

ORDINARY OR EXTRAORDINARY?

Redressing the Problem of the Bronze Age Corded Skirt

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This article uses previously overlooked evidence to discuss the social role of the Bronze Age corded skirt found in Scandinavia. This skirt type has been interpreted in many different ways through the years, from a summer dress to the attire of unmarried women, and more recently the popular label “ritual dress” has been applied. The aim of this article is to critically review the various interpretations of the use and social role of the corded skirt, drawing on the entire data set available for study rather than just a small sample of the known traces of corded skirts. Here it is shown that there is evidence indicating that the corded skirt was used at more times, and by more people and age groups, than previously thought, suggesting that it might have been an ordinary, everyday garment rather than something extraordinary.

Keywords: costume, southern Scandinavia, gender roles, age

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to critically review past interpretations of the use and social role of the corded skirt. Over time, the skirt has been interpreted in different ways, mostly based on Thomsen's (1929) three suggestions, which appeared in his original publication (see below). More recently it seems that the generally accepted view is to regard it as a ritual dress (see for example Kristiansen & Larsson 2005:306; Randsborg 2006:23, 2011:114). How the dress was worn was debated in the mid 1950s (Broholm 1951; Harald Hansen 1950, 1953). Harald Hansen's (1950) interpretation of how the corded skirt was worn on the hip and not placed on the waist "won" that debate and has been used since (e.g. Hvass 1981; Kristiansen & Larsson 2005:298–302; Bergerbrant 2007:54–56; Randsborg 2011:38–41).

In Denmark there are a number of well-preserved oak log coffin graves dating to the Early Scandinavian Bronze Age (Christensen 1999). They contain the remains of inhumed bodies, and from the later period they may also contain cremated remains. The coffins are found in mounds, often with more than one grave in the barrow, but there is normally one central burial with the others buried as secondary graves nearby or in the periphery of the mound (Boye 1896[1986]; Glob 1970). There are many indications from excavations that it was relatively common for the deceased of this period to have been buried in oak log coffins, but only a few examples have been surveyed using modern methods. Some of these oak log coffins also contain information about textile and clothing, as well as woodwork etc. from the Early Bronze Age (1700–1100 BC) in the Nordic region.

There are seven well-preserved outfits from the Early Bronze Age; these are assumed to be the clothing that was used while the person was alive, i.e. not special clothing for the burial. This assumption is based on the fact that the clothes have traces of wear, and there are also signs that long skirts had been reused and made into other pieces of clothing (Eskildsen & Lomborg 1977). Of the seven outfits, three are regarded as women's clothing based on osteological analysis and/or the artefacts found in the coffin. Too often, only these three complete outfits from the oak-log coffin burials have formed the entire basis for analyses and discussions of appearance and gender roles based on clothing in Scandinavia. This article demonstrates the dangers of basing our interpretations on this limited material only, and the importance of tracking down all relevant traces to assemble the largest sample possible.

One of these three burials, the Egtved burial, contains a corded skirt (Thomsen 1929). This is the only complete example of a corded skirt, al-

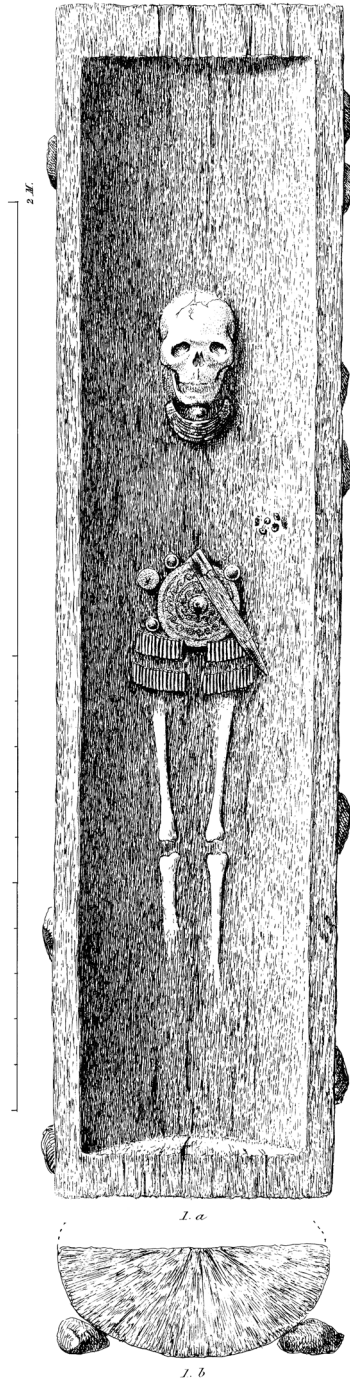


Figure 1. The Ølby burial, female burial with textile remains of corded skirt as well as bronze tubes (after Boye 1896[1986]: Pl. XXVI).

