

At Opposite Ends?

Cairns and Bronzes as Disparate Displays of Power in Bronze Age Western Sweden

BY SUSANNE SELLING

Abstract

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This paper explores the Bronze Age in western Sweden and the fact that while bronzes were scarce, other signs of the south Scandinavian Bronze Age were abundant. The role and placement of rock carvings and burials, and their relation to bronze objects, is analysed, based on the unusual existence of a monumental barrow in an area where cairns are far more common. The concept of borderland is an important aspect when trying to explain changes in society, but an analytical model based on cores and peripheries too often places a focus on changes in the “core” and sees events on the “peripheries” as reactions to these events, leaving little room for the influence of local traditions. It is proposed that the use of rock carvings in western Sweden supplemented the use of bronzes in ritual contexts. Bronze was a secondary symbol of the status of an already established prestige, and in areas where the need to claim the rocks through rituals was essential, the use of carvings, as well as cairns, played a central part.

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Introduction

Travelling down the coast of western Sweden you will notice the jagged coastline, the thousands of rocky islands scattered along its shores and, with an eye for prehistoric sites, an abundance of cairns making their mark on the present landscape just as they did three thousand years ago. Less accessible, but the cause of intensive research and speculation, are the rock carvings. Moving further south along the coast this image will change. Instead of rocks, carvings and cairns, you will encounter sandy beaches and a Bronze Age landscape shaped by burial mounds.

Since the time of Oscar Montelius, Bronze Age research has primarily focused on the study of bronzes. Typological sequences of bronze artefacts, for example, form the basis for the

division of European Bronze Age cultures into cores and peripheries, a division which is seen to cover both large-scale networks and exchange on local levels. Bronzes have been regarded as reflections of society, their appearance and use subject to changes in social structure. However, these bronze artefacts could also have served as active agents in the reproduction of society: “the bronzes constitute one of the ways through which society communicates and reproduces itself and they accordingly are not void of meaning” (Stig Sørensen 1987, p. 94). Clearly, the artefacts, whether found in graves or hoards, can greatly contribute to interpretations of the structure of Bronze Age society.

Questions concerning Bronze Age societies are numerous, and the most interesting concern social aspects: How were relations between people

structured and to what degree is it possible to discern these structures in the archaeological record? How was power expressed and how was society organized? Was there an elite, in control of the exchange of bronzes, and in that case, how was this elite rooted in the local community? Bronzes from the Bronze Age can contribute information about Bronze Age societies. But perhaps they should not only be used as possible evidence for the emergence of an elite. A study of bronzes and their symbolic meaning can reveal nuances in the relationship between elites and local populations, in areas traditionally regarded as peripheral in the south Scandinavian Bronze Age. My purpose is to create a platform to modulate the centre-periphery theory as a means for analysis. Studies conducted during the last twenty years of archaeological research concerning the Scandinavian Bronze Age still focus on the bronze artefacts. Instead I would like to emphasize that when the basis for the analysis – bronze – is not available, then the picture is slightly distorted and other materials must be used. The presumed peripheral role that western Sweden is ascribed during the Bronze Age becomes paradoxical on closer examination, since the area displays a large amount of monumental cairns and plays a central part in the rock carving tradition.

The aim of this paper is to explore the “fact” that, while bronzes were scarce during the Bronze Age in western Sweden, other signs of the south Scandinavian Bronze Age, such as graves and rock carvings, are abundant. Bronze as a prestige item is an established concept in Bronze Age research. I do not intend to disagree with this, but wish to point out some problems with accepting the power of bronze, its role as a creator of Bronze Age society, and the connection between bronzes and potential elites. I prefer to discuss my study area of western Sweden – the province of Bohuslän – as a region where local traditions and external influences met and blended in a very visible way. Hence the relationship between bronzes, cairns and elites is still marked, although perhaps not as obvious as at first glance.

Bohuslän – the Bronze Age on the Swedish west coast

Sweden is historically divided into 25 provinces. Bohuslän, approximately 200 kilometres from north to south, covers the northern part of the west coast (fig. 1). Traces of the Bronze Age population in this area can principally be found in the cairns of the Early Bronze Age and in the rock carvings, primarily considered to date to the Middle and Late Bronze Age (Nordbladh 1981; Bertilsson 1987, pp. 182 f.). Settlement sites are still few, even though a growing number of sites were identified in the 1980s and 1990s. In this area, apparently sparsely populated, there are several examples of splendid bronze works. Bronze artefacts cause speculations about the circulation of prestige goods, stratification and chiefdoms. The northern part of the Swedish west coast is an area that borders on what is traditionally regarded as the core area of the south Scandinavian Bronze Age “culture”. In Kristian Kristiansen’s words Bohuslän finds itself “between centre and periphery” (1998a, p. 85), and can be said to constitute a borderland for at least some of the characteristics of the south Scandinavian Bronze Age: bronzes and barrows.

Cairns from the Early Bronze Age can be found in many Swedish regions, but their abundance and concentration on the coastline in Bohuslän is notable (Andersson 1980, p. 128). Roughly 95% of all cairns in Bohuslän are situated on the coastal strip, while only a small part are to be found inland (National Heritage Board/Record of Ancient Monuments). The coastal landscape is characteristically rocky, with an archipelago made up of a multitude of small islands. During the Early Bronze Age the water level was approximately 20–25 metres above the present-day shoreline (Gerdin 1999, pp. 58 f.), and the association between cairns and water or the sea is hard to ignore. Often the cairns are highly visible, located on mountain summits or ridges, where they can be seen even from great distances.



