

# Graves, Grave-Fields and Burial Customs – Variation as Theme

## A Discussion of Late Iron Age Grave-Fields in the Inland of Småland

BY MARTIN HANSSON

### Abstract

*Hansson, Martin. 1998. Graves, Grave-Fields and Burial Customs – Variation as Theme: A Discussion of Late Iron Age Grave-Fields in the Inland of Småland. Lund Archaeological Review 4 (1998), pp. 49–66.*

This article deals with late Iron Age grave-fields in the medieval regions Varend, Finnveden and Njudung in Småland. A contextual analysis of different grave types in grave-fields shows a somewhat different picture than what has previously been argued about this region. Special attention is paid to burial customs in Varend, whose varied grave-fields distinctly diverge from cemeteries in Finnveden and Njudung. The background to this is discussed. Various hypotheses are tested and factors such as local traditions, settlement structure, and power structures are thought to have affected burial customs in Varend. Finally, while grave-fields in Finnveden and Njudung have parallels in eastern and central Sweden, cemeteries in Varend have their parallels in Halland, northern Scania and Blekinge.

*Martin Hansson, Institute of Archaeology, University of Lund, Sandgatan 1, S-223 50 Lund.  
E-mail: Martin.Hansson@ark.lu.se*

## Introduction

From the archaeological point of view, Småland is one of the least well known areas in Sweden. This is specifically true about the inland area. The number of archaeological excavations that have been carried out is small in comparison to central or southern Sweden, and the number of scholarly works on Småland is limited. At the same time, the survey of ancient monuments by the Central Board of National Antiquities, which is at present in progress in south Småland, has shown that the deep forests of Småland are extremely rich in ancient monuments. One of

the scholarly fields that has recently concerned Småland has been late Iron Age graves and their spatial variation. Many of the questions have been about whether graves can be used to delimit specific territories and societies.

Leif Nilsson has studied Iron Age grave-fields in parts of Varend. Through combinations of different grave types, he is able to show differences between various areas. From the presence of oval stone settings and their co-existence, or not, with rectangular stone settings, Nilsson is able to distinguish different



Fig. 1. The position of Varend, Finnveden and Njudung in southern Sweden. The broken line marks the medieval border between Sweden and Denmark.

“sub-regions“. These sub-regions are seen as a result of various social groupings (Nilsson 1990). Some criticism can be levelled against this method, since it puts oval stone settings, a grave type present in very large numbers, side by side with rectangular stone settings, of which there are far fewer. One can discuss whether rectangular stone settings, due to their small number, can be used as a basis for regional delimitation. This grave type should perhaps rather be connected to other phenomena in society.

In his dissertation *Arkeologisk samhälls-avgränsning* (1991), Mats Burström, using the grave material from Varend, Finnveden and Njudung as source material, tries to trace and delimit different regional societies during the Viking Age. The results support a previously argued opinion, namely, that the grave-fields in Finnveden are dominated by mounds, while the cemeteries in Varend are distinguished by other forms of grave (Eierstam 1965). This is shown by a thorough study of all registered graves in the area. The cause of the spatial variation of different grave types is to be sought in the existence of different societies. A problem with this work is

the fact that the grave types are analysed one by one. This means that questions concerning the combination of different grave types are ignored, since the graves are not analysed in a contextual way.

Working as an archaeologist in Småland, I have frequently had thoughts about late Iron Age grave-fields, as I have travelled around the region. These thoughts have mainly concerned two phenomena. Firstly, the spatial variation of grave types seems to be more varied and complex than has previously been stated. Secondly, the grave material ought to be able to answer more questions than those regarding spatial variation.

With Burström's and Nilsson's work as a starting-point and inspiration, the grave-fields in Varend, Finnveden and Njudung have once again been studied (Fig. 1). The aim has been to see where, and in what combinations, different grave types appear. While Burström and Nilsson are mainly concerned with graves as marking territorial delimitation, I would like to see the grave material in a broader perspective, where other factors than the territorial one are important. Graves are perhaps the most complex remains we have to deal with as archaeologists. In this material survival, human life is summarized. The shaping of the grave must be seen as a result of a great many different variables, from religious and ideological conceptions to the social relations of the deceased. Among these relations are gender, age and social status. All these and other concepts are materialized in the grave, concepts that we as archaeologists have to interpret (on “grave archaeology” see Chapman & Randsborg 1981; Bennett 1988; Jennbert 1988; Lagerlöf 1991; Andrén 1993; Jensen & Høilund Nielsen 1997; Kaliff 1997). The aim of this article is not to discuss the possibilities or limitations of grave archaeology. The purpose is to study the structure of grave types in late Iron Age grave-fields in inland Småland. Special attention will also be paid to the varied burial customs that are present in Varend, and the background of these burial customs will be discussed.

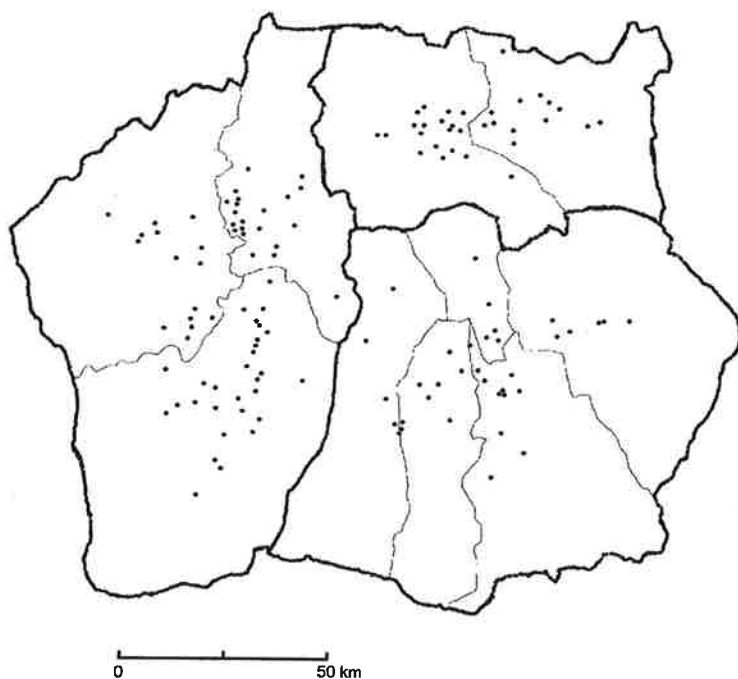


Fig. 2. The grave-fields that are included in the analysis.

