Reconstructing the spatial extension of ancient societies: a Scandinavian Viking Age example

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The spatial delimiting of ancient societies is here considered to be a kind of archaeological contextualization necessary for further interpretation of meanings ascribed to material culture. Traditionally the concept of archaeological culture has been used for delimiting societies. It has, however, proven to be very difficult to determine what this taxonomic unit represents in socio-cultural terms. In this paper methods for spatially delimiting individual societies based on material identity-legitimations are presented. These methods are applied in an analysis of the spatial extension of some Viking Age (c. AD 800–1050) societies in southern Scandinavia.

KEY-WORDS: society, spatial extension, identity-legitimation, southern Scandinavia, Viking Age

This paper focuses on one single aspect of the concept of archaeological culture, or rather, it focuses on one kind of problem in which this concept has been frequently applied, namely, the problem of spatially delimiting ancient societies. This problem evokes questions concerning the character of material culture as well as questions concerning the concept of society.

If we are to study the spatial extension of ancient societies, we have to ask ourselves why we are interested in delimiting societies. Is it some universal need to systematize and classify that makes archaeologists use concepts like “culture” and “society” in order to get an intelligible past? Is the search for ancient societies an anachronistic projection of the nineteenth-century nation-state on the distant past? Or is the delimiting of ancient societies a prerequisite for a more profound understanding of the past?

We must of course be aware of the political use, and misuse, of archaeological studies concerning the spatial extension of ancient societies. Archaeological interpretations concerning who lived where and when have frequently been used to give historical legitimacy to contemporary claims for land and territory.

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Regrettably, this kind of use of the past seems to be experiencing a renaissance in Europe of the 1990s (cf. e.g. Renfrew 1995:157). Having this in mind, it is important to motivate why, from an archaeological point of view, the spatial extension of ancient societies can be of interest.

MOTIVES FOR DELIMITING ANCIENT SOCIETIES

As a result of the theoretical debate within archaeology during the last 10–15 years, the vital importance of the context for the interpretation of material culture has been clearly recognized. The same type of object can be ascribed completely different meanings within different contexts. This realization is also fundamental for what Ian Hodder has called a contextual archaeology (Hodder 1982:217).

The number of contexts which may be relevant to consider for the archaeological interpretation is practically infinite. The contexts involve the ancient past as well as the present time, the individual as well as the *Zeitgeist*, and the single event as well as the structure within which this takes place.

One of the contexts which is of importance for the archaeological interpretation is the context constituted of the ancient society within which a certain object was ascribed meaning. Obviously, not all members of a society share the same opinion about the meanings of all objects. On the contrary, there is a variation between the interpretations made by different individuals and different groups of people within the society. Despite this variation, however, there are also important similarities. These are due to the fact that a society as such is constituted of individuals that share some general ideological conventions (see "The concept of society" below). These common conventions are by definition constant within an individual society at a given time, while they can be expected to vary between different societies. From this point of view the delimiting of ancient societies is a prerequisite for an archaeological interpretation of meanings ascribed to the material culture, since the meanings are dependent on the ideological conventions. The spatial extension also determines which objects are archaeologically relevant to relate to each other. In this sense the spatial delimiting of individual societies can be considered to be a kind of archaeological *contextualization*.

There are also other motives for studying the spatial extension of ancient societies. One is to break the tendency to write a kind of national prehistory governed by the political borders of today. The establishment of archaeology as an academic discipline was closely related to the formation of nation-states during the nineteenth century. The creation and romantization of a common past was an important element in the building of a nation (cf. Trager 1980:24–7; Kristiansen 1993). The routine use of modern national borders as a kind of "natural" delimi-
tation for archaeological studies and exhibitions has for the general public come to confirm and mediate the picture of the timelessness of these borders.

Considering the contemporary development within the European Union, we can in the years to come expect a growing interest in the European identity and an emphasis on a common European past. As a matter of fact, this has already happened; one obvious example is The Council of Europe’s campaign “The Bronze Age: the first golden age of Europe”, which started in 1994 and is planned to end in 1997. This campaign is an evident illustration of the intimate relation between archaeology and politics.

