

On the Continuity of Settlement in the Early Iron Age on the Åland Islands

In the publication issued by the first conference on the history of archaeology Stuart Piggott ends his contribution with the words:

»We can only hope no future historian of archaeology will go on to say that any of us share, as Willey said of the men of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, 'the sense of being at last in possession of the truth, which gladdened this enviable age'» (Piggott 1981, p. 189).

The whole history of archaeology is as Piggott states, »a chronicle of changing requirements, explanations and views of the past attainable within the climate of thought of the times» (Piggott 1981, p. 187). Archaeological truth, the way pertinent questions have been explained at various times, has always been and still is dependent on who poses the questions and in Piggott's view ». . . on the intellectual framework in which his objectives are conceived» (Piggott 1981, p. 187). The aim of archaeological research has always been »the past-in-itself», »wie es eigentlich gewesen», but so far the result has been only various »past-as-known» or even »past-as-wished-for» sketches. These may provide important intermediary stages and further research, if their relative nature is kept in mind, but they can also form barriers difficult to surmount, that may stop the development of archaeology in certain areas for long periods or even lead it completely astray.

An area of archaeological research, where the relativity of explanations and models is especially distinct, is the Early Iron Age and especially the period between the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of our era. (In this connection the Early Iron Age is defined as c. 500 BC – 500 AD).

Throughout the Baltic-Scandinavian area the Pre-Roman Iron Age – the lack of material that can be dated to this period – has for a long time constituted a mystery, to which highly varying explanations have been suggested. In the earliest literature on the subject the lack of datable finds has been explained as the continuation of the Stone Age to the beginning of our era (e.g. Grewingk 1874; Hausman 1908, p. 13; Aspelin 1885, p. 33, 42). After the Bronze Age had been identified as a period of its own, the lack of finds, which now presented itself much more clearly, was explained by recourse to two completely contrary assumptions. According to the first explanatory model the findless areas had become depopulated after the Bronze Age and the Iron Age proper had begun only after the beginning of our era. The second model stressed the continuity of settlement without break, although metal artefacts were lacking in the material for various reasons.

The model that stressed the interruption of settlement was more widely accepted in the early stages of research than the one that stressed continuity, with special popularity in Sweden and Finland. In Finnish research this was especially caused by Alfred Hackmans »Die Eisenzeit» from 1905, where the results of linguistics and archaeology were combined. In Sweden archaeological thought was influenced, i.a.

by Rutger Sernander's theory from 1910 on the rapid deterioration of the climate at the end of the Bronze Age, which could have completely desolated former agricultural regions (Sernander 1910, p. 197). Professor emeritus C. F. Meinander has in one of his lectures commented on the links between such a theoretical model and classical learning: already in their schooldays all aspiring scientists who had read Latin formed a viewpoint based on clear historical sources, whereby whole peoples could all of a sudden move from one place to another leaving a complete vacuum behind them, and it was this explanation that they subsequently applied to the archaeological material.

A uniform continuity of settlement has been stressed especially by Estonian archaeologists, e.g. M. Ebert already in 1913 and Harri Moora in the 1930s and in Finland in the early stages of research especially Julius Ailio (Ebert 1913, p. 527; Moora 1932, p. 28; Ailio 1917). In Sweden Sune Lindqvist presented in 1920 an explanation whereby the lack of metal artefacts was caused by a trade embargo effected by the »Celtic Hansa», forcing people to take recourse to organic materials (Lindqvist 1920, p. 113). This view was supported in Finland by A. M. Tallgren among others (Tallgren 1931, p. 95–96).

Also changes in religious beliefs have been suggested as reasons for the lack of metal artefacts. These would have had the result that the dead were no longer furnished with metal artefacts for the after-life (Moberg 1941, p. 163).

At the moment both the past-as-known and the past-as-wished-for stress very clearly the continuity of settlement and the main interest of research has shifted from metal artefacts to dwelling places and ceramics, which have been regarded as indicating the continuity of settlement throughout the Pre-Roman Iron Age. Instead of the previous vacuum we now have several distinct groups, all of which have continued the traditions of Bronze Age settlement (Meinander 1969, p. 67; Carpelan 1978, p. 9, 11).