To start with, the small number of archaeological excavations in Småland were mentioned. The late Iron Age graves that have been excavated were mainly investigated in the late 19th and early 20th century, when especially cemeteries with mounds were excavated in Finnveden (Palmgren 1875, 1879–81). Apart from that, single graves in grave-fields have been excavated in connection with minor development projects. Of the excavated graves, not all are dated to a more certain degree than “late Iron Age”. This poses some problems, since some of the grave types that are analysed are not securely dated. An example is the oval stone settings in Väreänd. In spite of the fact that this is the second most common grave type in Väreänd, none of them have a more secure archaeological dating than “late Iron Age”. Due to the small number of excavated graves, the analysis will have to rely on the outer shape of the graves.

The basis for the study is the register of ancient monuments by the Central Board of National Antiquities (*fornminnesregistret*). For Väreänd and the Sunnerbo district in Finnveden, the present Kronoberg County, the first registra-

tion of ancient monuments, from around 1950, has been used. For the rest of the studied area, the second modern registration from the 1980s has been used. At present the second registration is in progress in Kronoberg County, but the material is not yet available. The different quality of the registration is a major obstacle, since the registration of grave-fields in Kronoberg County soon will be altered.

The selection of grave-fields has been made according to two criteria, the number of graves and the grave types in the grave-fields (Fig. 2). When it comes to the number of graves, a limit of at least 40 graves has been used. This limit is subjective, but as will be shown later, it means that about half of all graves in grave-fields in the area have been used in the study. In some cases, grave-fields with 35 graves have been included, in order to prevent too skewed a geographical distribution of cemeteries. The idea is that variation in grave types is more easily seen in larger grave-fields. Larger cemeteries are also dominated by grave types which generally are dated to the late Iron Age. Small grave-fields can of course represent a specific social milieu, but

since the aim is to study variation in burial customs, the analysis has concentrated on larger cemeteries.

One problem concerns the terminology that is used in the registration of ancient monuments and the difference in people's understanding and use of this terminology. The problem is pronounced when it comes to the difference between the terms "mound" and "round stone setting" (round covered stone settings in grave-fields). If one compares the descriptions in the first and second registration of ancient monuments, it is evident that the assessment of different grave types has changed over time. There are examples both of earlier mounds now being identified as round stone settings, and of the opposite. These problems with a sometimes small or non-existent difference between the term "mound" and the term "round stone setting" raise the question whether it is meaningful to uphold a distinction between them. Maybe it would be better to use a common term for these graves, with the common features being the round shape and the vaulted form.

Apart from this, there is of course the other classical criticism of the sources. Here we have the question of different forms of destruction of

graves, for example by agricultural activities, and the problem with graves not visible above the ground. It seems to be clear that not everybody was buried in monuments that still are visible. How large this group was is difficult to estimate. These problems exist and are difficult to evaluate. However, they must be taken into consideration when evaluating the results.

## The dating of different grave types

Yet another problem when discussing graves in Småland is the dating of the different grave types. In Småland, with its relatively small number of excavated graves, the difficulties in dating various grave types are large. This is not the place to discuss the dating of grave types in detail. As a basis for the analysis lie the datings put together by Burström (1991, p. 65 table 2). No new results have been obtained to contradict these datings. Grave types from the late Iron Age in inland Småland are as follows:

- Round covered stone settings in grave-fields
- Mounds in grave-fields
- Oval stone settings without filling
- Ship-formed stone settings

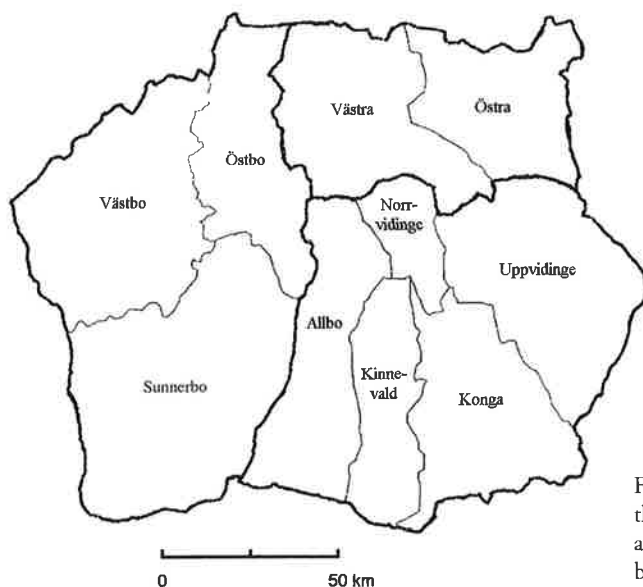


Fig. 3. The district-division (sw härad) in the studied area. The district-division is used as a rough tool for the analysis of the distribution of grave-types.

- Upright stones in combination with mounds and round stone settings
- Tricorns in combination with mounds and round stone settings

Apart from these types, others occur as well, but in smaller numbers, for example square and rectangular stone settings. Normally they are dated to the early Iron Age, but when they occur in combination with graves dated to the late Iron Age, it is more likely that they too belong to this period, at least in Småland. It is evident that there are great differences when it comes to the dating of graves between various regions. It should be made clear that little attention is paid to the dating of grave types in this article. Since the number of archaeologically dated graves in the area is limited, a thorough discussion of dating is meaningless. To make the following discussion possible, one has to allow oneself a certain lack of criticism of the sources when it comes to the datings of grave types.

## The grave-fields in Värend

According to the first registration of ancient monuments, there are 181 grave-fields in Värend with a total number of about 4375 graves (Åhman 1979, p. 9). Thirty-five grave-fields with late Iron Age graves have been studied. They mainly consist of round stone settings, oval stone settings, mounds, tricorns and upright stones. In Värend the total number of graves in the studied grave-fields amounts to 2493. This means that more than half of all graves in grave-fields in Värend have been part of the analysis. The average size of the cemeteries is about 70 graves. For Värend, the distribution of various grave types is shown in table 1.

In Värend, the grave-fields are dominated by three grave types. 80% of all graves are either oval stone settings, round stone settings or mounds. If Värend is divided into smaller parts, it is evident that there are differences in the distribution of graves. This is seen from a study of the grave-fields in the different districts

Table 1. Different types of graves in the grave-fields in Värend.

