valley and in direct spatial connection to large settlement areas. Photo: Marie-Louise Flagmeier, National Heritage Board.

valley and connecting valleys. Concentrations of cairns, located along the ridges that demarcate the valley, make it clear, even for present-day visitors, that the monuments embodied essential and complex religious meaning as well as profane symbolical functions within the organization of society (Thålin 1967; Lundborg 1985; Strömberg 1990; Hernek 1994; Ängeby 1994b; Artelius 1994b; Artelius & Arcini 1996; Gerdin 1997). Due to its location, and being a link between the Danish islands and the central parts of Götaland, the valley in the Bronze Age most certainly had an important transitional function in a socio-political and economic sense. Despite its northerly latitude, the valley of Ätran, from this communication perspective, was part of an interregional context.

When discussing the relation between man and landscape in a particular region we must recognize different levels of mental orientation towards that landscape. The ideological landscape is a materialization, a formation process, that in all its utter cultural complexity intertwined local traditions and interregional influences of both religious and more profane character at the same time. In this sense the valley shows signs of interregional influence and locally acquired traditions alike. The composition and nature of the votive depositions, the symbols used in burial contexts and the expres-

sions in the cup mark panels clarify an inter-regional influence in religious traditions and ritual (Baudou 1960; Oldeberg 1974; Larsson 1984).

The landscape of the dead

In collectively anchored religious beliefs, basic ideas of death and the afterlife have been expressed in material culture. The very idea of death and human mortality is in itself reflected and manifested through the institutions of society. In this way traditions of burial and monument building can be comprehended as reflections of society, and changes in the concept and idea of death consequently had effects on society (Moller 1995, p. 4; Bowker 1991 p. 18). In the Bronze Age of this region conceptions of death were demonstrated in spectacular monuments. We do not know what conceptions of death were manifested in such monuments, but we can understand the importance of bringing these ideas of death into material culture.

During period II–III there is a transformation from inhumation burials to cremation taking place in the whole of Southern Scandinavia. This shift in tradition and the likewise culturally "loud" pronouncement of the individual burial are the main material alterations in the burial customs that we face in this region during the

Bronze Age. Certainly there are large differences between period I and VI, but the burials are repeatedly performed at the same topographical places for the entire period. Often cremation burials from period IV–V were conducted in monuments that cover burials from the Late Neolithic and period I (Lundborg 1972, 1985; Ängeby 1994b; Gerdin 1997). It is important to recognize this chronologically extensive tradition in using the same place, from the perspective that the distribution of cairns, barrows and stone-settings reflects an ideological pattern that has cultural validity for the entire Bronze Age.

The barrows in the landscape

The large barrows are constructed of grass and soil over a centrally positioned cairn. The diameter is usually 12–20 m, and the barrows are located in open parts of today's cultural landscape. Some barrows are quite large, and it is fair to assume that they were built for the élite in society. Not only the monuments themselves but also the burials and the artefacts indicate that they were constructed within a network of social strategy (Lundborg 1972). Barrows appear in close spatial relation to settlement areas of the same periods, they are actually located within the settlements or positioned in rows surrounding the central settlement area (Artelius & Arcini 1996, p. 20; Carlie 1992, p. 15; Säfvestad 1993, p. 165).

The barrows generally contain several burials of various shapes, most often in relation to a centrally located primary grave. The secondary burials are performed in a manner that is the same throughout the region during period III–V, the bones are often put in small cists in the southern part of the barrows. Cremation becomes more frequent from period III. It is likely that the burials were performed in a traditional pattern throughout this 700-year period (Lundborg 1972). The burials in each barrow form a typological and chronological sequence, and it is likely that an ancestral cult and a concept of "social time" was expressed (Lundborg 1985; Jennbert 1993; Mizoguchi 1990).

The cairns

Although they are in many examples chronologically equivalent to the barrows, cairns are primarily located in a different topographical situation in the landscape. They are not usually located in the open lowlands; topographically they are located on mountain tops and larger ridges, often at spectacular and carefully chosen points in the landscape from where there was a very good view of the surrounding territory and other cairns (Hernek 1994; Gerdin 1997). The distribution of the cairns forms a pattern that provides a frame and demarcates the entire valley. Generally they are not found close to settlements, and cairns tend to contain fewer burials than barrows and stone-settings. Cairns excavated in the region have often contained no remains of burial at all (Furingsten et al. 1980, pp. 228 ff.; Furingsten 1985; Artelius 1990). This lack of burials cannot be explained only by bad preservation conditions in cairns. It is also evident that cairns contain fewer grave-construction elements, such as remains of small cists or slabs.

