

Kenneth Gustavsson, Otterböte. New Light on a Bronze Age Site in the Baltic. Theses and Papers in Archaeology B:4. Stockholm University 1997, 141 p. + 8 appendices.

In 1997, Kenneth Gustavsson published a new treatment of one of the most unique antiquities of Northern Europe, the Otterböte settlement in Åland. It is remarkable that the excavations there were already carried out in 1946 and 1950, and no new archaeological fieldwork was done in the connection with this monograph. The both leaders of excavations, M. Dreijer and C. F. Meinander (1954), had previously analysed the Otterböte materials, yet, for understandable reasons, their studies had become out of date long ago. In addition, all general treatments on Finnish prehistory (for instance, Kivikoski 1961; Salo 1984; Huurre 1995) have had to use and interpret the material assemblages of this site.

Gustavsson's main task is to clarify whether the Otterböte site was really a seasonal seal-hunting station, as previously accepted, or whether there are other explanations and possibilities as well. He also intends to achieve and analyse new and more detailed information about this settlement site itself, concerning both the house constructions and the find material. Finally, the author wants to demonstrate that one does not always have to dig up new finds in order to yield new and better information – one can also restrict efforts to existing museum collections and analyse them with modern methods. These new methods with help of which Gustavsson tries to enlarge the objectivity of archaeological material are mostly scientific. He calls this approach multidisciplinary; yet, the term 'interdisciplinary' would be better and more exact in this context. In the following, I try to examine to what extent the author has been successful in performing the tasks he has set up for his own research.

Gustavsson starts his analysis from a reconstruction of Bronze Age landscapes in the surroundings of Otterböte (the islands of Kõkar), and for this purpose, Ingemar Pålsson (appendix 1) composed a new pollen diagram. It was established that the flora of that time was typical of the outer archipelago, being rather similar to modern vegetation. Different biotopes, such as saline and brackish shore environments, small freshwater lakes, ponds and marshes, damp and dry areas (moraine and rock) were represented. Knowledge about

the environment and surrounding landscapes is very important in understanding the general context of the site and the possible activities of people living there.

The main structures of the Otterböte settlement were nine ring-shaped hut foundations of stone, six heaps of household refuse, six open hearths and a waterhole; in addition, within and beneath the huts were more hearths and post-holes. By describing and analysing these structures, Gustavsson limits himself to the same quantity and quality of material which is already known from Meinander's publication (1954, 121–130). This is quite understandable, because no new excavations have been carried out. However, it must be noted that the presentation of this material more or less remains on a descriptive level, and a real comparative analysis is missing. The author only mentions that the Otterböte type of huts is exceptional for Scandinavia and one can only find some parallels in Central Europe. Unfortunately, no evidence for that is presented in the book. At the same time, there is no doubt that this is an extremely important question, which simply has to be answered if one wants to solve the problem of the origin of the Otterböte population. If pottery has many similarities with Central European ceramics, and the author tends to look for the origin of Otterböte people in that area, then he also has to find firm and clear parallels to the hut type there. As a matter of fact, no cultural parallels to the Otterböte huts outside of Finland have been found by other Finnish archaeologists; their origin from local tent-like huts of the Stone Age has instead been assumed (Salo 1984). Such tent-like huts with a round bottom were widely distributed in northern Europe and Asia, particularly by Finno-Ugrian peoples from the Stone Age until modern times. However, stone foundations were usually not built for such huts in earlier times, but at least from the Medieval period there are good examples for both round-shaped and rectangular house floors of stone from Estonia (Lavi 1997, Fig. 7, 9–12, plate XXII: 1). These buildings served as summer cookhouses, and their stone foundations are very similar to the Otterböte hut-rings. The settlement sites of the Bronze and Early Iron Age are insufficiently excavated both in Estonia and Finland; yet, there still are some parallels to the Otterböte huts in Åland and Continental Finland (Uino 1986, 177), though not discussed by Gustavsson.

Although I am not sure whether this circumstance

has any importance and meaning or not, but it should be added that almost identical hut-rings of stone have been found in the British Isles, usually in Bronze and Iron Age contexts (see Dyer 1990, Fig. 53-54, 58; Fleming 1988, Fig. 47, 53, 54, 67).

It seems that the author should have paid more attention to a more precise reconstruction of the house type itself – what did the huts exactly look like and why did they need such firm stone foundations? The interpretation of some building details is also doubtful: for instance, the post-holes V–VIII inside hut no. 8 are interpreted as remains of a partition wall (p. 30); yet, they also could belong to a similar circle of post-holes which was discovered around the hearth in huts nos. 7 and 10. One would also expect more explanation, why pottery (and other household refuse) was only seldom found inside the huts and mostly in the refuse heaps (p. 49, Fig. 43). The experience of the Baltic fortified sites of the Bronze Age demonstrates that the majority of finds are concentrated inside the houses and particularly around the hearths. Was this difference in find distribution caused, perhaps, by certain differences in the livelihood and activities of those people?