District	Mounds	Round stone settings	Oval stone settings	Ship-formed stone settings	Tricorns	Square/rectangular stone settings	Upright stones	Cairns	Other graves	Total number
Allbo	21 5%	192 49%	20 8%	9 2%	3		135 34%		3	395
Kinnevald	35 9%	251 65%	61 16%		1		6 2%	18 5%	13 3%	385
Konga	170 23%	177 24%	204 27%	23 3%	24 3%	38 5%	13 2%	82 11%	18 2%	749
Norrvidinge	111 35%	143 46%	33 11%		2		7 2%	2	15 5%	312
Uppvidinge	35 5%	114 17%	405 62%		21 3%		1	63 10%	13 2%	652
<b>Total Värend</b>	<b>372 15%</b>	<b>877 35%</b>	<b>736 30%</b>	<b>32 1%</b>	<b>51 2%</b>	<b>38 1,5%</b>	<b>162 6%</b>	<b>165 7%</b>	<b>60 2,5%</b>	<b>2493</b>



Fig. 4. Oval stone settings on a grave-field at Lenhovda (RAÄ 18 Lenhovda parish).

in Värend. This division has nothing to do with prehistoric conditions; the districts in Värend are probably a medieval phenomenon. The district borders cut right through several Iron Age regions. However, the districts can be used as a rough tool for showing the distribution of grave types in various areas.

The old picture that oval stone settings is one of the predominant grave types in Värend during the late Iron Age is not quite true. Oval stone settings clearly dominate in the Uppvidinge district in north-east Värend (Fig. 4). This fact has been known for some time (Nilsson 1990, p. 134; Burström 1991, pp. 86 ff.). The only other district where oval stone settings predominate is the Konga district in south-east Värend. There are also a small number of square/rectangular stone settings in the grave-fields in this district. Their presence has been used to show that this part of Värend is a "sub-region" (Nilsson 1990). If the district division is ignored, the burial customs in different parts of Värend can be studied in more detail.

In the northern parts the grave-fields are dominated by either round stone settings or oval stone settings, while the graves in central Värend, the area around Växjö, mainly consist of round stone settings. In some parishes there is also a large element of oval stone settings. The western part of Värend, the area west of the lakes Salen and Åsnen, presents a somewhat different picture. Most of the graves in this area consist of round stone settings, followed by upright stones. Together these two grave types amounts to 85% of the graves in the studied grave-fields in this area. The large amount of upright stones, one third of the graves, is characteristic of the western parts of Värend. This raises the question of the dating of these graves. Normally they are considered to have their chronological centre of gravity in the early Iron Age, mainly in the Mälaren Valley, while in Skåne and Blekinge they are found in grave-fields from the late Iron Age (Hyenstrand 1984, pp. 69 f.) This grave type seems to have been used over a long time. However, it seems that in Värend they should be



Fig. 5. The grave-field "Kånna högar" in Finnveden, with around 250 graves, mainly mounds (RAÅ 24, Kånna parish).

dated to the late Iron Age when they appear in larger grave-fields in combination with mounds, round stone settings and ship-formed stone settings. In the Sunnerbo district in Finnveden, an upright stone has been dated to the Viking Age (Anderbjörk 1949).

To conclude, burial customs in Varend during the studied period are mainly characterized by variation in the outer forms. All in all, the majority of the people buried in visible graves in Varend were buried in either round or oval stone settings, or in mounds. In eastern Varend oval stone settings predominate. In western Varend there is a considerable number of upright stones, although about half of the graves were round stone settings. This was also the case in northern Varend. In central Varend almost two-thirds of the graves were round stone settings.

The largest grave-fields in Varend are found in the Uppvidinge district, and are thereby dominated by oval stone settings. According to Burström, large grave-fields may indicate local centres and hence also the presence of a local

élite. Burström (1991, p. 145) suggests that the persons buried in oval stone settings were members or followers of this élite. Given that oval stone settings mainly are present in limited parts of Varend, this interpretation seems less likely. For example, 80% of the graves in Näsby (RAÅ 30 Dädesjö parish total of approx. 225 graves), are oval stone settings. It does not seem likely that the large group of persons buried in these graves all manifested contact with or participation in an élite.

## The grave-fields in Finnveden

That mounds are the characteristic grave type in Finnveden during late Iron Age is no secret. The number of graves and grave-fields in Finnveden is higher than in Varend and Njudung. Generally speaking, the cemeteries are also larger. The majority of the graves are mounds (Fig. 5). In many cases they account for more than 90%. In Finnveden the total number of grave-fields is 465, of which 299 can be dated to the late Iron Age

Table 2. Different types of graves in the grave-fields in Finnveden.

District	Mounds, round	Mounds, oval	Upright stones	Round stone settings	Tricorns	Ship-formed stone settings	Other graves	Total number
Sunnerbo	2135 92%	49 2%	97 4%	36 1,5%	3		11	2331
Västbo	652 80%	1	28 4%	104 13%	2		22 3%	809
Östbo	815 68%		19 2%	353 29%	4	2	11	1204
<b>Total Finnveden</b>	<b>3602 83%</b>	<b>50 1%</b>	<b>144 3%</b>	<b>493 11%</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>44 1%</b>	<b>4344</b>

(Berglund 1983; Tagesson 1983; Helander 1986).

In Finnveden, 65 grave-fields have been studied, 29 from the Sunnerbo district, 21 from the Östbo district and 15 from the Västbo district. This means that 22% of all late Iron Age grave-fields in Finnveden are included in the analysis. Since the largest cemeteries are used, the number of graves in these 65 grave-fields probably amounts to about half of all graves from the period. The number of mounds in the 65 grave-fields is around half of the almost 7000 mounds given as the total number of mounds in Finnveden (Burström 1991, p. 145). Since the number of cemeteries is smaller in Östbo and Västbo, data from grave-fields with 35 graves have also been included in the analysis, in order to make the geographical distribution less skewed. The total number of graves in the 65 grave-fields is 4344. The average size of the grave-fields is about 67 graves. The various grave types in these grave-fields are shown in table 2.

The table shows, as expected, that mounds are the most common grave type. More than 80% of all graves are mounds. However, there are some minor, but interesting, differences between various parts of Finnveden. Mounds dominate in all three districts, but their share varies from 92% in Sunnerbo, to 68% in Östbo, where there is a considerable amount of round stone settings. In grave-fields in the eastern parts of Östbo, round stone settings predominate with a share of more than 50% (Fig. 6). The

grave-fields in this part of Finnveden resemble the cemeteries in Njudung. The view of Finnveden as an area completely dominated by mounds must be modulated. The pure "mound-fields", with more than 90% mounds, mainly characterize Sunnerbo and Västbo, while parts of Östbo have a more equal distribution between mounds and round stone settings, just as in Njudung. Something else that should be noted is the concentration of oval mounds in Sunnerbo.

