

Book Pyre in Grönköping?¹

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Abstract

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In a paper in *Urminne* archaeologists from the County Museum in Jönköping review the book *En vit fläck på kartan – Norra Småland under bronsålder och järnålder* (A blank spot on the map – northern Småland during Bronze Age and Iron Age). The review is an attack as it is written in a very sharp and insolent tone with personal attacks on Pål Nicklasson verging on libel as well as attacks on the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History in Lund and scholars involved in the production of the book. The attack finishes with demands that the book be banned and withdrawn. In this paper the critique of the book is refuted. Instead of unveiling defects in the book the archaeologists from Jönköping only reveal a lack of professionalism. The call to withdraw a book is very serious and must be refuted on democratic grounds. This kind of demand has been rare in this part of the world in recent decades, but now a possible exception to this has been heard from the County Museum in Jönköping.

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Introduction

The province of Småland and especially the part that includes the South Swedish Highland have been sadly neglected in archaeological research. This does not mean that monuments and areas of antiquarian importance are missing. On the contrary. The meagre environment with a moraine poor in nutrition has meant that the intensity of cultivation has not been as high as in neighbouring regions of southern Sweden and that pastoral farming has been of major importance. The rather low intensity of exploitation has also played a role in protecting the variety of pre-historic features. That should have inspired

archaeological research, but this has not happened, and one reason might be that the region is situated rather far from the university towns with their active archaeological research.

Research focusing on the prehistory of the South Swedish Highland should be greatly encouraged and have a high level of priority. However, efforts of this kind might in some cases involve major problems, even a high level of resistance from the regional antiquarian authority. One example will be considered here.

In 2005 one of us (Pål Nicklasson)

published a book with the title *En vit fläck på kartan – Norra Småland under bronsålder och järnålder* (A blank spot on the map – northern Småland during the Bronze Age and Iron Age), *Acta Archaeologica Lundensia*, Series in 8°, No. 50. The intention was to provide a view of the later prehistory of the region based on the surveys of prehistoric heritage, the archaeological excavations and the prehistoric material culture. It should not be denied that the introduction of the book is a critical and partly ironical presentation of the research – or rather the absence of research – especially in a regional perspective. This is all the more strange as the heritage and finds provide a detailed presentation and discussions of the societies and social systems that developed in the region.

The partly ironical tone of the introduction as well of the presentations and interpretations was not accepted by some of the archaeologists belonging to the County Museum of Jönköping, the central town of the region. They published a critical review, as a direct attack, of the book in *Urminne 2005*, a journal dealing with the archaeology of south-eastern Sweden (Borg *et al.* 2005).

Critique and counter-critique

Is there substance in the attack of the archaeologists from Jönköping? The critique is not easy to structure since their paper is written in an insolent tone and the subject at hand is often shifted in a way that makes it difficult to follow what is being attacked. The ideas in the book are not presented or summarized in such a way as to render it possible to assess them fairly. This makes it difficult for a reader to understand what is being attacked. Beneath the attacks is a sense of being violated. The attackers claim northern Småland as their territory where no outsider is allowed to trespass. Nicklasson discusses how archaeological research has been conducted in northern Småland, and points out that the insufficient research

carried out has made northern Småland a blank and unexplored spot on the archaeological map. This is taken as a personal insult, entitling harsh retaliation.

The attacks on Nicklasson and his book can be divided into three kinds. The first is aggressive personal attacks and outright lies, verging on libel. This kind of attack has no place in a scientific publication. The attacks will not be answered, but will be duly noted as signs of lacking professionalism on the part of the attackers. The attackers systematically use unfair methods to discredit Nicklasson. He should have taken into account works that were published after his book was printed. He is accused of incompetence in omitting small technical reports, truly minor papers and tacit knowledge.

The second kind of attack is in fact not on the book, but what the book is not about. The attackers note that the book does not cover, or in their opinion, does not focus enough on agricultural archaeology, quaternary geology, human geography, the archaeology of the prehistoric iron industry, the history of antiquarian research in the county of Jönköping, a history of research at the museum in Jönköping, the level of education in Jönköping County, or the cartography of the same province. Thus Nicklasson is accused of being a fraud by omitting these areas of research.

This critique can be dealt with easily. The critique merely acknowledges one of Nicklasson's main theses, that too little archaeological research has been carried out in northern Småland, and a lot of work has to be done before the archaeological record has been exhausted in the region. Several more books like Nicklasson's are needed before northern Småland will have caught up with neighbouring areas. The field is open for anyone who feels a need to study what has been omitted by Nicklasson.

One could ask why no one at the museum in Jönköping has written about the subjects

that they accuse Nicklasson of not having written about? Why should Nicklasson be forced to write about things he is not interested in, good at, or regards as less relevant? Why not criticize what is in the book instead of condemning it for what is not discussed in it?