Fig. 1. Map of South Scandinavia, with study area marked. Map of study area showing sites/places mentioned in the text.

In combination with the introduction of bronze in Bohuslän – albeit on a small scale – and the motifs depicted in the rock carvings, the existence of cairns could signal the first steps taken towards the adoption of an ideology, built increasingly on the accumulation of status, expressed through the display and control of portable prestige items (cf. Miller & Tilley 1984, p. 150; Kristiansen 1998b). In this scenario, the people buried in the cairns were the ones who controlled the exchange of bronzes, and the

reason for building a cairn is connected to a changed relation to ancestry, land and territory. My aim is to show that a low number of bronzes could also indicate that these ideas, associated with agriculture and the exchange of bronzes as symbols of status, were merely in part adopted by a small portion of the population and that the cairn as a symbol shows alternative traditions and is not a simple translation of the south Scandinavian Bronze Age barrow.

The bronzes of Bohuslän

Bohus County Museum (1998) has conducted an inventory of bronze artefacts from the Bronze Age in the region. In comparison to the Neolithic, from which fine flint objects are plentiful (Moberg 1963, p. 60), there is a marked lack of finds from the Bronze Age.

The representativeness of remaining graves, hoards and bronzes in Denmark has been analysed by Kristian Kristiansen (1983), but no conclusive answer to the problem is presented. There is no sure way of telling to what degree actual finds of barrows and bronzes correspond to the original number built or deposited. Kristiansen points out that "hoards from the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age are randomly distributed within the areas in which it was customary to deposit hoards" (1983, p. 139). But a low number of hoards also reflects regional variations in deposition practices (1983, pp. 137 ff.). He also discusses the problem of looting and the destruction of barrows (1983, pp. 116 ff.). Modern-day agricultural methods have contributed to the destruction of prehistoric monuments such as barrows. At the same time draining, loaming, and tree planting of arable land are factors of agricultural development which contribute to the larger number of hoards brought to light in the 19th and 20th centuries.

A lack of bronze artefacts could be due to the fact that preservation conditions in cairns are worse than in barrows. Thousands of years of rain have permeated the cairn-structures and consequently conditions for the preservation of metal as well as organic material are far from ideal. However, context alone cannot explain the low number of bronze finds since hoard finds are scarce as well, in comparison with neighbouring regions such as the province of Halland to the south, or Västergötland to the east (Oldeberg 1974)

My assumption in this particular study is that the lack of bronze artefacts on the Swedish west coast is not simply a source problem. The next question then follows immediately: How

do we explain this scarcity? My intention is to regard this problem as a result of active choices with the purpose of creating a starting point that lies beyond an explicit focus on bronzes. Before I discuss the other Bronze Age phenomena apparent in Bohuslän, a short presentation of the general character of the bronze artefacts found in the province is needed.

The bronzes provide us with an image of an area with widespread contacts with continental Europe. An example is an early Bronze Age axe, of the Färdrup type, found in Kville parish (Oldeberg 1974, no. 2585). Yet another example of extensive prehistoric networks is a find in Tanum parish in northern Bohuslän, an area famous for its rock carvings. In the early 1990s a bronze sword was found during the excavation of a cairn. This sword was most likely manufactured in eastern Central Europe during the Early Bronze Age (Bohus County Museum 1998, no. 27).

The sites in Bohuslän where bronzes have been found are all located in the coastal area, but the finds are most numerous in graves and hoards in the south of the region. There are concentrations of finds on the Tanum Plain, the southern and western parts of the island of Orust, the area south of Hällungen down to Nordre River, as well as the area surrounding the mouth of Göta River. If we look at finds from the Late Bronze Age, we find that they are more evenly distributed along the coast (Kindgren 1998, p. 77). The bronzes are often found close to land used for farming or grazing in the coastal area, the very same areas that in historical times constituted the traditional agricultural lands. Rock carvings are more common to the north and bronzes are still found in larger numbers in the south (fig. 2). Cairns and rock carvings contribute to an image of a Bronze Age with a concentration on the clay plains along the coastal strip.

The way in which bronzes were used and consumed shows a change over time, from a context of burials to hoards. One theory is that this change indicates that leadership ceased to be

