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Helena Victor



Med graven som granne

Om bronsålderns kulthus

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ABSTRACT

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The archaeological material used in this thesis consists of ritual Bronze Age houses, different from ordinary dwelling houses in construction and context. My investigation is mainly focused on South Scandinavian Bronze Age material with strong emphasis of the c. 80 ritual houses of Sweden, generally situated in the central areas of Bronze Age landscape. The material is divided into two types, here referred to as post houses and stone foundation houses, which are homogenous in appearance and environmental location. The excavation of a stone foundation house in Håga, Uppland, has yielded valuable information on ritual houses.

First, a context for ritual buildings and their milieu is provided. The larger houses with stone foundations can be dated to the Early Bronze Age, and the smaller post houses to the Late Bronze Age. The houses are compared to other phenomena, and discussed as expressions of ritual actions, e.g., house symbolism in the form of house urns, graves on top of dwelling houses, and typical settlement finds such as fire-cracked stones in connection to graves. Interpretations of ritual contexts as rock carvings, settlement organisation and grave enclosures are included. Methodologically, analogies from anthropology and history of religion are sought in order to analyse and deepen the interpretations of Bronze Age religion, ideology and social structures. Emphasis is put on ancestor worship.

The morphology of the dwelling house was transferred to graves and ritual contexts. This pattern represents a wish to transfer an incorporated meaning of the concept of house to the sphere of the dead, the ancestors. The ritual houses express the *Idea of the House*, where the dwelling house is the basis of a symbolism in which house and home is the centre for human beings and their culture. It is a symbol of the household and the settlement, of nourishment, warmth and safety, of family, kin and their reproduction, of the beginning and end of life.

A ritual house is a building of the same size and plan as a dwelling house or an economical building, but shaped for ritual purposes to enclose a holy area, a *temenos*. However, it often lacks walls, entrance and roof and is spatially associated with graves or areas of strongly ritual character. Building material, situation and orientation deviate from profane houses, and ordinary settlement finds are absent. The sturdy walls of the houses with stone foundations, like the post-marked walls of the smaller ritual houses were constructed for enclosing ancestors. By constructing ritual houses, Bronze Age man desired a symbolic representation of a dwelling house for the ancestors to reside in.

The Scandinavian Bronze Age landscape was settled by stratified societies in which an elite controlled metal resources and trade routes. Ritual houses were used by this elite to display their ancestors and to show their strong connections to the past and to their origin. Thus, the houses manifested their supremacy and their access to the origin. The use of the *Idea of the House* in constructing these houses also visualised the strong connection to family and kin.

The change in appearance and size of ritual houses, dwelling houses and graves indicates a change in ideology and in the perception of the individual in Bronze Age Sweden.

Keywords: Bronze Age, ritual houses, religion, ancestors, Håga

Helena Victor, Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University, SE-753 10 Uppsala, Sweden. Email: Helena@Victor.se

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The Grave as a Neighbour – on Bronze Age ritual houses

Summary

Introduction and aims

The archaeological material used in this thesis consists of ritual houses dated to the Scandinavian Bronze Age, discovered in grave contexts which are not associated with settlements. My investigation is mainly focused on South Scandinavian Bronze Age material with a strong emphasis on Sweden where there are about 80 ritual houses (fig. 26). My final interpretation is that they were used in an ancestral cult, probably as dwellings for the spirits of the ancestors.

Questions in focus are, e.g.: why do ritual houses appear in so many parts of Sweden? What is the cause of the common form of expression in such a large area? Why and by whom are the houses created? Is there a chronological or functional reason for the different types of ritual houses?

My first aim is to provide a context for the ritual buildings and their milieu. These are then compared to other phenomena which I also interpret as expressions of ritual actions. These include house symbolisms in the form of house urns, graves on top of ordinary dwelling houses, and typical settlement finds such as fire-cracked stones in connection to graves and rituals, to name a few examples. Interpretations of expressions of other ritual activities such as rock carvings, settlement organisation and grave enclosures are also included. I seek analogies from anthropology and history of religion in order to analyse and deepen my interpretations of Bronze Age religion, ideology and social structures.