In the past there was a multitude of societies. If we pay more attention to the societies that were relevant to ancient man, we will hopefully be able to avoid some simplified projections of the present on the past.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CULTURES AND ANCIENT SOCIETIES

The usefulness of the concept of archaeological culture for systematizing the source material is clearly shown by the archaeological research-history. It has, however, proved to be very difficult indeed to interpret what the archaeological cultures represent in socio-cultural terms. In my opinion these difficulties are due to the way in which archaeologists have defined cultures.

Traditionally archaeological cultures have been defined by what David Clarke called the polythetic theory. According to this, an archaeological culture should be defined by a number of different artefact-type categories including as many aspects of prehistoric activity as possible, Fig. 1 (Clarke 1978: 246–7). The motive for using this method is that the distribution of single artefact-types can be assumed to overlap the borders of several archaeological cultures. The criterion for identifying an archaeological culture is therefore not supposed to be the occurrence of a single artefact-type. The identification must instead be based on a group of different artefact-types (Clarke 1978: 37, 368).

A well-known example of the polythetic theory is Gordon Childe’s often cited definition from The Danube in prehistory. Childe (1929: v–vi) writes:

“We find certain types of remains – pots, implements, ornaments, burial sites, house forms – constantly recurring together. Such a complex of regularly associated traits we shall term a ‘cultural group’ or just a ‘culture’. We assume that such a complex is the material expression of what today would be called a people.”

Later Childe expressed a growing doubt about the possibilities to determine what kind of socio-cultural units the archaeological cultures represent (Childe 1956: 19), and increasingly considered them to be just taxonomic units.
In my opinion the shortcoming of the traditional concept of archaeological culture is related to the way in which a number of different artefact-types are lumped together to form a common unit. The distribution of these artefact-types can be related to completely different factors, and by bringing them together the uniqueness in distribution of each particular type is lost and thereby also the possibilities to recognize the relevant factors (cf. Hodder 1977:12, 1978:110–1; Cunliffe 1978:10). Instead a taxonomic unit is created the correspondence of which to any kind of ancient unit is very doubtful.

The result of lumping together different artefact-types is a mess of signs, the original meanings of which were probably related to completely different factors. An archaeological culture can, for example, happen to consist of a brooch-type reserved for unmarried women, ceramic vessels restricted to a certain centre of manufacture, a house-type adjusted to regional weather-conditions, and a grave-type reserved for elderly men of high rank. An archaeological culture defined in this way is an analytical construct, and the probability that it coincides with any socio-cultural unit of the past is very small (cf. Shennan 1989:11–14).

The alternative to the polythetical way of defining an archaeological culture in order to delimit ancient societies is to study the distribution of single artefact-types one by one (cf. Cunliffe 1978:10). The reason for such a method is that only some objects can be assumed to have been used to legitimate societal identity. Most objects have not, and are therefore to be found in several different societies (cf. Barth 1969:14; Hodder 1982). The distribution of objects that are used to legitimate societal identity coincides, however, with the spatial extension of the society. This means that the distribution of the identity-legitimating objects ends at the border with neighbouring societies. This kind of discontinuous distribution-pattern and border-effect ought to be possible to detect archaeologically.

Of course, even this alternative method involves considerable problems. There can, for example, be several explanations for a discontinuous distribution-pattern. Therefore, each particular case must be examined in detail and include a discussion
of alternative explanations. We also need to focus on the concept of society, which is as complex as the concept of archaeological culture.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIETY

During recent years it has been repeatedly questioned whether it is at all possible to delimit individual societies, and I think Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley (1987: 209) are right in stating, “There is no such thing as “society”; there can be no abstract and universal definition of society”. This was also the essence of David Clarke’s important remark concerning the difficulties in equating archaeological cultures with historical, political, linguistic or racial entities. Clarke declared (1978: 369) that also the latter are constructed by scholars and therefore in a sense are arbitrary entities. The traditional view of societies as closed units which can be socially and spatially delimited has also been rejected by the British sociologist Michael Mann. In his opinion this concept of society is a scientific construct without any correspondence in the real world (Mann 1986: 1–3).