though there are many other traces of corded skirts that contribute to a fuller picture of this garment type. A corded skirt has a narrow starting border, which warp threads were twisted onto to form a series of cords. These cords were held together at the bottom by a fine string (Broholm & Hald 1935:285–286). Bronze tubes were sometimes used to decorate the cords, and are one of the primary indications of the presence of a corded skirt. In a number of burials such as Ølby, Denmark (Boye 1896[1986]:138, Pl. XXVI, see Figure 1) one row or more of bronze tubes have been found below the belt-plate. Many of these bronze tubes contain remains of woollen cords and other textile fragments showing very clearly that they were a part of a corded skirt (Fossøy & Bergerbrant 2013).

Sofaer (2006) argues that it is important, wherever possible, to study both the archaeological artefacts and the body together since they are related to each other. What is left for the Early Bronze Age South Scandinavians is a part of the performed gender. In some cases it is hard for us to make out which category the deceased belonged to, but this would not have been the case for those attending the funeral. In order to understand the medium within which appearance acts, Sørensen has divided the total appearance into separate parts: *cloth* – the textile itself; *clothing* – garments created from the cloth; and *costume* – the assemblage of clothing, ornaments, and dress fittings (Sørensen 1991, 1997:95–96). Sørensen's categories for appearance analysis provide a useful framework for approaching this study. The emphasis here is on the corded skirt as a costume, that is, the entire assemblage and its interpretation and social implications. The actual textile is given less attention, as it has been considered elsewhere, for example in Fossøy and Bergerbrant (2013).

There is no evidence that corded skirts were used in the Iron Age, as there are no textile remains indicating this (500 BC – c. AD 1000) (Manring *et al.* 2012). This suggests that the corded skirt probably went out of use sometime during the Late Bronze Age (1100–500 BC). Due to a change in burial customs in the Late Bronze Age, from inhumation to cremation burials, the material is more difficult to interpret. This change also leads to fewer preserved textiles (Bender Jørgensen 1986:15). The burials from this period are not published in extensive catalogues as they are for the Early Bronze Age; it is therefore difficult to compile an overview of the number of burials containing bronze tubes. It is clear that some bronze tubes were used on possible corded skirts even during this period, as observed in some burials and hoards dating to the Late Bronze Age (Broholm 1949:59–60; Jensen 2002:391), however, these seem to be very rare and belong to Periods IV and V of the Late Bronze Age (Broholm 1946; 1949:59, 92). This article therefore focuses on the material from the Early Bronze Age (1500–1100 BC).

This article considers different views on the corded skirt one by one and assembles all of the evidence relevant for the discussion so that it may be critically examined. The main material for this debate derives from the graves and their content, and burials taken into consideration have either bronze tubes and/or actual textile remains of corded skirts. The fact that the research on dress in the South Scandinavian Bronze Age has only focused on a few graves rather than including all relevant material has resulted in severe biases in the interpretations, and here it is argued that it has led to a distorted understanding of Bronze Age gender roles, overemphasizing the ritual aspects and the “erotic” significance of the corded skirt.

CRITICAL EVALUATION OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The Egtved excavator suggested three possible interpretations for the corded skirt, which he compared with the only other female dress then known, i.e. that from Borum Eshøj. The suggestions were: a summer dress, the young girl’s costume or ritual attire (Thomsen 1929:195–196). Below these different interpretations will be examined critically based on the burial and hoard assemblages containing textile remains from a corded skirt and/or bronze tubes. In all the well-excavated burials where we have knowledge of the placement of the bronze tubes they have been found below the waist (Bergerbrant 2005; Fossøy & Bergerbrant 2013), therefore bronze tubes are here seen as an indication that the buried individual in life had worn a corded skirt. The archaeological material for this evaluation can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

Summer dress?

The interpretation of the corded skirt as a summer dress has most recently been discussed by Randsborg (2011:80–81). Randsborg starts by testing this idea based on a hypothesis he and Nybo published (1986), where they argue that the direction of the coffin and the placement of the head in the coffin indicate the time of year the deceased was buried. Summer in this sense is a fairly long period ranging from March to mid-October (Randsborg 2011:80–81), i.e. a period of seven and half months, leaving the winter period mid-October to March. It is also argued that:

In most regions, the supine dead person “faces” east and the sunrise at the time of the burial, the head being in the western end of the coffin. However, on eastern Sjælland (Zealand), and further east in the Skåne (Scania) Countries, including Bornholm, the dead usually faces west and the sunset at the time of the burial (Randsborg 2011:80).

