Identifying the Bronze Age landscape: ideology and settlement organisation in a south-western Swedish river valley

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This paper is a reflection on the relationship between natural and ritual landscapes. The region of interest are the southern parts a river valley, Åtradalen, in south-western Sweden. The archaeological material is Bronze Age houses, graves and cup-marks. In the paper I argue that the characteristic topography of the natural landscape has constituted the development of a specific organisation of society. This organisation is ideologically expressed in burial traditions as well as in how settlements, graves and petroglyphs are repeatedly located in combinations within certain topographical spots in the landscape. The formation of a clearly visible ritual-symbolical landscape, which in my opinion can be determined as the combined essence of a natural and cosmological landscape, provides the necessary means for identification and regeneration of the social organisation over time.

KEY-WORDS: landscape, settlement organisation and location, cosmology, Bronze Age, south-western Sweden.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is on the relation between ideological organisation in Bronze Age society and the natural landscape. Ideology and more specifically, ideological organisation can, in my view, be understood as the overall and normative ideas that determined how all sacral and profane activities were organised and performed within society, on an individual as well as collective level. Ideological organisation can thus be regarded almost as synonymous with mythology in the sense that it hosts and includes vital moral values, and functions as a normative system that defined how all activities were carried out. As a result, the ideological organisation of society also determined how sacral rituals, in this case burials, petroglyph production and votive offerings, were traditionally designed in the landscape.

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Fig. 1. The province of Halland in south-west Scandinavia. The southern parts of the valley of Åtran is marked with a circle. The river stretches from central Västergötland.
The archaeological context that is of interest can in the simplest way be described as a number of singularly located settlements that each one has played a part in a larger network and socio-economical organisation in a river valley during period III–VI. A settlement is recognised as the combined location of a farm and topographically suitable spots for burial grounds, offerings and petroglyphs.

My purpose is to exemplify how a population, within a certain natural landscape—a river valley with clear natural boundaries—and within a likewise certain set of ritual traditions, expressed ideology in settlement organisation. The ideological organisation of the local river valley society was in my opinion deeply rooted and composed around a single farm settlement system, and through the traditions in construction and localisation of grave monuments, petroglyphs (cup-marks) and votive deposits, the traditions were transformed into a physically visible cultural and ritual landscape. A ritual landscape that developed in close correspondence to the structure of settlement organisation and in a wider range therefore also in correspondence with the very characteristic topography and geology of the natural surroundings.

The natural landscape consists of the river Ätran and its surrounding systems of river branches and valleys in south-western Sweden. By shaping the landscape not only in functionalist and rationalist means, but creating and visualising an idea, a mythological landscape that reflected social organisation and served as a ritual tool for the identification of ideology and cosmology, the necessary means and possibilities for regeneration of the socio-political structure as a whole was provided and sustained over time.

The concept of, and relation between, the natural landscape and the formation of ritual landscapes has been frequently discussed in post-processual tradition during the last ten years. Emanating from sociology and anthropology theories on social space and ritual behaviour have been applied in contextual studies of prehistoric landscapes. These studies have contributed to a widening research view on landscapes as archaeological concepts (for example Barrett 1990, 1994, Bradley 1993, Tilley 1994). In a contextual tradition, physical landscapes can be labelled as terms of holistic values that can be separated into many different levels of meaning and understanding (for example Jennbert 1993, Tilley 1997: 161–162, Hingley 1997).

