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MULTAS PER GENTES ET MULTA PER SAECULA

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NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE BATTLE AXE CULTURE OF SOUTHERN SWEDEN

Lars Larsson

Abstract: The site at Kverrestad, southern Sweden, presented a mass destruction by fire that at first sight seemed most exotic within the Battle Axe culture. The large deposition and cremations of tools as well as humans are, as a combination, still unique, but the elements taken separately are well proven within the social context. The mass destruction by fire also includes a perspective into the past that linked the Battle Axe culture to phenomena within the Funnel Beaker culture several centuries before. The erection of palisade enclosures appears to be a link between the cultures.

Keywords: Southern Scandinavia, Middle Neolithic, Battle Axe culture, Funnel Beaker culture, Single Grave culture

INTRODUCTION

The different variations of the Corded Ware Complex in Sweden and Denmark have been presented in a number of publications by Hübner (2005) and (Ebbesen 2006) concerning the Danish Single Grave culture, and Malmer (2003), Edenmo (2008), Brink (2009), Å. Larsson (2009) and von Hackwitz (2009) about the Battle Axe culture in Sweden.

In Denmark the Single Grave culture is mainly related to Jylland, western Denmark and dated to the period 2800–2200 cal. BC. The influences of this culture on the island to the east are later and are presented in a somewhat different context. The phase of the Battle Axe culture in Sweden seems to cover the same time interval as the Single Grave culture. However, the material culture and social expression are somewhat different.

MASS DESTRUCTION BY FIRE

During the revised survey in Scania, the southernmost part of Sweden, fire-damaged flint artefacts were found in a field at Kverrestad, about 15 km from the sea (Fig. 1). The site is located on a small plateau on the southern side of the river valley, with slopes on three sides and with a wetland below

the site. Fire-damaged flints could be found on the plateau within an area of approximately 70 x 70 m (Fig. 1).

The site was surveyed on several occasions, when every find was recorded in order to determine patterns of spatial distribution. During the excavation a number of pits of varying size and depth were found, in which fire damaged flint and stone artefacts had been deposited together with pottery (Larsson 2000a, 2000b).

Fragments from about one hundred thick-butted hollow-ground axes (Fig. 2:1) and chisels (Fig. 2:2) have been found, as well as a small number of thin-bladed axes. There is variation in the degree of final polishing of the axes. Among the arrowheads, tanged arrowheads of the so-called D-type have been identified (Fig. 2:4), as well as pressure-flaked projectile points. Some are leaf-shaped (Fig. 2:5), while others have a marked tang (Fig. 2:6).

Fragments of flint ‘food knives’ – a prototype for daggers (Nielsen 1976) – have been identified as well (Fig. 2:10). Flake scrapers (Fig. 2:11) and large blades have also been damaged by fire (Fig. 2:12).

Non-flint tools such as thick-butted axes (Fig. 2:3) and battle axes (Fig. 2:7) have been exposed to fire. The find material also includes a small number of slate objects such as tanged arrowheads and a slate chisel.