Table 1. Burials with bronze tubes or textile remains of corded skirt remains. Explanation to references in table: Ke + number = the catalogue number in Aner and Kersten volumes; DBI + number = the catalogue number in Broholm 1943; Ol + number = the catalogue number in Oldeberg 1974; Hå + number = Håkansson 1985; NM archive = Archive in National Museum in Copenhagen; SHM = Swedish History Museum, Stockholm. MPI = Montelius Period I, MPII = Montelius II, MPIII = Montelius Period III, EBA = Early Bronze Age.

Name	Context and artefacts	Source
Pluggegård, Bornholm, DK	Burial in mound, dagger blade and pommel, arm ring, bronze tubes, 2 glass beads [MPIII]	Ke1440J
Ols Kirke, Bornholm, DK	Burial in mound, 2 double buttons, 2 finger rings, Bornholm fibula, 40 bronze tubes, knife, ceramic sherd [MPIII]	Ke1454
Billegravsgård, Bornholm, DK	Cremation in mound, 2 bronze tubes [MPIII]	Ke1466L
Store-Loftsgård, Bornholm, DK	Cremated bones in stone coffin in mound, bronze disc, double button, finger ring, Bornholm fibula, bronze tubes, 28 glass beads, 2 bronze beads, 1 amber bead, small bronze hook, ceramic sherd [MPIII]	Ke1477IVA
Gyldensgård, Bornholm, DK	Cremation possibly under flat ground, bronze tubes [EBA]	Ke1550
Sonnerup, Fredriksborg, DK	Burial in mound, belt-plate, tutuli, approx. 70 bronze tubes [MPII]	Ke228E
Præstegårdsmark, Fredriksborg, DK	Burial in mound, neck collar, belt-plate, 2 tutuli, dagger, bronze tubes, glass bead, 2 amber beads [MPII]	Ke243I
Veksø/Viksø, Fredriksborg, DK	Inhumation in mound, fibula, bronze tube, amber bead [MPII]	Ke284B
Ølby, København, DK	Inhumation in mound, neck collar, belt-plate, 4 tutuli, lower part of a sword blade, minimum 125 bronze tubes, glass bead, bronze beads, 2 amber beads [MPII]	Ke299
Måløv, København, DK	Inhumation in mound, tutuli, double button, 54 bronze tubes [MPIII]	Ke335A
Gerdrup, København, DK	Inhumation in mound, neck collar, belt-plate, arm ring, bronze tubes [MPII]	NM archive no. 4788, grave 5
Holte, København, DK	Cremation in mound, tutuli, possible dagger, many bronze tubes, knife [MPIII]	Ke415
Karlslund, København, DK	Burial in mound, neck collar, gold finger ring, many bronze tubes [MPII]	Ke516A
Såby Huse, København, DK	Inhumation in mound, 2 gold finger rings, min. 35 bronze tubes, knife [MPIII]	Ke578A
Flinterupgård, Holbæk, DK	Cremation in mound with megalith, belt-plate, arm ring, bronze tube [MPII]	Ke623
Svallerup, Holbæk, DK	Cremation in mound with megalith, neck collar, 4 tutuli, 3 arm rings, fibula, 5 bronze tubes, spiral tubes [MPII]	Ke626D