## The grave-fields in Njudung

In Njudung, 32 grave-fields have been analysed, 13 in the Östra district and 19 in the Västra district. Totally, there are 2737 graves in the 32 grave-fields, which gives an average of 85 graves per grave-field. The largest cemetery in Småland, at Byestad, east of Vetlanda, consists of about 325 graves. The different grave types in Njudung are shown in table 3.

The table shows that the grave-fields are totally dominated by round stone settings and mounds. Together these two grave types amount to over 90% of all graves. If an alternative definition of grave, "round vaulted grave", is used, then the burial customs in Njudung seem to be as homogeneous as in Finnveden. It is interesting that the burial customs in parts of Östbo in Finnveden, close to Njudung, resemble the burial customs in this region.



Table 3. Different types of graves in the grave-fields in Njudung.

District	Mound round	Mounds oval	Upright stones	Round stone settings	Tricorns	Ship-formed stone setting	Other graves	Total number
Västra	640 43%		32 2%	752 50%	21 1,5%	2	42 3%	1489
Östra	527 42%		6	631 50%	20 1,5%		64 5%	1248
<b>Total Njudung</b>	<b>1167</b> <b>43%</b>		<b>38</b> <b>1,5%</b>	<b>1383</b> <b>50%</b>	<b>41</b> <b>1,5%</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>106</b> <b>4%</b>	<b>2737</b>

The study has shown that an analysis of the distribution of grave types based on grave-fields gives a somewhat different result compared to a study based on the distribution of the single grave type. The result is summarized in fig. 6. In Värend one can suspect the presence of various ideas and perceptions in different areas as to how

a burial should be made. These ideas and perceptions were different from those prevailing in Finnveden and Njudung. When the present terms mound and round stone setting are regarded as being in principle the same type of grave, a round vaulted grave, the burial customs in these areas are homogeneous.

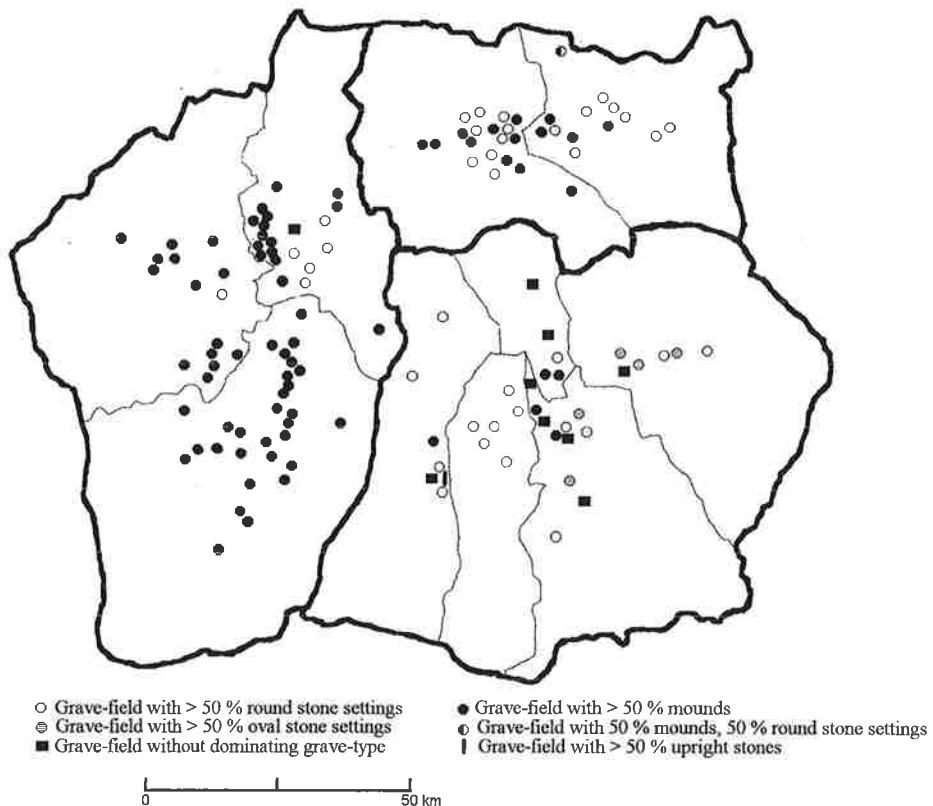


Fig. 6. The distribution of grave-fields dominated by different grave-types.

## Burial customs in Värend – variation as theme

The picture of the burial customs in Värend which has been presented is complex. The late Iron Age grave-fields in Värend are not characterized by oval stone settings; these are only typical of the east, especially the north-eastern parts. A striking amount of upright stones distinguishes western Värend, while round stone settings predominate in central Värend. But what is most characteristic is the variation in grave types. Variation is more likely to distinguish the typical burial customs in Värend during the late Iron Age. What, then, is this a reflection of?

### *Graves as a territorial reflection*

Even though variation in forms is typical of the grave-fields in Värend, it is evident that some types seem to be more or less tied to different areas. In accordance with this, the different grave types could be seen as representing the following areas: oval stone settings in the east, a mixture in the middle and round stone settings and upright stones in the west. Hypothetically, the various grave types are then an expression of the origin of the deceased, where he or she originated. Local traditions were responsible for how a person's grave was constructed. These traditions were perhaps stronger in a landscape like Småland, where the settlements were scattered and more or less separated by vast woodlands. This would have caused a certain degree of isolation, which in turn could have affected the burial customs in such a way that local features in some areas were emphasized.

It would, however, be an oversimplification to claim that graves only reflect territorial aspects. Several other parameters were probably involved when the decision was made as to what type of grave to use. Looking at some grave-fields in detail, one can find pure "mound-fields" of the same character as in Finnveden, not only in central but also in eastern Värend. These circumstances pose the question whether

burial customs can also be affected by the settlement structure.

### *Grave-fields and settlement structure*

Just outside Växjö there are three grave-fields: RAÄ 111 at Lilla Fjäll in the north, with 86 graves; RAÄ 46 at Kampen near the town centre with 51 graves; and a couple of kilometres to the south, at Skir, RAÄ 19+21 with 89 graves. The grave-fields at Lilla Fjäll and Skir are dominated by a diversity of grave-forms, such as oval and round stone settings, mounds, cairns and stone circles. At Kampen, on the other hand, all the graves are mounds. The people buried in these different grave-fields must have had a great deal in common. They were living in the same area, probably had the same livelihood and religious beliefs, yet at Kampen people were only buried in mounds.