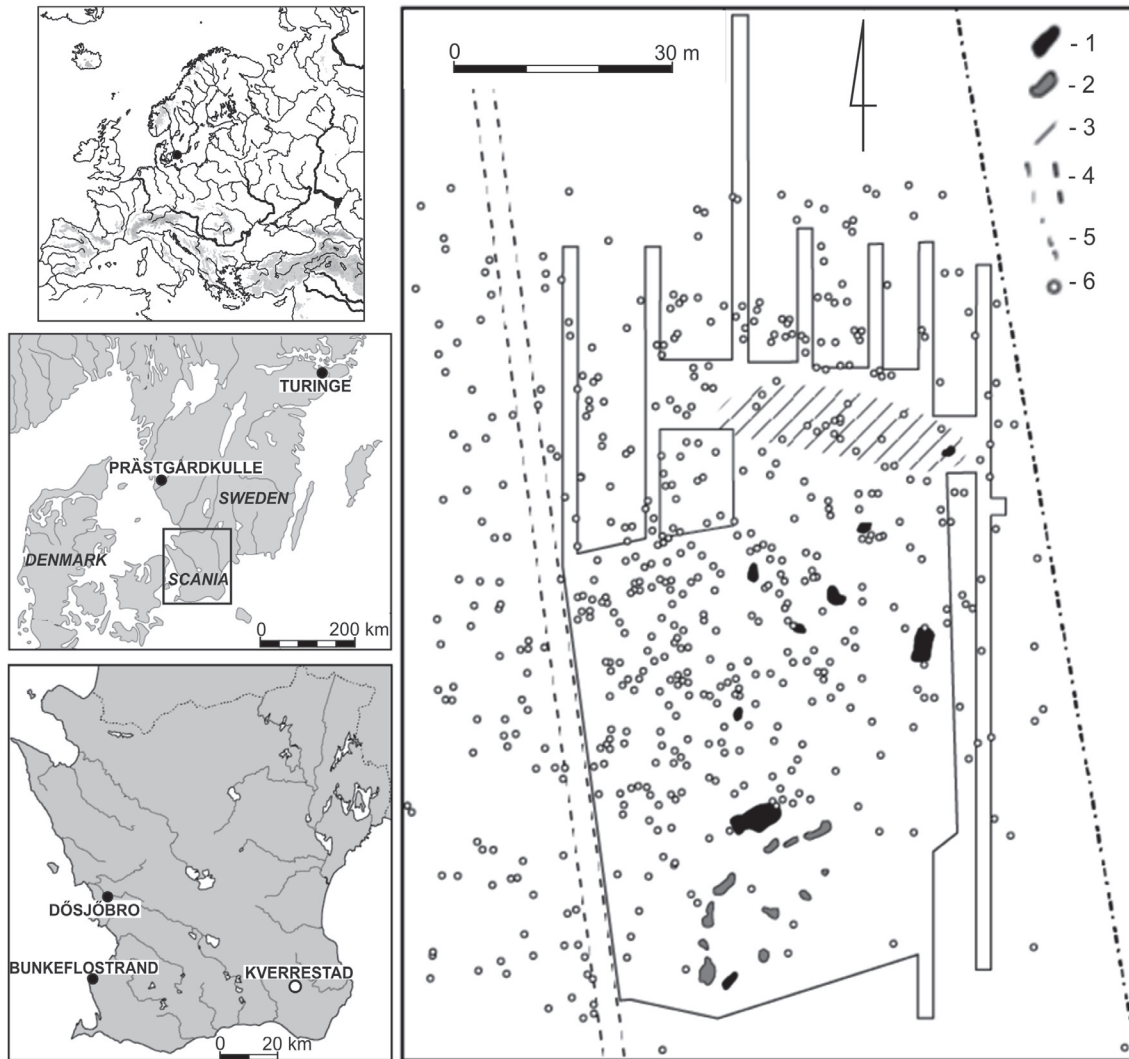


Fig. 1. Left: the location in Southern Scandinavia of the Kverrestad site and other sites mentioned in the text; right: the distribution of finds and features at Kverrestad. 1. pits with finds; 2. pits with a clay filling; 3. area with a thin plough zone; 4. field-road; 5. field boundary and 6. surface finds.

Pottery, mainly from vessels with a semicircular cross-section, decorated with large zigzags, types G–J (Malmer 1962), are also present (Fig. 2:8–9).

Burnt bones, intentionally cracked into small pieces, were also found. Only skull fragments from adult human have been identified.

The dating of the vessels to the latest part of the Battle Axe culture is in good agreement with all the finds.

DESTRUCTION OF WEALTH

The large number of axes and chisels must in itself have had great value to the society that left the depositions. The flint type is not local, originating from the southwestern part of Scania, some 70 km

or even further away. However, some tools originate from a much more distant source.

Pressure-flaked projectile points, some leaf-shaped, have not earlier been identified in southern Sweden. However, a small number have been found in Denmark (Ebbesen 1980; Hübner 2005; Ebbesen 2006). They are present in the Corded Ware culture of the upper Oder area or even further south (Schröder 1951). The finds from Kverrestad, altogether some thirty pieces, make up the largest collection of such points in Scandinavia.