Name	Context and artefacts	Source
Årby, Holbæk, DK	Cremation in mound, fibula, 6 bronze tubes [MPIII?]	NM archive no. 4321
Allerup, Holbæk, DK	In mound, double button, arm ring, bronze tubes [MPIII]	Ke1061C
Mastrup, Holbæk, DK	In mound, neck collar, tutuli, dagger blade, arm ring, many bronze tubes, awl [MPIII]	Ke1000
Hagendrup, Holbæk, DK	In mound, neck collar, belt-plate, bronze tubes [MPII]	Ke967
Kværkeby, Sorø, DK	Inhumation in mound, neck collar, approx. 5 bronze tubes [MPII]	Ke1104G
Tårnholm park, Sorø, DK	Inhumation in mound, neck collar, belt-plate, tutuli, dagger blade and pommel, 2 arm rings, finger ring, min. 4 bronze tubes [MPII]	Ke1163
Ravnsby, Maribo, DK	Inhumation in mound, belt-plate, dagger blade, numerous bronze tubes, awl [MPII]	Ke1655
Boel, Hjørring, DK	In mound above cover stones to a chamber, Dagger blade and pommel, bronze tubes [MPII]	DBI509
Bustrup, Viborg, DK	Inhumation in mound, neck ring, belt-plate, dagger and chase, numerous bronze tubes, beads made of animal tooth, 2 ceramic vessels [MPII]	DBI741, Ke6283A
Hverrehus, Viborg, DK	Inhumation in mound, neck collar, belt-plate, 14 tutuli, dagger, bronze comb, 4 arm rings, 178 bronze tubes [MPII]	DBI728, Ke6201A
Ginderup, Thisted, DK	Inhumation in mound, neck ring, fibula, double button, 2 arm rings, finger ring, textile remains of corded skirt [MPIII]	Ke5451A
Hammer, Århus, DK	Unknown, dagger blade, remains of antler hilt, double button, 2 bronze tubes [MPIII]	DBI2175
Nimtoft, Randers, DK	Inhumation in mound, arm ring, finger ring, Lockenring, bronze tubes, ceramic vessel [MPII]	DBI773
Lille Almstok, Ribe, DK	Cremation in mound, arm ring. 2 gold finger rings, fibula, bronze tube, pin [MPIII]	Ke4133
Egtved, Veje, DK	Inhumation in mound, belt-plate, 2 arm rings, antler comb, awl [MPII]	Ke4357A
Trindhøj burial C, Ribe, DK	Inhumation in mound, arm ring, amber bead and tin double button [MPII]	Ke3817C
Rege, Jæren, NO	Inhumation in mound, neck ring, belt-plate, tutuli, dagger blade, 2 arm rings, fibula, bronze tubes, spiral ring [MPII-MPIII]	Myhre 1981
Bore, Klepp, NO	Inhumation in mound, tutulus, bronze tubes, animal bones, sherd and flint [MPII]	Engedal 2010 app. III no. 63
Åkarp's Villans Vårdsshus, Scania, SE	Mixed find in mound, neck collar, dagger blade, bronze tubes [MPIII]	Hå25, OI97
Bjärsgård no. 2, Scania, SE	Inhumation in coffin in megalithic monument, neck collar, tutuli, arm ring, a number of bronze tubes [MPIII]	Hå45, OI398

Table 1. Continues.

Name	Context and artefacts	Source
Bosgården, Scania, SE	Inhumation in mound, neck collar, belt-plate, tutuli, arm ring, 13 bronze tubes, awl, comb, sickle [MPII]	Hå95, OI551
Viarp, Scania, SE	Probable burial, neck collar, belt-plate, 2 arm rings, Bornholm fibula, 24 bronze tubes [MPIII]	Hå111, OI669
Lars Perssons Plan, Scania, SE	Inhumation in mound, gold ring, double button, 2 arm rings, min. 77 bronze tubes, knife [MPIII]	Hå142, OI753
Valleberga 5:2, Scania, SE	Inhumation under flat ground, belt-plate, 2 arm rings, 20 complete, 80 frag. bronze tubes [MPII/III]	Hå157
Simris-Nöbbelöv, Scania, SE	Unknown, 3 bronze tubes in one remains of woollen cord [EBA?]	OI668, SHM8762
V. Vemmerlöv no. 23, Scania, SE	Probable inhumation in mound, neck collar, 2 fibulas, tutuli, knife, 2 gold ear rings, approx. 50 bronze tubes [MPIII]	Hå166, OI946
Spärlinge, Scania, SE	Inhumation in mound, 2 tutuli, dagger blade, finger-ring, 9 bronze tubes, flint debris [MPII]	Hå2, OI4

One element brought into this discussion is organic material found in the oak-log coffins. Randsborg argues that the yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) flower found in the Egtved burial (Thomsen 1929:179–180) indicates burial between June and September (burial facing 78° east to

Table 2. Hoards with bronze tubes all found in wetlands. Explanation to references in table: Ke + number = the catalogue number in Aner and Kersten volumes; DBI + number = the catalogue number in Broholm 1943; OI + number = the catalogue number in Oldeberg 1974; MPI = Montelius Period I, MPII = Montelius II, MPIII = Montelius Period III, EBA = Early Bronze Age.