According to Gustavsson (p. 38), the seasonality of the Otterböte settlement can be derived from the following circumstances: the absence of graves, the extreme location in the outmost archipelago, the sealing activities, and the results of the scientific analyses. In terms of seasonality he might be right, of course, but I would like to point out that this interpretation cannot be that simple. For instance, the Asva and Ridala fortified sites were both also located in the archipelago, people living there dealt with sealing (and, of course, with other activities), and no contemporary graves are known in the vicinity of these antiquities. In East Lithuania, East Latvia and Byelorussia, almost no graves are registered in the vicinity of numerous fortified settlements with striated pottery. In this way, the criteria mentioned by the author may contain more than only one meaning; therefore they cannot be taken as a firm evidence for seasonality.

New data on the date of the Otterböte settlement are presented, mostly based on TL and C¹⁴ analyses. The results of the both methods refer to the turn of the second and first millennia BC (1300–1000 and 1200–900 BC correspondingly). The author tries to find additional support to these dates from the topography: taking into the consideration the probable shore displacement chronology and the development of the environment, he finds out that this time (1200–1000 BC) was “the optimal period for possible site activity” (p. 39). It seems

as if the ancient people were waiting for centuries for the time to be ripe and topographical conditions to become optimal to go and settle in Otterböte. Rather, they came when they had to come, and the station was built there because the place was good enough for their activities. This is *our*, not their, knowledge that the topographical conditions of that time were optimal. Therefore one cannot take topography as a base or source for the dating; one can only check whether the dates achieved from the other sources are plausible and possible from the topographical point of view.

The largest amount of new information is to be found in the analysis of find material. It is commendable that the author pays much attention to methodical questions of the collecting of finds. As the methods of the collecting were rather insufficient, according to the modern understanding, the possibilities for the analysis of the material on a higher level (concerning, at least, the stone and bone artefacts) are limited. The Otterböte material, particularly pottery, has been analysed many times; yet these analyses had been rather cursory. Therefore, Gustavsson had to start from a new basis. The results of his analysis are fresh and well grounded, but here I would like to refer to a few questionable aspects.

For the typology of pottery, one of the criteria used has been the surface treatment (striated, textile-impressed, smoothed/burnished and rusticated). It does not become clear, however, what the author has done with such pots, the surfaces of which have more than one kind of treatment? For instance, there are pots with both striation and textile impressions, or striation and burnishing, or (which is particularly typical for Otterböte) striation and rustication. The usage of different surface treatments on one pot is very typical in Estonia, for instance; and it was not rare at Otterböte either. The overview of the distribution of the pottery styles around the Baltic Sea is good and thorough, at least where Scandinavia is concerned. For the Baltic countries, it is sometimes not the case. For instance, rusticated pottery was not rare but rather popular in Latvia during the first millennium BC: it has been found from all sites of the time and comprises 10.7–55.2 % of all ceramics of this time (Vasks 1991, 30). In some cases, furrow decoration has also been discovered, as well as the striation beneath the rustication (Vasks 1991, 31, plate III: 4). The typology of the Latvian rusticated ware differs from that of Otterböte, however. The distribution of striated pottery in the Baltic countries, as pictured by Gustavsson, is incomplete as well. It seems that the author is not aware of the existence of the whole culture of Striated Pottery in East Lithuania, East Latvia

and the neighbouring areas in Byelorussia, where a number of settlements with rich collections of the striated pottery are reported (Vask 1991; Lietuvos archeologija No. 5). The author's statement (p. 77) that Estonia and Latvia received textile-impressed pottery as a result of strong cultural influences from Russia in the Late Bronze Age, is not correct; this type of pottery was already known here starting from the Late Neolithic (Jaani et al. 1982, 117–118). The interpretation of a kind of striation technique (Fig. 56) as an imitation of the furrow decoration on rusticated pottery is a little problematic. Pottery with similar striation (horizontal striation beneath the rim, slantwise on the neck and vertical on the body) has been found from a number of sites which have not yielded rusticated ware (Jaani et al. 1982, Fig. 111; Lang 1996, Fig. 10: 2, 12: 1, plate VI: 1; Vask 1991, Fig. 7: 11, 8: 1, 9: 1,3,5). We are dealing here, perhaps, with a universal method of treatment that was originally used in the striation of pots and was later taken over into the rustication. In rusticated pottery, this technique received the character of decoration.

Birgitta Hulthén (appendix 2) has carried out the scientific analyses of raw material for making the pottery. The results of these analyses occupy a significant place in Gustavsson's work. It was established that the clay of the majority of Otterböte vessels could not be local and its origin has to be sought elsewhere. As an archaeologist I am not able to discuss these results. Yet, the presentation of these results could have been better – for instance, I could not find from chapter 9 and appendix 2, whether the striated and textile-impressed pottery of Otterböte was made of local or foreign raw material. It is not before page 110, where one can read a sentence that one reads that “only a few textile-impressed vessels might have been made in an Åland environment”. If so, it is hard to understand why the hunters coming from Central Europe started to make textile-impressed and not rusticated vessels at Otterböte? Anyway, it is necessary to continue with analogous scientific analyses; it is particularly important to study pottery styles, considered local in cultural archaeology.