Fragments of knives made by pressure-flaking technique are very rare in southern Sweden. As the best parallels exist in the same area as the projectile points they might have been introduced through the same distribution contacts.

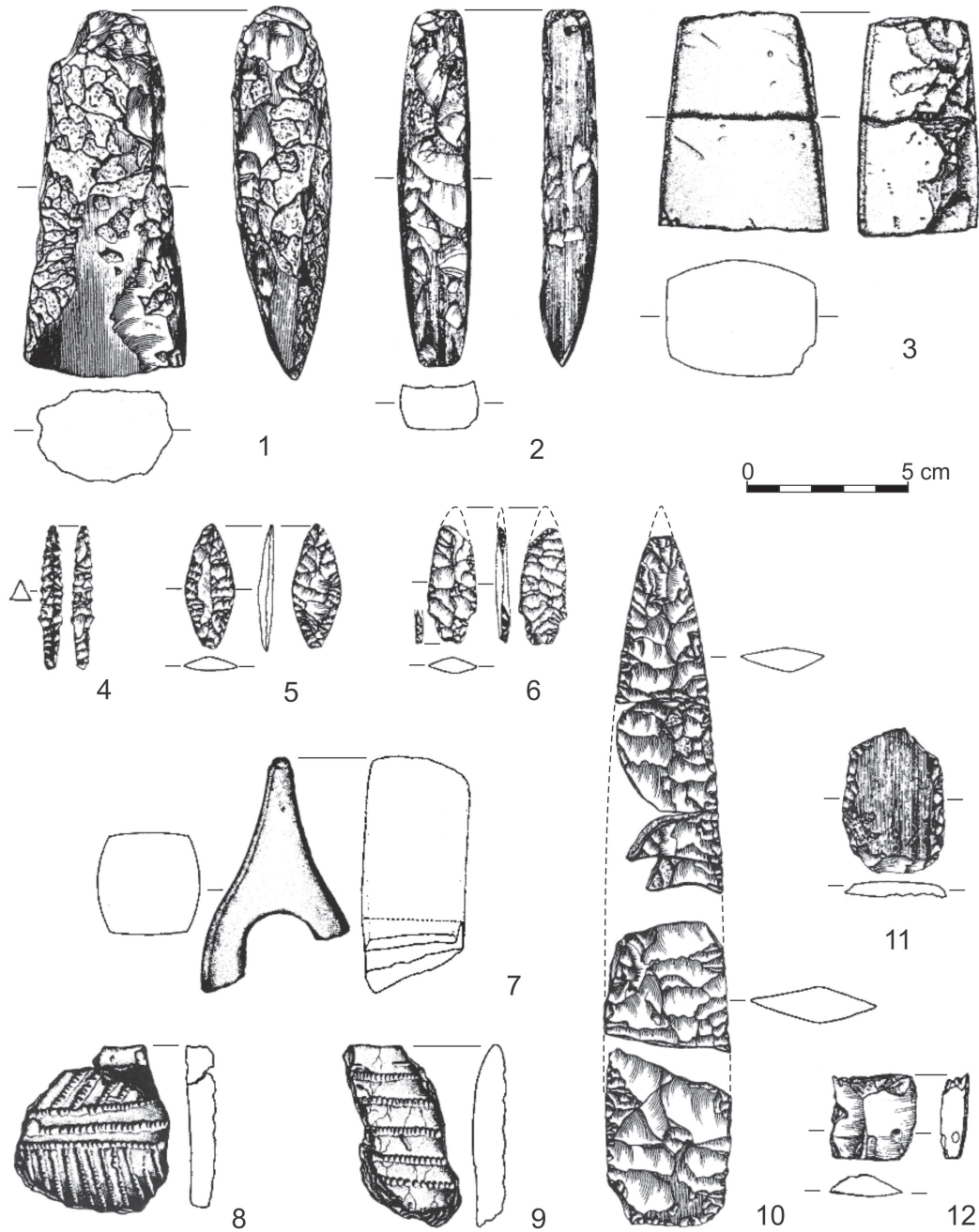


Fig. 2. Tools found at Kverrestad: 1. an almost intact hollow-edged flint axe; 2. an almost intact hollowed-edged flint chisel; 3. fragment of a thick-butted stone axe; 4. tanged arrow-head; 5-6. pressure flaked arrow-heads; 7. neck fragment of a battle axe; 8-9. rim fragments of decorated vessels; 10. fragments of a "feeding-knife"; 11. flake scraper and 12. fragment of a blade (drawing by B. Wallebom).

