

Beers and Barrow, or Barrows and Beer?

A Short Reply to Anders Berttsson

BY JOAKIM GOLDBAHN

Joakim Goldbahn, Department of Archaeology, Kalmar University, SE-391 82 Kalmar. joakim.goldbahn@hik.se

Debates are great fun, not least within the archaeological field. At first, I therefore welcomed Anders Berttsson's article "Me and you and a case of beer. How the Bronze Age barrows were built?" (Berttsson 2005), and the doubts he tries to raise over Professor Emeritus Henrik Thrane and his analysis and interpretation of the labour invested in building the famous Late Bronze Age barrow of Lusehøj (Thrane 1984). However, after reading his polemic paper, I had second thoughts. And here is why: When dealing with other archaeologists' interpretations of the past and when serious doubts are raised against colleagues, we should never forget to treat them with respect and a sincere and open mind. And that also goes for other archaeologists that have been working with the same issues that are put under fire.

Berttsson's paper clearly aims to cast doubts on Thrane's calculation of the amount of labour that was invested in building barrows during the Bronze Age. He finds Thrane's numbers too high, even absurd, and claims that the latter has suggested that it took about 129,000 working days, with 10 hours work per day, to build Lusehøj. These are – of course – absurd numbers. But the most remarkable

and absurd thing about these numbers is that Berttsson has added one zero to Thrane's calculations; Thrane has suggested that it took 12,900 working days to build Lusehøj (Thrane 1984, p. 152), nothing more and nothing less. I suppose that this may be a brilliant mistake by Berttsson that he later failed to notice. I nevertheless find this troublesome and inauspicious. The result is that Thrane is put forward as a yarn, and he is perceived as a vague and dubious archaeologist with a strange sense of numbers. I, among others, do not hold the latter to be true, and to make this even worse, this is published in one of the most respected archaeological journals in northern Europe.

Berttsson then goes on and suggest more "sober" numbers for the time and labour invested in building barrows, calculated, among other things, from the time it took to lay pipes in his own garden [*sic*]. As several researchers before him have suggested, none of them cited by Berttsson though, he instead proposes that each square metre in a finished burial monument is more or less equivalent to a ten-hour working day for one person. In the case of Lusehøj this would mean that it took about 3,200 working days to build the barrow



Fig. 1. Building barrows would have been a remarkable and familiar view during the Early Bronze Age in Southern Scandinavia (after Bech 2003).

(fig. 1), instead of 12,900. In abstract numbers, this means that 320 people had to work for ten days, or that ten people worked for 320 days, et cetera, et cetera. Berntsson's conclusion after this exercise is indeed remarkable, though he proclaims that building barrows during the Bronze Age was an easy task that only required some friends and a few beers. Cheers!

This may be true for Berntsson's own digging in his backyard, laying pipes and planting flowers, but, regrettably, this functionalistic dream world does not hold true against the vast archaeological research that has dealt with this issue before, *or after*, Thrane's work on Lusehøj. For me personally, it enough to open Vilhelm Boye's *Fund af Egekister fra Bronzealderen i Danmark* from 1896, or one of the immense and indispensable volumes of Aner and Kersten's *Die funde der älteren Bronzezeit des nordischen kreises in Dänemark, Schleswig-Holstein und Niedersachsen*, to realize that building barrows was a serious business that was interwoven with extended ceremonies and rituals that go far beyond the simplistic functionalism that Berntsson seems to long for. And if these books should not be adequate readings, there are other scholars and sources to be addressed (e.g. Baudou 1968; Lundborg 1972; Wihlborg 1978; Mandt 1983; Ringstad 1987; Burström 1992; Larsson 1993; Randsborg 1993; Wason 1994;

Bolin 1998; Jensen 1998; Widholm 1998; Bradley 1999; Carlie 1999; Andersson 1999; Artelius 1999, 2001; Gerdin 1999; Goldhahn 1999; Olivier 1999; Parker Pearson 1999; Brueing-Madsen et al. 2001; Holst et al. 2001; Widholm & Regnell 2001; Bech 2003, et cetera, et cetera). None of these titles should be unfamiliar to Berntsson, but they ought to be addressed and considered while he discusses the task of building burial monuments during the Bronze Age.

In this connection, I find it eccentric that Berntsson does not refer to any other colleagues in his arguments and his endeavour to cast doubts on Thrane's research. Evert Baudou (1968) discussed the labour invested in building burial monuments during the Bronze Age, a discussion that has later been followed up by Björn Ringstad (1987), Dagfinn Skre (1997), Hans Bolin (1998), Lise Nordenborg Myhre (1998), Dag Widholm (1998) and myself (Goldhahn 1999). Lately this issue has also been discussed by the members of the internationally renowned Skelhøj Project (Brueing-Madsen et al. 2001; Holst et al. 2001, 2004), but also by Gro Kyvik (2005) and Ulf Ragnesten (2005), and this list could be added without too much trouble. Berntsson seems to work most of the time alone in his garden. He does not even seem lonely.