Points of departure and discussion of concepts

The material remains of the Bronze Age can be measured and classified, but we cannot even begin to discuss what activities and thoughts they are traces of without using analogies. It is impossible to 'read the archaeological text' without understanding its language and syntax. How could we interpret an archaeological material as traces of a ritual context if we do not know

under which circumstances such contexts are formed, and whether these even occur regularly? Without referring to available anthropological, historical, environmental, functional, general and personal human data and experience, no meaningful statements about prehistoric society can be made at all (Gräslund 1994). In this respect, Bronze Age research has been a step behind, e.g., neolithic research, primarily because of the difficulty to find close correspondences between the Nordic and the European Bronze Age society in recent anthropological material. This has been one reason why Bronze Age research has remained at a relatively empirical level in interpretations, while these have to a considerable extent been based on a more or less inadvertent use of analogies. Parker Pearson (1999:44) summarizes my views on the use of ethnological analogies:

The role of ethnoarchaeology is thus not to fill the ancient and prehistoric past with possibilities derived from other people's present but to open up our imagination to the extraordinary range of human approaches to death and life

Eriksen argues that most oral societies have a preoccupation with ancestors and their spirits. The respect shown to the ancestors also has effects on political authorization and stabilization (Eriksen 2000:233). In Helms' ethnographic coverage based on 96 studies, *Access to Origins*, she concludes that there are three apparent main links to the origin of humans (fig. 1). To control the origin has been the most powerful means to gain and maintain supremacy (Helms 1998; Sundqvist 2000:136ff). The ancestors have been important in this process, since they can represent a direct link to the mythological founding ancestors (Helms 1998). It is thus very important to manifest the greatness and importance of one's family, and the ancestors are an important part of the family.

The Idea of the House

The morphology of a house was often transferred to graves and ritual contexts. I argue that this pattern of using houses in conjunction with graves represents a wish to transfer an incorporated meaning of the concept of house to the sphere of the dead, the ancestors. The ritual houses express an idea, the *Idea of the House*, where the dwelling house is the basis of a symbolism where house and home is the center for human beings and their culture. The Idea of the House also stands for security, the spirit of family cohesion, and continuity. It is a symbol of the household and the settlement, of nourishment, warmth and safety, of family, kin and their reproduction, of the beginning and end of life (fig. 2). In short, the house and the daily activities in and around it form a symbol and expression of the human life-world (Bourdieu 1977; Eliade 1959; Hingley 1990; Sweely 1999; Whittle 1996). It was a Bronze Age vehicle for perceiving, manifesting and comprehending the world and the universe. The house stands for stability, strength and continuity, and is animated by its inhabitants. Whittle (1996:69) describes the Late Neolithic, profane dwelling houses in Bulgaria as powerful icons of stability and permanence, as in a sense "living" and active beings. Goldhahn claims that the strength of the metaphor lies in its power to expand something known and intimate to include something more – to express an allegory. There is nothing haphazard or incidental in metaphorical thinking; rather, it is based on established codes and structures expressed both in immaterial and material culture (Goldhahn 1999:153f with refs.).

During the initial stages of my work, I noticed associations between houses and graves in the material culture of the Bronze Age in Sweden. These appeared in different contexts, but were so frequent that they could hardly be coincidental. The morphology of the house has been transferred to ritual buildings, and to burial urns shaped as small houses (fig. 3, 4); there are also graves located directly on top of former dwelling houses (fig. 5, 6) (Boysen & Wulff Andersen 1983; Larsson, L. 1993; Rasmussen 1993). A survey of 300 excavated Early Bronze Age mounds in southern Jutland and southern Schleswig shows that about every second mound lies on top of some kind of settlement remains (Rasmussen 1993).

An explicit ritual expression of the Bronze Age Idea of the House is the ritual house. However, the use of houses in ritual contexts is not unique to the Scandinavian Bronze Age, but has occurred in many socie-

ties across time and space. In this work, examples are presented from the Neolithic to the Iron Age in Europe.