Along the same line of attack, the attackers pile dozens of references that are not used in the book, but in their opinion should have been. The accusation is that Nicklasson has not done his homework, and has left out crucial sources of arcane knowledge of the pre-history of northern Småland. The references range from unpublished material from excavations, minor technical reports of excavations, seminar papers, popular papers in the year-books of local heritage societies, papers and books not relevant for the time periods, or dealing with other regions than discussed in the book, to publications that are merely duplicates of works quoted by Nicklasson.

This critique could lead to intricate discussions of what is a relevant reference and what is not. As the attackers unconsciously note, there is always one more reference that possibly could be relevant for something discussed in a book. Archaeological research could thus be a competition about who can quote the most obscure sources and make the longest list of references, relevant or not. The important thing is to read and treat the reference you use in the text, not to compile a long list of publications. The attackers have missed the point of this aspect of archaeological research. It is obvious that it was possible to write the book without quoting them. Since the attackers never show that the use of one or other additional reference would have changed the results or conclusions reached in the book, the critique is irrelevant.

Graves and Hearths

The third kind of critique is some strange and fragmented attacks on the contents. Normally this kind of critique is the most serious for any

book. But strangely enough, in this case they mostly serve to strengthen the arguments of the book, not discredit them. The attacks are not uniform but very disparate, not to say desperate. They are often combined with critique of types one and two in the hope of making a successful combined attack. A popular way is to rip a paragraph, sentence or even a single word from the book in shreds, and then criticize it from every possible, and impossible, angle. It never strikes the attackers that if you do not present what you attack in a fair way, it is not possible for a reader to evaluate whether the critique has any relevance. That a word could be deemed wrong, misspelled, misplaced or badly chosen is not a successful way of undermining an argumentation. This aggressive way of attacking is therefore counterproductive, and instead of pursuing a victorious bombardment the attackers fails to make a point and reveal themselves as ignorant.

Some examples of this critique should be presented. In the book there is a discussion of graves from the Early Roman Age. In the northern part of Jönköping County there are several weapon graves (Selling 1952; Nicklasson 1997a, b). Nicklasson notes that weapon graves are traditionally interpreted as masculine. The weapon graves in this region are not accompanied by archaeologically discernible female graves containing, for instance, brooches, jewellery or other objects traditionally archaeologically interpreted as female. To attack these facts, the attackers triumphantly conjure a fourth grave (unpublished) that has been radiocarbon-dated to around BC/AD and osteologically determined as containing a female. The conclusion is that Nicklasson is wrong; there are female graves in the region. This is a very strange argument since Nicklasson has never doubted the presence of women in northern Småland during the Roman Iron Age, or that they most probably were buried in one way or another. The point he makes is that there is a conspicuous absence of traditional female objects in graves.

That a woman in a grave has been osteologically identified does in fact strengthen Nicklasson's argument, since it was not possible to classify the grave as a female grave based on the archaeological contents. The critique is poor in other ways too. The weapon graves in the region are dated to the time around 100 AD and it is unlikely that a radiocarbon dating (unpublished) of around BC/AD is contemporary with them. The attackers have a strange way of using radiocarbon datings, which casts doubt on their understanding of fundamental archaeological methodology. The conclusion is that the critique is counterproductive and that the (unpublished) female grave presented by the attackers strengthens Nicklasson's conclusions instead of weakening them. As an insult the attacker claims that Nicklasson himself excavated the grave. He is not only an incompetent archaeologist, he is not even aware of what is going on around him. The claim is of course untrue and shows how the attackers use personal attacks and lies to discredit Nicklasson. What really is at stake is the ethics at Jönköping County Museum.

An even stranger example of the relentless critique aimed at the book is that Nicklasson in his book criticizes the interpretation one of the archaeologists from Jönköping makes about some ordinary Iron Age hearths found in Huskvarna (Hylén 2002). Since the paper by the attackers is unusually unclear and badly written in this section, some basic facts are needed to understand what is at stake. The original interpretation of the hearths is a very odd one. It denies any practical use of the hearths. Instead the hearths were used to send signals between groups living in the area. They were used as places for performing social dramas. It can be very cold in Småland, and one imagines that the need for heat and the chance of cooking something warm would surely have been appreciated in this part of the world. In the book Nicklasson draws the conclusion that Hylén is the first to fill the Swedish word *hårdområde* (hearth area) with a meaning of sig-

nalling and social drama. In the counterattack, the hearths are now compared to hearths arranged in long rows, most probably for ritual purposes, as has been studied by Raimond Thörn (Thörn 1996). The hearths are thus of the same kind as hearths on the very special sites described by Thörn, and thus a similar meaning of *hårdområde* to the one Hylén uses has already been used. Nicklasson is very wrong to give Hylén credit for inventing the notion. To escape the initial critique by Nicklasson, the poor hearths are now equated to very special ritual places. One absurd interpretation succeeds the other. We are still curious about the first interpretation. If the hearths were centres for social dramas transmitted between groups gathered around different hearths, were the dramas performed at night, when the hearths were visible, but hardly the participants in the dramas, or by day, when the actors were visible, but the hearths had no function whatsoever?