Anyhow, even if this short reply to Berntsson could be read as a criticism of the editors of LAR and its referees (?), I wish to take the opportunity to suggest some further reading on the subject of "death, barrows and burial rituals" to him: (e.g. Nilsson Strutz 2003; Svanberg 2003; Gansum 2004; Gansum & Oestigaard 2004; Holst et al. 2004; Stensköld 2004; Thedéen 2004; Andersson 2005; Artelius & Svanberg 2005; Feldt 2005; Fernstål 2005; Kyvik 2005; Lagerås & Strömberg 2005; Strömberg 2005). I also tempted to give him some blunt advice: sober up and stick to the "barrows and beer approach", but skip the "beers and barrow"!

We then might learn something new and odd about the past that we did not know before, and I am confident that the more we learn about them, the less “they” are going to look like “us”.

References

- Andersson, G. 2005. *Gravspråk som religiös strategi. Valsta och Skälby i Attundalaland under vikingatid och tidig medeltid*. Riksantikvarieämbetet Arkeologiska Undersökningar, Skrifter 61. Stockholm.
- Andersson, M. 1999. Högens betydelse som socialt och religiöst monument – en studie över gravhögar från yngre bronsålder i nordvästra Skåne och södra Halland. In Olausson, M. (ed.), *Spiralens öga*, pp. 9–25. Riksantikvarieämbetet Avdelningen för Arkeologiska Undersökningar, Skrifter 25. Stockholm.
- Aner, E. & Kersten, K. 1973–. *Die funde der älteren Bronzezeit des nordischen kreises in Dänemark, Schleswig-Holstein und Niedersachsen*, I–XI. Neumünster: Karl Wacholtz Verlag.
- Artelius, T. & Svanberg, F. (eds.) 2005. *Dealing with the dead. Archaeological perspectives on prehistoric Scandinavian burial ritual*. Riksantikvarieämbetet Arkeologiska Undersökningar, Skrifter 65. Stockholm.
- Artelius, T. 1999. Från sorg till saga – människors handlingar vid en halländsk gravhög. In Olausson, M. (ed.), *Spiralens öga*, pp. 27–46. Riksantikvarieämbetet Avdelningen för Arkeologiska Undersökningar, Skrifter 25. Stockholm.
- 2001. *Bortglömda föreställningar. Begravningsritual och begravningsplats i halländsk yngre järnålder*. Riksantikvarieämbetet Arkeologiska Undersökningar, Skrifter 36. Stockholm.
- Baudou, E. 1968. *Fortida bebyggelse i Ångermanlands kustland*. Arkiv för Norrländsk Hembygdsforskning XVII. Härnösand.
- Bech, J. 2003. *Fra fortidsminder til kulturmiljø – hvad Alstrup Krat og Hohøj gemte*. Kulturministeriet, Kulturarvsstyrelsen og Miljøministeriet, Skov- og Naturstyrelsen i samarbejde med Kulturhistorisk Museum, Randers, Geologisk Institut, Aarhus Universitet, Nationalmuseet. Copenhagen.
- Berntsson, A. 2005. Me and you and a case of beer. How the Bronze Age barrows were built? *Lund Archaeological Review* 2004, 21–24.
- Bolin, H. 1998. *Kulturlandskapets korsvägar. Mellersta Norrland under de två sista årtusendena* f Kr. Stockholm Studies in Archaeology 19. Stockholm.
- Boye, V. 1896. *Fund af Egekister fra Bronzealderen i Danmark*. Copenhagen: Andr. Fred. Høst & Søns Forlag.
- Bradley, R. 1999. *The significance of monuments. On the shaping of the human experience in Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe*. Routledge. London and New York.
- Brueing-Madsen, H., Holst, M. K. & Rasmussen, M. 2001. The chemical environment in a burial mound shortly after construction – an archaeological-pedological experiment. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 28, 691–697.
- Burström, M. 1992. Rösesten – naturlig tillgång och kulturellt val. *Arkeologi i Värmland. Fornminnesinventeringen 1991 Säffle, Grums, Kils och Arvikas kommuner* (Englund, L.-E. ed.), 40–43. Riksantikvarieämbetet. Stockholm.
- Carlie, A. 1999. “Sacred white stones”. On traditions of building white stones into graves. *Lund Archaeological Review* 5, 41–58.
- Feldt, B. 2005. *Synliga och osynliga gränser. Förändringar i gravritualen under yngre bronsålder-förrömersk järnålder i Södermanland*. Stockholm Studies in Archaeology 37. Stockholm.
- Fernstål, L. 2005. *Delar av en grav och glimtar av en tid. Om yngre romersk järnålder, Tuna i Badelunda i Västmanland och personen i grav X*. Stockholm Studies in Archaeology 32. Stockholm.
- Gansum, T. 2004. *Hauger som konstruksjoner – arkeologiske forventninger gjennom 200 år*. Gotar Serie B. Gothenburg Archaeological Thesis 33. Göteborg.
- Gansum, T. & Oestigaard, T. 2004. The ritual stratigraphy of monuments that matter. *European Journal of Archaeology* 7(1), 61–79.
- Gerdin, A.-L. 1999. Rösen. Uttryck för makt eller platser där himmel och jord möts i det kosmiska rummet. In Olausson, M. (ed.), *Spiralens öga*, pp. 47–74. Riksantikvarieämbetet Avdelningen för Arkeologiska Undersökningar, Skrifter 25. Stockholm.
- Goldhahn, J. 1999. *Sagaholm – hällristningar och gravritual*. Studia Archaeologica Universitatis Umensis 11. Umeå.
- Holst, M. K., Breuning-Madsen, H. & Rasmussen, M. 2001. The south Scandinavian barrows with well-preserved oak-log coffins. *Antiquity* 75, 126–136.
- 2004. Skelhøj. Et bygningsværk fra den ældre bronzealder. *Nationalmuseets Arbejdsmark* 2004, 11–23.