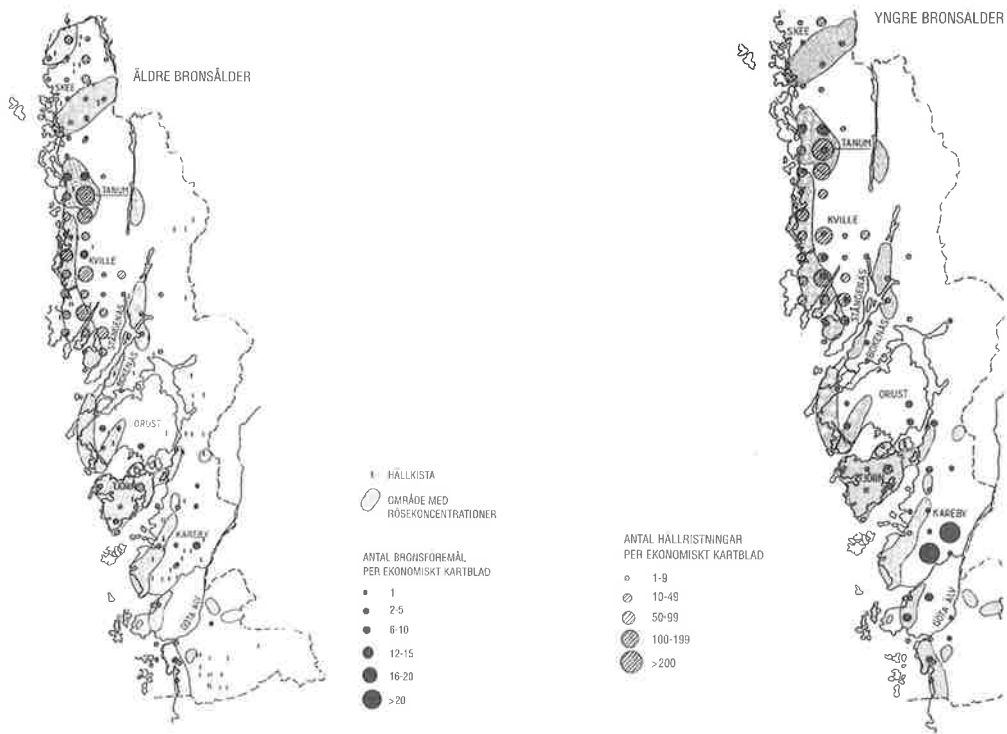


Fig. 2. Distribution of cairns, bronzes and rock carvings in Bronze Age Bohuslän (Kindgren 1998, pp. 78 f.).

directly inherited. High status, which during the Early Bronze Age used to be displayed through individual splendour in graves, gradually came to be negotiated by society at large, reflected in the Late Bronze Age hoards where objects from several individuals were deposited (Fokkens 1997; Selling 2000). Bronzes were exotic, they had to be imported and were limited in numbers. Producing bronzes with their various shapes, with intricate ornaments, was probably a specialized craft (Herner 1987, pp. 184 ff.). Bronze items therefore had the qualifications necessary for a prestige item, although concepts and ideas associated with different bronze items probably went far beyond accumulation of prestige. But were they indispensable items enabling specific groups in society to maintain control? And control over what? Is it possible that elites could emerge even in areas where bronzes were scarce, where today finds of bronzes are unusual?

The Faxø barrow

The Early Bronze Age grave at Kareby, in southern Bohuslän, is an interesting site in a discussion of the meaning of bronze and the importance of cairns. The grave is a barrow in an area where cairns are more common by far, and north of this area only cairns are found. According to surveys conducted by the National Heritage Board (1974, 1989–90), local farmers have claimed that small barrows once existed in the area, but the traces of these have long disappeared. Whether these grave mounds were actually from the Bronze Age is debatable.

The Faxø burial, in Kareby parish, was first excavated in 1961 and dated to Montelius period II (Rosén 1961), 1500–1300 BC. It originally measured some 20 metres across and its estimated height was 4–5 metres. A stone chamber was identified in the southern part of the mound, surrounded by a small cairn. In the chamber was found a belt plate, decorated with a zigzag and

spiral design. There was also a dagger, a tutulus, a button, parts of two arm rings made of round, twisted metal rods, and seven bronze fragments (fig. 3). At the bottom of the chamber traces of a skeleton were identified (Rosén 1961; Oldeberg 1974, p. 327). The bronzes indicate that a woman had been buried in the barrow. Another excavation was conducted in 1967 on the outskirts of the barrow, and a deposition of burnt bones was found, possibly a secondary burial (Oldeberg 1974, p. 327). At least two other stone structures, possibly chambers, were originally placed in the barrow, although at the time of excavation the remains of these had been

scattered, because the barrow had been severely damaged (Holmberg 1967). The bronzes found in the first excavation are very similar to the finds in the famous Danish oak coffins (Brøndsted 1939; Broholm 1961) (fig. 4). Can this grave, and its bronze items, help explain the role of bronze objects and furthermore, how does it fit into a discussion of hierarchies in southern Bohuslän?

In addition to the finds in the Bronze Age barrows in Denmark, finds similar to the ones in the Faxe barrow have been made in Norway. In Jæren in south-west Norway, artefacts found in the grave of the “Rege woman” consist of a

