SMALL THINGS
WIDE HORIZONS

STUDIES IN HONOUR OF
BIRGITTA HÅRDH

Edited by

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Bertil Helgesson and Bengt Söderberg

ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY
## Contents

**TRINKETS**

- **Buttons as brooches** 77  
  Morten Axboe

- **Hand rings** 82  
  Torsten Capelle †

- **Gold in Guleboda** 86  
  A Byzantine gold coin from southern Småland  
  Martin Hansson

- **A little piece of silver from the Romele ridge area** 91  
  Bertil Helgesson

- **Two brooch-knobs and a handful of thoughts** 97  
  Karen Høilund Nielsen

- **Notices on the Notitia** 104  
  A comparison between heraldic insignia of late Roman military units as depicted in Notitia Dignitatum and certain patterns on Scandinavian Migration Period jewellery like wrist clasps and relief brooches  
  Jan Peder Lamm

- **Close to Asgard – between West and South** 110  
  Lars Larsson

- **Shield-formed pendants and solar symbols of the Migration period** 115  
  Bente Magnus

- **“Vikings in Bavaria”** 121  
  An unpublished spännbuckla from Munich and its history  
  Sonja Marzinzik & Michaela Helmbrecht

- **A female statement of power?** 126  
  Some reflections on the Viking Age Yelets-brooch  
  Michael Neiß

- **A Hind to your Health!** 132  
  Alexandra Pesch

**SILVER**

- **The background and the early history of the neck rings of the Glazov type (also called Permian) and the beginning of East-West connections in Early Medieval Northern Europe in the 8th and 9th centuries** 13  
  Johan Callmer

- **The social weight of silver in the Íslendingasögur and the Viking Age hoards** 20  
  Fredrik Ekengren & Maria Domeij Lundborg

- **100 Viking Age hoards of Bornholm** 27  
  Status, challenges and perspectives  
  Gitte Tarnow Ingvardson & Finn Ole Sonne Nielsen

- **Hoard and sinuous snakes** 35  
  Significance and meaning of ring ornaments in Early Viking Age hoards from Gotland  
  Christoph Kilger

- **At the end of the silver flow** 43  
  Islamic dirhams in Sigtuna and the shrinking Viking network  
  Mats Roslund

**COINS**

- **Viking-Age coins found in Sweden** 51  
  Kenneth Jonsson

- **The earliest coin hoard of Lund** 58  
  Jens Christian Moesgaard

- **Nicholas of St. Albans, Anketil and Alfvini—three Danish moneyers of English origin from the 12th and 13th centuries** 64  
  Jørgen Steen Jensen

- **Three Crowns—Coin motive and (trans-)national symbol** 69  
  Cecilia von Heijne