We can thus conclude that the delimiting of individual societies is dependent on what criteria we choose to define as relevant. In order to carry out analyses which aim at spatially delimiting societies that were relevant to ancient man, however, we are forced to choose criteria. In archaeology the criteria must be based on material culture.

I believe that most people, in the past as well as present, have thought of themselves as members of a society. This means that they share a common identity and consider themselves to be different from others. Factors of importance in the moulding of this identity are recurrent social interaction within the society, common social institutions, a common ideological base and common traditions. Within a society there is also a hierarchy of societal subgroups. The members of these subgroups also have a common identity and they compete with other subgroups for different sort of advantages. These different identities are being communicated and legitimated in several ways.

Why do people at all consider themselves as belonging to different societies or societal subgroups and why do they legitimate these identities? The motives can be sought in two different directions: according to one model the functional aspect is dominant, and according to another the cognitive aspect is most important.

In the functional model the motives for identity-legitimations are connected with the advantages that different identities give rise to. By adjusting the choice of legitimated identity to what is most favourable in a specific situation, the individual can manipulate within what is socially acceptable in order to derive her/his own advantages.
In the cognitive model the motives for identity-legitimations are connected with fundamental mental and knowledge processes. People are assumed to have a need to classify their world in order to grasp it intellectually. By legitimating one's social identity, one's intellectual classification of the world is maintained and confirmed.

The functional and cognitive models need not, however, exclude each other; identity-legitimations can be regarded as an expression of a universal human need to classify, a need which is used in social strategies.

I find the most important criterion for an archaeological delimiting of societies to be ancient man's own conception of her/his identity. In so far as societal identities, consciously or unconsciously, were communicated by material culture, they ought to be archaeologically reconstructable. Also the membership in societal subgroups can have been communicated by material culture and can be used to study the spatial extension of individual societies.

IDENTITY-CLASSIFICATIONS AS THE BASIS FOR DELIMITING INDIVIDUAL SOCIETIES

To be archaeologically demonstrable an identity-classification must fulfil several conditions: it must be legitimated in the material culture, it must be preserved to the present, it must be archaeologically known, and it must exist in such numbers that it is possible to analyse with quantitative methods. Most ancient identity-classifications can consequently be assumed to be inaccessible to archaeology.

How can material identity-legitimations be used to delimit individual societies? To answer this it is necessary to make a distinction regarding the character of the group that has legitimated its identity. Two different alternatives can be distinguished: (i) The group consists of the entire society, and (ii) The group consists of a societal subgroup. On this basis two methods for an archaeological delimiting of individual societies can be formulated: the qualitative direct method and the qualitative indirect method. To these qualitative methods a quantitative method can be added, Fig. 2. The unfilled and filled circles mark contemporaneous remains from two individual societies.

At the top of Fig. 2 a quantitative method for an archaeological delimiting of individual societies is illustrated. The basis for this is the quantitative distribution of material remains in space. The figure shows two agglomerations of artefacts or monuments with an intervening zone without any material remains. These agglomerations are assumed to reflect individual societies. The quantitative distribution can, however, be conditioned by factors other than the spatial extension of
individual societies. The agglomerations can, for example, reflect different settlement areas belonging to the same society. It is therefore always necessary to complement a quantitative delimiting with qualitative variables.

In the middle of Fig. 2 a combination of the quantitative method and a qualitative direct method is illustrated. The quantitative principle is the same as in the former example, but to that a qualitative variable has been added. The basis for this is that the members of the two societies (or of one of them) have legitimated their societal identity by the shaping of some objects in the material culture. This has resulted in a contrast in material culture between the two societies. The basis for this qualitative method is that the material identity-legitimations have aimed at separating members of a given society from members of another, neighbouring society. The identity-legitimation can therefore directly be interpreted in terms of societal affiliation. The qualitative direct method confirms the quantitative delimitation in Fig. 2 (top) and increases the credibility of this.

