

## Review articles

# Two perspectives on Iron Age southern Scandinavia

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LOTTE HEDEAGER. *Iron Age myth and materiality: an archaeology of Scandinavia AD 400–1000*. xxx+286 pages, 93 illustrations. 2011. Abingdon: Routledge; 978-0-415-60602-8 hardback £80; 978-0-203-82971-4 e-book; 978-0-415-60604-2 paperback £24.99.

FRANDS HERSCHEID. *The Early Iron Age in South Scandinavia: social order in settlement and landscape* (Uppsala University Occasional Papers in Archaeology 46). 450 pages, 124 colour & b&w illustrations. 2009. Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet; 978-91-506-2117-4 hardback.



In this Scandinavian duet, on the earlier and later Iron Age, two distinctive voices can be heard. As Hedeager's and Herschend's books are both very comprehensive, I cannot give credit here to all the ideas and conclusions exposed

there. Instead, I shall select interpretations which I find either good, or bad or challenging. The authors' approaches are quite different: while Hedeager is close to the post-processual school, Herschend is . . .

## Later Iron Age

Lotte Hedeager's book on Late Iron Age Scandinavia is divided into five parts devoted to mythical narratives, identity and origins, 'otherness', places and landscape, the fifth and final part being 'The making of Norse mythology'. The author's main purpose is to broaden and deepen our understanding of Norse cosmology

and mentality, rather than expose how societies functioned in Scandinavia between AD 400 and 1000. Using a variety of early written sources, she selects aspects such as religious practices, sexuality, human-animal relations or man-woman relations. The book also tries to explain the major structural changes in Norse society during the fifth–sixth centuries AD, though this is limited to southern Scandinavia.

The written sources (the Poetic Edda, the Icelandic sagas and Continental historical writers) and what they can tell us about Old Norse society are key to Hedeager's argument. Several myths and narratives of Old Norse literature are found in the material culture from the fifth century onwards, showing that the stories, told for example by Snorre Sturluson, were indeed known in large parts of Scandinavia. On the other hand, even more stories not found in the texts can be told from artefacts; one guesses that the texts only show the tip of a mythological iceberg. Can we ever, based on the archaeological record alone, recreate a lost myth or story?

The archaeological record shows that radical changes took place in the material culture during the period of transformation of the middle of the first millennium. In terms of style, it is exhibited by changes from Roman belt mounts with animal ornament to Salin's Style I with animal (and human) ornament covering the entire surface of the artefacts, which, as an old Swedish professor sarcastically expressed, is "Scandinavia's only contribution to World Art"! The use of animal style continued with Salin's style II during the Merovingian period and the many Viking Age styles. In shaping a new identity, new iconographic messages and style helped in the creation and legitimation of power, as Hedeager argues convincingly. She concludes that the Style I linked the warrior elites together during the Migration period, and during the Merovingian period, when

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the new kingdoms were established, Style II came to symbolise shared identity and close bonds between them.

Hedeager rightly states that animals were an important part of the new Norse cosmology. The gods and some humans could metamorphose into different animals and could also communicate with animals. This is an old and universal element in human thought, nevertheless enhanced in the material culture of the Migration period, compared to previous periods in South Scandinavia. Hedeager sees the use of the animal as an intentional mythological message of shared identity and destiny. She also discusses the character of animals in the myths (e.g. snake, eagle, raven, wild boar, wolf and bear) and notes that they frequently appear in male names as well as in styles during the Migration and Viking periods. From this she concludes: 1) Humans are rendered in animal form and human faces are incorporated into animal figures; 2) Hybrids (man/animal) are a clear indication that we must change our ontological assumptions regarding the 'natural' classification of humans *vs.* animals; 3) The bird, snake and aggressive and powerful mammals are recurring characters, sometimes united in one figure, sometimes also combined with a human; this is upheld through the Viking Age; 4) The animals are inseparable from the warrior elite; and 5) There are no domestic animals, except stallions. These conclusions serve to highlight the mentality of the warrior elites who sought to emphasise the characteristics of wild, aggressive and dangerous animals.

Hedeager touches upon a favourite subject of the 1970s—sexuality, and its role in religion and politics. The religious role of sexuality is well known in Old Norse literature and to some degree in the archaeological material. How the *political* consequences of sexuality were maintained during the Iron Age I did however not quite understand from the text. The gender theme discussed here is mainly relevant when talking of women who dress and fight like men, but elsewhere one can interpret differently the cup and staff symbols on the gold foils which Hedeager picks out as female attributes. She considers them female because of the many *Valkyrie* scenes found on picture stones and portable art, but these symbols could equally be attributed to men, like *erilaR*, kings or cult leaders. The rare aristocratic weapon-less graves with sceptres and drinking horn/glasses may represent that element of the aristocracy.

