



Book Reviews

ÖSTERSJÖNS SKEPPSSÄTTNINGAR. MONUMENT OCH MÖTESPLATSER UNDER YNGRE BRONSÅLDER BY J WEHLIN

Gotarc Serie B. Gothenburg Archaeological Theses 59, Göteborgs Universitet, Göteborg 2013. 393 pp, richly illustrated, English Summary, ISSN 0282-6860, ISBN 078-91 -85245-51-8,pb, price unknown.

The English title of this doctoral thesis, “Baltic Stone Ships. Monuments and meeting places during the Late Bronze Age”, informs us that it is the stone built ship-shaped monuments which date from the Late Bronze Age, which are in focus here. In Chapter 1, the geographical area covered is the seaboard of what is called the Baltic Proper, which is the inland sea that stretches from the Danish sounds in southwest to the sea around Åland in the north, but excludes the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Riga. In this region, there are several concentrations of ship settings of Bronze Age date. The study examines four investigation areas: Saaremaa in Estonia, the islands of Åland, the Danish island of Bornholm and the Swedish island of Gotland. Gotland is the main area of research with the highest density of stone ships, where more than 400 are known. The work is supplemented by a comprehensive catalogue covering all Bronze Age ship settings and Early Iron Age boat-shaped stone cists of Gotland, including a large number of photos and plan drawings (pages 229-374). Bronze Age ship settings are found in other parts of Scandinavia, such as Halland, West Scania, East Blekinge and the island of Öland, Sweden. These regions are used as reference areas.

Since the study is based on a specific type of monument, the ship setting, the chronological focus is congruent with the dating of this type of monument. The ship settings have been dated to the Nordic Bronze Age Montelius Periods IV-V (1100-700 BC) but the inclusion of the boat-shaped stone cists of Gotland which belong to the Early Iron Age means some expansion of the time-frame examined in this study. Even though it should be admitted that it is beyond the scope of the present work, the general reader not fully acquainted with the long history of stone ships of Scandinavia, might have wished for a short account of similar monuments belonging to the Migration Period and the Viking Age for some comparison. For how can we typologically determine the stone ships of the Late Iron Age? And how can we distinguish those monuments that do not belong to the Bronze Age from the Bronze Age monuments proper?

The book is organized in a clear and logical way. The first chapters present the theoretical and methodological approaches as well as the frames of reference in both time and space. After a chapter on research history, the empirical data on stone ships is presented: their size, morphology and landscape settings. A number of new radiocarbon dates are presented as well as the results of osteological analyses of the cremated bone material related to the ships (being part of the research programme). These descriptive sections of the book lead gradually to the more discursive parts including wider comparative analyses of the Nordic ship imagery and the social and religious meaning of the stone ships.

In particular, I would like to highlight the chapters where the Nordic ship iconography is incorporated (Chapters 6 and 7). The stone ships of the Baltic Sea area are treated in their wider religious and cultural contexts and are associated with rock carved ships as well as ships depicted

on bronze objects. The incorporation of this large and varied comparative material in the analyses enables the author to draw interesting and convincing conclusions.

In the concluding chapters, the synthesis is presented. The stone ships were much more than just visible monuments containing the earthly remains of the deceased. They seem also to represent meeting places related to voyages and exchange. It is proposed that activities related to the Bronze Age stone ships should be linked to the maritime sphere in society and probably rituals and ceremonies in connection with departure and/or arrival to and from long distance journeys. The words “journey” and “departure” are key words. Thus, two types of journeys seem to manifest themselves through the stone ships and each marks places of transition: From life to death and from home to faraway shores, in other words from the known to the unknown.

The chapter on research history – Chapter 3 – gives the reader a splendid survey of the Bronze Age of the Baltic Sea, including the most recent investigations and approaches. When considering hill forts and rampart structures, reference is made to recent research, where hillforts operated as meeting places and symbolised protection to the traveller rather than only representing martial interpretations of defense and violence. In the discursive and concluding chapters, the author examines these ideas in relation to the stone ships arguing that they would reflect meeting places. The author argues that both the stone ships and the hillforts should not be associated solely to functional aspects operating only as places for exchange and trade. He suggests that the activities, which probably took place here, would have been linked to rituals and events connected with arrivals and departures from the place, as well a focus as social gatherings and meetings.

In Chapter 4, a typology is presented, comprising four main types of stone ships. Many of the Bronze Age ships of standing or recumbent stones have their prow marked by a larger stone or a separate stone just in front of the prow proper. It would be helpful to the reader to have each of the different typologies presented as idealised diagrams.

A larger series of radiocarbon dates from cremated bones in the stone ships is published, and these dates enable the author to demonstrate that the types to some degree reflect a chronological sequence and that generally, the traditional dating of diagnostic objects related to the burial is confirmed by the scientific dates. Thus, the stone ships belong to Montelius period IV and V of the Nordic Bronze Age (1100-700 BC). However, when considering the radiocarbon dates, there seem to be a tendency towards a slightly older date than expected when compared with the traditional chronology. This, though rather insignificant deviation, may be caused by contamination by the smoke of ‘old’ wood used in the cremation (p 67).

The osteological analyses of the cremated bone material have demonstrated that in most cases only smaller parts of the individual are present and in Chapter 6 there is some discussion on missing bone material. The author suggests that the deposition of the bones seems to be a part of a complicated ritual process with the ship being one link. Of particular interest is the occurrence of paired stone ships. Whenever the ships are in pairs it would often seem as if only one of the ships contained a small amount of cremated bones (although in certain cases they are completely devoid of bones). Perhaps, as part of the ritual process some of the bones were taken from one ship and relocated into the other. Somehow, the stone ship, which represents movement or departure in a wider sense, could also represent movement of the dead: the stone ship therefore serving as a place of transition for the dead.