THE VALLEY OF ÄTRAN

As the headline states, my interest is in the specific bronze age-context of Ätran. A wide and beautiful river surrounded by hundreds of characteristic formations and localities in the natural landscape that in prehistory as well as today carried their specific symbolic meanings. In the present we can still sense the prehistoric symbolic meaning through ancient place-names.
Close to the river were up until 19th century large wetlands and large heaths, and these were interrupted by spectacular and strangely formatted mountaintops and surrounded by narrow and very sandy ridges. In the moraine slopes we find large erratic boulders with cup-marks and in the forests there are lots of bogs and small circular meres, and in some of those, hoards have been found in the 19th century. In a valley like this there are of course hundreds of different localities that has carried their specific symbolical and historical meaning in the past. The valley can as a whole be looked upon as a very large set of localities, that each one of them contained a meaning of social and ritual value, and the understanding of the complex symbolical relationship between these localities constituted the ritual landscape of the entire section of this river valley. This means that the part of interest here, an area that is approximately 25 x 10 kilometres large, should be percepted as an assembly of ritual and social values that combined can be labelled as an identity of regional representation. The landscape can be divided into different levels of understanding that emanates from the relations between localities. The singular settlement and its immediate surroundings can be labelled as a restricted and local natural landscape containing values that are singularly and intimately connected to the specific population in that settlement. The landscape could be looked upon as a large set of small household-related ritual landscapes consisting of a farm, a burial ground a petroglyph area and a traditionally suitable spot for offerings. In combination the amount of differently organised settlements create the cultural landscape of the valley.

The southern parts of Åtran is situated in the county of Halland in southwestern Sweden (Falkenberg municipality). The river is one of the major watercourses in south-western Sweden. From its springs in the central parts of Västergötland it stretches approximately 170 kilometres in a mainly south-western direction. It runs along the western side of the Smalandic Highlands and further south it flows into Kattegatt after having passed through the open and nowadays almost fully cultivated central parts of Halland. The river thus stretches through a very much varied natural landscape, from the springs in Västergötland, through the dense woodlands of the highlands, before it reaches the open coastland in Halland. In the open and almost fully cultivated landscape near the coast the river runs through a very fertile and in the spring wet lowland. Geologically the lowlands consists of a ground of densely packed clay. These wetlands are mainly used for pasture, nowadays as well as in prehistory. Some hundred meters away from the river the geology and topography turns into a landscape that is characterised by sandy hills and moraine slopes. This is where bronze age settlements primarily are found. Grave monuments are in the same way characteristically located to the brows of the ridges and mountains that demarcates the valley. The valley was surrounded, and still is, by large forests and connecting lake systems,
which provided possibilities for an almost endless colonisation of new territories in the higher inland throughout bronze- and preroman iron age (FURINGSTEN 1985, CONNELID ET AL. 1993, WEILER 1994). The wide and long river valley has in all epochs provided people with the best possible lands for pastoralism and crop-raising, hunting and fishing—excellent opportunities to support a population. The river itself, and the large systems of roads and paths closely connected to it, has since the Neolithic period served as one of the main routes of communication also in an overregional perspective—the communicating and exchange of ideas, trade goods, prestige items, as well as an entrance for hostile armies and terrible diseases.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

Artefacts found in monuments and bogs makes it evident that the area already in period II took active part in an overregional exchange network of ceremonial prestige goods like axes, swords and daggers (Montelius 1869:62–68, 1917: nr 870, 873, 1203, 1212, 1476, OLDEBERG 1974, BAUDO 1960, LARSSON 1984). In a regional perspective there is a clear concentration of prestige objects from period III–VI in the valley. The distribution of grave monuments and petroglyphs show an even more significant concentration to the valley and its side branches. The massive concentrations of very large grave monuments—cairns, mounds and stone settings—all located in carefully chosen and quite spectacular topographical positions along the ridges that surrounds the valley, makes it clear, even for present-day visitors, that the monuments embodied essential and complex sacral as well as profane symbolical functions within the organisation of society (HERNEK 1994, ÅNGEBY 1994b, ARTELIIUS 1994b, ARTELIIUS AND ARCI 1996, GERDIN 1997). Due to its location, and being a link between the Danish islands and the central parts of Götlaland, the valley most certainly played a crucial transitional part in political, economical and ideological sense. Through the representation of chronologically typical artefact categories, grave monuments, building constructions and votive deposits, the valley, although its Nordic altitude, formed a remote part within a European cultural context. In shared sacral traditions with southern regions we can define Åtradalen as an actor within an overregional Central European cultural context.