A way in which ritual actions connected with houses are expressed is in the tradition of sacrificial deposits in houses. In her analysis of the houses at Pryssgården in Östergötland, Borna-Ahlkvist observed house sacrifices in several Late Bronze Age houses. At Pryssgården some houses appear to have been abandoned, and Borna-Ahlkvist suggests that these houses have become areas where the ancestors could be venerated at the same time as they marked place continuity (Borna-Ahlkvist 2002).

A less distinct but still obvious expression of the connection between houses and ritual contexts consists of remains which are traditionally attributed to profane houses and household activities. Grinding stones in or next to graves are probable indicators of one such connection, as are evidence of ritual cooking (Lundborg 1972; Goldhahn 1999:171). In the graves at Ringeby a large number of grinding tools and hammering stones were found, and Kaliff adds that it appears to be the rule rather than the exception to find these artefact categories in Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age graves (Kaliff 1995b:33). Fire-cracked stones, normally being debris from cooking and metal work, occur on top of rock carvings and ritual houses or in graves. Bengtsson (2002) suggests that ritual cooking may have been performed at rock carvings, and Olausson (1995) has observed remains of ritual cooking in hill-forts in Uppland.

Several authors have discussed symbolic houses of the Late Neolithic. For example, Hodder has suggested that Early Neolithic long-mounds can be regarded as symbolic long-houses while functioning as graves (Hodder 1984). Ritual houses are also known from the Neolithic (fig. 25) in Denmark (Fabricius & Becker 1996; Jensen 2001) and Sweden (Apel *et al.* 1995; Lindström 2002), and from the Iron Age in all Scandinavia (Kaliff 1997; Artelius 2000). A.-S. Gräslund notes that: "Post-holes near Viking Age graves have been recorded from several sites, including Gotland, Skåne, and Jutland; they have been interpreted as some kind of mortuary building" (1980:34).

Many archaeological contexts help us throw light on the function and development of ritual houses, e.g., funerary custom, the changes in construction of dwelling houses, and the change in settlement structure.

There is today wide consensus that ancestor worship was important in Bronze Age society (e.g. Kaliff

1997; Kaul 1998; Widholm 1998; Goldhahn 1999; Hauptman-Wahlgren 2001; Larsson 2002). Our picture of Scandinavian societies during the Neolithic also contains assumptions on an ancestor cult. This is particularly true when graves, ritual enclosures and ritual houses are discussed. Historians of religion early used ethnographic analogy to argue for prehistoric ancestor worship (Birkeli 1943, 1944; Eliade 1959). In archaeology, Neolithic research was earlier influenced by this methodology than Bronze Age research. Since ancestor worship is a common trait in low-technological societies (e.g. Helms 1998; Parker Pearson 1999; Eriksen 2000), it is not unreasonable for the purposes of this thesis to assume that it was important also during the Bronze Age.

Ancestor worship is most clearly expressed in grave design and content, with gifts and with structures enclosing the spirit (e.g. Kaliff 1997; Gräslund 1994). There is a change in burial customs: in the Early Bronze Age monumental graves are common while the graves of the Late Bronze Age appear to have been mostly unmarked. In Period II, cremation burials are introduced, a custom which becomes predominant in the Late Bronze Age (Sørensen 1989; Gräslund 1994; Kaliff 1997). The monumental graves are often regarded as expressions of an elite and an ancestor cult, but also as markers of claimed land ownership and power.

The three-aisled long-house was introduced in Bronze Age society in Period II (fig. 15). They are generally oriented east-west (fig. 17). During the course of the Bronze Age the length of houses decreases (e.g. Björhem & Säfvestad 1993; Tesch 1993; M. Larsson 1995), probably reflecting a gradual shift in focus from an extended kin group towards the nuclear family (Karlenby 1994; Ullén 1994, 1995).

Ritual houses

The absence of a theoretical debate on ritual houses has resulted in the term being used in a routine way. When new buildings are found that do not fit into a profane interpretative model, the label "ritual house" is attached uncritically without being questioned. Still, the term gives us a hint of what kind of house and area of interpretation it concerns, and contains an implicit interpretation of the meaning and function of the house.