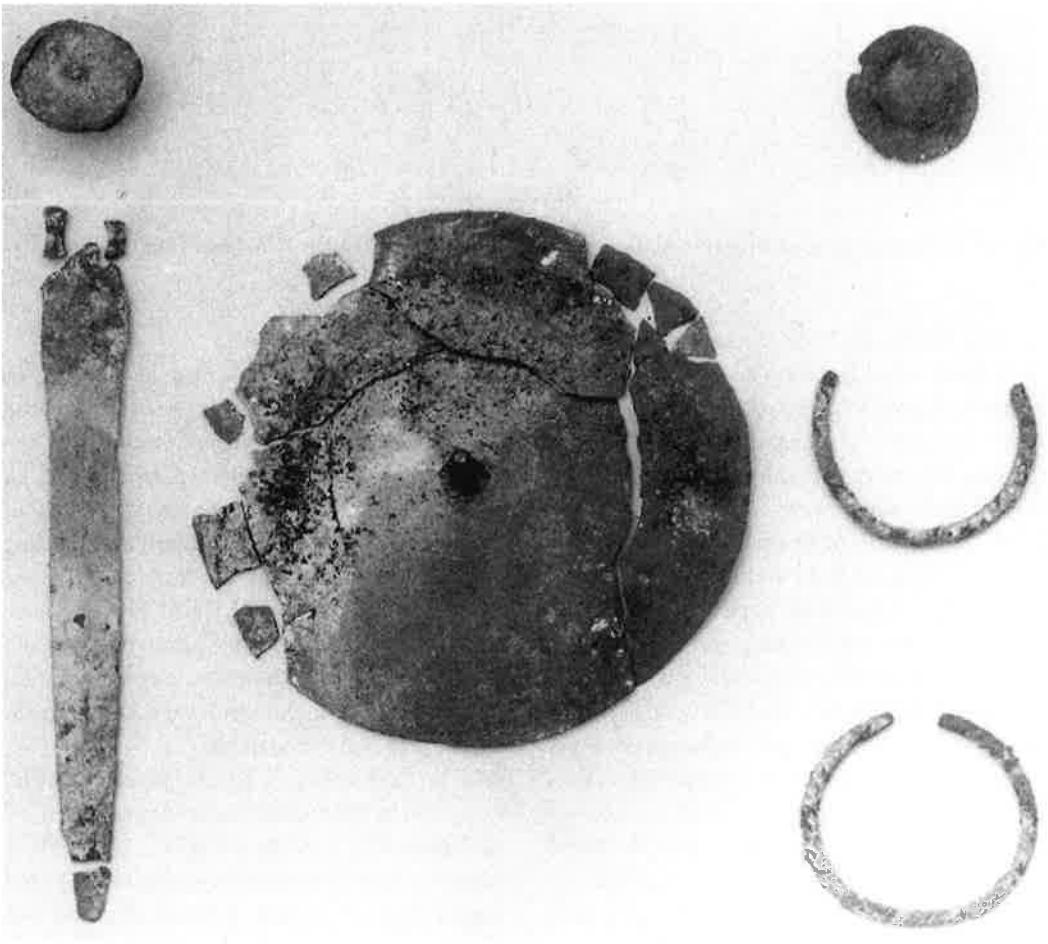


Fig. 3. Grave goods from the Faxe barrow in Kareby parish, Bohuslän. Belt plate, dagger, tutulus and fragments of arm rings (Bohusläns museum/arkiv).

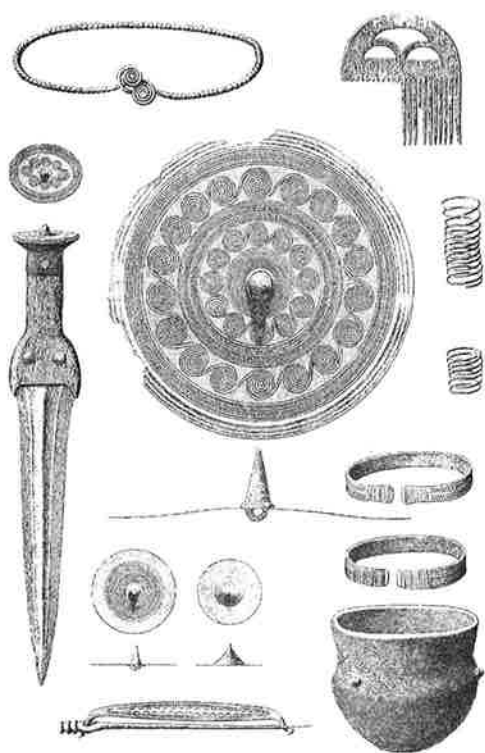


Fig. 4. Grave goods found in the barrow at Eshøj, southern Jutland, Denmark (Glob 1971, p. 25).

bronze collar, two arm rings, the blade of a dagger, and two belt plates (Magnus & Myhre 1976, pp. 131 f.). In Sweden finds of belt plates are most common in Scania and Halland. In eastern central Sweden, however, a find similar to the one in the Faxe barrow was made in the parish of Tierp in Uppland, consisting of a belt plate, a bronze collar, a miniature dagger, a belt ornament, and several tutuli (Oldeberg 1974 no. 2839). The artefacts were found in a cairn and are dated to Montelius period II. It needs to be emphasized that while these bronze items were very rare, their geographical distribution is extremely wide (Selling 1999).

The barrows and cairns of the Early Bronze Age have been used as evidence of the existence of elites. At the same time they may indicate that the foundation for these organizations was still rather unsure since the use of this vibrant symbol

was needed in the first place (Hodder 1982, p. 121; cf. Thrane 1994, p. 102, 109). The construction and the work involved in building a cairn will have given people the opportunity to either reconfirm or change their relationship to the surrounding landscape by creating new shapes and emphasizing the importance of different building materials (for instance earth, peat or stone). Some meanings are enhanced at the cost of others. The understanding of this construction does not need to have been uniform. Dominant groups in society can consciously manipulate material symbols to justify and legitimize power (Tilley 1991, p. 155). This, however, can only happen if society as a whole recognizes and jointly ascribes given desirable values to certain material symbols.

The Faxe barrow demonstrates a choice of building material which does not fit into local tradition, at the same time as the bronzes in the grave mound are similar to those in the Denmark-Scania area. The relative scarcity of bronzes in Bohuslän was probably due to a variety of reasons. Even though people did have access to the "bronze network", the interest in acquiring bronze items was not the same as further south. The notion that elites emerged on the basis of an exchange of bronzes is in this region less credible. In Bohuslän, on the other hand, there is a large number of cairns. Do they have the same symbolic meaning as the barrows in south Scandinavia? This is something that needs to be discussed further. The two phenomena share similar traits in that only select groups of people could be buried in these monuments. But I would suggest that the choice of building material contributes in a vital way to the appearance of the monument and affects both participant and spectator. Stone as a material is hard, durable, it reacts in a special way to fire, and its association with the coast and the bedrock is very strong. These characteristics are obviously important for the choice of stone as a building material for graves.