At the bottom of Fig. 2, a combination of the quantitative method and a qualitative indirect method is illustrated. The quantitative principle is the same as in the two former examples, but as in the last example there is also a qualitative variable. One third of the material remains in the society at the right differ from the remaining two thirds. Within this society different subgroups have legitimated their identities in the material culture. As a secondary effect of this there is, however, also a contrast between the material remains from the two societies. Even if the identity-classifications that are communicated in the material culture did not originally have the purpose of legitimating a societal identity, archaeologically they can have this effect. The basis for the qualitative indirect method is that the material identity-legitimations aimed at separating members of one societal subgroup from members of other subgroups. If the subgroup that legitimates its identity has a continuous spatial distribution

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Fig. 2. The three main principles for an archaeological delimitation of individual societies: quantitative, quantitative + the qualitative direct method, quantitative + the qualitative indirect method (after Burström 1991:47). The unfilled and filled circles mark contemporaneous remains from two individual societies.
in society, however, the spread of this material identity-legitimation will coincide with the spatial extension of the society. Even the identity-legitimation of a societal subgroup can consequently have a society-delimiting effect. The qualitative indirect method confirms the quantitative delimitation in Fig. 2 (top) and increases the credibility of this.

Exactly which objects are ascribed a symbolic meaning as identity-legitimations is determined by culture-historical specific conventions and cannot be archaeologically predicted (cf. Barth 1969: 14). Therefore, the best starting-point for an archaeological analysis that aims at spatially delimiting individual societies is probably to look for spatial variation in the spread of material culture within a limited area. Such a variation can certainly be caused by several factors; one possible factor, however, is that the objects have been ascribed a symbolic meaning as identity-legitimations and have therefore been prevented from becoming more widespread.

A SCANDINAVIAN VIKING AGE EXAMPLE

In order to try to spatially delimit individual societies, an analysis of the distribution of different types of grave-monuments in the province of Småländ, southern Sweden, has been carried out (Burström 1991). Spatial variation in the distribution of different grave-types in this area has been noted before (Einerstam 1965). No attempt has been made, however, to give a cartographical or statistical account of these variations. In the interior of Småländ different grave-types seem to be tied to different areas which, during the Middle Ages (c. AD 1050–1520), constituted separate administrative units (Sw. land). Moreover, the graves are also concentrated to the central parts of the three medieval units of Finnveden, Njudung and Värend, so that in this area it seems possible to practice qualitative as well as quantitative methods for an archaeological delimiting of societies, Fig. 3.

The medieval administrative units of Finnveden, Njudung and Värend, which together constituted the Tiohärad law-district (Sw. lagsaga), may have been a kind of organisational relic of units that earlier were separate societies. According to such a hypothesis, the spatial extension of these medieval units is of great interest for the interpretation of the spatial variations in the distribution of grave-monuments. It can also be mentioned that the province-name – Småländ – literally means “the small countries”.

Another factor of importance is that two of the medieval units, Finnveden and Värend, are mentioned in Viking Age (c. AD 800–1050) runic inscriptions. With the exception of a mention of Finnveden in a runic inscription in the province of Uppland, the other inscriptions are found in the same geographical unit that is
mentioned in the inscription. Finnveden is mentioned in two such inscriptions and Värend in one. In the latter a man is described as an inhabitant of Värend. That a person is classified in this way, as belonging to a geographical unit, is of great interest. It indicates that the medieval units had some societal relevance already in the Viking Age.

The purpose of the analysis carried out was to test whether the distribution of any type of prehistoric grave-monument was tied to a single medieval unit. If such a spatial pattern could be demonstrated it may indicate that these medieval units constituted separate societies before the creation of the medieval Swedish state.
THE ANALYSIS

The data for the analysis consisted of the grave-monuments registered by the survey of ancient monuments, which was carried out by the Central Board of National Antiquities (Sw. *Rikantikvarieämnet*). The analysed area included 669 Economic Map sheets (each sheet covering a 5 x 5 km large area) with a total area of 16,725 square kms, Fig. 4. This area coincides with the medieval units of Finnveden, Njudung and Värend. Within this area the survey of ancient monuments registered 23,381 grave-monuments.