- **The background and the early history of the neck rings of the Glazov type (also called Permian) and the beginning of East-West connections in Early Medieval Northern Europe in the 8th and 9th centuries** 13  
  Johan Callmer
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BURIALS</th>
<th>CENTRALITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small items and major conclusions 141</td>
<td>Small things and wide horizons from a Birka perspective 229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A discussion of the findings from Gullhögen, Old Uppsala</td>
<td>Björn Ambrosiani &amp; Ingrid Gustin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birgit Arrhenius with contributions by Ingmar Jansson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncovering more Death 150</td>
<td>Detecting Vester Kærby 237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some recent excavations of graves from the Early Iron Age in Scania</td>
<td>Problems associated with the interpretation of metal-detector finds from the plough soil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Björk</td>
<td>Mogens Bo Henriksen &amp; Helle W. Horsnæs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vester Galsted – an inhumation grave at P. Frey’s field 160</td>
<td>Early medieval trading centres and transport systems between Dorestad, Ribe and Wolin 245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Ethelberg</td>
<td>The latest results of the Priority Research Programme “Harbours from the Roman Iron Age to the Middle Ages” Hauke Jöns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rune-stones and the localisation of graves 169</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burial customs in the Conversion period</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne-Sofie Gräslund</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pidgirci (Western Ukraine) and Havor (Gotland, Sweden)—two grave finds connected with Byzantine Christianity 175</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Müller-Wille</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pot and amulet pendants in the early mediaeval grave 130 of Frankfurt-Harheim 182</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uta von Freeden</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRAFTS</td>
<td>TRANSFORMATIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production of Scandinavian-style sword hilts on the southern Baltic coast? 191</td>
<td>From replica to relic—Gokstad goes abroad 275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A stray find, presumably dating to the Late Roman Iron Age, from Lübsow / Lubieszewo in Poland</td>
<td>Bodil Petersson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andreas Rau, Ruth Blankenfeldt &amp; Jan Schuster</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joining threads—a discussion of the archaeology of the tacit 199</td>
<td>Monumental make over? 281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulla Isabel Zagal-Mach Wolfe</td>
<td>Remains of a long dolmen close to the ship-setting Ale’s stones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bengt Söderberg &amp; Björn Wallebom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FARMS AND FIELDS</td>
<td>Vikings and the Western Frontier 289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did the Wells conceal? 211</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hvissinge Vest—a Village from the Germanic Iron Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda Boye</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicinal herbs—useful and fatal 218</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early traces of medicinal plants in Europe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ulla Lund Hansen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DUST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dust to dust 297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A short story of no-thing and every-thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jarl Nordbladh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>List of contributors 301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Birgitta Hårdh—a Bibliography 303</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tabula Gratulatoria

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Uppsala
The 16th of August 2015 is Professor Birgitta Hårdh’s 70th birthday. At the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History in Lund, an editorial group was set up for the publication of a Festschrift in her honour.

For several decades Birgitta has been an important staff member and researcher at the Department. Her doctoral dissertation was based on Viking Age silver deposits in southernmost Sweden. This is a field that she later developed in several national and international publications. As a result she is regarded as one of the leading experts on the Northern European Viking Age, engaged in diverse research projects both in Sweden and internationally, and she is a vital collaborator in various networks specializing in the Viking Age.

Through time, Birgitta has extended her research to comprise other periods in the Iron Age. This is particularly clear in her research on the major site of Uppåkra outside Lund. Here she has devoted articles to a detailed treatment of the finds from the Late Iron Age. She has also edited several of the volumes in the series Uppåkrastudier, with both national and international contributions.

Another special field examined by Birgitta Hårdh is the megalithic graves in south-west Scania. Both find material from individual sites and broader perspectives on the Middle Neolithic have been covered in these studies.

Besides doing research, Birgitta Hårdh has for several decades been a lecturer and professor, with long experience of teaching students and supervising doctoral candidates in the subject. She has also been director of studies and served on a number of committees in the Faculty of Arts and Theology.

A feature common to all Birgitta Hårdh’s research is that she has been able, through analysis of a body of finds, to broaden the perspective, not least geographically through her profound knowledge of phenomena in Northern Europe and indeed all of Europe. This book has been given the title Small Things – Wide Horizons, which is a good summary of Birgitta’s research hitherto.

Thanks to the large network of contacts to which Birgitta Hårdh belongs, the call for papers for this Festschrift met a great response. A total of forty titles were submitted to the proposed volume.

Through this Festschrift we wish to thank and honour Professor Birgitta Hårdh as a fine colleague and an excellent scholar. We all look forward to coming years and many more important contributions to archaeological research.

Lars Larsson, Fredrik Ekengren, Bertil Helgesson, Bengt Söderberg
Birgitta Hårdh
Monumental make over?
Remains of a long dolmen close to the ship-setting Ale’s stones.

Bengt Söderberg & Björn Wallebom

Abstract

This article deals with the site of the largest preserved ship-setting in Sweden, Ale’s stones, situated at the Kåseberga ridge in south-east Scania. The site is described and the monument is briefly discussed in relation to similar monumental ship-settings in Scandinavia. In 2012 the writers of this article took part in a research project “Ales stones in a new light” inspired by a hypothesis put forward by professor Måria Strömberg, that the ship-setting was built of re-cycled boulders, i.e. taken from older monuments in the district. A small excavations based on the results of a geophysical prospection was carried out, resulting in the find of a long dolmen close to the ship-setting. The connection between the now standing and the disappeared monument is discussed and, finally, the question of how to put the monuments in a wider context is touched on.

