

Towards a realistic understanding of the Bronze Age

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Given the available space, I will focus on the Nordic Bronze Age (BA). Rich data, evolving methods, and conceptual rejuvenation of continental perspectives, politics, conflict and society, and an appreciation of the diversity and scale of BA economy. Ling et al. aim to pull this body of knowledge together and comparatively interpret it. Factors like the Bell Beaker Culture's (BBC) expansion, maritime capacity, trade, slavery and warriors are essential analytical components, recasting the scale and structure of BA economy, networks and society.

The complexity and scale of BA economy in northern Europe is often underestimated, and commonly described in terms of agro-pastoral subsistence. Long distance "exchange" is commonly described as the circulation of a limited number of prestige goods: metal and amber in the full-fledged BA, flint in the Late Neolithic (LN). This leaves a discrepancy in trade volumes – a massive 2000 year trade deficit. Wilderness products like pelts and furs are commonly inferred to be goods entering networks from the north. There is extensive upland activity in the LN and BA, and evidence of species prized for their hides, furs and antlers are found at the production end. However, few traces have turned up at the market end. Ling et al. bring timber boats and slaves, and hides and cereal, into the equation, and expand the scale of BA economy in terms of goods and trade. There were conceivably a host of products traded in intricate local to continental networks, should BA economy be viewed as more diversified and complex?

Cereal and cattle production took place even in marginal environments throughout Scandinavia; is it reasonable that grain and hides were distance-traded in bulk? Evidence of production of wool textiles is scarce in southern Scandinavia, but wool fibres from the Scandinavian Peninsula are potentially a commodity. Wool production can explain the upland expansion in the LN and BA. Is large-scale timber production for overseas markets feasible in the Bronze Age? Floating timber down a river is very different from transporting it across the sea, and LN and BA deforestation is better correlated with the intensification of agro-pastoralism and increase in farms than lumber export. Forced labour and trade in slaves were almost certainly a part of BA economy, but is a slave market on the scale suggested in the article likely? Though there is significant evidence of violence in the Bronze Age, how does systematic, long-term slave-raiding fit with expanding agro-pastoral settlement throughout Scandinavia? Despite all the advantages of maritime raiding, is it enough to make slave raiding a predictable mode of production and pillar of trade? The logical argument for slavery is stronger than the evidence – the rock art is ambiguous and if the mass grave at Sund is a slaving raid, why kill the children? Though I agree that slavery was probably part of BA-society, the structure and scale remains unclear. Whether dealing with wilderness products, slaves, timber, wool, dried fish, grain or cattle hides, problems remain in that circumstantial argument are blunt, evidence is weak and comparisons need explication.

The article emphasises maritime raiding, which was undoubtedly important. Another structural impetus for violence is found in the pastoral sector. Access to pastoral resources was virtually a zero-sum game in terms of labour and pastures already in the LN. To expand pastures, competitors had to be driven away. Cattle, sheep and goats were conceivably highly valuable as capital, raiding can immediately increase this capital. The thousands of bifacial

points found along the coastal heathlands and in the mountains are conceivably linked to feuding over pastures and raiding of herds, as well as hunting - or attacking wealthy centres?

This leads to an uneasiness concerning the term “MMP”. Again, sea travel, “bottlenecks” and large boats (whether building, manning and navigating boats or gaining access to ports, e.g. Kvalø 2007) are essential in understanding LN and BA history (Prescott et al. in press, Austvoll 2017). Along Scandinavia’s coasts, the correlation between agricultural potential, bottlenecks and strategic positioning between resource areas is pivotal to explaining centres of power. However, the farms, upland shielings, production sites and hunting camps attest to a multidimensional economy and society. The use of MMP, and connotations inherent to the term, seem inaccurate. Like the traditional emphasis on agriculture that under-communicated maritime and non-agrarian factors, MMP bifurcates a composite totality of a decentralized complex LN/BA and understates a multifaceted society and economy.

Comparing the BA with the Viking Age (and other societies) is valid, and serves heuristic and rhetorical purposes. The LN through the BA also represents the institutional continuum leading up to the contemporary world. From the interpretative perspective of understanding the structure and history of the BA, it might be productive to emphasise differences.

Highlighting the BBC as the catalyst of the LN is warranted. The BBC affected Jutland’s Corded Ware (CW), but it also had direct impact on areas along the western Scandinavian coast inhabited by hunter-gatherers, where evidence of the CW remains elusive. The dating of the Mjeltehaugen grave chamber, with its enormous mound and slabs decorated with a dagger, geometric textile motives and LN boats has been termed an “enigma”. However, Mjeltehaugen should be compared to BBC monuments in Iberia and western-central Europe (Prescott et al in press, Sand-Eriksen 2017), and is an elite expression in the early LN. Mjeltehaugen and other finds (Melheim 2012, Prescott and Glørstad 2015) represent the events that sparked the Nordic LN. Given an emphasis on maritime capacity, the terrestrial CW does not seem to have a dynamic role in the final transformation of third millennium Scandinavia. However, the article’s reference to a “fusion” between the SGC and BBC underlines a key task: unravelling the pivotal events around 2400 BC and the different historical trajectories in encounters between the CW and BBC.

There is a need for further adjustments, balancing and clarification, but Ling et al. explicate the scope of BA society and economy, advocate maritime capacities and raiding, and through comparative perspective, contribute to lifting the BA out of the socio-historical backwaters where it sometimes stranded.

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