Magical powers and character are also considered in the figure of the Iron Age smith. Here, when referring to bones found in a hearth, Hedeager however loses touch with archaeological reality. In an elegant, but probably wrong, interpretation, she proposes that the mixing of bones in the forging process had a deeper symbolic meaning. If the bones of an admired, strong and aggressive animal or warrior were put in the hearth, their spirit would be passed on to the artefact, for example a sword or a spear. In the best-preserved smithy in Scandinavia, fifth-century AD Gene in Central Norrland, there were plenty of charred bones, some burnt into the slag, in one of the hearths. The bones were from sheep/goat, i.e. as far removed from heroic warriors and powerful animals as is possible. The purpose of the bones in the hearth was to create a phosphor-rich steel, either for pattern welding or, more probably, to harden the edges of knives.

The author also discusses the 'old new' theme of landscape and central places. Since quite a few central places have been excavated in Scandinavia in recent decades the discussion around their meaning and function has escalated. Such sites include Uppåkra, Gudme, Sorte Muld, Helgö and Högom for the Roman Iron Age–Migration period and Birka, Kaupang, Lejre, Tissö and Borre for the Late Iron Age. Depending on period, they have different functions of course, but the older ones represent centres for a regional aristocratic power, with large halls and luxury artefacts. Hedeager takes Gudme (Home of God) as an example of how the landscape was ordered according to the model of the mythological Asgård. Four kilometres east (not west) of Gudme lies the coastal site of Lundegård, with workshop residues and imported artefacts, probably some kind of trading site. At Møllegårdsmarken, between Gudme and Lundeborg, there is one of the largest cemeteries in Denmark and west of Gudme there is a little lake without sacrificial finds. There are also three (for Denmark huge!) mountains: Albjerg (Holy Hill, 77m asl), Gudbjerg (God's Hill, 93m) and Galbjerg (Gallows Hill, 102m) south, west and north of Gudme respectively. Hedeager models these elements onto Asgård, where the long hall at Gudme is Gladshem, which was the cosmological centre and where Odin had his high seat. Directly north of the large hall at Gudme other excavated dwellings represent, according to the model, Valhall, where Odin's (fallen) warriors lived. The stream Tange Å leads from Gudme to Lundborg and on its way it passes Hel, i.e. the large cemetery of

Möllegårdsmarken. Lundeberg on the coast, close to the mouth of Tange Å, is a place liminal to the outside world of chaos, i.e. Utgård. It is undoubtedly the case that the Gudme complex is of the utmost importance for the region during the Roman Iron Age and the elements used by Hedeager to test the correspondences between Asgård and Gudme are very elegantly discussed. But this model should be tested in other places to ascertain whether applicable there too.

In the long-standing debate over the changes that took place in the Migration period, to which practically no reference is made, Hedeager advocates that it was a new group of outside rulers who took over 'Scandinavia'—the Huns! As this theme ends the book, one gets the impression that she considers it also as her most important contribution to the cultural history of Scandinavia. This is understandable, because of its controversial nature and the extensive criticism she has received earlier for that opinion. Most energy is spent on showing how the Huns played a crucial role for 'Scandinavian' society during the Migration period: they were kings in Scandinavia; they invented Salin's Style I; they were portrayed on relief brooches and Attila was Odin! When the new Hunnic kings took over, they built large mounds in their *kyrgan* tradition. The mounds as a phenomenon goes back to the Neolithic and over time there were periods with more mounds than at other times, but to say that they are an invention or idea of the Hunnic kings in Scandinavia during the fourth–fifth centuries is plain wrong. There are several Iron Age examples of large tumuli older than the 'Huns in Scandinavia' demonstrating a quite different tradition of erecting huge monuments in the landscape. Concerning the large halls of the leaders, they are mostly built in a three-aisled technique used since the Early Bronze Age in southern Scandinavia and never used by the Huns.

The presence of Huns in leading roles in Scandinavia must be shown in the archaeological remains. Material testimonies are weak and open to different interpretations. They comprise finds of open-ended earrings of gold (and silver) and a few bronze mirrors, most of which were found in Denmark. It has been questioned whether all these artefacts belong to the Hunnic period, but in my opinion this does not matter as another interpretation better fits the picture: since the earrings in question are mostly single finds in Scandinavia but on the Continent they occur in female graves, it is more plausible to interpret them

as a sign of cross-marriages. Scandinavian warriors participated in wars with the Huns and probably also brought brides home, especially to Denmark. The bronze mirrors are absent outside Denmark, except for a questioned artefact from Old Uppsala's East Mound. Hedeager adds further similarities between Hunnic and Scandinavian findings: dry land sacrifices (Sösdala type); ceremonial dress resembling caftans; short belted tunics; saddle types; arrow types; etc. Most of these elements also fit the 'joined armies' interpretation but in reality we know too little of earlier examples of tunics and saddles, i.e. regional changes in outfits, to draw conclusions.

## Earlier Iron Age

Frands Herschend's book deals with earlier times, the Early Iron Age up to the Migration period. Its seven chapters are about ordered space, the author's main concern being the presentation of new analyses of material from South Scandinavia excavated mostly long ago. Herschend also clearly defines what he means by South Scandinavia, which is important.