The monument and it’s setting

Ale’s stones, beautifully situated on top of the Kåseberga ridge, close to the Baltic, is one of the most admired ancient monuments in Sweden (Fig. 1). The ridge follows the coast-line and appears to have been partly separated by lower terrain from the rich and fertile plain to the north. Large settlements and grave-fields covering all prehistoric periods are situated at some distance from the coast and the ridge, which in contrast has been thought of in terms of a seasonally exploited resource-area (Strömberg 1994).

During the Late Viking Age a re-location of the settlements in the nearby plain took place, in favour of the historically known village-sites somewhat further inland (Strömberg 1982, 204). The distribution of rune stones and silver hoards show that the settlements in the district were dominated by an elite of wealthy landowners, residing on large farms (Söderberg 2005, 422). In the 12th century the presence of a strong, supraregional aristocracy is reflected in the architecture of the local church-buildings, their rich inventories and fortifications (Wikborg 2002).

The prehistoric settlements on the ridge are mainly known through field-walking and the collecting of loose finds, mainly flint artifacts (Strömberg 1994). The fishing village
of Kåseberga is taking shelter on lower terrain at a short distance to the north-east of the monument. The village, which is mentioned in the 16th century, was flooded and moved a couple of hundred meters away from the sea-shore in the 18th century (Wikborg 2002). Due to heavy erosion of the slopes of the ridge, remains of the village has been exposed together with hearths and cultural layers, representing several periods from the Stone Age to the Medieaval Period. The nature and extent of these activities are, however, difficult to estimate at the moment (Söderberg 2013).

When climbing the plateau on the ridge the visitor is richly rewarded with wide horizons and suddenly the magnificent stone ship is visible, in splendid isolation. This is however, which we will try to clarify, an illusion. The even pasture of the site today is primarily caused by long-time cultivation, wind-erosion, and some recent bulldozing as well.

The 67 meters long and 19 meters wide ship-setting consists of 59 boulders including the so-called rudder stone (M4) outside the south-east stern as well as the altar-stone (M2), which is a slab lying on the ground inside the stone ship (Fig. 2). In accordance with a photography showing the monument after the 1917 restoration, the slab was probably standing in the foundation pit 1012 at the time, although it is uncertain whether it is an original feature (Fig. 2: Söderberg et al. 2012, 29).

Some obvious irregularities catch the eye. One boulder is missing in the south-west railing and a stone-packing, possibly a foundation for the missing boulder, has been found (Fig. 2: 1009 between S15 and S16). Most of the boulders have probably been adjusted to some extent, but only a few, such as N2, N3 and N4, have actually been moved away from their original locations. Another foundation indicated by a stone-packing has been discovered just outside of N4 (Fig. 2: 1011).
Some of the boulders are quite impressive, up to 4,6 meters long (M1), but most of them vary between 2—3 meters in height. Altogether, the boulders can be described as pillar-like. The average relation between width and height is about 1:2,5 (Bergström 1990, 28). The material of the stern-, rudder-, and altar-stones is Cambrian sandstone and the geological expertise argue that the two stern-stones were originally quarried in the coastal area, about fifteen miles further to the east. The boulders in the railings are erratic and the material mostly granite (Bergström et al. 1988).

The orientation of the monument (north-west—south-east) must also be mentioned. It was meticulously measured and studied by Curt Roslund at the department of Astronomy, Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg. His hypothesis was that the monument made it possible to find the precise time of the summer solstice during the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age (Roslund 1979). However, later on he pointed out that the orientation could just as well be related to the topography of the landscape, primarily the ridge and the coast-line (Roslund 2004; cf. Fig. 2). This view, that the creator was perhaps more of a landscape-architect than an astronomer, has gained certain support by comparisons to monumental ship-settings elsewhere. The orientation in relation to the cardinal points vary, but it is always in harmony with the topography of the local landscape (Vestergaard 2007).