If we are to discuss the relation between “man and landscape” in a certain region we must recognise different levels of mental orientations towards that landscape. The physical organisation of a visible ritual landscape is a materialisation, a formation process, that in all its utter cultural complexity intertwines local traditions and overregional influence of both sacral and more profane character at the same time. Åtradalen show signs of an overregional as well as locally acquired
structure of traditions and social organisation present at the same time. The composition and nature of the votive deposits in bogs, lakes and streams, the symbols used in burial contexts and the symbolic expressions in petroglyph areas clarify an overregional influence in sacral traditions and religious ritual. The artefacts and the votive deposits and the large mounds might as well have been found in southern Jutland. The resemblance in the symbolic expressions are that closely related. In the valley graves, settlements, votive deposits and petroglyphs are found in separate topographical sections and locales in the landscape. There has been a clear tradition of which topographical spots to use in the natural environment for a given purpose. Ridges and mountaintops were symbolically useful localities for the construction of grave monuments, boulders on a certain distance from the farms were suitable for petroglyphs. In some remote areas of the valley, where no settlements seem to have been located there are concentrations of cup-mark panels to be found. Small river branches, secluded meres and small bogs were equally suitable spots for offerings.
THE GRAVE MONUMENTS

To be able to at least reflect on the nature between the natural landscape, the settlement system and the creation of a visible ritual landscape, an understanding of the burial traditions, and especially the grave monuments is necessary. The graves and the burials in many ways reveal information that gives us the possibility for an interpretation of the whole system of settlement organisation within a region.

The bronze age grave monuments are exteriorly of three different kinds in the valley – barrows, cairns and stone settings. The large barrows are constructed of grass turf and soil over a centrally positioned cairn of round stones. The diameter of the barrows are usually between 17 and 30 meters, and they are most often found in the open parts of today’s cultural landscape. In contrast to cairns the barrows appear in close spatial relation to settlement areas of the same periods, actually they are often located in the settlements or positioned in rows that surrounds the central settlement area (Artelius and Arcini 1996:20, Carlie 1992:13). The barrows contain several burials, advocated around a primary and centrally located grave. Often the oldest burial is a Neolithic gallery grave. The secondary burials are effected in a pattern that is the same throughout the region during period II–V. Cremation is almost general from period III, and the cremated bones are put in small stone cists in the southern part of the barrows. It is likely to ascertain that the burials are performed in a tradition pattern throughout the whole of this 700 years long period (Lundborg 1972, Jennbert 1993). The burials in each barrow form a typological and chronological sequence, and it is likely to assume that an ancestral cult and a concept of “social time” here is present and expressed (Jennbert 1993, Mizoguchi 1990 et al.) The fact that the bronze age barrows more often than cairns and stone settings are constructed on older late Neolithic burials is interesting. The tradition to reuse Neolithic grave monuments, although these Neolithic burials and graves were conducted in an entirely different manner from the Bronze Age tradition, implies that the worship of ancestors has been quite important and significant throughout the bronze age. The reusing of Neolithic monuments also means that the decision on localisation of barrows, in comparison to stone settings and cairns, was not actually taken in the Bronze Age.

The second type are the large cairns, constructed out of carefully chosen stone material (Figs 2–3). Often they have a diameter that exceeds 25 meters. Cairns, although they are chronologically equivalent to the mounds, are located to a different topographical situation in the landscape. They are not found in the open lowlands, even if stone material for construction is quite available also in the open lands. Topographically they are located to mountaintops and ridges – in very spectacular and carefully chosen points in the landscape from where you have
Fig. 3. On the mountains that surround and demarcates the valley large cairns constructed by carefully chosen stone material were built in likewise carefully chosen topographical and geographical spots in the natural landscape. Photo: R. Hernek (from Hernek 1994: 10).

a very good view over the surrounding territory and other cairns. The distribution of the cairns form a very clear pattern of long rows on the ridges and mountains that provides a frame and demarcates the territory of the valley as a whole. Generally they are not found close to settlements. The cairns do not very often contain burials from the Neolithic period. This means that the location, in a higher degree than is the case with the barrows, is the result of an organisational decision related to a specific Bronze Age phenomenology of landscapes. Cairns are constructed primarily during period I–IV.