In the analysis, maps showing the distribution of different types of grave-monuments within the analysed area were presented. The maps made it possible to form an opinion on whether any grave-type is tied to a single medieval unit. On the maps the frequencies of each grave-type per Economic Map sheet are presented according to a division into classes. This division is based on the mean value (M)
of graves of each type per Economic Map sheet. The classes which exceed M are presented as filled circles on the maps, and those below this level are presented as unfilled circles.

In the analysis the distribution of the following grave-types were presented: gallery graves, cairns, upright stones, stone circles, square stone-settings, Iron Age dolmens, triangular stone-settings with concave sides, round stone-settings, ship-formed stone circles and stone-settings, oval stone-settings, and mounds.

The analysis demonstrated that two types of grave-monuments generally dated to the Viking Age are connected with separate medieval units. Oval stone-settings are characteristic of Värend while mounds are tied to Finnveden. The mound’s link to Finnveden especially refers to mounds located in cemeteries with a pronounced mound-character.

**Oval stone-settings**

In the analysed area 917 oval stone-settings are registered. This is a rather unfamiliar grave-type and it is rarely found in other parts of Sweden. The oval stone-settings are generally 4–9 m long, 2.5–6 m wide, and consist mainly of an oval stone kerb, Fig. 5. In the short sides there are usually larger stones, which
are sometimes also upright. Some oval stone-settings also have larger, upright stones in the middle of one or both long sides. Most oval stone-settings are orientated north-south.

Only a small number of oval stone-settings have been excavated in Värend and none of these has been thoroughly dated. There are, however, quite a lot of indications that point to a dating to the Viking Age (cf. Burström 1991: 106–9).

The distribution of the oval stone-settings is strikingly concentrated to the central part of Värend, Fig. 6. There are some occasional occurrences in Finnveden and Njudung, but from a quantitative point of view Värend shows a total dominance.

**Mounds**

In the analysed area the total number of registered mounds is 9137. The mound is a well-known grave-type that is frequent in many parts of Sweden.
The mounds have a long chronological span; in the analysed area they have been built for a period of 3000 years, from the late Neolithic to the end of the Viking Age. In order to minimize the chronological span a special group of mounds was discerned; these were mounds located in cemeteries with a profound mound-character. This classification refers to cemeteries which consist of mounds to at least 90%, and the number of mounds in these cemeteries amounts to 6099. These cemeteries are also visually distinct, Fig. 7.

A rather large number of mounds have been excavated in the analysed area. There are therefore good grounds for giving the mounds located in cemeteries with a profound mound-character a general dating to the Viking Age.

The distribution of mounds located in cemeteries with a profound mound-character is strikingly concentrated to the central part of Finnveden, Fig. 8. There are a few occurrences in Värend, still more in Njudung, but from a quantitative point of view Finnveden shows a total dominance.

We can thus conclude that two types of Viking Age grave-monuments – oval stone-settings, and mounds located in cemeteries with a profound mound-character – are tied to two different medieval units, Värend and Finnveden respectively.
This spatial variation cannot be explained by source-critical factors such as obliteration by ploughing, different principles of registration, or shortcomings in the data-base. Nor is the spatial variation caused by regional variation in the occurrence of building material (Burström 1991:111–8). Instead the reasons for the spatial variation must be sought in the Viking Age grave-builders themselves.

DELIMITING VIKING AGE SOCIETIES

The analysis demonstrated that two different types of Viking Age grave-monuments are tied to two different areas which, during the Middle Ages, constituted separate administrative units. This spatial variation coincides with the quantitative distribution of grave-monuments, cf. Fig. 3. The prehistoric graves are concentrated to the central parts of the medieval units and are surrounded by
a zone without grave-monuments. These border-areas were not colonized until the Middle Ages. The spatial variation as well as the quantitative distribution of graves seems to indicate that Finnveden and Värend constituted separate societies during the Viking Age.