Chapter 10 (“Vessel function”) deserves much recognition. According to earlier interpretation, the Otterböte pots were used for storage and transporting of train oil; yet, the author shows convincingly why this cannot be accepted. He also doubts in many other stereotypical interpretations, like water was boiled in clay pots by using hot stones, and the black, charred residue on the surface of pots is a result of burned porridge. Us-

ing modern scientific methods, Gustavsson demonstrates some other possible interpretations. Time will show how close to the truth he reached himself, but solely the doubting of the “old truths” and looking for new interpretations is worthy of appreciation. The conclusions that the large vessels of Otterböte were mainly used for bringing and storing water, preparing food, fermenting porridges and brewing drinks, and smaller bowls were for drinking mead or beer seem rather convincing to me.

Remarkable results have also been achieved by studying plant impressions in pottery (pp. 100–106). Such imprints were previously unknown in the Otterböte ceramics, but the new investigation yielded altogether 180 different traces. Thirty-nine of them belonged to cereals (barley, wheat, oats and millet), and the rest of imprints originated from seeds, roots or small twigs of various plants. Gustavsson considers particularly important the discovery of pulses, which occurred for the first time in Scandinavia. There are some other features as well, by which the Otterböte plant imprints differ from those of Scandinavia in that time (the domination of hulled barley over naked barley and the existence of millet). Thus, the suggestion about the foreign origin of pottery (and hence, people) of the Otterböte site receives additional support from the study of the plant imprints. However, I am not satisfied with the author's conclusion about the season during which the vessels were made (pp. 106). He has proceeded from the idea that seeds could have been mixed with raw material of pottery only after the plants had flowered, i.e. in late summer and autumn. Hence, the vessels too were made not before this season. But what about those vessels, which do not have plant imprints? Some pages below (110), this idea is developed further: since the vessels need a rather long time for drying before baking, it was impossible to do this work in Åland in the autumn (rain, storms, etc.). At the same time, the drying in autumn was an easy task somewhere in Central Europe, for instance in Poland, which is famous by its “golden autumns”. But what about the drying of vessels in houses or under roofing? Such ad hoc explanations are unnecessary and diminish the trustworthiness of the other explanations given by the author.

According to Gustavsson, the Otterböte settlement served as a seasonal (winter) station of seal hunters coming from Central Europe, the areas of the Lusatian, or Lausitz, culture. Coming from the south they also brought clay vessels with them. Why did they have to do this? The only answer is that was impossible to make pottery at Otterböte in rainy and stormy autumn. This

is an explanation what I cannot believe, however. If textile-impressed pottery was made on spot, then why they could not prepare other stiles of ceramics? The large amount of pottery at Otterbõte is astonishing – particularly where the seasonality of this station is concerned – yet, the author is wrong in writing that this is exceptional for this part of the continent (p. 126). There were 37 potsherds found per one square metre of excavation at Otterbõte; yet at Asva, the corresponding number is 53. And if people really came from the more advanced Bronze-Age society of Central Europe, as pointed out by the author, why then were no bronzes were found at Otterbõte?

In summary, the situation is as follows. No exact parallels are known for the stony hut-rings of the Otterbõte type around the Baltic; yet tent-like houses with a round base have been characteristic of peoples everywhere in Northern Europe and Asia since the Stone Age. The other type of structures – refuse heaps with fire-cracked stones – is uncommon in Finland and in the Baltic countries, but is rather characteristic of Scandinavia. The pottery is alien to Finland, but it has certain parallels around the Baltic Sea. The rustication as such was rather widely distributed both east and west of the Baltic; vessels with furrow decoration were relatively rare, however, except for the areas of the Lusatian culture in Central Europe. Yet, as mentioned by the author, the typology of Lusatian pottery differs slightly from that of Otterbõte. I would like to remember that the influence of the Lusatian culture was extremely strong both in Scandinavia and the Baltic countries in the Late Bronze Age, but even the earlier cultural school of archaeology did not consider this influence as a result of immigration. Gustavsson tries to convince the reader with help of scientific analyses that the Otterbõte pottery was not made on spot; yet, I think, work in this direction has to be continued.

There is no doubt that this work by Kenneth Gustavsson contains a bulk of new and interesting information about the Otterbõte settlement. Although the earlier interpretation of this site – a seasonal station of seal hunters – did not change as a result of this research, the author has nevertheless succeeded in expanding previous knowledge about the general milieu and seal hunting of that time. For this purpose, he has also used eth-

nological comparisons (chapters 13 and 14), which, of course, do not prove anything concerning the Otterbõte population, but make the understanding of that era more simple and figurative. The interpretation of the origin of pottery (and hence, people) is new; yet, as mentioned, some additional archaeological and scientific analyses are perhaps necessary. The background and origin of local house type need also more thorough investigation and explanation, as well as the reasons, why it was unavoidable to take large amounts of fragile clay vessels on long seafaring voyages. I am convinced that Gustavsson's monograph is a remarkable work, which in trying to answer old questions has posed a number of new problems.

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