Name	Artefacts	Source
Gørlev, Holbæk, DK	3 neck collar, 3 belt-plates, 21 tutuli, 4 arm rings, 7 finger rings and 75 bronze tubes, 2 bronze sickles [MPII]	Ke669
Vognserup, Holbæk, DK	2 neck collar, 2 belt-plates 40 tutulus, 4 arm rings, 193 bronze tubes [MPII]	Ke1043I, Frost 2011
Rådbjerg, Hjørring, DK	Neck collar, belt-plate, 6 tutuli, 31 bronze tubes [MPII]	DBIM57
Prästlycke, Småland, SE	Belt plate, arm ring, bronze tubes, axe, packed in birch bark [MPIII]	OI1775, Goldhahn, pers. comm.
Turinge, Södermanland, SE	2 belt-plates, 5 tutuli, 1 double button, 2 arm rings, 4 finger rings, 30 bronze tubes, spear head, 3 chisels, 5 axes, 7 sickles [MPIII]	OI2759

north) (Randsborg & Nybo 1986:164). The fully developed cow parsley (*Anthriscus silvestris*) in the Skrydstrup burial (Broholm & Hald 1939:23) would have grown from April to October, and flowers in May and June, and the burial here faced 90° east (Randsborg & Nybo 1986:164). According to the authors, a mature plant would derive from the period after flowering, i.e. July to October (Randsborg & Nybo 1986:164). This indicates that both the Egtved and Skrydstrup were buried in the same season, meaning that both female costumes would have been worn at the same time of the year. Grave B in Guldhøj contained three fresh, fully developed crab apples (*Pyrus malus sylvestris*) (Boye 1896 [1986]:77), which, according to Randsborg and Nybo, probably occurred in mid-October as the grave is “facing” 108° east (Randsborg & Nybo 1986:164). From these three burials the authors hypothesized that the orientation of the coffin and the head reveals the season in which the deceased was buried.

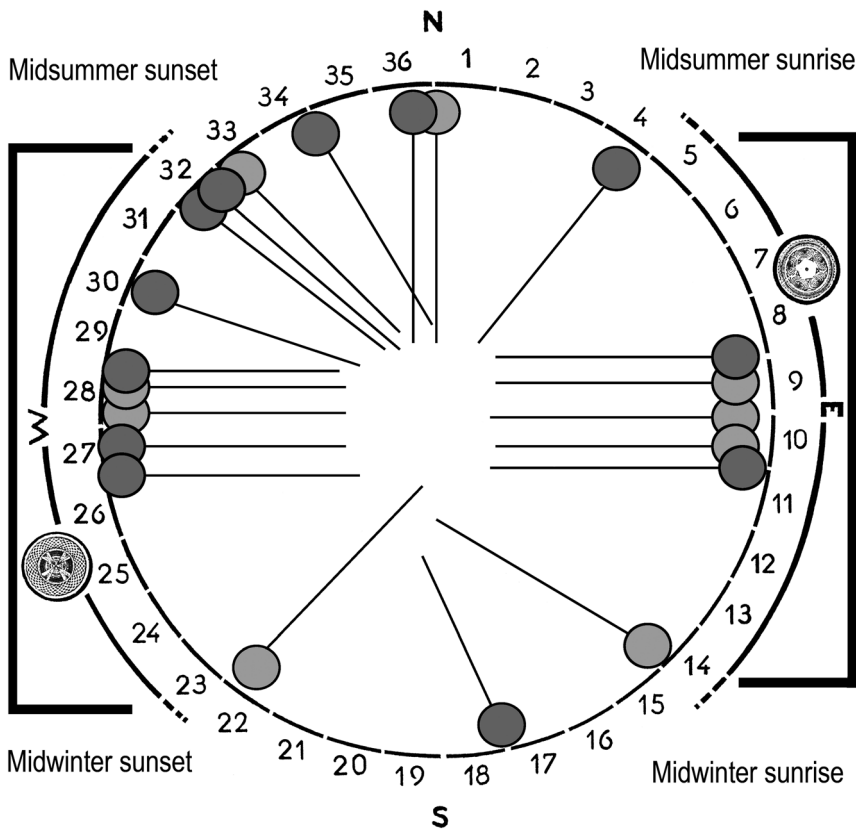


Figure 2. Orientations of the 23 graves containing corded skirts, circle placement of the heads and line the orientation of the body.

According to Randsborg (2011:80) the burials with corded skirts clearly cluster in the warmer period, April to September, and he points out that there is no clear burial evidence in the warmest period, from May to July. This seems to be based on the direction of eleven burials (Randsborg 2011: Table 6). Going through the source material, it was possible to determine the direction of another twelve coffins. Therefore, the direction of 23 burials has been taken into account in this study. As shown in Figure 2, they seem to occur across the seasons, spanning from winter to summer. This suggests that either the Randsborg and Nybo model of a relationship between the direction of the coffin and the season is flawed, or that there is no clear connection between the corded skirt and summer, or possibly that both ideas are erroneous. In other words, no clear connection may be identified between the corded skirt and the summer period based on the available material and current methods for analysing it, and therefore it is not possible to conclude that the corded skirt was used only during certain seasons.