According to this interpretation, the reason for the spatial variation between the distribution of mounds located in cemeteries with a profound mound-character and that of oval stone-settings is that these grave-types are tied to separate societies. Within these the grave-types are assumed to have had a symbolic meaning as identity-legitimations, and they have therefore not spread outside their individual society. This interpretation is supported by the quantitative distribution of graves, the spatial distribution of archaeological centre-indications (large mounds, large cemeteries, and some place-names, cf. Burström 1991:132–3), the mention of Finnveden and Värend in Viking Age runic inscriptions, and by the correlation between the archaeological observations and the medieval border between the administrative units of Finnveden and Värend. Also the size of the delimited societies seems reasonable for Viking Age conditions in this area. It was possible to travel on horseback from the geographical centre of each society to its outer edge within the course of a day (cf. Burström 1991:131).

There is, however, an important difference in the way in which mounds and oval stone-settings appear in Finnveden and Värend, respectively. In Finnveden the mounds are the dominant grave-type during the Viking Age. This means that the population in its entirety can be assumed to have legitimated their societal identity by the shape of the grave-monuments (cf. above, the qualitative direct method). The mounds can in this way have created, confirmed and maintained a collective feeling of affinity among the members of society. Through their common identity the population in Finnveden contrasted themselves with members of neighbouring societies.

Against the interpretation of mounds as communicating a Finnveden-identity, is the fact that mounds are also found in many other parts of Sweden and Scandinavia. This illustrates, however, the vital importance of the context for the archaeological interpretation. The same type of object – for example a mound – can, depending on the context in which it appears, have been ascribed completely different meanings. It is likely that while the mounds in Finnveden communicated societal identity, the mounds in other areas communicated something completely different.

In Värend the oval stone-settings can be calculated to amount to approximately 13% of the Viking Age grave-monuments (Burström 1991:143). This means that those who legitimated their identity through oval stone-settings must have constituted a societal subgroup (cf. above, the qualitative indirect method). The oval stone-settings appear in the largest cemeteries and are thus tied to local centres and a class of lords. It is possible that the latter felt a special need to show their distinctive character
at a time when the outside world was characterised by constant struggles for political domination (see below). The grave-monuments can have been important in the legitimating of the subgroup's social and political position within their own society. In this way the oval stone-settings can be an expression of both the political situation outside Värend and internal social strategies.

The reason that grave-monuments were used for legitimating group identity can be related to their great visual accessibility in time and space. They are still – a millennium after their creation – visible at a great distance in the landscape. It is also likely that the relation between the past, present and the future, as represented by graves, was of special importance in the formation of identities.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to understand the historical context in which Finnveden and Värend appear as separate societies, it is necessary to widen the spatial perspective to include southern Scandinavia as a whole. During the Viking Age the Nordic societies were characterised by a constant struggle for power and domination between kings and lords on different levels. The kingdoms shifted in size, with many kings being forced to submit to the supreme domination of other, more powerful kings. Some Danish kings appear to have been especially powerful; indeed, during the first half of the eleventh century Denmark can be described as a veritable "great power". The power of the high kings was mainly based on strong navies.

Because of their geographical position in the interior of southern Sweden, Finnveden and Värend are relatively remote from the coasts where foreign kings with their navies competed for political domination during the Viking Age. It is therefore probable that during the Viking Age Finnveden and Värend managed to maintain a fairly independent position in relation to the outside world. The plausibility of such an assumption is confirmed by the considerable difficulties the Swedish central power had in maintaining its authority in these border provinces during the Middle Ages (cf. Larsson 1975: 76, 218).

During the Viking Age a number of societies were forced to submit to the domination of foreign kings. It is likely that this created a greater need in Finnveden and Värend to show one's distinctive character and presumed independence.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The title of this paper implies that the discussion concerns the reconstruction of the spatial extension of ancient societies. Against this is the fact that all archaeological interpretations are actually constructs made in the present. Although I certainly see
the relevance of such an argument, I still maintain that my interpretation of the spatial extension of Viking Age societies is reconstructive in the sense that I consider these units to have been relevant to Viking Age man.

If I had chosen to study another category of material culture than grave-monuments, or if I had systematized these in another way, I may have found other distribution-patterns. This is a result of the multitude of factors that govern the shaping and distribution of material culture. Some of these other distribution-patterns may also reflect the spatial extension of ancient groups of people. Whether or not these units — or for that matter the ones I have reconstructed above — should be termed societie, however, is indeed a scholarly problem of the present.

REFERENCES