- Jensen, J. 1998. *Manden i kisten. Hvad bronzealderens gravhøje gemte*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.
- Kaliff, A. & Oestigaard, T. 2004. Cultivating corpses. A comparative approach to disembodied mortuary remains. *Current Swedish Archaeology* 12, 83–104.
- Kyvik, G. 2005. *Fenomenologiske perspektiver. Gravritualer i bronsealder*. Universitetet i Bergen Arkeologiske Skrifter, Hovedfag/Master No. 1. Bergen.
- Lagerås, P. & Strömberg, B. (eds.) 2005. *Bronsåldersbygd 2300–500 f.Kr. Skånska spår – arkeologi längs Väst kustbanan*. Riksantikvarieämbetet Avdelningen för Arkeologiska Undersökningar, UV Syd. Lund.
- Larsson, L. (ed.) 1993. *Bronsålderns gravhögar*. University of Lund Institute of Archaeology, Report Series 48. Lund.
- Lundborg, L. 1972. *Undersökningar av bronsåldershögar och bronsåldersgavar i södra Halland Höks, Tönnersjö och Halmstads härader under åren 1854–1970*. Hallands Museum. Halmstad.
- Mandt, G. 1983. Tradition and diffusion in West-Norwegian rock art. Mjeltehaugen revisited. *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 16 (1), 14–32.
- Nilsson Strutz, L. 2003. *Embodied rituals and ritualized bodies. Tracing ritual practices in Late Mesolithic burials*. Acta Archaeologica Lundensia 46. Lund.
- Nordenborg Myhre 1998. *Fragmenter av en annen virkelighet*. AmS-Småtrykk 46. Stavanger.
- Olivier, L. 1999. The Hochdorf “princely” grave and the question of the nature of archaeological funerary assemblages. In Murray, T. (ed.), *Time and Archaeology*, pp. 109–138. Routledge. London.
- Parker Pearson, M. 1999. *The archaeology of death and burial*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.
- Ragnesten, U. 2005. En rösemiljö i Arendal på Hisingen i Göteborg – ett komplext rituellt område. In Goldhahn, J. (ed.), *Mellan sten och järn. Rapport från det 9:e nordiska bronsålderssymposiet, Göteborg 2003-10-09/12*, pp. 353–383. Gotarc Serie C. Arkeologiska Skrifter 59. Göteborg.
- Randsborg, K. 1993. *Kivik. Archaeology and iconography*. Acta Archaeologica 64 (1). Copenhagen: Munksgaard.
- Ringstad, B. 1987. Vestlandets største gravminner. Ett forsøk på lokalisering av forhistoriske maktsentra. Opubl. Magistergradsavhandling framlagd vid Bergens Universitets Arkeologiske Institutt 1986. Bergen.
- Skre, D. 1997. Raknehaugen. En empirisk loftsrydding. *Viking* 1997, 7–42.
- Stene, E. 2004. *Att berätta en senneolitisk historia. Sten och metall i södra Sverige 2350–1700 f.Kr.* Stockholm Studies in Archaeology 34. Stockholm.
- Strömberg, B. 2005. *Gravplats – gravfält. Platser att skapa minnen vid – plaster att minnas vid*. Gotarc Series B. Gothenburg Archaeological Theses 35. Göteborg.
- Svanberg, F. 2003. *Decolonizing the Viking Age 1 & 2*. Acta Archaeologica Lundensia, Series in 8°, No. 43. Lund.
- Thedéén, S. 2004. *Gränser i livet – gränser i landskapet. Generationsrelationer och rituella praktiker i södermanländska bronsålderslandskap*. Stockholm Studies in Archaeology 33. Stockholm.
- Thrane, H. 1984. *Lusehøj ved Voldtofte – en sydvestfynsk storhøj fra yngre bronzealder*. Fynske Studier XIII. Odense.
- Wason, P. K. 1994. *The archaeology of rank*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- Widholm, D. 1998. *Rösen, ristningar, riter*. Acta Archaeologica Lundensia, Series Prima in 4° Nr 23. Lund.
- Widholm, D. & Regnell, J. 2001. Grave monuments and landscape in south-eastern Sweden. *Lund Archaeological Review* 2001, 29–49.
- Wihlborg, A. 1978. Sagaholm. A Bronze Age barrow with rock-engravings. *Meddelande från Lunds Universitets Historiska Museum* 1977/1978, 111–128.