In Chapters 6 and 7, the ship representations on other media – bronzes and rock carvings – are related to the stone ships. Much of the Bronze Age ship iconography can either be associated to burial contexts (bronze objects, certain rock carvings) or to specific coastal settings. However, a

certain inaccuracy occurs when the author relates twin or double ship depictions on bronzes to the burial sphere. In the English summary we read that, “*The decorated bronze objects are clearly associated with graves*” (p 135 and p 204). This statement goes well for the decorated razors, but it should be emphasised that it is on the neck-rings that the double ships have their well-manifested appearance as a specific iconographic pattern. And the neck-rings do not belong to the burial category, but to the class of votive deposits. Ships depicted on the neck-rings are shown on figures 2.4 and 6.13, but it is not mentioned that they belong to the votive find category. Furthermore, on the same figure (6.13) with caption: “Different variants of the duality among the ship images of the Bronze Age” (in Swedish: “*Olika varianter av dualiteten hos bronsålderns skeppsbilder*”), part of the motif on a razor from Veerst, Western Jutland, is shown, namely two ships. However, two of the three ships depicted on the same surface of this razor have been omitted in the illustration, even though the three ships are depicted closely together (as will be seen in Kaul 1998 cat. no. 313). Furthermore, looking at the full illustration, it seems not quite clear how it demonstrates or clarifies the author’s ideas on duality or dualities.

Most interesting is the study of the shape of the stone ships and the comparison with ship representations in other media such as on rock carvings and bronze objects. The documentation of details of the stone ships demonstrates that they are not just indistinctly shaped symbolic ships, but must have had real ships as models. For instance in a number of cases a pointed or higher prow is marked by the setting of stones, while the rear end of the ship is more blunt or has a low rectangular construction. In other cases, the prow is marked by an extra outlying stone that is probably reflecting the keel extension as seen on the outline-drawn ships on rock carvings and bronzes. Small rectangular stone constructions at the opposite end of the ship would reflect (or signify) the stern. It is clearly of great importance that in many cases it has been essential for the Bronze Age people to have shown the direction of the stone ships. The author concludes from this that the stone ships were not just north-south-oriented (or close to), but that their sailing direction towards south was deliberately accentuated.

When considering the ship images of the bronzes – the razors in particular – the author discusses the model of the voyage of the sun proposed elsewhere by this reviewer (1998), where the iconography seems to reflect the religious ideas related to the full day and night journey of the sun. Joakim Wehlin questions whether the scenes represent the full spectrum of the voyage of the Sun (pages 128-131). For him it is the transitional phases of the voyage of the Sun that was portrayed, sunrise and sunset. It is in this dangerous liminal (transitional) phase that the Sun needs its helpers or agents such as the ship, the horse, the bird and the fish.

It is among the main objectives of the present book to seek structural parallels of liminality among the many different media of Bronze Age art and funeral architecture. I shall certainly not be the one to contest that liminal aspects were reflected in both funeral monuments, in the (setting of) rock carvings, and in the miniature art of the razors – where many motifs without doubt render the notions behind sunrise and sunset. But perhaps the focus on transformation/liminality as a sort of general explanatory model is narrowing our comprehension of Bronze Age ideas and their complexity rather than widening it.

Thus, according to the author, a burial in a stone ship reflects a liminal transition – and that is seemingly the end of the story. However, when being limited to focus on the liminal aspects (of the ship) the author discloses himself from discussing a possible end destination for the dead – an afterlife – and the full spectrum of the personal eschatology. In the final conclusion (and on page 134) two types of journeys are seen as manifesting themselves through the stone ships, marking places of transition: From life to death and from home to faraway shores, from the known to the unknown. I find this structural parallelism most convincing. Nevertheless, there is one phrase of this parallelism between the ‘last journey’ and the ‘earthly journey’ I would like to

question, namely: “From the known to the unknown”. Were the goals of both sorts of journeys unknown? Did they have no ideas of an afterlife? Were the aims of the earthly journeys totally unknown?

The sailing direction of the stone ships towards south is seen by the author as a reflection of the travel direction along the Gotland coast to faraway shores in the south, and the sun – together with the moon and the stars – was leading the ships and its crews on its journey. Thus, here the Sun is considered almost secularized, merely being a sort of practical navigational device. For me, the travel direction of the stone ships, towards south, would mark a wish for the goal of the ‘last journey’ – the Sun. In Chapter 7 Wehlin points out that: *In contrast to Kaul’s (1998) theory that a ship leads the sun across the firmament, I mean that it could well be the sun, moon and stars which lead the ship and its crew on the journey* (page 204). But why should there necessarily be any contrast? Why could the sun not be the greatest divine power, and at the same time serving as a practical navigational helper?

This most recommendable book gives – both by its documentation (which includes the presentation of new evidence) and by the discussions – new insights into the meaning and the use of the monuments of the Bronze Age in the Baltic region. Of course, discussions will arise when dealing with matters concerning burials and monuments and the related rituals. Through the history of research different weight has been laid on whether the evidence of such rituals should reflect what is called social strategies, or whether they should reflect the transemperical facies of religion. Joakim Wehlin is mostly – though not entirely – in line with a ‘practical’ or social approach, saying that: *My opinion, however, is that it is important to point out that the ship and the ship symbolism are predominantly located in coastal regions and therefore are most likely to have been part of a social ritual act linked to maritime practice* (page 208).

Reference

Kaul, F, 1998. *Ships on Bronzes, A Study in Bronze Age Religion and Iconography*. Publications from the National Museum vol. 3 (1 & 2), Copenhagen

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Review received: June 2014

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