The third type is large and most often quite shallow stone settings. This monument category shows a much more heterogeneous chronological variation as well as there are great construction variations within the group. These stone settings are often more than 15 meters wide and not more than 30 cm high above the ground. The form is most often circular, but there are also rectangular, quadratic and triangular stone settings from the Bronze Age in this region. They appear in two different typical locations in the landscape. Primarily they are solitarily situated in remote parts of today’s forests. The second location is in a close spatial and almost schematically repeated relation to the settlements. These
stone settings are smaller and they contain several burials in a chronological sequence that often matches the chronology of the settlement. The three main categories of grave monuments of the period seem to have differentiated symbolical values according to their localisation in both the natural landscape and in relation to the bronze age settlements, the cultural landscape.

The petroglyphs in the valley are all non-figurative and they almost exclusively contain cup-marks. These appear in two topographical locales; on boulders within settlements and on rock faces in the higher terrain and often in close relation to cairns and stone settings. It is also evident that concentrations of cup-marks appear in some remote areas in the valley where it is not likely that settlements have been located.

COSMOLOGY AND SETTLEMENT ORGANISATION

In the following I will exemplify how the settlements in the valley can be divided into two main categories concerning their organisation in the natural landscape. In this diversion we are able to reach an understanding of the nature of relation between the manifestation of locally formatted traditions in the natural landscape on the one hand and the impact that overregional influence has had on sacral traditions and settlement/landscape organisation on the other hand. In the following a settlement is determined as the combined complex of a farm with traditionally suitable spots in the landscape for a burial ground, petroglyph area and offerings.

A vast quantity of excavations have been undertaken in Halland during the last 30 years by the County Museum (situated in Halmstad) and the Central Board of National Antiquities. Since the late 1960s approximately 90 bronze age burials in 50 cairns, stone settings and barrows and about 35 settlements with remains of bronze age houses, pits and/or other features have been excavated only in the valley (Lundborg 1985, Carlie 1992, Ångeby 1994a, Artelius and Arcini 1996). Due to disturbances from younger settlement phases and modern ploughing clear structures of houses have been scarce. Only 5 settlements with well preserved remains of typical three-aisled long houses have been recorded in the valley, and in all cases it is likely to ascertain that these have been the remains of singularly situated farmsteads (Ångeby 1992, Artelius 1994a, 1994b, Bramstång and Artelius 1997). More complex settlement structures consisting of several clustered and well preserved long houses from the period has been registered and excavated only at Brogard, near Halmstad, some 50 kilometres further to the south from Ätran (Carlie 1992).

The excavated settlements indicates that the economical system in the valley primarily was organised in a system of single farms that were located to sandy
moraine soils, preferably in slopes facing south, and in close vicinity to the main river or one of its main branches. In relation to these single farms larger settlements were located to certain communicative central spots in the natural landscape. The settlements can thus be divided into two levels, the single farm and the larger and in communicative terms more central settlements.