We may assume that these grave-fields represent different settlements. A hypothesis could be that villages have a more uniform structure than single farms, not only when it comes to the division of land and farming, but also when it comes to internal life and social relations. Village formation meant increased cooperation between humans, who were tied more closely together. Compared to a single farm, life in a village requires that a whole range of matters should be decided together, mainly in the agricultural sector. In the same way, it is possible that burial customs were affected too, by the collective ideas about what graves should look like and what they should represent. This would result in a homogeneous grave-field, like the one at Kampen. The varied grave-fields could perhaps, on the other hand, be seen as the result of a common cemetery for several single farms.

Similar thoughts, that uniform burial customs are a result of a village structure, have been presented when it comes to the large grave-fields with oval stone settings in north-east Värend (Klang 1975, p. 28). If these thoughts are correct, the grave-fields would then be a mirror of village formation in progress. Where it had been accomplished, the burial customs became more

standardized; where the single farms dominated, the varied burial customs continued. The settlements in Värend would then consist mainly of single farms, with some villages, while the settlements in Finnveden and Njudung were villages. Support for this interpretation can to some extent be found in the fossil arable land. In north-east Värend, the area with most uniform grave-fields in Värend, lies the largest, and so far, almost only examples of strip fields that have been found in the province. These strip fields have been dated to the middle of the Iron Age, and have been connected to a village formation. In other parts of Värend there seems to be no evidence hitherto that this type of fossil arable land existed (Klang 1980; Jönsson & Klang 1983; Skoglund 1997). Perhaps the ongoing registration of ancient monuments will change this. A problem with this interpretation, however, is that strip fields so far do not seem to be common in Finnveden either. Perhaps the reason for the uniform burial customs in Finnveden is due to other causes than settlement structure.

#### *Graves and kinship*

Viking Age society is usually characterized as a society of families and kin-groups. The family was the basis for everyday life. The head of the family ruled and controlled the members. One hypothesis could be that different families/kins had different burial customs. The importance of family and kin during the late Iron Age is difficult to study, however. According to David Gaunt (1983, pp. 193 ff.), we must assume that that the Scandinavian people during the Viking Age, like the people in Western Europe, had a bilateral system of inheritance. This means that a person has relatives on both the father's and the mother's side. As a result every person has individual relatives. A consequence of this is that the emergence of strong family groups is counteracted. Against this background, it is far from clear that the Viking Age should be seen as a family-based society. The same conclusions are drawn by Christer Winberg in his study of landowning and kinship (1985). Instead, soci-

ety was based on alliances between different persons, not families. Most of all, it was important to be tied to, and submit to, a magnate who could guarantee support and protection (Gaunt 1983, pp. 208 ff.).

In view of this, kinship does not seem to be likely as determining factor for how a burial was performed. In the archaeological material, it would also be difficult to distinguish this factor, as determining, compared to the former, by which the farm or village was seen as decisive.

#### *Graves, power and social position*

That factors such as sex, age and social status affected how a burial was performed is evident. Agneta Bennett (1988) has shown how burials in the Migration Period in the Mälaren Valley were adjusted to the sex and social position of the deceased. For example, there was a tendency that women were more often buried in round stone settings, while men were buried in other forms of stone settings. With material from Jämtland, Mikael Jakobsson (1997) has shown how graves can be used for studies of ideology and social identity. In this connection, it must be underlined that graves first of all have to be seen as a religious phenomenon. The grave is a way for the surviving relatives to take care of the dead person according to prevailing perceptions about life and death. The social input of the graves, for example, grave-goods, the shape of the grave and so on, are secondary, yet integrated in this religious dimension (see Lagerlöf 1991).

Despite this, I would argue that it is possible to use grave material as a way to discuss social conditions. Grave-goods and other phenomena are used in a situation where religion, ideology and social relations are mixed and transformed, only to be materialized in the grave. The prevailing burial customs seem to be interesting to study in this context. The population in inland Småland, whether in Värend, Finnveden or Njudung, must have been part of the same religious and ideological superstructure. In the two latter areas this led to burials in round, vaulted graves, in Värend to burials in a variety

of graves. Perhaps this difference is due to the fact that the graves in Värend more were used for social expression. One social aspect of the graves has already been mentioned, settlement structure, but other aspects need to be discussed.

Social differences among the dead can be traced in the shape of the grave as a whole, but also in its details. To what degree can a grave be said to reflect superior social status, in its outer shape or its position in the landscape? To what degree are grave-goods present and what do they reflect about status or sex? Questions like this can be put to graves from the whole of prehistory. When it comes to Småland, these questions are almost impossible to answer, since they demand thoroughly excavated grave material. Here a discussion of the social meaning of the graves has to rely on shape, type, size and position in the landscape. This discussion of necessity focuses on graves that diverge from the usual pattern. As a consequence, these graves can be said to reflect the position of the dead in the society.

To see which graves diverge, we must conclude which are normal and can be assumed to represent the "ordinary" population. In Värend, almost 90% of the graves on the 35 grave-fields are either round or oval stone settings, mounds or raised stones. One or two of these types also dominate in different parts of the region, accounting for 70–85%. An assumption that these graves represent the "ordinary" population is probable. More interesting are the last 10% of the graves. If we disregard damaged and undecided graves, we are left with a group of about 5% of the total number of graves. This group consists of ship-formed stone settings, tricornes and square/rectangular stone settings. When these grave types appear, it is mainly in small numbers. Their share of a grave-field seldom rises to over 10% of the total number of graves. These grave types could then suggest by their low number that the persons buried in them had a special position in society.

Ship-formed stone settings are mainly present in western and southern Värend. Here we have

a problem with the registration of this type of grave. Where do we draw the line between a ship-formed and an oval stone setting? They have the same shape. This problem is the same as the difficulty of distinguishing mounds from round stone settings. When it comes to oval and ship-formed stone settings, the former are usually 4–9 m long, while most of the ship-formed stone settings are more than 15 m long. If we are to regard ship-formed stone settings as an "unusual" grave type in Värend, this can only be true about large ships, at least 15 m long. Shorter ones should be regarded as oval stone settings. However, ship-formed stone settings and oval stone settings have the oval boat-form in common. The use of this form was widespread especially in eastern Värend, and the oval form indicates a strong connection between the two grave types. That the oval form became important was probably due to local tradition in combination with the symbolic value of the ship.