We measure the "holiness" of a site by its close association with graves and other features that we consider spatially and ideologically dissociated from the

profane, and an absence of culture layers and typical settlement finds and features. However, there is a risk that the identification of a ritual site based on ritual remains will be based on a tautological argument.

A ritual house is a building of the same size and plan as a dwelling house or an economic building, but one which has been shaped for ritual purposes to enclose a holy area, a *temenos*. However, it often lacks walls, entrance and roof. A ritual house can also be regarded as another physical manifestation of the Idea of the House in the shape of a two- or sometimes three-dimensional depiction or model of a dwelling house or other building. Here, the archaeological context guides our interpretation.

Building material, situation and orientation of ritual houses deviate from profane ones, and ordinary settlement finds are absent. At the same time, they resemble dwelling houses in shape and size. In contrast to dwelling houses, storage buildings, barns or workshops, the ritual houses are spatially associated with graves or areas of strongly ritual character. Thus, I reject interpretations like byre, livestock enclosure, dwelling house, hunting cabin, natural formation, and so forth. I assume that it is a house without practical (economic) function in relation to what we know today about Bronze Age economy and living conditions.

Ritual houses are of two different types, one group termed stone foundation houses (fig. 20), and another called post houses or small ritual houses (fig. 21). The terms are based on differences in construction material and on the remains now visible above ground. The two groups differ as to construction, situation and dating.

Stone foundation houses have walls of stone and soil or merely large stones, rounded gables and angular inner corners (fig. 36, 40). They are 10-45 metres long (normally 12-25) and 6-12 metres wide. They lack visible entrances and internal finds. About 60 houses of this type are known (fig. 27). Among those that have attracted most scholarly attention are the Håga Church (Almgren 1905) at the Håga Mound, Bondkyrko parish, Uppland, the houses in Koarum next to the Kivik cairn, Scania (Arne 1925), the houses in Broby, Börje parish, Uppland (Schönback 1952), and those in Vessinge, Veinge parish, Halland (Arne 1925). The houses appear not to have had any roofing, but perhaps thin walls of planks or wattle and daub.

The ritual houses are placed in topographically attractive locations, often in direct contact with a Bronze Age grave overlooking main communication routes.

They are located in Bronze Age clusters of mounds (fig. 7) and deposits (fig. 60), i.e., areas considered as central.

Post houses share common traits in that they are smaller, often D- or C-shaped, and, judging from interior post-holes, that they have been roofed (fig. 71, 73). They are less homogenous in their morphology than the stone foundation houses but still form an integrated group. Generally they contain finds and sometimes even graves, and are found on cemeteries in what appears to be ritual contexts, close to graves, altars, cup-marks, and so forth (Kaliff 1997). Some of the best documented have been found at Ringeby, Kvilleinge parish, Östergötland (Kaliff 1997), Glasrutan, Linköping town, Östergötland (Karlenby 1996), Fosie IV, Oxie parish, Scania (Björhem & Säfvestad 1993), and Klinga, Borg parish, Östergötland (Stålbom 1994).

It is concluded that the ritual houses with stone foundations have been erected during the earlier Bronze Age and the smaller posthole houses during the later part. The contexts are similar for both types of ritual houses. Common denominators are the ritual context with fire-cracked stones, knapping stones, cremation graves, small hearths, deposited food offerings, pottery drinking jars and metallurgical remains.

There is a difference in focus of the ritual houses. Stone foundation houses have no apparent orientation, except the avoidance of the orientation interval of dwelling houses. The smaller post houses on the other hand are oriented towards a grave or rock carving close by and located closer to the settlements.

A Ritual house in a context

Although some houses have been excavated, no excavations have been done for the purpose of dating and defining activities connected with ritual houses. Therefore I excavated a ritual house close to the Håga mound, Bondkyrko parish, Uppland. This house could be dated to earlier Bronze Age, and remains of several activities were found, supporting my interpretation that the house has been used for ancestral rituals.