The smaller settlement, consisting of one farmstead, is always found in close relation to a burial ground. These burial grounds most often consists of only one or two visible monuments, and they are almost always stone settings, not cairns or barrows. They have been shown to contain as many as 7 individual burials, and in many examples the burials stretch over such a long period of time that the burial traditions have changed dramatically during that time, but the burials are still organised within the same monument, in close relation to the settlement area, but never within the settlement. The monuments are most often located to a small hill some 100–200 meters away from the farm. This is a pattern that is traceable throughout the whole valley during period III–V. The grave monuments are then
Fig. 5. This oversimplified drawing shows how the settlements throughout the valley repeatedly are located and organised in the same way in a certain pattern. Close to the river we find the pastures, and in some examples votive deposits have been recorded. On the sandy moraine the house is constructed and on the tops of the ridges cup-marks and graves are located. Drawing by Anders Andersson.

found in rows along the ridges and it is likely to assume that each monument symbolically represented one farm, or one household. In period III–V we assume that the settlements have been organise in a large number of singularly operating farms. In direct relation to the farms the likewise singularly distributed grave monuments and a panel or boulder with 2–20 cup-marks appear repeatedly in positions in the natural landscape that expressed a symbolical meaning of sacral character. The single farm is thus accompanied by the single grave and the singularly positioned cup-marks in certain topographical spots. The formation and natural limits of the landscape creates in the end an ideological organisation related to the single farm system that is expressed in the profane as well as in the sacral sphere of society.

The second example are settlements that are located into areas which in both geographical, topographical and communicative aspects must be identified as central places within the region. In these settlement areas the traditional, and mythologically defined, distribution pattern of grave monuments, boulders with petroglyphs and votive deposits suddenly is totally changed. In these by the natural landscape defined central areas, where to rivers meet or there is an extremely large, fertile and well drained sandy plateau, we find concentrations of barrows in relation
Fig. 6. The models show the 3 main types of settlement organisation that has been recorded in the valley – the traditional settlement consisting of a long house and a stone setting for burials (1). These single farms have repeatedly been found in rows along the river. And the connected grave monuments – most often stone settings – are organised in the same way, as a symbolical resemblance of the settlement system (2). The third example shows a larger and in my interpretation a settlement of regional importance. In this case barrows and petroglyphs are situated around and within the habitation area of the settlement, which means that the graves and the petroglyphs are located in a way that has an overregional rather than locally regional identity and significance. The traditional pattern of locating the graves and petroglyphs in certain characteristic topographical spots in the natural landscape has been abandoned, the symbolical expressions are brought inside the settlement – The main expressions of sacral traditions, the graves and petroglyphs, are located, and symbolically used in the more profane milieu of the central settlement (3).

Drawing by Anders Andersson. The circles and triangles are graves.

to the settlement instead of stone settings. It is fair to postulate that barrows, in comparison to cairns and stone settings, to a higher degree can be used to define central settlements that has played a part in a regional or overregional social system. From a processual standpoint we could argue that the barrows define settlements of regional interest that has played a central and complex role in the social and economical organisation of the entire valley – mainly because of its close vicinity to important communicative points in the natural landscape and the burials in the barrows are to be considered as the remains of high-status funerals – and the tradition of constructing barrows can be related to regions as the Danish isles and
central Europe – and it is reasonable to interpret that the barrow builders themselves to a higher degree identified themselves not in the ideological organisation that has its traditional roots in the valley, but as a part of a larger region. The distribution of barrows in the valley reflects the presence of an overregional
ideology which is chronologically parallel with the single farm system that is traditionally connected primarily to cairns and stone settings.

The distribution of the three types of grave monuments, the barrows, the cairns and the stone settings thus show a certain pattern in relation to the settlements that demands different levels of explanation. It is evident that large barrows, and more specific concentrations of larger barrows in burial grounds, is situated in close relation to the larger settlements (Lundborg 1972, 1985, Carlie 1994, Artelius and Arcini 1997) In the valley these concentrations of larger barrows are found in topographical points that has been of great communicative interest along the river, and it is fair to argue that these settlements, surrounded by barrows, has played a central part of regional interest in socio-political and economical way in the valley during the period. In the same way it is possible to argue that stone settings are more frequently registered in association to minor settlements that in my interpretation has been consisting of a single farm. These settlements are more heterogeneously located in the whole valley. Cairns have primarily been constructed in very spectacular spots in the landscape, preferably in long rows on the tops of mountains and ridges in such a way that they create a pattern that limits the valley as a whole.