Ships and ship symbolism are common in prehistoric graves from different parts of the prehistory. Ship-formed stone settings occur during both the Bronze Age and the Iron Age (Varenius 1992, Artelius 1996). That the significance of the ship increased in the late Iron Age is shown by the presence of boat-graves. Ships are also a common motif on Gotlandic picture-stones. In Nordic mythology the ship is a important and powerful symbol. According to Anders Andrén (1993, pp. 43 ff.), the ship can symbolize a hierarchic, male-dominated society. Similar thoughts concerning ship-formed stone settings have been presented by Anne Carlie regarding northern Scania. The importance of the ship as a means of transportation for long-distance trade gave the ship a special meaning. Even in an inland area like northern Scania, the symbolism of the ship was strong. Ship-formed stone settings are often large and monumental, and in northern Scania they are mainly present in large grave-fields. Carlie makes the assumption that there is a connection between ship-formed stone settings and the local power-structure



Fig. 7. The grave-field at Ingelstad with "King Inges" mound. From an outline of Erik Dahlberg's "*Suecia antiqua et hodierna*", late 17th century.

(Carlie 1994, pp. 182 ff.).

The same discussion could be applied to Västergötland. Here ship-formed stone settings occur in small numbers and tend to occur in large grave-fields, for example at the grave-field at Ingelstad, with its two "king-size" mounds (Fig. 7). The use of this grave type seems to have been restricted. Apart from having a mythological meaning, the ship in inland areas can also be seen as a symbol of long-distance communication. Through communication and trade, prestige goods necessary for the maintenance of personal alliances and power support became available (Hedeager 1990, pp. 91 ff., Gurevich 1992). The ship turns out to be both a religious symbol and a symbol for long-distance connections. The common use of the oval form in Västergötland reflects the importance of the ship as a

symbol. The oval stone settings might then reflect the religious and mythological meaning of the ship. Large ship-formed stone settings can perhaps furthermore be seen as graves for local magnates. The oval form is also present in the oval mounds that are mainly found in Sunnerbo in Finnveden. When excavated, they have turned out to be covered ship-formed stone settings (Anderbjörk 1949).

Tricorns are mysterious graves, which occasionally lack traces of burials. They are common in southern Sweden, where they occur during the whole Iron Age. In the Mälaren Valley, tricorns seem to have been used during the late Iron Age, mainly in combination with mounds. In inland Småland, tricorns either occur alone on the border between Finnveden and Halland, or in grave-fields (Fig. 8). Tricorns occur more



Fig. 8. Tricorn on a grave-field at Lenhovda (RAÄ 18 Lenhovda parish).

often in cemeteries than in isolation, and they occur in cemeteries both from the early and the late Iron Age. In the Mälaren Valley, tricorns are found mainly in big grave-fields, often with large mounds, for example at Ottarshögen in Vendel (Hyenstrand 1984, pp. 79 ff.). That tricorns had a special meaning in the prevailing social structure is evident. Exactly what role they played is unclear, but just as with the ship-formed stone settings, it is probable that this type of grave was erected over a person with special functions or status. The fact that they appear in a small number underlines this interpretation. That tricorns and ship-formed stone settings normally do not coexist could be because the persons buried in these graves represent different spheres in society, with power being expressed and perhaps exercised in different ways.

Here it may be appropriate to consider the question of large "king-size" mounds. Their role as a symbol of power has long been noticed

(Lindqvist 1936; Burström 1988). In Varend, the "Inglinge mound" holds a unique position. It is mostly forgotten that the grave-field at Ingelstad has two large mounds, one 35 m and one 28 m in diameter (Fig. 7). Large mounds are normally either dated to the Bronze Age, the Migration Period or the Viking Age. At Ingelstad an Iron Age dating is most likely. During the Bronze Age, Varend is one of the areas with the greatest density of cairns. A couple of kilometres west of Ingelstad lies "Limerör", the largest cairn in Varend, 45 m in diameter and 4.5 m high. The building of large mounds during the Bronze Age in Varend does not seem to be likely against this background. The Ingelstad area appears to be a regional rather than a local centre during the late Iron Age, with both large mounds and large ship-formed stone settings.

The small grave-field "Gullhögarna" (RAÄ 402, Dädesjö parish) is interesting in this connection (Fig. 9). The grave-field consists of 16 mounds, of which six have to be regarded as

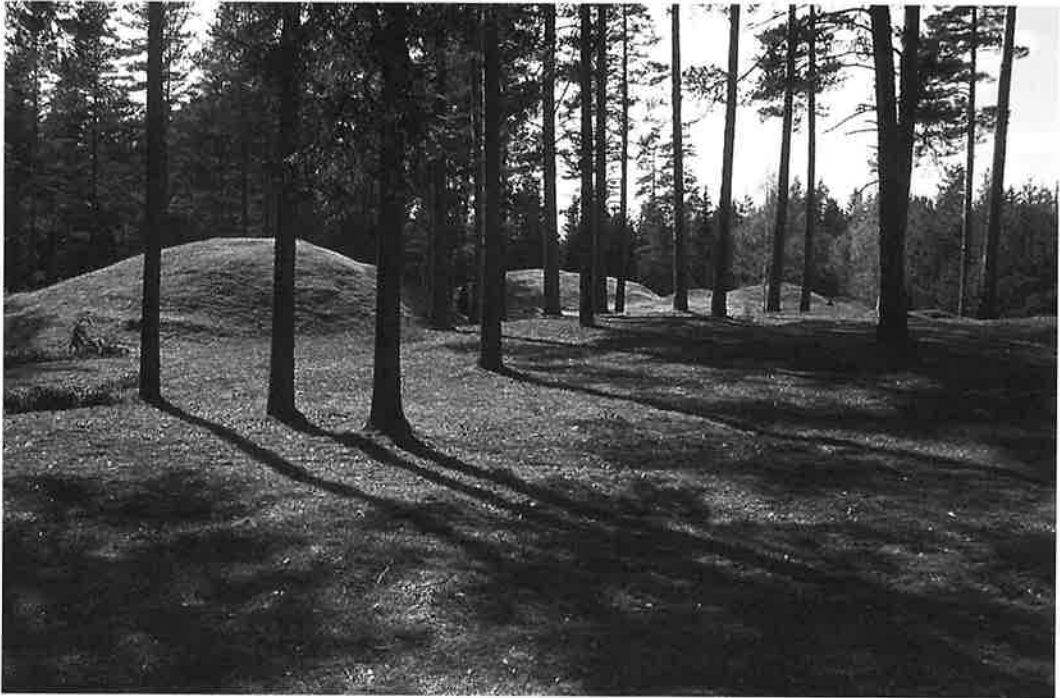


Fig. 9. The large mounds on the grave-field "Gullhögarna" (RAÄ 402 Dädesjö parish).