Among the finds of battle axes, at least one is a typical example from the late Single Grave culture, a form well-known in the Single Grave culture of western Denmark, but also within the west Baltic coastal area in present-day Germany (Ebbesen 2006).

The slate objects are items well-known in the central and northern part of Sweden (Taffinder 1998).

This confirms that some of the deposited artefacts arrived as a result of distant networks of contacts and therefore were of exotic origin, probably ranked as artefacts of very high value. It seems to be the highest-valued items of the material culture that have been fragmented and deposited.

This type of public sacrifice of rare objects, using fire, may have been practiced on special occasions,

probably in combination with external or internal threats. It could be an act which was primarily meant to legitimate power by impressing representatives of another community (Larsson 2000a; 2000b).

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CREMATION OF HUMANS

That cremated human remains are not only found on the site, but are also mixed among the fragmented tools promotes a view of complexity in the relations between social perspectives and the material culture. However, a couple of sites, both regarded as mortuary houses, might give a better understanding.

At Prästgårdskulle in western Sweden charcoal marked the limits of a wooden structure measuring 4x3 m. Cremated human bones were found within this delimited area, as well as in the centre of the building, at both locations mixed with charcoal, burnt flints and daub, along with two vessels dated to the late Battle Axe culture (Särilvik, Jonsäter 1974; Nordqvist 1997).

A construction measuring 5 x 3.3 m was erected at Turinge, central Sweden (Lindström 2006). In the trench for the walls, several small pits held the cremated bones of at least 16 individuals, both newborn children and adults. Typical grave goods, such as battle axes, flint axes, flint blades, and vessels, were found together with the bones. However, only

a flint scraper and some bones of sheep exhibit traces of fire. The finds show that the building belonged to the late Battle Axe culture. The position of human remains as well as the evidence of the rite of cremation, which is not proved with certainty among ordinary graves, indicates that this building was not an ordinary mortuary house. However, it has some similarities to those structures that have been found above ordinary graves in southernmost Sweden (Larsson 1988) as well as in Jutland, Denmark. In Jutland the construction surrounding the grave may be rectangular or round and may include massive posts that indicate a tower-shaped building surrounding the grave (Hübner 2005: 552 ff.).

The finds and features from the two structures mentioned above prove that cremation of humans occurred in other places during the Battle Axe culture and even together with artefacts affected by fire. However, the bones are too infrequent at Kverrestad, compared with any other site, for it to be regarded as a true cremation burial. Could this mean that human bones were intermixed simply as part of the deposition? We know of cremated human bones, for example, in causewayed enclosures, earlier in the Neolithic where just a small number of bones have been deposited (Andersen 1999). This might mean that the mortuary practices included the possibility of depositing the body at more than one place. Such a practice is very difficult to identify, as cremation might destroy body parts or make accurate osteological analyses difficult. It might also include inhumations with poor preservation. It could be that a practice of depositing body parts at two or even more locations might have been rather frequent.

PALISADE ENCLOSURES

During recent years a number of enclosures consisting of palisades have been identified in the eastern part of southern Scandinavia. Within the southwestern part of Scania five palisade enclosures have so far been excavated, four of them situated so close together as to be intervisible. They vary in length from 175 to 300 m, with an enclosed area of between 3 and 5.5 hectares (Nielsen 2004; Brink 2009b; Klatt 2009; Larsson 2012). The enclosures consist of one to four rows of posts (Fig. 3). Most of them have produced rather few finds. In most cases there are few features. The exception, Bunkeflostrand, has a large number of pits, but their contents, namely antlers and a small amount of pottery, differ from ordinary settlement material (Brink *et al.* 2009).