Figure 3. Illustration of women wearing a corded skirt and a long skirt. Illustration: Richard Potter.

Attire relating to age or marriage status?

Many assumptions have been made about the age of the wearer of a corded skirt. Based on the age of the Egtved girl and the Borum Eshøj woman, Thomsen (1929:195–196) suggested that the corded skirt was the dress of the young women in contrast to the mature woman, who wore a long skirt (see Figure 3). This interpretation is also found in Ørjan Engedal's (2010:291) Ph.D. thesis, where it is suggested based on the three oak-log coffin burials (Borum Eshøj burial C, Skrydstrup and Egtved) that the corded skirt was related to the fertile unmarried or fertile non-mother stage, and that the long skirt was linked to the mother or married stage of a woman's life. Based on the age of the women in the above graves he suggests that this shift probably occurred around the age of 17–19 years old. Eskildsen and Lomborg (1976; 1977) came to the opposite conclusion based on an idea from Nielsen (1971) that the female long skirt could have been re-made into either a kilt and a cloak, or a wrap-around and a cloak, depending on the length of the long skirt. Based on this assumption they assume that the corded skirt is the married woman's dress.

These assumptions are based on two or three burials. Unfortunately, there are few burials with preserved skeletal material. Only eight of the 43 burials with indications of corded skirts (see Table 1) have any information about age, and in one case age can only be inferred from the size of the coffin and the artefacts (see Table 3).

For most researchers the site Trindhøj, Vamdrup parish, is synonymous with the fully preserved oak-log coffin grave that contained a dressed man, Burial A (Bergerbrant 2007:51–52; Boye 1896 [1986]:88–92; Broholm & Hald 1940:27–39). However, concerning corded skirts,

Table 3. Age-determined burials containing remains of corded skirts. All age determination is based on osteological analysis, with the exception of Trindhøj.

Burial	Age	Source
Trindhøj C	6 or younger	See discussion
Egtved	16–18	Alexandersen, et al. 1981
Bustrup	Younger than 30 probably 20–25	Lock Harvig, pers. comm.
Hverrehus	Approx. 20+	Randsborg 2011:152
Billegravgård	Adult or almost adult	Lock Harvig, pers. comm.
Rege	Probably adult	Goldhahn, pers. comm.
Bore, Klepp	Adult	Goldhahn, pers. comm.
Ølby	Younger than 30	Lock Harvig, pers. comm.
Veksø/Viksø	Adult or almost adult	Lock Harvig, pers. comm.

Trindhøj burial C is of interest, as it included corded skirt remains (Fossøy & Bergerbrant 2013:27). The grave is dated by dendrochronology to c. 1347 BC (Christensen 1999:113). There are no bones preserved (Boye 1896 [1986]:88–95). The oak-log coffin inner measurements of grave C are 1.13 × 0.34–0.31 m and it is 18 cm deep. This grave contained a thin skin, textile remains, a child's arm-ring (inner diameter 4 × 3.6 cm), an amber bead and a tin button (Boye 1896 [1986]:93–94). The size of the inner coffin and the diameter of the arm-ring indicate that it was a child's burial (Boye 1896 [1986]:94). Based on a study of children's growth from the World Health Organization (WHO 2007), most children today reach the height of 110 cm before the age of six, indicating that the deceased was probably under six years old at the time of the burial. The very narrow arm-ring also indicates that the grave is that of a child under six years old. Therefore it is assumed here that the child was probably six years old or younger.

The average life expectancy in the Bronze Age varies slightly between different regions during the Bronze Age; for women in Lower Austria it was about 35 years old and for the men some more years (Teschler-Nicola 1994:169). Don Brothwell (1972:83) has shown that the average life expectancy for a 19-year-old in the English Bronze Age was 29.9 for women and 31.3 for men. Only 3.3% of the population reached over 50 years old (Brothwell 1972:84). There are probably two reasons why we have no individual wearing the corded skirt who is over 30 years old: firstly, few women reached the age of 30, and secondly, the number of aged skeletons in the studied material is small. The fact that we have remains of corded skirts from more or less the full age span in the Bronze Age, from a small child to adult, indicates that age was not a determining factor in who wore a corded skirt in the period 1500–1100 BC.