large, with diameters of 26, 22, 18, 17, 16 and 15 m. Here we seem to have the burial place for a minor "dynasty". They are the largest mounds in Varend, except for the two mounds at Ingelstad. Apart from that, the grave-fields consist only of mounds, in a district, Uppvidinge, where mounds are otherwise rare. (It must be mentioned, however, that this grave-field originally was larger, and that the presence of a stone circle in the vicinity makes it possible that other grave types also existed.) Furthermore, it is situated on the border between two medieval parishes, Drev and Eke. Normally late Iron Age grave-fields are situated in the vicinity of the historical villages. Perhaps this grave-field is a reminiscence of an original late Iron Age magnate's estate, later divided. The Romanesque stone church in Drev and the farm "Bosgården" in Eke remind us of the probable presence of magnate farms in the Middle Ages.

These examples show, among other things, that a social dimension prevails behind the

burial customs. When discussing the outer shape of the graves, as has been done here, a connection between graves and local power structures emerges. It is probable that large mounds represent some form of local élites, whereas for the other graves we can only guess; they could represent anyone from persons connected with the prestige-goods system to religious or military leaders. In many cases these functions were united in one person. The grave types in Varend testify that several grave forms, not only large mounds, can be brought into a discussion of local power structures.

## Variation as theme

Varied burial customs are nothing unique for Varend, however. In the Mälaren Valley, several types of graves occur in the grave-fields from the early Iron Age. This state of affairs is replaced by homogeneous cemeteries with mounds in the late Iron Age (Hyenstrand 1984, pp. 84 ff.). The

same development can be traced in Finnveden. The uniform grave-fields in Finnveden and Njudung have clear parallels in central Sweden. Also in Möre in the east, late Iron Age grave-fields are dominated by mounds and round stone settings (Hyenstrand 1984, p. 168). Varend is surrounded to the west, north and east by areas dominated by uniform round, vaulted graves, a custom that to some extent has to be regarded as "Swedish".

Grave-fields similar to those in Varend are on the other hand common in Scania, Halland and Blekinge. Anne Carlie has shown that the grave-fields in northern Scania during the late Iron Age consist of ship-formed stone settings, stone circles, tricorns and square stone settings (Carlie 1994, p. 100). In Halland, the grave-fields consists of a variety of forms: mounds, stone circles, tricorns, ship-formed stone settings and most of all upright stones (Arbman 1954, pp. 155 f.). The same types of graves occur in late Iron Age grave-fields in Blekinge (Stenholm 1986, pp. 41 ff.).

There are thus similarities between grave-fields in Scania, Halland and Blekinge, which were to become Danish provinces, and Varend. Several types of graves are common, but what these areas share most is the variation, with many grave types used side by side. Even if the oval stone settings are mainly concentrated in Varend, the burial customs in Varend cannot be seen only as a way for the population to manifest their identity as inhabitants of Varend, as has been supposed previously (Burström 1991, pp. 138 ff.). The burial customs were rather a way to manifest an identity in a local community, based on southern Scandinavian perceptions of how burials should be performed. This perhaps casts new light on Varend's role and position in the Swedish and Danish state-formation process.

## Conclusions

This study of 132 grave-fields with about 9500 graves has shown that there may be many expla-

nations for why a person was buried in a specific grave. In this connection, it must be remembered that it was not the deceased, but his/her relatives that erected the grave. Even if the deceased had expressed a wish as to how the burial should be performed, it was the relatives that had the decision in their hands. This meant that it is their image of the dead person that emerges in the grave.

The discussion has completely relied on the outer shape of the graves. It has not been possible to use factors like inner construction and grave-goods. This both aggravates and simplifies the discussion. At the same time, it was the outer shape and the position in the landscape that was the signal to the contemporary society. They did not have any knowledge either of what the inner form of the graves was like, other than as oral tradition. The symbolic meaning of different graves had to be interpreted from their outer shape, both now and in the past.

The analysis has shown the importance of studying graves in their context, in the grave-fields. A study of single grave types gives a somewhat simplified result. The result of this study confirms previous studies: oval stone settings occur in Varend and mounds in Finnveden. But at the same time, the reality is more complicated. What has to be emphasized is that the varied burial customs in Varend are something different from the uniform one in Finnveden and Njudung. Instead of looking at the whereabouts of single grave types, we should see what types of graves dominates as a whole and whether the burial customs are characterized by variation or homogeneity. The latter is evident in Finnveden and Njudung, where the burials were conducted in round, vaulted graves, while a variety of graves were allowed in Varend.

A couple of hypotheses have been discussed for seeking the reasons behind the burial customs in Varend. It is evident that there is a territorial dimension, with local traditions being very important. What this territorial dimension represents is not clear, however. At the same



time, grave-fields with diverging graves, for example with only mounds, tell us that settlement structure may also have been important. The suggestion that variety in burial customs reflects a settlement of single farms, while a more homogeneous customs reflects village settlements, is interesting. Since we do not know a single late Iron Age settlement in Varend as yet, this material cannot tell us anything about what the settlement looked like. Some graves can be said to reflect power-structures in Varend. This is mostly true for large mounds and large ship-formed stone settings, perhaps also tricornes and square/rectangular stone settings. That these graves were erected over persons with special status is probable, since they diverge in shape and are present in a small number. Thereby, three factors together can be suspected to have influenced burial customs in Varend; local tradition, settlement structure and local power structures. Family ties and kinship seem to be less likely as a guide to how a burial should be performed.

One aspect that not has been discussed is the religious one, in spite of the fact that graves are also a religious phenomenon. During the late Iron Age, there seem to have been several alternative views and beliefs about life after death. The religion that is present in the written sources, was perhaps mainly a religion for an élite, and did not include the beliefs of ordinary people. According to Anders Kaliff, different groups can have had different religious beliefs, but a common religious base (Kaliff 1997, p. 21 f.). Varied burial customs could then be a result of different religious beliefs. As has been argued earlier, however, it seems likely that the religion and ideological superstructure were homogeneous in the current area, so religious causes cannot explain the differences in burial customs. It is very evident, however, that burials during the late Iron Age, just as before and just as later on, were subordinate to several factors: religious, ideological and social, and also regional.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Anders Andrén, Institute of Archaeology, Lund University, for valuable discussions.