Håga has always been central in discussions of chiefdoms and central places during the Bronze Age (Almgren 1905; Burenhult 1988; Jensen 1989; L. Larsson 1993; Johnsen & Welinder 1993), but apart from the Håga mound (Almgren 1905), few excavations had been done in the area before the 1990s (Forsberg & Hjärthner-Holdar 1985; Olausson 1995; Frölund 1996; Göthberg & Holmström 1997).

The Håga area, together with Broby, 6 km to the north, was in a protected position on the west bank of a large gulf. The favourable situation is according to Schönback best illustrated by the riches of the Håga mound (Schönback 1952:41), but to understand the power of the area, the large number of ancient monuments and finds in the region must also be taken into account.

Oscar Almgren excavated the Håga mound in 1902-03 with support from Crown Prince Carl Gustav Adolf. The grave goods represent a classical period IV set. The construction of the mound can be dated to 943-1108 BC, i.e., period IV. The ¹⁴C datings by Olausson show that the hill-fort Predikstolen nearby was constructed during period III, and that it seems to have burnt down during period V (Olausson 1995).

Approximately 160 m due south of the Håga mound is a large stone foundation (fig. 85), the so-called Håga Church or King Björn's Church, 45 x 17 meters in size. The finds from the excavations 1998-99 include a deposited pot, layers of soot and stone, various ceramic shards and three hearths (fig. 87). ¹⁴C samples taken by Michael Olausson from the burnt layer under and in conjunction to the lower parts of the bank and from the numerous small hearths on the outside of the bank indicate that the house was constructed c. 1300-1050 BC, before the Håga mound (fig. 83), constructed c. 1000 BC. Samples from the hearths inside the house were dated to the Early Bronze Age, i.e., contemporary with the deposited pot. Accordingly two phases of use can be shown.

The Håga pasture

In the pasture a ritual house is surrounded by three heaps of fire-cracked stone (fig. 89). One of the heaps contained a destroyed gallery grave from earliest Bronze Age. Like many other gallery graves it was covered and sealed by fire-cracked stone, probably in connection to the construction of the ritual house. Cremation graves from period V without visual markings above ground were found in another heap of fire-cracked stone. One contained a bronze needle (fig. 91).

The ritual house

The walls were based on a foundation of fire-cracked stone and soil between large rocks and blocks of stone, placed in two parallel lines. The west wall was much better preserved than the east, which was only intact

in the northernmost part. Fillings seem to have been added in the east wall, probably in an attempt to level the slope on which the house is placed. Where the walls were intact, the outer contour of the house was clearly delimited by a kerb-stone setting (fig. 92).

The width of the walls was approximately 2.5 m, while the interior width was only 1.8 m. Finds and features were mostly found in the walls and on their outside. No contemporary finds were found inside the house. Deposited ceramics from the Late Bronze Age were found in the walls and inside.

Two large hearths were found 2.7 and 4 m outside the gables, respectively. The southern of these was larger and had even stronger soot coloring than the northern one. Between the southern hearth and the gable of the house a line of four post-holes were located (fig. 92). The house was constructed in Period II-early Period III (fig. 83).

A ringing stone with cupmark was discovered on the inside of the north gable. It was put on top of the gable approximately as in the reconstruction drawing (fig. 94), and was overturned at the end of Period III-early Period IV (fig. 98).

Considering the sturdiness of the enclosing walls in relation to the small interior area of the house, as well as the density of finds outside and the high degrees of phosphates in the walls in relation to the lack of finds and low degrees of phosphates inside the house, the demarcating effect of the walls appears to have been its primary purpose.

The use of the Håga pasture area starts approximately 1800 BC, when fires were burnt and a gallery grave was built. The ritual house was constructed during the end of Period II or early Period III. Possibly it was used concurrently with its construction in a slow process where the walls were gradually improved. By improving the walls of the ritual building using the fire-cracked stone and clay from wattle and daub constructions, impregnated by the spirits of the ancestors, the souls are subdued into the house and into the collective of ancestors residing there. The lack of finds from the Early Bronze Age inside the house also implicates that the interior was not used by the living. At the time of the destruction of the ritual house in the Håga pasture and the overturning of the ringing stone, late Period III or early Period IV, the large Håga Church was constructed. This destruction and the presence of a deposited pot in the middle of the house, which may be dated to Period IV, suggests that a temporary end was put to the use of the small ritual house in the Håga pasture.