The stone-settings

The round, large and shallow stone-settings form a heterogeneous group as regards construction and chronology, and they appear in two different types of location. They are generally situated in the vicinity of a cairn or in a close spatial relation to a settlement area. The stone-settings often contain several burials in a chronological sequence spanning most of the Bronze Age (Ängeby 1994b).

Local and regional identification

Although parts of many settlements have been excavated during the last fifteen years only five with any preserved remains of typical three-aisled longhouses from the Bronze Age have, to my knowledge, been recorded in the valley so far, and in all cases it is likely that these are the remains of single farms (Strömberg 1990; Ängeby 1992; Artelius 1994a, 1994b; Bramstång & Artelius 1997).

Fig. 5. At Stum in the parish of Ljungby five shallow stone-settings containing burials stretching from period II until the Pre-Roman Iron Age were excavated in 1994. The picture gives a good impression of the typical location of these monuments along the narrow ridges. They are built at a clear distance within the group of monuments. Photo: Gisela Ängeby, National Heritage Board.
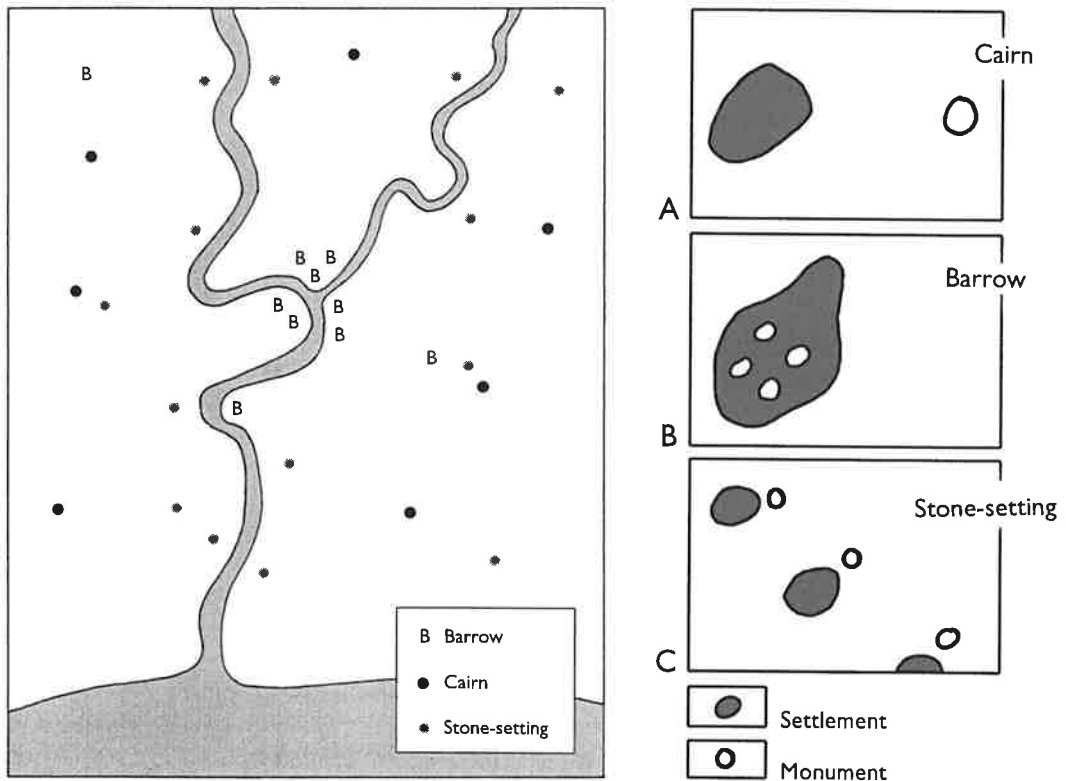
Fig. 6. The schematic drawing shows the main distribution of the three categories of monuments in the valley. To the right is a general model of the relationship between settlements and the three categories of burial monuments (A–C).