The stone material used when constructing a cairn seems to be a choice of careful

consideration and not just any material at hand. It is therefore a cultural choice, not just a functional one (Hyenstrand 1979, p. 83). The inherent power of stone could be made evident with fire, when the stone cracked and the spirit or life power was freed. This is an aspect explored by Anders Kaliff (1997). Stone as a building material is common in graves, in clearance cairns, but also in hearths, cooking pits and piles of fire-cracked stone. The latter is an excellent example of a specific place where several spheres, life and death, seem to meet (Kaliff 1997; Karlenby 1999; Eklund 2001). In these heaps of stones, everyday items such as pottery and scraps of bones are not uncommonly mixed with burnt human bones. The importance of rock is emphasized even more as it serves as a canvas for the many rock carvings. To be buried in a cairn is therefore something slightly different from being buried in a barrow, even though the sense of monumentality is the same. The relationship between the barrow and the cairn could be described as a close cousin, but not a sibling. The barrow and the cairn are similar, but not identical symbols for a similar phenomenon. The barrow and the many bronze objects in the Faxø grave indicate a conscious choice to blend exotic expressions into a local context.

The building, carving or casting of a symbol

The power of the monument

According to Kristian Kristiansen, a warrior elite controlled society during the Early Bronze Age (1998b, pp. 379 ff.). Their foremost symbol was their weapons of bronze. The ownership of such a weapon demonstrated their membership in an elite. The question is whether it was possible to belong to this elite without owning weapons or even bronzes. Parallel to depositions in barrows and cairns, bronze items were also placed in hoards. The use of hoards indicates a custom where more people were involved, since items from more than one individual seem to

have been deposited (Levy 1982, pp. 108 ff.; Bradley 1989, p. 16). The ritual activities connected with the deposition of hoards could have been carried out by several participants, perhaps whole communities. This would indicate that the political power was not necessarily centred on a few chosen people. Perhaps this also explains the massive legitimization by the use of cairns and barrows.

The reasons for the emergence of elites during the Neolithic are probably as diverse as they are complex. John Barrett (1994) argues that during the latter part of the third millennium BC, there was an ideological shift from the ancestors as a focus for the social order, towards living intermediaries. The growing use of stone monuments, such as megalithic graves and henges, is evidence of this. An elite could have emerged, not by establishing political power, but when a select few had access to important rituals. Monuments were used by people with prominent positions in society, who acted out the structure of society through rituals. This ritual elite made way for later changes in burial rites. John Chapman puts forth a similar thought when he argues that the development of a ritual, focused not only on local graves but also on hinged sites, can have taken place during the Neolithic (Chapman 1988, p. 35). This ritual is controlled and organized by members of society with the most power over the ritual resources of life, with the highest claim to a monumental burial, i.e. the leaders of local groups.

The building and the use of a monument covers a multitude of activities. The cairns of western Sweden could have been nodal points, physical meeting places and shared visible symbols, related to various kinship groups. It is probable that the monuments, both cairns and barrows, were in use over a long period of time. The process of construction was a lengthy one, and secondary burials as in the Faxø barrow, which probably caused rebuilding of the monuments, are common. A monument was not built ready-to-use, but was constructed and reconstructed (Bradley 1998, p. 71). In his

study of the cairns along the Swedish north-east coast, Hans Bolin points out that reuse of cairns seems to have played a central part as a ritual institution, aimed at maintaining social stability (Bolin 1999, p. 64). Another environment, similar to the Swedish west coast, has recently been studied by Dag Widholm (1998). With his study area of Snäckedal on the south-east coast as a starting point, he argues that single cairns and circular stone settings in what he defines as peripheral areas show that colonization of such areas did not start with the construction of large ritual sites, but rather through the marking of the ritual as well as the temporal power of specific individuals (Widholm 1998, p. 154).

The south Scandinavian Bronze Age barrows are generally found in Denmark and in southern Sweden, primarily in the provinces of Scania and Halland. The barrows, just like the cairns, are found on higher levels in the land. However, barrows are perhaps associated more with flat

country as opposed to a rocky, coastal landscape (Hyenstrand 1979, p. 80). To get closer to an understanding of what the construction of a cairn represents, they should be regarded as a phenomenon less linked to the building of barrows and with more emphasis placed on the local characteristics. The building of a cairn was probably a way to visualize a cosmology, to express reverence for ancestors and the gods, as well as referring to exotic ideologies and accomplishing political gain. The actual construction process – the chosen site, the material used, and the people involved – contributed to the meaning of the cairn. The building and the use of a cairn included both ritual and political aspects, in a society where these parts were not separated, at least not at this time.

In Bohuslän, sites with cairns and sites with rock carvings differ. The cairns are usually found on top of the mountains (fig. 5), while the



Fig. 5. Bronze Age cairn in Åseby, Solberga parish, Bohuslän (photo by the author).

carvings are placed on the polished rock surfaces at the base of mountains (Bertilsson 1987, pp. 175 f.; cf. Sognnes 1987). By building monuments and carving in the bedrock, the human landscape changed and a more restricted room was created. Monuments and carvings contributed to infusing the land with visible ideas and interpretations. The individual, and more importantly, the decision about who had access to these rooms, became more important. This contributed to establishing the position of specific groups, who would have acted out rituals for large communities. Membership in these groups could have been based on age, gender, descent etc., but their position was transformed by participating in increasingly elaborate ceremonies. A new category of people was created, belonging to a select and sacred community (Barrett 1994; Whittle 1997). Artefacts of special importance were used by these elites to show status, but their status was probably not dependent on the objects in themselves. It was possible to be a part of these elites without the use of bronze objects.

