

Sandby Borg: New Perspectives for Iron Age Archaeology in the Baltic Region. Report from an Archaeological Conference at Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden. 8–10 May 2019

Richard Grönwall & Rebecka Jonsson
Uppdrag Arkeologi

As part of a research project entitled Frozen in time: Stories of life and moments of death at Sandby borg, an archaeological conference took place in Kalmar in May 2019. The conference spanned over three days and included two days of thematic presentations and discussions at Linnaeus University. The program contained over 20 presentations given by both Swedish and international researchers. The third day consisted of a well-attended full-day excursion to Sandby borg, as well as other ringforts and prehistoric monuments on Öland. The main aim of the conference was to present and discuss the results of the project and further to place Sandby borg in a regional and international context and relate the site to contemporary questions of ‘difficult’ heritage, tourism and ethics.

The first thematic session of the conference, *Negotiating the Violent Past – Dealing with Warfare and Violence*, addressed whether Sandby borg should be seen as a ‘difficult heritage’ in light of the violent acts evidenced by the human remains found in the recent excavations (see Alfsdotter 2019 and references therein) and, if so, the possible challenges of working with such a site. Examples of other potentially ‘difficult heritages’ were presented, ranging from the Spanish Civil War, World War I, the Thirty Years’ War and the Bronze Age battlefield in the Tollense valley in Germany. The subsequent discussion came to focus on the definition of ‘difficult heritage’. Should ‘difficult heritage’ be viewed as an inevitable consequence of the violence evidenced by certain archaeological remains, or is it rather a question of contemporary ideological, ethical and political stances that result in some heritage being perceived as ‘difficult’ today? Another point of discus-

sion was whether researchers should give special consideration to ‘difficult heritages’, for instance regarding publishing? Opinions on these matters differed greatly. The contrasting views largely seemed to originate from different points of view concerning interaction with the public. Questions of how to assess diverging target groups’ abilities to absorb information about and reactions to ‘difficult heritage’ are chiefly of importance to museum educators, while researchers primarily aim to identify, analyse and present empirical data. To unambiguously define what constitutes a ‘difficult heritage’ and restrict how to approach such a heritage should, however, reasonably seem redundant to both.

The second thematic session, *Stories of life and moments of death – Tracing the individuals in the past*, concerned possibilities for approaching individuals in the archaeological record, through different scientific methods. Starting from the human remains found in Sandby borg, the presentations covered results from osteological analysis, radiocarbon dating, stable isotope analysis, strontium analysis, aDNA analysis and plant fossil analysis. It is not possible in this review to discuss in detail the results of these various analysis, some of which were revealed for the first time at the conference. However, an overall impression is that the development of incorporating different scientific methods of analysis in archaeology during the last decades has led to new ways of approaching questions concerning themes such as ethnicity, mobility, nutritional intake and economical organization. The ensuing discussion came to focus on the challenges that researchers might face when presenting such results, especially concerning aDNA analysis.

The second day began with a session about the material culture of Sandby borg: *Understanding objects – Contextualizing Iron Age material culture*. Especially noteworthy is the almost complete lack of weapons in the ringfort, together with the many exquisite metal artefacts found in deposits inside the excavated houses. The pottery from the ringfort is relatively fragmented and of ordinary character, with some notable exceptions, such as an exclusive decorated vessel from the fourth or fifth century. The traces of glass production are elusive as there is a lack of correlation to a particular building, implying that the glass production could have taken place after the massacre. Objects dated to later periods have been found in the ringfort, for instance artefacts from the Vendel and Viking Periods, which suggesting that the site might not have been completely abandoned after the Migration Period. The area was also used as a burial site before the construction of the ringfort, as evidenced by remains of cremation burials from the second or third century. One hypothesis is that large parts of the ringfort area consisted of a burial ground similar to those found elsewhere across Öland.

It is essential to relate Sandby borg to other archaeological sites in a larger regional context. The fourth thematic session was titled *New per-*

spectives for Iron Age archaeology in the Baltic region and the presentations concerned Scania, the Baltics, Denmark, Bornholm and Gotland. Although not all presentations were directly connected to Sandby borg, they contributed to paint a bigger picture of the societies and material cultures in southern Scandinavia and northern Europe during the Migration Period. The session concluded with a discussion about the function of ringforts on Öland in a local context and their relation to other contemporary settlements on the island.

Conclusively, the wider perspective applied to the conference highlighted the fact that there is still much left to investigate regarding Sandby borg. One important task is to present more secure dates, both concerning the construction of the ringfort and of the massacre. The discussions following the thematic sessions revealed contrasting views regarding the societal structures on Öland during the Roman Iron Age and subsequent Migration Period, as well as the function of the ringforts. Further analyses of the material from Sandby borg, along with additional excavations, will likely provide important additional data. Another crucial question is whether the massacre at Sandby borg should be viewed as a unique event. Today, as an archaeological monument, it lacks known parallels. However, human remains have been found in other ringforts on Öland, for instance in Eketorp, and these observations need to be investigated further in the light of the events at Sandby borg.

To summarize two crammed conference days with approximately 20 presentations in a short review is of course a challenge. Each thematic session could by themselves be subjects of separate conferences. However, the shorter thematic format allowed for the participants to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the current research concerning not only Sandby borg, but also a more general and international perspective regarding contemporary research questions and the development of new archaeological methods. All in all, it was a well spent three days in Kalmar – well organized, and an ambitious variety of topics and inspiring discussions.

Reference

- Alfsdotter, C. 2019. Social Implications of Unburied Corpses from Intergroup Conflicts: Postmortem Agency Following the Sandby Borg Massacre. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*. Vol. 29(3) pp. 1–16.