The idea that the ship-setting is a sun calender from the Bronze Age has long been maintained by Bob G. Lind, lately in co-operation with quaternary geologist N-A. Mörner (Mörner & Lind 2011). Since it is hardly possible to rule out or to prove that the monument was built with the specific intention to function in relation to the sun, this is rather a question of belief. As we will show, however, there are good arguments for the dating of Ale’s stones to the Early Medieval Period and the Late Viking Age in particular.

Märta Strömberg and Ale’s stones

In spite of two restorations and an article written by Oscar Montelius in 1917, archaeological excavations had actually never been carried out at the site before the project "Ales stone’s and the Kåseberga ridge" was initiated by professor Märta Strömberg (†) in 1989. From this year on, small-scale archaeological fieldwork was conducted annually until 2005. In total close to 15 % of the area inside the ship-setting was excavated and 32 boulders were partly excavated. Excavation data has been compiled in a report which is available on the internet, but unfortunately not in English (Söderberg et al. 2012).

The Ale’s project included collaborators from other subject fields, such as archeo-astronomy and geology. The results were primarily published in local periodicals although the intention was to make them available to international readers after the project was completed. However, only one article in which the most important results of the project were summarised, is available in English (Strömberg 2003). In this article, several ideas of importance in relation to our work were also discussed, which we will return to. To summarise, the project proved to be successful in several respects, although there were many challenges to overcome (Strömberg 2003, 80). From a source-critical point of view the monument’s bad state of preservation pose a substantial problem. The ship-setting and its immediate surroundings have suffered severe damage from prolonged cultivation accompanied by erosion. Furthermore, an air reconnaissance station was built partly inside the monument during the world war 2 and repeated restorations were carried out without proper archaeological documentation. In 1956 excavators removed sand dunes from inside the ship as well as the plough soil surrounding it, and there is little doubt that archaeological information was lost in the process.

Monumental ship-settings

The tradition of building ship-settings is primarily found in certain regions in Scandinavia at different times during the Bronze Age and the Iron Age/Early Medieval Period, c. 1700 BC—AD 1050. Ale’s stones belong to a subclass consisting of monumental ship-settings, measuring more than 40 meters in length. These over sized ship-settings are only known from certain regions in Sweden and Denmark and whereas most of the smaller ship-settings contains graves, predominantly cremations, there is generally a lack of grave-related finds in the monumental ship-settings. Accordingly, their functions have been debated (Capelle 1986; Vestergaard 2007).

A study of the monumental ship-settings in Denmark and Scania shows that they were generally erected on high ground close to communication routes, clearly indicating that they were intended to be seen and admired (Vestergaard 2007). There is also a connection to places of power, including Royal sites such as Jelling and Lejre. In Denmark rune stones are often integrated in the monumental ship-settings and the inscriptions leave no doubt of the relation to a social elite. The inscription of the Tryggevælde rune stone is quite informative when it comes to the function of the ship-setting as well as the setting as a whole. Runologist Erik Moltke translated it as follows: "Ragnhild, Ulv’s sister, placed this stone and made this mound in memory—and this ship-setting—of Gunulv, her husband, a "clamourus man"; son of Nerve"… (Moltke 1981, 226).

According to the inscription the ship-setting was part of a monument complex intended as a memorial. There are several other examples of monumental ship-settings that were part of similar monument complexes, the largest, most famous and multi-faceted being the recently investigated and re-interpreted stone ship at the site of Jelling (Holst et al. 2013). In Tryggevælde and Jelling the mounds were most probably "made" at about the same time as the ship-settings, but some examples shows that a Bronze Age mound also could do, such as the complex
at Beekke, Jutland, where the ship-setting is anchored to a Bronze Age mound. The most pronounced elite-connected monument complex of this kind in Sweden, Anundshög (Anund’s mound) north to Lake Mälaren, may be viewed as a variation on the theme, although Anund’s mound supposedly was built during the sixth century AD. This mound, which in fact is one of the largest in Sweden, is the anchorage of a double monumental ship-setting, more than a hundred meters long. The incision of the rune stone close by says that “Folkvid raised all of these stones…” which, however, probably refers to a number of menhirs flanking the ancient road at the site (cf. Sanmark & Semple 2008).