The distribution and organisation of settlements reflect the distribution of graves in a very structured way in the valley – as we have seen this reflection of course also could be looked upon the other way around – that is, the settlement pattern reflects the distribution of other monuments as graves and petroglyphs. It is also evident that there is a deep cultural identity linked to the choice of which grave monument that is constructed – and how these monuments are exposed in the natural and ideological structure of the landscape – and in relation to settlement areas. The overall ideological organisation of society – that is the normative mythology and the socio-political system that the mythology by its constant repeating in rituals regenerate – in the end create landscapes that can be identified at many different levels. I have tried to exemplify – with the use of the traditional single farm situation in a remote south-western river valley – that the basic level is one that could be detected and described as locally achieved. In our Åtradalen-case the tightly structured pattern which connects the organisation of the single farm system and the likewise singularly located stone settings appears to be such a local ideological organisation pattern, created a symbolical representation which was suitable in this characteristic natural landscape. In this tradition we also find that votive deposits, large cairns and most evidently the cup-mark-petroglyphs repeatedly are situated at certain characteristic points in the natural landscape – This system of the single farm has its symbolical expression in the burials – burials that follow a certain typological and chronological pattern within the grave monuments for a period of over 600 years. In my interpretation what we
Fig. 8. The settlement at Sannagard in Åtrakalen is located to a wide and far-stretching ridge in the north of the discussed area. The settlement area which is large, 200 x 300 meters, and it is surrounded by large barrows (marked with arrows) on the three sides that do not face the river. Within the settlement area boulders with cup-marks have been found and votive offerings have been organised in a small bog 3 km south-east from the settlement area. This has been a central settlement containing a large number of households and it is fair to postulate that the identification of the settlement is regional rather than local. The symbolical expressions in the graves, petroglyphs and votive offerings are taken out of the local tradition concerning their localisation and appearance in relation to the settlement. From Artelius and Arcini 1996: 29.
face is how the ideological organisation of society — expressed in burial traditions, votive deposits and petroglyph panels — serve as a means to regenerate the social and economical system that is expressed in the single farm system — and in the unique formation of this beautiful natural landscape the society as a whole and the individual household both express and find constant confirmation in the rightfulness of this mythologically anchored way of living.

In the same tradition certain settlements, that are centrally placed in a natural communicative landscape — can be identified as parts of a larger regional and overregional cultural context. This identification is expressed in the construction of barrows instead of cairns and stone settings and through the bringing of large grave monuments, petroglyphs and votive deposits into the settlement itself. To a larger extent this focus in location, and abandonment of the traditions of where to locate graves and petroglyphs, of the main and symbolically strong means of identification into the settlement seems as a natural way to express prestige, rank and status in order to uphold a position in a larger regional network that is based on socio-economical matters. And basically also in these settlements the natural landscape by its formation creates the possibility to uphold the regional social organisation.

The purpose of this paper has been to relate two different kinds of, but simultaneously operating “ritual landscapes” in a river valley. From some examples I postulate that the traditional settlement system in the valley was organised in a single farm system, and intimately connected to these farms were suitable topographical locations for the household burial ground and petroglyph production. This system has created a symbolical — ritual — landscape, that even nowadays gives a very strict impression concerning the necessity to use spots in the natural landscape in a very traditional way that clearly identified the presence of an ideological organisation — a mythology — in operation. This traditional ideological pattern of the single-farm, the single-grave, the single petroglyph panel and the single-votive offering seems even more fixed in comparison to the few larger settlements that were identified within a regional or even overregional network and ritual landscape. In these cases large barrows and petroglyphs are found within the settlement — a way of using sacral traditions that rather expresses and underlines the presence of a hierarchical socio-political organisation.

REFERENCES