Evidence for ritual dress or other social categories?

Thomsen (1929:195–196) suggested, but doubted, that the corded skirt could indicate that the Egtved girl could have been a temple dancer involved in erotic rituals. The idea is probably partly a reflection of the prevailing attitude of the time, which viewed the skirt as indecent. The ritual connection has survived the centuries, though, and may possibly be connected to the fact that many people still attach an “erotic” connotation to the skirt and to the female figurines from Fårdal. Dating both rock art and figurines can be rather difficult; the figurines seem to belong to a Later Bronze Age phase (Broholm 1949:59–60). However, there is little evidence or discussion as to why the corded skirt should have a ritual connection. In an attempt to address this Randsborg (2011) formulated a number of criteria for defining female status,

such as senior (married) member of cult group, and so forth (Randsborg 2011:165). He does not discuss the reasons for his distinctions beyond that it seems logical to attach married status to the woman in Borum Eshøj and unmarried status to the women buried in the famous Egtved burial and in the Skrydstrup grave (Randsborg 2011:86–87), i.e. trying to use some form of common-sense logic rather than scientific criteria to distinguish whether a woman was married or not. He also adopts the idea that some of the belt-plates held calendar information (see Randsborg 2006:68–78), and that this should be regarded as “secret knowledge” which only select belt-plates had, thus indicating their ritual status. However, he maintains that most of the belt-plates were just imitations made without this specialist knowledge (Randsborg 2011:87–88). According to Randsborg:

It is very interesting that certain women carried such superb astronomical knowledge in their bronze image of the sun. It underlines their role in society, and in particular in the sun cult (Randsborg 2011:87).

It seems rather contradictory that Randsborg views all belt-plates as signs of cult membership when he argues that most of the belt-plates did not contain the exclusive calendar information and most of the makers of the belt-plates, and therefore probably the wearers, were unaware of this knowledge. The main objects that show a woman as a person with “cultic” obligations are belt-plates and/or tutuli, the criteria mainly based on definitions advanced by Randsborg (Randsborg 2006:27). There are problems with the criteria for the different groups as they seem to be based on only a very limited part of the known material, and mainly based on the well-known and rich burials, as well as Randsborg’s own ideas about the orientation of burials in connection with the season (see above), and belt-plates as calendars, etc. Other authors have also argued for a cultic relationship for the belt-plate:

A select group of chiefly elite women during the period 1500–1300 BC carried the symbol of the sun, identical to the Trundholm sun-chariot, on their bellies as an ornament that symbolised their chosen role. These women were also wearing the short corded skirt, and we see the same (young) priestesses in the female figurines from the ritual miniatures... (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005:298).

This quotation could easily make one think that they connect the corded skirt only to cultic behaviour, but in an unpublished manuscript from 1975, which was translated and published in 2013 (Kristiansen 2013), Kristiansen argued that there was only one Nordic Bronze Age costume, and that this comprised a blouse, a corded skirt and an outer garment

(see also Kristiansen 1974). In other words the belt-plate would have been the only possible indication of a ritual function. However, the stress placed on the corded skirt in connection with ritual use in many texts blurs this idea.

Here Randsborg's criteria have been applied to all of the burials and hoards with bronze tubes and/or burials with textile remains of corded skirts from the Early Bronze Age known to the author (see Tables 1 and 2). Hoards are here seen as one or more person's personal belongings following Kristiansen (1974). Frost (2011:39) has already interpreted the hoard from Vognserup Enge as the remains of two ritual costumes. In order to test whether Randsborg's criteria (see Table 4) fit his interpretation of the corded skirt as ritual attire, all the material must be included in the discussion (see Tables 1 and 2 for all of the material in this study).

When categorizing the burials and hoards compiled in Tables 1 and 2 according to Randsborg's criteria for different social groups (see Table 4), less than half of the burials can be classified as cult members (see Table 5), and if the category "high rank" is included then 49% belong to this group; excluding the category "high rank", only 37% can be seen as belonging to the ritual sphere. When the hoards are added the numbers increase to 56%. This would also hold true for Kristiansen and Larsson's association of belt-plates as indicators of individuals with ritual function, as all the burials classified as senior or junior cult members contain belt-plates.

Can the artefacts found in burials with corded skirts give us any clues about the status of the wearers or any indication of a common identity? As shown above, the burials with bronze tubes or remains of corded skirts fit into all of Randsborg's categories; from high rank to low rank,

Table 4. Randsborg's criteria for distinguishing social status (based on Randsborg 2011: Table 14). This table show the criteria Randsborg uses to categorise female burials into different social statuses.