Creating carvings in the rocks

Ulf Bertilsson links the rock carving tradition to the discussion regarding centre and periphery in the Bronze Age world. The carvings are not evenly distributed, but are primarily found in a few parishes in northern Bohuslän (Bertilsson 1987, p. 169; 1989, pp. 125 ff.). In Bohuslän and in the adjacent area of Østfold in Norway, rock carvings are often found in the transitional zone between mountainous and agricultural land. The carvings were surely visible, although rules limiting access could have been used (Bengtsson & Hygen 1999). The heavy clay soils in the coastal zone indicate that a pastoral way of life, with the grazing of animals, was more important than agriculture, but the pattern of subsistence and its impact on culture and ideology is a debated one. The central role of rock carvings in western Sweden cannot be explained by its geographical location or subsistence patterns. There are other regions in south Scandinavia,

for instance the south-east coast of Sweden, where the geographical conditions are similar to those in Bohuslän, but even though rock carvings have been found in this region (Magnusson 1988), they cannot be compared with the number and diversity of rock carvings in Bohuslän.

A recent study regarding the parish of Tanum in northern Bohuslän, an area with a huge variety of rock carvings, identified two categories of rock carving sites (Algotsson & Swedberg 1997). One, belonging to an older phase (i.e. Early Bronze Age), indicates places of common interest, possibly meeting grounds close to waterways, or market places. These sites are often quite large, but are not indicators of settlement sites. The other category comprises smaller sites which are not connected to meeting grounds along the waterways. Instead they are described as territorial markers close to settlement sites. They are, however, usually of a later date, probably Late Bronze Age (Algotsson & Swedberg 1997, p. 23). At Pryssgård in eastern Sweden extensive excavations were carried out during the 1990s (Borna-Ahlkvist 2002). A focus came to be placed on the Bronze Age settlement spanning from the Early Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age. Three rock carving sites are situated just one kilometre away. These sites are usually related to the Early Bronze Age, but at least one may cover a much wider time frame. Borna-Ahlkvist argues that rock carvings and settlement sites are much more closely related than previous research has indicated (2002, p. 180).

Mats Malmer (e.g. 1970) has argued that rock carvings are a phenomenon linked to the periphery. People in areas where bronzes were hard to come by imitated rituals where bronzes played a vital part, by depicting them on rocks. This theory has had a great impact on archaeological research (e.g. Bradley 1993, pp. 34 ff.), but this way of regarding the rock carvings is too simplistic. It still does not explain the appearance of carvings in certain peripheral areas but not in others, nor does it explain why Bohuslän came to play a central role in the rock

carving tradition. Since the Bronze Age site at Pryssgården is the largest Bronze Age settlement in Sweden to date, rock carvings as a peripheral phenomenon should be questioned, in line with a view that cores and peripheries – traditional patterns of the distribution of bronzes, barrows and carvings – do not explain the complexity of Bronze Age societies. In Bohuslän the rocks were claimed for burials and rituals. The rock carvings can express several values and meanings at the same time, without contradiction. They were given meaning, and were perceived in their time according to this meaning. This is what makes this phenomenon so complicated and multifaceted.

The imagery depicted in the rock carvings, as well as the few bronze artefacts dating from this period, show that the people in Bronze Age Bohuslän participated in a network of contacts and alliances that covered at least Northern and Central Europe, although there were many local and regional variations (Bengtsson & Hygen 1999). Participation in the exchange indicates that the people in this vast area also shared a similar belief system. The sea was a major component in this ideology. It was both a way to make a living and a means of connecting people and cultures. Its symbolic value must have been great. The mountain was another component. The symbols carved on its polished surfaces gave a concrete form to what was holy, absolute and inviolable. The importance of stone as a panel for carvings, and as building material in cairns, is indisputable.

It is important to emphasize that exotic influences from near and far reached south Scandinavia in different ways and by various means. The rock carvings of Bohuslän are a mixture of external influences, of ideas of rituals and traditions perhaps more important in communities in the south, in combination with local traditions (such as the use of and emphasis on stone) that gained importance to varying degrees. In Bohuslän the rock carving tradition can be traced to the Neolithic, with cup marks connected with the megaliths, and perhaps to

even earlier times since some rock paintings probably date to the Mesolithic (Bertilsson 1987, p. 184). When old meets new, adaptation and tradition generate a meeting ground where certain ways of expression become essential (see Hodder 1982; cf. Miller 1989, p. 69).

Whether the rock carvings of Bohuslän depict myths, important social or chiefly events, or actual religious rituals, is something that I leave unsaid (fig. 6). My opinion is that by creating carvings – lasting pictures or markings – in the rocks, a durable “artificial” memory was created. The people who knew how to interpret these pictures certainly had a common meeting ground. And the knowledge about the existence of such carvings is bound, I think, to have affected local peoples. “Rituals are social acts. Just by taking part in a joint public act, the performers signal that they accept a common social and moral order” (Kottak 1996, p. 98). Hence the act of creating the carving is as important as the carving itself – and can be identified as a ritual.