Highly elaborate settings such as Jelling and Anund’s mound clearly shows that the memorial function was part of a larger parcel, underlining the legitimacy of a ruler/ cult leader or a dynasty. They may also have been intended as assembly-places. Several of the monumental Swedish ship-settings, such as Anund’s mound, were situated in connection to the Royal road called Erikssgatan, where a newly erected king had to travel to the local things in order to confirm his election (Elfstrand 1998). Erikssgatan is mentioned in the oldest provincial law in Sweden. Written sources also mention that thing was held at Anund’s mound in 1392, and at Rane’s stones in the late 12th century. Rane’s stones is a monumental ship-setting situated at Askeberga, in the province of Västergötland (Elfstrand 1998; Artelius 2000; Sanmark & Semple 2008).

At present, monumental ship-settings are known from about 30 locations in Denmark and Sweden with a concentration in Scania, in particular the eastern part of the province (Söderberg & Knarrström in prep.). However, the connection to the social elite is not that explicite in the Scanian examples. The most elaborative setting known so far in Scania is the site at Färölö, where excavations has revealed at least two monumental ship-settings situated at a grave field alongside an old road and close to a rune stone, thus reminding of the setting at Anund’s mound. Although the inscription could not be read because of the weathered surface of the stone it was established that the old runic alphabet was used, dating to the 8th or 9th century. The ship-settings were dated to the Vendel—Viking Period by radiocarbon analysis, using charcoal from the foundation pits. A number of cremation graves, including a richly furnished weapon grave, were also found at the site, dating to AD 200—400 (Björk 1999).

The dating of Ale’s stones

It is fair to say that the monumental ship-settings are generally dating to the Early Medieval Period. However, a few exceptions are known from the island of Gotland and the mainland next to the island, dating to the Bronze Age (Capelle 1986, 1995; Wehlin 2012). When comparing the over-sized Bronze Age- and Early Medieval ship-settings a number of morphological differences may be pointed out, the most important concerns the railings or outer contours. The railings of the Early Medieval stone ships generally consists of sparsely erected monoliths in contrast to the more or less unbroken lines of chain-stones characterising the Bronze Age stone ships.

The most exact datings, provided by the rune stones, suggests that the monumental ship-settings in Denmark were erected during a rather short period, approximately AD 900—970 (Vestergaard 2007, 152). However, most of the large stone ships in Sweden can only be dated by using blunter instruments such as typology, stratigraphy, radiocarbon analysis and artifacts. The absence of graves makes it particular difficult. As Vestergaard has pointed out, they may well be contemporary with the Danish examples but some may be slightly older and a few may even date back to the Bronze Age.

In the case of Ale’s stones a series of six radiocarbon samples of charcoal from contexts selected by Strömberg has been dated within the time-span cal. AD 260—1050 (Söderberg et al. 2012, 51 f.). However, a number of observations and some finds as well, indicate that Ale’s stones was built at a place which had been used as a grave-field for some time, reminding of Färölö. According to descriptions and illustrations by visiting antiquarians Hilfeling and Bruzelius during the 18th and 19th centuries respectively, small stone- or ship-settings were observed, flanking the large stone ship (Söderberg et al. 2012, 24 ff.). In connection with the restorations a round stone-setting was observed, situated close to the south-east stern. Finally, a menhir and it’s presumed foundation pit were found in 1950, at a distance of c. 60 meters to the north of the ship-setting. Some of these features as well as a number of anomalies indicating more hidden features were identified during the geophysical prospection in 2006 (Fig. 3: Trinks et al. 2012, 36 ff.).