In mid-Period IV the Håga mound was constructed, probably as a manifestation for a strong family in the area. During Period V the house in the Håga pasture was reused. This phase of the employment of the ritual house coincides with the dating of a cremation grave next to the house. The house was also used in a new way, just as in the Håga Church.

The complex house

The Scandinavian Bronze Age was settled by stratified societies in which an elite of some kind controlled metal resources and trade routes (Kristiansen 1998). Ritual houses were used by an elite in society to display their ancestors and to show their strong connections to the past and to their origin. The houses thus manifested their supremacy and their access to the origin. The use of the Idea of the House in constructing these houses also visualized the strong connection with family and kin.

To tend to and revere the ancestors was important to Bronze Age man, while still fearing them. That is why ritual houses lack entrances, making sure the spirits cannot enter the world of the living.

Ethnographical examples show how separating the dead from the living can be considered a problem (Radin 1957; Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Parker Pearson 1999; Eriksen 2000). The spirits of the dead may be helpful, but can also be dangerous (Radin 1957; Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Kaul 1998; Parker Pearson 1999; Eriksen 2000). Because of this, it was important to separate the dead from the living. The separation could be geographical, which means the body of the dead was placed in dedicated places, geographically detached, or symbolic, by imposing a border between the living and the dead (e.g. Parker Pearson 1999; Bloch & Perry 1982). These places are usually remote from the dwellings of the living, e.g. on the other side of a water, on an island, higher, lower or at a distance from the dwelling place. (Parker Pearson 1999:124f). The reason for this symbolic or geographical partitioning is that the dead now belongs to a different sphere than the living. He is now in another group, and this must be clearly indicated, both to the dead himself and to the living relatives. To illustrate how the manifestation of ancestors worked in societies of low technology, I quote Parker Pearson:

"The ancestors may be considered to dwell apart from the living or in their presence, often

occupying actual or imagined houses of the dead. In many ancestor-worshipping societies elaborate monuments are constructed to the glory of the ancestral collectivity." (1999: 158)

The sturdy walls of the houses with stone foundations, like the marked walls of the smaller ritual houses, have had the purpose of delimiting an area. I have already discussed their design for ancestors, which is also indicated by the lack of cultural layers, features and finds inside the houses. The erection and positioning of these houses indicate that they were constructed for enclosing ancestors. By constructing ritual houses, Bronze Age man desired a symbolic representation of a dwelling house for the ancestors to reside in. I consider these houses to be dwelling houses for the ancestors, shaped like the ordinary dwelling houses, but located in other contexts and built of a different material.

There is an obvious similarity both in shape and size. If it was not intentional to make them as a reflection or transformation with the same symbolic message as the dwelling house, why then make them so similar? They could have constructed it any other way or in any other size, yet they choose the same shape and size as the dwelling houses. Since the traces of postholes indicate a different building design, it is improbable that the similarities in shape and size have an explanation founded on functional matters. To state the connection ever further it is worth noting that the same well-documented sequence of changes noted in Bronze Age dwelling houses (Karlenby 1994; Tesch 1993; Ullén 1994) can also be seen in the ritual houses. Both tend to be smaller towards the end of the Bronze Age.

It is also interesting to observe how the changes in the appearance of ritual houses seem to be related to the development of graves. The earliest rituals were small and their purpose seem to have been to be burnt after a short period of use, rather than to be turned into monuments or to be used for generations. The graves also give an impression of impermanence by their rather diminutive size. The later graves of the Early Bronze Age were on the other hand made very monumental and located in the landscape so that they could be seen for miles. By then the ritual houses also had grown larger and were often positioned in full view. Towards the end of the Bronze Age the ritual houses, like the graves, were markedly smaller, built of materials that only left postholes, indicating a much shorter period of use. During the same period, the later Bronze

Age, the graves again went almost unnoticed above ground.

This change seen in ritual houses, dwelling houses and graves indicates a change in the ideology and in the perception of the individual in the Bronze Age of Sweden.