The metal as a symbol

Europe during the Bronze Age was an area with regional traditions, but also an area that shared certain prestige objects. The exchange of these objects helped create alliances, one purpose being to maintain or increase access to metal (Bradley 1989, pp. 12 f.). By this exchange participants gained an important ritual knowledge about exotic areas (Helms 1988, p. 64; cf. Kristiansen 1998b, pp. 384 ff.). Bronze in South Scandinavia was imported, either as raw material or as exotic items that were to be recast into local products, easily recognized by everyone. The making of bronze items meant possession of specialized knowledge, a specialized craft that contributed to the importance of bronzes and their role as prestige items. It is possible that the smiths were controlled by local or regional elites, even if both circulating and stationary smiths could have existed. According to an analysis carried out by Elisabeth Herner (1987), although her analysis can be discussed – is the source material punched

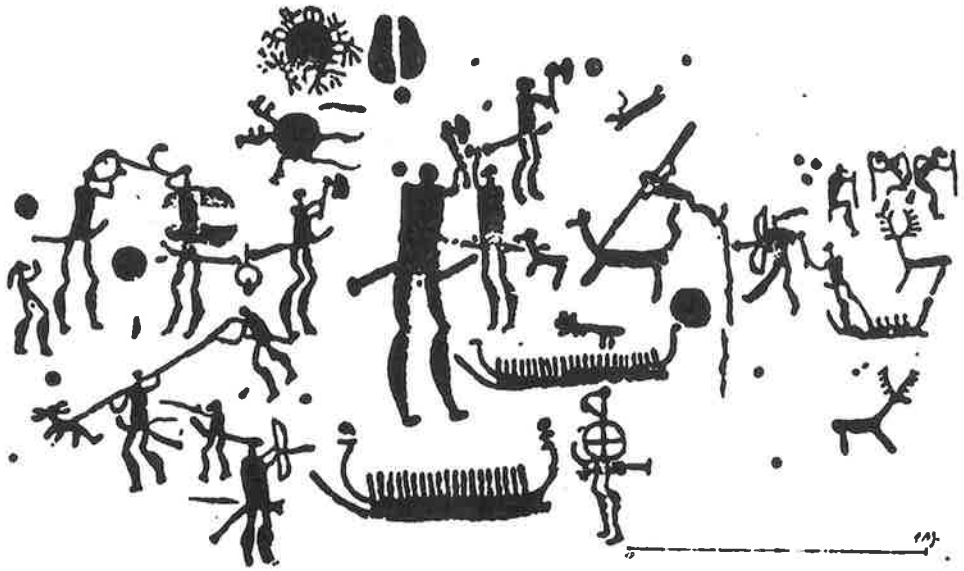


Fig. 6. Carvings at Fossum in Tanum parish, Bohuslän (Almgren 1927).

or cast? – the degree of specialization and the awareness of high-quality work indicate a hierarchical social structure,

If we return to Kristiansen's European networks and the emergence of a warrior elite, the same phenomenon occurs from the Black Sea across the Balkans to the northern Alps: a new type of political and economic relationship between different areas, based on unequal trading of prestige items in exchange for products needed in the Mediterranean, i.e. iron, silver, amber, gold, horses and slaves (Kristiansen 1998b, pp. 363 ff.). Bohuslän is situated just north of what is traditionally regarded as the core areas of the Bronze Age in south Scandinavia (Baudou 1960; Oldeberg 1974), a view which is primarily based on the scarcity of bronze finds combined with a lack of the thousands of barrows found in areas where bronzes were more common. What is regarded as "centre" and what can be categorized as "periphery" is basically a matter of perspective. The use of the term "warrior elite" cannot be made to fit into all areas of Bronze Age southern Scandinavia. The small number of bronzes, the use of cairns and rock carvings, indicate that

elites did emerge in Bohuslän, but were based on partly other conditions than in Denmark-Scania.

In a paper dealing with the focus of bronzes and what we today perceive as chiefly goods, Noel Broadbent wrote (1983) that "the introduction of bronze, iron and even agriculture has been given too much significance. There is too much variation in the Nordic region for these models to have the explanatory potential we assign them" (1983, p. 21). We must consider the temporal and spatial contexts available to us for analysis. Broadbent argues in the same paper that bronze should be regarded as an *expression* of wealth or power, since bronze objects in themselves were not revolutionary or functionally superior to other available materials. Accordingly bronze should have acted as an assertion of status in an already established social order (1983, p. 10).

The archaeological debate in the closing decades of the 1900s has in part focused on these issues, but the focus has remained on bronzes as chiefly attributes. Subsequent work, for instance by Kristiansen and T. B. Larsson, has shown the importance of bronzes as indicators of the

dynamics between cores and peripheries. Questions that still remain concern how this power or status was established, why bronze was used as an expression of status and power and what the situation was in areas where bronzes are scarce or do not appear at all. My opinion is that a focus on bronze artefacts is not necessary when discussing the Bronze Age, even though I can understand the use of bronzes for creating a common basis for comparison, since settlement patterns are uncertain and burial traditions vary regionally. I would like to show, however, that the non-existence of bronzes in the find material can supply us with an additional entrance into the Bronze Age world, be it in Denmark, Scania, or other parts of the Scandinavian peninsula.