Most probably at least some, perhaps all the radiocarbon-datings reflect activities at the grave field previous to the building of the ship-setting. During the Ale’s project a Migration Period ceramic vessel was found inside the stone ship together with a single fragment of burnt human bone. Another fragment was found close to a raling stone (Söderberg et al. 2012, 51). Three datings from these two contexts represent the earliest datings in the time-span mentioned above. Two samples were collected close to the south-east stern, one from the round stone-setting and the other from the area nearby. The writers of this article is of the opinion that the sample of charcoal collected in the pit A1010 (Fig. 2), centrally situated in the ship-setting, is closest in time to the building of the monument (Lu-2578: BP 1110±75, cal. AD 690—1050). The pit A1010 may be interpreted as a foundation for a large stone—a symbolic maststep—a feature which, according to Torsten Capelle, was erected in the ship-settings of the Viking Period “as far as they are datable” (Capelle 1995, 74). According to an old tradition recorded in the early 18th century there was something written on one of the boulders, and it is tempting to speculate in the possibility that there was originally a rune-stone in the centre of the ship (Söderberg et al. 2012, 26).
Finally, a hitherto unpublished Viking Period glass bead was recently discovered in a box together with finds from the surroundings of the Ale’s stones. The box was deposited at the Historical Museum, University of Lund by Strömberg. The find information specified that the bead was found in the plough soil close to the railing.

In addition there are evidence of activities at the site prior to the Iron age/Early Medieval Period. A radio-carbon dated sample of charcoal from a mixed layer inside the ship-setting correspond with the period when megalithic graves were built in Scandinavia (Lu-4012: BP 4600±140, 3650—2900 cal. BC). Furthermore, a shard of pottery attributed to the Battle Axe Culture of the Late Middle Neolithic Period and some polished flints has been found in the plough soil inside the ship-setting. A number of stray finds from the near surroundings have also been registered, indicating activites during different periods of the Neolithic, Late Bronze Age and Iron Age—Medieval Period (Söderberg et al. 2012, 53, 119).

Ale’s stones in a new light

The choice of the object for excavation was based on the results of the geophysical prospection in 2006 (Trinks et al. 2012). Apart from the anomalies discussed above, the data indicated the presence of a large circular structure with a rectangular structure in it’s centre, situated some 25 meters east of the ship-setting (Fig. 3). The structure as a whole bear a certain resemblance to an excavated grave monument in the nearby site of Skogsdala, with remains of an Early Neolithic long dolmen, covered by Bronze Age burial mounds and encircled by kerbstones (Jacobsson 1986).
The prospect of identifying a dolmen close to Ale’s stones was considered most interesting in relation to the hypothesis put forward by Strömberg, that some of the boulders in the monument were recycled, i.e. taken from megalithic monuments in the district (Strömberg 2003). The hypothesis was introduced when cup marks situated at different parts of several boulders in the ship-setting were discovered; at the base, on different sides and on the top of the boulders. Cup marks often occur on boulders in dolmens and passage graves, and some examplex in the district are known (Strömberg 1971, 29, 168).

So far cup marks has been securely identified on seven boulders in the railings of the stone ship (Fig 2: N1, N25, S7, S9, S12, S22 and S27). A number of observed cup marks on other boulders are considered less reliable and must be examined further, by experts (Söderberg et al. 2012, 47 ff.). On five boulders cup marks were discovered far below the surface when the lower parts of the boulders were excavated. Some of them were well preserved while others were in poor condition, and it was concluded that the two categories “represent a rather long time and were not made on the ridge just before the construction of the ship-setting” (Strömberg 2003, 86).

The excavation was carried out at the site in October 2012 (Andersson et al. 2013). Using an excavator a sixty meters long and 2,5 meters wide trench was dug across the 50 meters wide anomaly and it’s central part where an extension was made. The internal structure of the anomaly corresponded well with a number of archeological features interpreted as the remains of a rectangular long dolmen, measuring approximately 22 x 10 meters. Impressions of boulders and regular foundation pits form a chamber in the centre of the rectangular structure which is delimited by stone brims and impressions/pits from a chain of boulders (Fig. 4). The interpretation is based on how ploughed-out dolmens use to appear in archeological records. During recent years a number of destroyed and ploughed-out dolmens have been excavated in Scania (Andersson & Wallebom 2013).