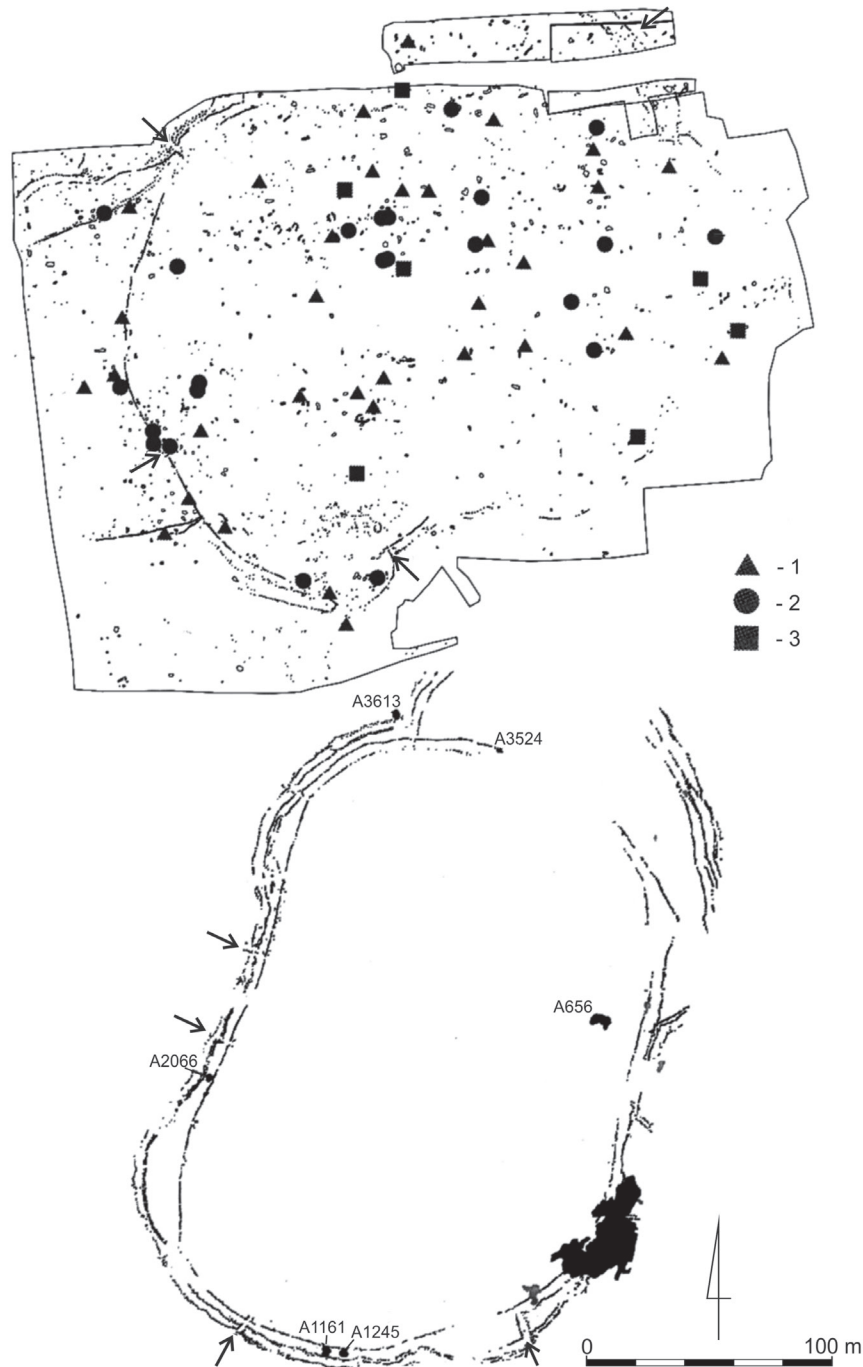


Fig. 3. The palisade enclosures at Bunkeflostrand (above) and Hindby (below). The entrances are specially marked.
1. pit; 2. storage pits and 3. wells (from Brink 2009b).