A burial ground is generally to be found in the close vicinity of these settlements, either in the physical landscape, in the archives, or in the memories of the local population. The preserved ones usually consist of one or two shallow stone-settings. As many as seven individual burials have been documented in one such monument, and, as mentioned, the burials stretch over a long period of time. Burial traditions changed radically during the Bronze Age, but they were still conducted within the same monuments and in close relation to a settlement, but in these cases not within the settlement itself. The general picture is that these stone-setting monuments are positioned in rows along the ridges, and it is likely that each monument represented one farm, a kin-group and household. We can assume that the settlements were

organized in a large number of singly operating farms. In direct relation to the farms the likewise singly localized grave monuments appear repeatedly. The single farm is thus probably ideologically accompanied by the single grave, and such a monument is most often a stone-setting.

The second example are settlements located in areas which, from a geographical, topographical, economic and communication perspective, could be identified as of central interest in the valley. In such areas we find barrows in direct relation to the settlements: the barrows are located within the settlement area or around it. It could be argued that the barrows define settlements of regional interest, settlements that played a part in the social and economic organization of the entire valley – and did so mainly because of the close proximity to important communica-

tion points in the natural landscape. The tradition of building barrows can be identified within an interregional context, and it is reasonable to suggest that the barrow builders themselves to some degree identified themselves within the social organization of a larger region than the valley. The distribution of barrows in that sense reflected the presence of an interregional ideology which is chronologically parallel to the traditional single farm system.

The large cairns are not primarily related to settlements at all. Of course there are exceptions (Strömberg 1990), but most of the cairns are located at topographical points in the landscape that were not suitable for settlement. Thus the distribution of the monuments discussed and their relation to settlements indicate a certain pattern that demands different levels of explanation and identification.

It is fair to postulate that the traditional households in the valley identified themselves within a local tradition of building stone-settings for burial, monuments that were in use for hundreds of years, or as long as the household and farm survived. Large barrows, and more specifically concentrations of larger barrows, were situated within, or in the immediate vicinity of, larger settlements. These were located in parts of the valley that can best be described as central places of high value for communications and economy. The barrows were thus primarily identified within a wider network of settlements of regional importance.

Cairns are rarely located in close relation to settlements. They are found on mountain tops that demarcate the entire valley. In comparison to the stone-settings and the barrows, it is likely that the cairns should be identified as monuments, collective in character, underlining historical identities.

Conclusions

The characteristic topography of the valley allowed the development of a certain physical cultural landscape and social organization along-side the river and its main tributaries. Through the opportunities and limitations provided by nature, the traditional settlements were positioned along the waterways. These farms were spatially connected to a household burial ground, a stone-setting monument. The appearance of these monuments and the burials in them show no extraordinary signs of elite identification, no high prestige burials occur in general. Instead the monuments can be labelled as manifestations of local identity reflecting the social structure and the local settlement system of this particular valley, and therefore ultimately the specifics of nature itself. In this way the monuments became a reflection of an ideological order – the single farm system.

Ultimately an ideological landscape was projected on to nature, a landscape consisting of monuments that were identified at various individual and collective levels and within a number of diverse local and regional traditions. In the overall ideological organization of society we find three levels of identification through burials and monument building in the valley, and in each case identity is constructed in relation to formation of the local topography. In this hypothesis we also indirectly find a comment on the long-debated question concerning why barrows, cairns or stone-settings were preferred as grave-monuments (Bertilsson 1980; Stjernquist 1983). In this view the different categories of monuments were built as a strategic display of identity. In this region barrows, cairns and stone-settings were constructed in the same periods. New barrows were constructed as late as period V in the valley, and in central Halland (Lundborg 1972, p. 74; Lundborg 1974; Johnson 1973; Artelius 1998). The following conclusions may be drawn:

– The local tradition of constructing shallow stone-settings underlined identity at an individual and household level.
– The tradition in southern Scandinavia of constructing large barrows underlined strategies of displaying regional identity as well as socio-

political power and prestige at a kin-related level.
– The tradition of building cairns primarily served as a collective means to identify and socially demarcate the valley, and thus through the monuments underline the historical identity of the people living in this specific natural landscape.

Acknowledgements

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