The depopulation theory has also been applied to many other periods than the Pre-Roman Iron Age. It has had an especially central role (and still has) in reconstructions of the Iron Age history of the Åland Islands. The generally accepted, well-nigh classic, theory of the development of settlement in Åland is that the thriving Bronze Age settlement of the islands disappeared for some reason, the islands were depopulated and resettled only as late as the late 6th century AD from Sweden. A similar view was already presented in 1795 in »Beskrifning öfver Åland» (Description of Åland) by Fredrik Wilhelm Radloff, the first actual researcher of Åland, and it has remained (Radloff 1795, p. 16). It is only in the last few years that archaeologists, mainly Matts Dreijer and Matti Huurre, have seriously considered other alternatives (Dreijer 1979, p. 51; Huurre 1979, p. 164).

Indications of the continuity of settlement in Åland throughout the Early Iron Age have appeared since the beginning of archaeological research. Already K. A. Bomansson expressed surprise at the fact that cairns in Åland contained iron artefacts while those on the mainland contained bronze objects (Bomansson 1858, p. 17). In the 1910s Björn Cederhvarf investigated low stone-settings in Jarmo in Jomala and in one of these found a bronze pin, dated by Hackman to the Pre-Roman Iron Age (Hackman 1914, p. 148). In 1925 and 1926 Alfred Hackman investigated a cairn in Saltvik the location of which he thought suggested a post-Bronze Age date, with the aim of finding out how long this form of burial was in use in Åland (Hackman, excavation report 1925/26). Unfortunately Hackman never published this find. On the other hand, Matts Dreijer has investigated several Early Iron Age remains throughout the years. The best known of these are the over 80 stone-settings

and graves at Nabberget in Storby, Eckerö (Drejter 1979, p. 45). The material recovered in various investigations includes all of the periods of the Early Iron Age (see H. Edgren 1982).

At the end of the 1970s a new prehistoric survey of Åland was carried out as well as new pollen studies. These shed new light on the problems of the development of Iron Age settlement. According to pollen analyses published by Gunnar Glückert in 1978 there is evidence of permanent human activity in Lemland already around the beginning of our era, viz. 400–500 years earlier than hitherto believed. The matter is clear despite the fact that the actual theme of Glückert's study was land upheaval and sampling sites were thus not chosen with the purpose of finding settlement indicators (Glückert 1978, p. 54).

The new surveys of prehistoric remains include a group that is hard to date elsewhere than the Early Iron Age. This consists of cairn cemeteries which, unlike the Bronze Age practice, were erected on low-lying sandy ridges, often at a distance from the shoreline of the period and near the present cultivated areas. The locations and often elevations of these make them distinct from the Bronze Age cairns; the form of burial, in turn, is completely foreign to the Swedish settlement of the Late Iron Age. The three- and four-sided stone-settings mainly located on the western coast can be dated to this period on the grounds of their form.

According to surveys there are c. 125 locations of prehistoric remains of the above kind on the main islands of Åland. In addition to these there are also observations of graves in the archipelago between Åland and the Finnish coast, that has not been surveyed. Single cairns and stone-settings number c. 1200 in these cemeteries according to present data, viz. nearly three times the number of Bronze Age cairns (as according to Meinander 1954). If the results of Swedish studies are applied in this connection and it is assumed that only half of the actual number of graves is registered, which seems quite probable taking into account the difficult terrain, the number grows considerably (Ambrosiani 1964, p. 58). It must also be taken into account that it was only rarely that one person was buried in a cairn. The remains of an estimated 9 persons were found in a cairn investigated on Mellanö in Storby, Eckerö. Thus the number of actual burials is several thousand, which is completely in conflict with the depopulation theory, even when this number is divided over a period of a thousand years.

The most densely inhabited areas of Åland in the Early Iron Age were in Eckerö, Jomala and Sund. Remains of the above type seem to be completely lacking in Geta. The only cairn in Geta that can be with some certainty classified as a grave is on a low outcrop of bedrock, that had risen from the sea as late as the Late Iron Age, an interesting though not the only indication of the continuity of the cairn tradition in Åland.