## References

- Åhman, E. 1979. Fornlämningarna. In Larsson, L.-O. *Småländsk bebyggelsehistoria I. Från vikingatid till Vasatid*. 1:1 Kinnevalds härad. Acta Wexionensia. Serie 1. History & Geography. Växjö.
- Anderbjörk, J.-E. 1949. Undersökningar och förhistoriska fynd i Kronobergs län. *Kronobergsboken*.
- Andrén, A. 1993. Doors to other worlds. Scandinavian death rituals in Gotlandic perspectives. *Journal of European of Archaeology* 1993:1
- Arbman, H. 1954. Hallands forntid. *Hallands historia. Från äldsta tid till freden i Brömsebro 1645*. Halmstad.
- Artelius, T. 1996. *Långfärd och återkomst – skeppet i bronsålderns gravar*. Uppsats för licentiatexamen, Göteborgs universitet, Institutionen för Arkeologi. Riksantikvarieämbetet Arkeologiska undersökningar, Skrifter 17. Varberg.
- Bennett, A. 1988. Graven. Religiös och social symbol. In Iregren, E., Jennbert, K. & Larsson, L. (eds.), *Grauskick och Gravdata. Rapport från arkeologidagarna 13–15 januari 1988*. University of Lund Institute of Archaeology Report Series 32. Lund.
- Berglund, A. 1983. *Järnåldersbygden i Östbo härad, Småland*. C-uppsats i arkeologi. Lunds universitet. Mimeo.
- Burström, M. 1988. Regional identitet och territoriell organisation. Exemplet inre Sydsverige under järnålder. In Hyenstrand, Å. (ed.), *Sambällsteori och källmaterial – aktuell arkeologi II*. Stockholm Archaeological Reports 21. Stockholm.
- 1991. *Arkeologisk samhällsavgrensning. En studie av vikingatida samhällsterritorier i Smålands inland*. Stockholm Studies in Archaeology 9. Stockholm.
- Carlie, A. 1994. *På arkeologins bakgård. En bebyggelse- arkeologisk undersökning i norra Skånes inland baserad på synliga gravar*. Acta Archaeologica Lundensia. Series in 8° N° 22.
- Chapman, R. & Randsborg, K. 1981. Approaches to the archaeology of death. In Chapman, R. Kinnes, J. & Randsborg, K. (eds.), *The Archaeology of death*. Cambridge.
- Einerstam, B. 1965. Småland: Jönköpings och Kronobergs län. *Med arkeologen Sverige runt*. Stockholm.
- Gaunt, D. 1983. *Familjeliv i Norden*. Malmö.

- Gurevich, A. J. 1992. Wealth and gift-bestowal among the ancient Scandinavians. In Howlett, J. (ed.), *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*. Cambridge.
- Hedeager, L. 1990. *Danmarks jernalder. Mellem stamme og stat*. Aarhus.
- Helander, A. 1986. *Järnåldersbygden i Sunnerbo härad, Småland*. C-uppsats i arkeologi. Lunds universitet. Mimeo.
- Hyenstrand, Å. 1984. *Fasta fornlämningar och arkeologiska regioner*. Riksantikvarieämbetet och Statens historiska museer Rapport 1984:7. Stockholm.
- Jakobsson, M. 1997. Burial Layout, Society and Sacred Geography. A Viking Age Example from Jämtland. *Current Swedish Archaeology* 5.
- Jennbert, K. 1988. Gravseder och kulturformer. I arkeologins gränsland. In Iregren, E., Jennbert, K. & Larsson, L. (eds.), *Gravskick och Gravdata. Rapport från arkeologidagarna 13–15 januari 1988*. University of Lund Institute of Archaeology Report Series 32. Lund.
- Jensen, C. K. & Højlund Nielsen, K. (eds.) 1997. *Burial & Society. The Chronological and Social Analysis of Archaeological Burial Data*. Aarhus.
- Jönsson, B. & Klang, L. 1983. Kulturlandskapsarkeologi i Uppvidinge. *Kronobergsboken*.
- Kaliff, A. 1997. *Grav och kultplats. Eskatologiska föreställningar under yngre bronsålder och äldre järnålder i Östergötland*. Aun 24.
- Klang, L. 1975. *Agrara kulturlandskapets framväxt. Varend i bebyggelsearkeologisk belysning*. C-uppsats i arkeologi. Stockholms universitet. Mimeo.
- 1980. Sävsjö och Granhult i Uppvidinge härad – exempel på fossila kulturlandskap. *Kronobergsboken*.
- Lagerlöf, A. 1991. Gravmaterialet som källa för kunskap om människans livsvillkor, religiösa och sociala värderingar – en fråga om flera perspektiv. In *Gravfältundersökningar och gravarkeologi*. Riksantikvarieämbetet. Stockholm.
- Lindqvist, S. 1936. *Uppsala högar och Ottarshögen*. Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien. Stockholm.
- Nilsson, L. 1990. Iron Age Grave Fields in Varend. Grave Forms, Combination Patterns and Local Features. A Preliminary Analysis. *Meddelanden från Lunds universitets historiska museum 1989–90*. New Series 8.
- Palmgren, L. F. 1875. Fornlemningar i Vestbo härad, Småland, på Svenska Fornminnesföreningens bekostnad undersökta år 1873. *Svenska Fornminnesföreningens tidskrift* II 1873–74.
- 1879–81. Fornlemningar i Finveden (Småland) på Svenska Fornminnesföreningens bekostnad undersökta år 1875. *Svenska Fornminnesföreningens tidskrift* IV 1878–80.
- Skoglund, P. 1997. Röjningsröseområden i Kronobergs län. In Hansson, M. (ed.), *Gårdar, åkerar och biskopens stad. 3000 år i Kronobergs län*. Smålands museum. Växjö.
- Stenholm, L. 1986. *Ränderna går aldrig ur – en bebyggelsehistorisk studie av Blekinges dansktid*. Lund.
- Tagesson, G. 1983. *1500 år i Västbo härad, Småland. Bebyggelseutveckling under äldre och yngre järnålder*. C-uppsats i arkeologi. Lunds universitet. Mimeo.
- Varenius, B. 1992. *Det nordiska skeppet. Teknologi och samhällsstrategi i vikingatid och medeltid*. Stockholm Studies in Archaeology 10.
- Winberg, C. 1985. *Grenverket. Studier rörande jord, släktskapssystem och ståndsprivilegier*. Stockholm.

English revised by Alan Crozier