New thoughts and ideas spread, perhaps as part of an ideology that promoted social changes, control of resources and territories (cf. Kristiansen 1989, p. 23; Larsson 1997), as well as helping to define groups for whom it was important to control resources and/or knowledge. In some areas, however, these elites remained more important in ritual contexts, and less emphasis should be placed on the political aspects. The rock carvings could be seen as a reflection of this, as would the adoption of the use of bronzes in a very limited way, since bronzes first and foremost were *symbols* of power and status. The cairns, on the other hand, contributed to enhancing specific kindreds as well as stressing the importance of common efforts in referring to both ancestors and descendants, living and dead. The sheer monumentality of these constructions contributed greatly to creating foundations for the emergence of elites, whose primary privilege was based on rituals and ceremonies.

Displays of power

An elite can be defined as a group of people who, if they fulfil certain criteria, have an assumed right to interpret what is considered important in a society; be it politics, economics or cult. During the Early Bronze Age we see the emergence of elites with a right to interpret and

define society through cairns, carvings and rituals. They assume the right to pass on exotic influences by controlling the exchange networks and contacts with others.

As opposed to a view where patterns of subsistence are deemed decisive to changes in society, and where agriculture is regarded as fundamental in creating elites (cf. Larsson 1986; Herner 1987), it can be argued that ideas and influences are not consequences of subsistence and that ideas travel not only in the shape of actual artefacts, but also as ideologies. If new ideas about the world took root first, changes in subsistence patterns were secondary (cf. Bradley 1998, pp. 12 f.). The ideological aspect is important since the geographical location of settlements and other sites of importance not only reflects subsistence patterns, but also communicates social meanings and ideas about how to organize space. To live in a certain place is to communicate through space in a social context: which group you belong to, your customs and traditions, your relationship to neighbours. In Bohuslän only a handful of settlement sites from the Bronze Age have been identified. In waiting for new data, the population seems to have been small and scattered.

The rock carvings of Bohuslän are found in the coastal area, predominantly in northern Bohuslän, while bronze finds are concentrated in the south of the region (Moberg 1963, pp. 61 ff.). What we see carved in the bedrock is not just an imitation of ideas and concepts in other areas, but expressions of ideas which came to life through the ritual of rock carving, where activities and ceremonies (in which bronzes may have been important) were depicted and made "concrete". The use of carvings supplemented the use of bronzes, and in areas where the need to claim the rocks through rituals was essential, the use of carvings, as well as cairns, played a central part.

The carvings in Bohuslän, combined with the choice of building cairns, can be regarded as a major reason why bronze did not become as

meaningful a symbol as in neighbouring areas. New elements can mix in rituals, and scenes, myths, rituals and stories contribute to the world of pictures that we see carved in the rocks. In a meeting between local communities with a variety of traditions, and exotic ideas from faraway places, it becomes important to accentuate rock and stone, as well as rituals and myths closely connected to this way of expressing ideas.

For the changes that occurred during the Bronze Age in western Sweden, construction and contact are key words. The barrow at Faxe is an example of both these activities, although the impact of such a demonstration does not seem to have been great in this area. Cairns and carvings are much more common than bronzes and barrows. The Faxe barrow was an outpost, exotic and noticeable, in both shape and content. The bronzes found in the grave show that the symbols used over a large area at this time were the same. Belt plate, dagger and arm rings were a part of a female attire of bronzes, unusual but widely spread. The choice of building material in the grave mound at Faxe was clearly exotic, since the construction of a monumental barrow was an anomaly in a landscape shaped by the use of cairns. If the people had chosen to build in stone they would have made a connection to local communities, kinship and ancestors. The barrow shows a different priority, ideas put forward in new or at least alternative ways, or a wish to make apparent a tie to a different community, perhaps with kin in other areas.

The issue of this paper has to some extent been to summarize the theories linked to the distribution of Bronze Age bronzes, carvings and graves. My conclusion is that in relying on the models based on the availability of bronze items, on the construction of barrows, on the existence or non-existence of carvings, and hence the artificial creation of cores and peripheries in the Bronze Age world, not enough attention is paid to the areas simply regarded as "peripheries". A periphery is explained in relation to the core, without consideration for the fact that actions

are rarely purely reactionary and that choices are constantly made. Actions are filled with meaning and people performing these actions act in accordance with multifaceted beliefs and complex loyalties that go beyond supply and demand.

I suggest that it is the allure of control and definition of the land, i.e. the place where people lived and acted, that is the key. The explanation for the lack of bronzes in Bohuslän cannot be regarded as simply a source problem. Elites probably emerged in the northern part of the west coast as well as in the south, and the cairns remind us of the importance of certain kindreds or individuals linked to prominent groups. The foundations for the emergence of these elites could have been similar to the ideas and actions taking place in communities further south (exchange, rituals, monuments, bronzes) but these attributes did not become as obvious in Bohuslän. A focus should be placed on these groups as elites, i.e. not one elite but many, with varying motivations and expressions, and where conditions could vary regionally. Perhaps in Bohuslän the border between elite and non-elites was not defined in the same obvious way, maybe it shifted faster or perhaps it was less distinct. Bronze as a symbol of this status was important but the status of the group or the community was shown primarily in the cairns, and also in the importance of certain sites for rock carvings. These sites had different importance in different areas, the importance of rock carving sites becoming most prominent in northern Bohuslän. The importance of blood lines, of families and ancestors, is reflected in the cairn as a common symbol of life and death, just like the rock carvings. The cairns were positioned on higher grounds, indicating a wish to communicate with higher powers, in places where ancestors and spirits were present and made visible by elites. The use of bronze was a secondary symbol of the status of an already established prestige, by groups who had already gained the right to choose sites for cairns, settlements and carvings.

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