There is an interesting link between flint axes and palisades. Flint axes have been found in post-holes usually associated with an entrance. In most palisades a number of post-holes contain flakes characteristic of refuse from axe or chisel production. In some cases the number of flakes might be large. In one case, Dösjöbro, flint flakes from axe production, except for a large number of finds in some post-holes, were

found in large quantity within an area about 150 m from the palisade (Runcis 2008; Svensson 2008). It seems that in a number of cases axe production was directly or indirectly related to palisades. That flakes have deliberately been deposited in the palisades indicates a ritual connection with the “birth” of axes. On the other hand, palisades could be regarded as sites where many people assembled, and it might

have been reasonable to locate the production of axes at a site excellent for trade and exchange during short but intensive meetings.

Another aspect related to axes at Kverrestad is the fact that a considerable amount of the flint found in post-holes or features connected with palisades has been burnt.

At Dösjöbro another link between axes and humans can be discerned. The area between the palisade and the axe production site contained at least three graves typical for the late Battle Axe culture (Lagergren 2008). These were located more or less in a line. Cemeteries with a linear system are well known in the Battle Axe culture. Because previous excavation areas were small, rarely including examination of the surroundings of a grave, the number of linear cemeteries might have been much larger.

CHRONOLOGICAL RELATIONS

The chronology of these palisades is problematic. Based on finds as well as radiocarbon dates, one palisade from southwestern Scania is dated to the late Funnel Beaker culture (MN AV) (Forssblad 2003). The rest have provided dates relating to the phase 2800–2600 BC equal to the early part of the Battle Axe culture (MN BI). However, few finds in post-holes and features related to the palisades are dated to that phase. Most belong to the late part of the Battle Axe culture. On the contrary there are no finds dated to the late Funnel Beaker culture.

The situation in the eastern part of Denmark and the southernmost part of Sweden seems to be complicated. The finds, more or less well related to the palisades, belong both to a later phase of the Funnel Beaker culture and the early Battle Axe culture. The graves in the southwestern part of Scania with grave goods typical for the Battle Axe culture date to between 2600 and 2100 BC (Brink 2009b; Fornander 2011). New research places the earliest part of the culture in central Sweden with a link to Finland (Å. Larsson 2009).

Based on the dates from palisades and graves, there seems to be a time difference of some centuries between the erection of palisades and the deposition of graves. There might be a presence of both late Funnel Beaker culture and early Battle Axe culture in the southernmost part of Sweden for a couple of centuries (Larsson 1992).

The situation in eastern Denmark is equally complicated. The late Funnel Beaker culture appears to continue for some centuries after the Single

Grave culture has become established in western Denmark (Ebbesen 2006). The palisade enclosures are either dated to the late Funnel Beaker culture by the find material or to the phase 2900–2600 BC by radiocarbon dates (Nielsen 1998; Klatt 2009). Later, at about 2600 BC, a material culture similar to the late Single Grave culture is established, but the old megalithic tombs are still used as burial sites. So, the mortuary practice of the Single Grave culture is not accepted, and the megalithic tombs are used for burials as before. The markedly individualistic treatment shown by the graves in the Single Grave culture is not exemplified in eastern Denmark. It is not until the Late Neolithic that similar elements are introduced across Denmark.

CONCLUSION

The site at Kverrestad, southern Sweden, presented a mass destruction by fire that at first sight seemed most exotic within the Battle Axe culture. The large deposition and cremations of tools as well as humans are, as a combination, still unique, but the elements taken separately are well proven within the social context. The mass destruction by fire also includes a perspective into the past that linked the Battle Axe culture to phenomena within the Funnel Beaker culture several centuries before. The erection of palisade enclosures appears to be a link between the cultures. In eastern Denmark and southern Sweden the relationship between the Funnel Beaker culture and the variations of Corded Ware culture appears to be complicated, with a parallel existence for centuries. The mortuary practice is mainly based upon strict norms, but a number of graves or mortuary buildings provide a picture of a degree of variation. Individual or regional identification might be sought in small differences concerning, for example, the position of grave goods.

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