According to their location the Early Iron Age cemeteries on the main islands of Åland can be divided into three groups, which probably corresponded to three population groups practising different means of livelihood. The first group consists of cairns located on outcrops of bedrock rising from the shore, in the same way as the Bronze Age cairns. These cemeteries can be assumed to have belonged to a population that had practised its livelihood through sealing and fishing in the old manner. The larger cemeteries of this group are in Storby in Eckerö and on Gloscholmen on the northern shore of Saltvik. Some of the cairns of the latter must be dated to the Late Iron Age on the basis of their elevation.

The second and largest group consists of inland cemeteries, usually situated near present areas of fields on sandy ridges, often quite close to cemeteries of the Late

Iron Age, and they may have similarly belonged to a population that practised farming and animal husbandry.

The third group consists of cemeteries of what I shall term Lemland type, which will be discussed in further detail below. They form at this moment the best known Early Iron Age material and it is with their help that we may investigate both the continuity of settlement and the contacts of the population with the outside world.

Of the 191 graves presently known in Lemland 9 have been investigated either completely or partly. Grave goods, in this case ceramics, were found only in four cairns, but in large amounts in each, and on the basis of decorated sherds at least 19 vessels have been identified in the material. Already in 1969 Meinander stated that the sherds from Flaka belong to Morby ceramics as defined by him (Meinander 1969, p. 43, 44), but the material also includes sherds, with parallels in the regions to the north and east of the Morby area as well as some clearly Bronze Age vessels and so-called Iron Age common ware. The presently known Morby ceramic material from Åland resembles the Finnish material more than e.g. the ceramic material found in Darsgårde in Sweden.

In the bog area of Lemland the ceramic material displays contacts in three different directions: firstly and primarily with the Morby group of the Finnish coastal region, secondly with the group of textile-impressed ceramics and thirdly with the local Bronze Age culture. Influences from the east have played an important role but also the local ceramic tradition has continued.

Continuity of settlement from the Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age cannot be proved on topographic grounds. All of the Early Iron Age cemeteries on Lemland are in the southern part of the island in a low area of bogs crossed by sandy ridges, separate from both Bronze Age and Late Iron Age remains. The area is old sea-bottom that had begun to rise above the surface in the beginning of the Bronze Age. By the beginning of the Early Iron Age at the latest the bays that were becoming isolated from the sea and the shallow ponds that were in the place of the present bog ponds afforded excellent possibilities for human activity, whereby the preconditions for the birth of settlement existed already in the Bronze Age.

Shore meadows have been highly regarded as pastures and shallow waters made specialized fishing possible. The area offered the best economic possibilities to a population, which, like the later archipelago farmers, made its living partly by cattle raising and partly by fishing. The population of Lemland thus formed a kind of intermediary form between the above-described hunting and farming populations.

The changing of the terrain through land upheaval into marshy ground was a decisive factor in the disappearance of the cairn population. Before more detailed pollen analyses are available it cannot be said when the shallowing of the bodies of water had gone so far as to destroy the possibilities of settlement.

An archaeological *ante quem* in this connection can be the lack of Swedish-type mound graves in the bog area, which in my view indicates that the cairn cemeteries are at least for the main part older than these, viz. pre-6th century. In Åland there are several indications of how the boundaries between these two forms of burial are not clear or distinct, the adoption of one form did not necessarily mean the end of the other. In the northern part of Lemland there are three mixed cemeteries, where it can be observed how the mounds are grouped around a large cairn. Also here the population that built the cairn cemeteries could have lived for some time alongside the mound cemetery population. It is also possible that the population of the bog area was forced through the deterioration of their living conditions into moving to the northern parts of the island and there they gradually adopted a new form of burial.

In the light of present material it is in my view clear, that neither in Lemland, or elsewhere in Åland, can it be maintained that settlement disappeared at the end of the Bronze Age and the old theory of interrupted settlement can be rejected also on the part of Åland. Swedish settlers did not come in the beginning of the Late Iron Age to settle a desolate land, but rather followed cultural contacts that already in the Late Stone Age linked the Central Swedish, Finnish and Estonian coastal regions and whose importance for the formation of the Iron Age culture of Åland may have been greater than hitherto believed.

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