The outer, circular structure of the anomaly corresponded with a ditch-like structure in the southern part. However, a similar structure could not be discerned to the north, were a layer of stones in different sizes emerged. The outer structure appeared as vague compared to the inner structure, and the question of functions remains in this case open.

The finds were generally quite sparse and consisted only of worked flint. A flake scraper was found in the ditch to the south. Charcoal (ash) from a foundation pit belonging to the central chamber was analysed and dated to the Middle Neolithic Phase B (Ua-30880: BP 3996±32, 2580—2460 cal. BC). It is considered to be secondary, reflecting activities when the dolmen was in use.
Towards a ship-setting in context

The excavation clearly shows that a megalithic grave, a long dolmen, was built at the site of Ale’s stones a long time before the ship-setting was erected. At some point in time the boulders belonging to the dolmen were taken away. Although it is difficult to actually prove that the boulders were re-used in the ship-setting it is our opinion that the find strongly support this hypothesis.

Ale’s stone has often been perceived as a riddle, and considered as difficult to put in context. The necessary prerequisite is, of course, a reliable dating. Although it is still an assumption that Ale’s stones was built during the Viking Period—in our opinion well into the 10th century—this dating must be considered well-founded as it is based on a variety of archaeological and scientific data as well as comparisons with monumental ship-settings elsewhere.

It may be argued that the re-use of boulders from megalithic graves also speaks in favour of a dating to the Viking Period. During recent years excavations of sites containing megalithic graves in Scania shows that dolmens in several instances occur together, in complex settings (Andersson & Wallebom 2013; Söderberg 2014). The results shows that the sites were in active use for c. thousand years and then continued to be respected for several millennia. A re-use during the Bronze Age is known, such as at previously mentioned Skogsåla (Jacobsson 1986). During the Early Medieval Period, however, there are signs of re-use beyond the traditional funerary context. At Skegrie, the dolmens were integrated in the settlement structure, and the find of a sunken floor-hut at Döseryggyg indicate a similar behaviour. It has been suggested that the Skegrie dolmens were regarded as assets ascribed to the ancestors, thereby granting the farm-owners the right to the land (Andersson & Wallebom 2013, 132 f.; Söderberg 2014, 102 ff.). However, there is significantly less evidence for a strict funerary re-use of megalithic graves compared to Bronze Age mounds during the Early Medieval Period. According to Eva Thäte the megalithic graves may have been perceived differently from the Bronze Age mounds, and consequently they were seldom re-used for funerals (Thäte 2007, 176 f.). Thäte also raises the question whether the postulated re-use of the boulders in Ale’s stones was meant as a symbolic link to the ancestors, or if the megalithic monuments were considered as meaningless structures in an area where large stones were lacking.

The find of the dolmen and the suggested monumental make over raises many questions concerning the formation and transformation of the site during the course of prehistory. Did the setting contain several megalithic graves? The possibility can hardly be ruled out since Ale’s stones consists of some sixty boulders. The finds and radio-carbon datings from the site represents quite a number of periods. Altogether, this setting, perceived by today’s visitor as a solitary monument, should actually be viewed as a heavily re-arranged and severely fragmented accumulation of monuments and artifacts, spanning in time from the Early Neolithic Period to the end of the Viking Period.

A model by John Chapman (1997) concerning the development of cultural landscapes in two different courses running parallel and to some extent interacting with each other may serve as an interesting point of departure for further analysis of the site. One course is characterised by the vernacular landscape, which is developed successively and transformed over time. The other course is the political landscape, formed by the fact that certain places are ascribed a specific significance and are shaped accordingly. The objective of social groups, in particular elites, was to display their social power in physical monuments. However, in order to put Ale’s stones in context it is also of vital importance to consider continuity and change at other levels than the site itself, locally and regionally as well as in the wider political and cultural sphere.

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