Power and Society

Nicklasson is declared to have some serious dysfunction in that he always sees hierarchies and social systems based on power in everything. It is nice to see that the archaeologists from Jönköping have noted one of the main perspectives in the book. The critique is that to see things in Småland in a perspective of power and hierarchies is irrelevant. In Småland the society was egalitarian, people worked hard to clear the forest or build clearance cairns. They had no interest in societal power in addition to their everyday work. Life in Småland was in fact very trivial and could do without chiefs, kings or aristocracy. Thus Nicklasson is wrong in using perspectives discussing societal power. In addition the perspective Nicklasson uses is old-fashioned and outdated. Yet the study of societal power could not have been separated from the study of other aspects of society. Philosophers such as

Bourdieu, Baudrillard and Foucault have shown this (for instance Baudrillard 2001, Bourdieu 1977, Foucault 2001). Since power could be successfully studied inside an asylum, it certainly can be studied in Småland as well. The people clearing forest and building clearance cairns were part of a social group and a society, thus their existence can very well be studied from a perspective of societal power. The critique is also strange in the light of other scholars who have identified central areas and structures of power during the Bronze Age in other parts of Sweden, based on the presence of bronzes and mounds. Societal power during the Iron Age has been studied based on the presence of mounds, imported objects, gold and weapon graves among other things. Since all these objects are frequent in Småland, as presented in Nicklasson's book, it is in fact high time to introduce a perspective that acknowledges societal power in Småland. The attack on the choice of perspective reveals an unfamiliarity with modern archaeological research in Jönköping. During the last few decades there has been a vast amount of research focusing on societal power. With our roots in Lund, we could mention the ten volumes of the Uppåkra project as one source for what archaeological scholars have been doing lately. The discussion conducted by Nicklasson is a badly needed attempt to bring the research on prehistory in Småland up to date.

The attacks never get more skilful than this. The fragmentization of Nicklasson's book means that his conclusions and theses survive the onslaught. Instead of nailing Nicklasson, the archaeologists from Jönköping unmask serious shortcomings in their archaeological knowledge, the way they apply archaeological methods and source criticism, and most of all in the way they present their critique and themselves.

Nicklasson invited the archaeologists in Jönköping to read the manuscript to the book and discuss archaeology in northern Småland.

There was no response to this. No one took the chance to influence the final product or criticize the ideas of the book beforehand. It is a very strange behaviour to be asked by an author to read and criticize a manuscript, decline the offer, and then make aggressive public attacks on the author and the book.

A Pyre for Books?

The review includes attacks verging on libel. This kind of attack has no place in a scientific publication.

The review includes an attack on the department that is said to show very poor scientific judgement in allowing Nicklasson to publish his book in one of its series. But the ultimate low-water mark in the criticism is to be found in the final sentences where a total withdrawal of the book is advocated.

However, the story does not end with this review. In December 2005 a letter from the head of Jönköping County Museum arrived, addressed to the board of the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History (Sundström 2005). It included a summary of the criticism presented above and likewise suggested a withdrawal of the book. Another argument for the withdrawal was a statement that the book included a number of illustrations published without permission and thereby violating copyright. The letter ended with a suggestion that a person should scrutinize the publication with a good knowledge of the archaeological situation in Småland.

Concerning the copyright, it later turned out that there were highly diverging opinions about if and when permission had been given or not. As to the proposal to scrutinize the book, the fact is that the publication has already been scrutinized. The manuscript for the book was included in an application by Nicklasson to be accepted as a *docent* (associate professor) at the department. The application was examined by Professor Ulf Näsman, a

well-known scholar especially in the Iron Age of Scandinavia (Näsman 2004). The report included some critical valuation of the manuscript, mainly about the unnecessarily sharp tone in the introduction. However, it stated that the manuscript was a well-balanced and exciting work where the Iron Age material from the region was presented for the first time in a modern scientific context. The evaluation of the manuscript was an important part in the argument that Nicklasson should be appointed *docent*, an opinion that was later confirmed by the faculty. An examiner of high competence in Iron Age research presents an opinion in stark contrasting to that of archaeologists and the head of Jönköping County Museum!

We thought that annihilation of books, because they present critical opinions, belonged to history in this part of the world. To practise this kind of censorship is definitely not worthy of a modern institution such as a county museum. That such a suggestion is expressed shows how far from the main furrow of scientific research some people in Jönköping County Museum are. Shame – double shame on you!!

Note

- 1 *Grönköpings Veckoblad* is a paper that in a ironical and humorous way presents the inhabitants of the fictitious Swedish small town of Grönköping.

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