Herschend starts off with graves. He mentions the well-known and oft-discussed deficit in graves for an original Iron Age population and considers three scenarios: a) that children are often completely missing and that the ashes of others were scattered; b) irregularity in burial practices, i.e. that in certain areas and during certain periods there were simply no graves dug or built; and c) poor preservation conditions. In my own area of study, Central Norrland, there is a relatively simple relationship between settlement and graves: during the first millennium AD, 90 per cent of the graves belonging to a farm are found within 100m of the settlement. Herschend however additionally finds nine different ways of siting graves, demonstrating that there was enormous regional and chronological diversity in the ways of dealing with the dead. From numerous well-presented cases, Herschend concludes that making a burial manifest signifies a *reflexive identification* between grave and settlement, because they mirror each other and constitute a place. Further, that the graves or cemeteries define or enhance a *border zone*: graves were needed in Iron Age society to inscribe the historical heritage of the place in question.

Herschend's examination of cemeteries leads him to identify different groupings (themes), like children (rarely), gender, family, orientation or social status;

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these can also be related (e.g. children and gender) and can be followed over the short or long term. Concerning the richer graves, especially in southern Jutland, there appears to be a clear link between the establishment of successful, dominant farms and two peaks in richly-furnished graves. The peaks also coincide with the changes that took place within the Roman Empire, perhaps not surprisingly since the Romans penetrated as close as 200–300km south of Jutland. For Herschend, the Roman world plays an essential role in the changes that affected South Scandinavia, a view I would certainly endorse.

Next, the author discusses the abandonment of houses by asking whether houses were burnt down on purpose and whether they were buried and the artefacts deliberately left behind in a kind of house grave. This is of course quite speculative, although there are examples of deliberately burnt-down houses (e.g. Görding) or of houses emptied and supplied with artefact offerings. If Herschend is right, some burnt-down houses would therefore not reflect the activities that normally took place in the house, counter to the argument in favour of ‘fossil’ house evidence. South Scandinavia, where examples of ‘fossil’ houses are very few, is, in my opinion, not best suited for such a discussion when elsewhere, for example in most of Norway and Central Norrland, there are much better examples. There the norm is that burnt-down houses contain more artefacts than abandoned and unburnt ones. I find it unlikely that houses should be prepared before burning. Herschend also refers to a change in tradition concerning the abandonment of houses. In the Early Pre-Roman Iron Age houses were deliberately buried and new houses not built on top of the older ones. From the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age onwards the new house was built on top of the old one, but the floor of the old one was sealed and some artefacts were left intentionally. Herschend states that there is no purpose in covering the floor with earth, an odd statement since there are hundreds of practical reasons to renew a floor in a house.

Herschend’s quest for order is also shown in his approach to analysing settlement structure, which includes examining landscape elements like hillocks or wetlands which were significant for the inhabitants of a settlement area or ‘*Siedlungskammer*’. The comparison between the fenced village at Hodde and the surrounding landscape is intriguing: comparing the plan of Hodde (c. 120m across) with an old map of the productive landscape delimited by wetlands

(c. 1200m across) Herschend finds the forms very much the same! The similarity in configuration (at a scale of 1:10) is, in his view, no coincidence. If the pattern is recurring, I am prepared to agree, but until then I reserve judgement; not that I believe Iron Age people incapable of such engineering, just that I cannot see the point of it.

The analysis of a number of excavated sites, especially in Denmark, reveals—in impressive detail supported by excellent diagrams—the transformations the settlements, houses and assemblages underwent over time. The collective nature of the Pre-Roman Iron Age, with settlements set up as “a model of simplicity and IKEA mentality”, changed during the first half of the first millennium AD: the first larger farms inside fenced villages appear, which in turn are fenced off. Byre-less houses (not present earlier) outside the village fence, and dependent on the farms inside the fence, are a sign of social stratification, possibly the first example of the existence of families without private property. In the Roman Iron Age the collective fence is replaced by individual fenced farms of different sizes and more outhouses (implying surplus production). The byre-less houses linked to the larger farms with byres “must be seen as the larger farms’ needs for herdsmen or craftsmen” in Herschend’s view. He concludes that certain professions, not connected to agriculture, were able to form households. Finally, during the Late Roman Iron Age and Migration period central places with halls, stewards and serfs appear. The hall settlements, like Gudme on Funen and Uppåkra in Scania, are seen to represent the centre of power over a region or realm. The hall-owner could control several estates and the hall settlements therefore became targets for conquest, because it meant access to several estates.

This work, deeply anchored in empirical data, is a most intriguing *archaeological* publication. The material, conclusions and discussions are too numerous to discuss here. The analyses of settlement material are in many cases new and creative, leading to conclusions about specific functions and processes mainly at local and regional levels. This is South Scandinavian regional archaeology at its best.

In conclusion, it is fruitless to pitch two very different approaches one against the other. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of Hedeager’s and Herschend’s books inevitably reveals strengths and weaknesses. Among positives are Hedeager’s willingness to connect the written sources to the physical archaeological record

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and emphasis on the role of cosmology. In my opinion, she has exaggerated the latter and has paid too little attention to the pragmatic policies and the economy. Herschend in contrast works the other way round, drawing on the analysis of the archaeological

record and seeking support in the written sources. As his main material is settlements, most of his conclusions concern basic social relations and changes in economic structure. Both books can be most inspiring, and both can be most infuriating.