High rank: elaborate coiffure; gold; many (fine) bronzes, dagger, fibula; glass beads
Senior (married) member of cult group: Neck collar, belt-plate, tutuli, belt-box (Period III many amulets) vessel for drink
Junior (unmarried) member of cult group: (small) belt-plate and/or tutuli, bracelets, vessels for drink
Married status: necklace/neck collar, dagger, "male" bossed tutuli
Unmarried status: bracelets and minor rings (only) sanitary napkin
Lower rank: no gold; no exotica; a few bronzes

Table 5. The numbers and percentage of burials with bronze tubes and/or textile remains of corded skirts (43 burials and 4 hoards including 7 personal sets). The hoard from Turinge has been excluded from this study as it occurs far from the core area and seems to have occurred with a very different set of artefacts, and therefore does not correspond as a personal set(s).

	High rank	Senior (married) member of cult group	Junior (unmarried) member of cult	Married	Unmarried	Lower rank	Total
Burials with bronze tubes	5	12	3	10	1	9	40
Corded skirts	0	0	1	1	0	1	3
Hoards (sets)	0	6	1	0	0	0	7
Total	5	18	5	11	1	10	50
Percent	10%	36%	10%	22%	2%	20%	100%

from unmarried to married. It therefore seems that the artefacts indicate that the corded skirt was used by a large variety of women in the Early Bronze Age. A look at the content of the burials (see Table 1) demonstrates that bronze tubes are the most common artefact type found in association with corded skirts, but this is probably only due to preservation conditions, as the corded skirts without bronze tubes are less likely to be preserved. The three burials with remains of corded skirts but no bronze tubes indicate that the skirt might have been a more common type than the material might at first suggest. No typical artefact or pattern in the combination of artefacts has been identified to signal the presence of a corded skirt (Table 1). The corded skirt exists both in burials that are heavily laden with bronze and also in some with very little bronze material. This seems to indicate a degree of universality in the use of the corded skirt, which occurs across a wide range of social groups.

Late Bronze Age figurines

One of the main arguments for a ritual connection for the corded skirt is the Late Bronze Age figurines (see e.g. Kristiansen & Larsson 2005:298). There are only a few human representations from the Late Bronze Age that show individuals wearing corded skirts. These people tend to wear jewellery such as earrings, arm-rings and neck-rings, but



Figure 4. Late Bronze Age figurine from Fårdal wearing a corded skirt (published with permission from the National Museum, Denmark).

have no clothing other than the corded skirt (Broholm 1949:264–270; Jensen 2002:391–393). As discussed above there is no clear connection between corded skirts in the Early Bronze Age and any specific jewellery type, so this relationship between the bronze figures and neck-rings is only seen in the Late Bronze Age figurines. Neck-rings can be seen on the helmet-wearing men from Grevensvænge as well (Djupedal & Broholm 1953) and are therefore not gender-specific, but might be related to ritual practices. Most of the preserved female figurines are of standing naked women, each wearing a neck-ring (Broholm 1949:265–267; Malmer 1992:378). There are neck collars or neck-rings present in 43% of the burial material, or 48% when the hoard material is added, making the connection with the corded skirt stronger than that with the belt-plate. There is information about a female bronze figurine wearing a different type of skirt that was found in Grevensvænge in the late eighteenth century, which is only known in the form of a drawing (Djupedal & Broholm 1953). The figurines wearing corded skirts (Figure 4) are dated to Periods IV and V (Broholm 1949:265–267). A clear difference between the preserved corded skirt from Egtved and the depictions is that the figurines wore much shorter versions of the skirt. They just basically cover the bottom, whereas in the burial they are longer. The Egtved skirt is 38–40 cm long (Thomsen 1929:189) and the Ølby burial has two rows of bronze tubes (Boye 1896 [1986]: Taf 26), while the Melhøj example had three rows of bronze tubes (Thrane 1965). A clear visual difference can therefore be seen between the Early Bronze Age corded skirt and the ones represented on the figurines.

Is every bronze figure with a corded skirt female? It has previously been assumed that the bronze figures wearing corded skirts from the Late Bronze Age are all female. The figure from Fårdal and the human-shaped knife handle from Itzehoe have clear breasts (Broholm 1949:269, Planche 71; Glob 1970:129, 131), indicating that they are indeed representations of females. The somersaulters from Grevensvænge are not as clear-cut as the other two. The Grevensvænge find contained seven figurines, of which we know the appearance of six, but only two of them are preserved and are now in the collections of the National Museum of Denmark. Three of the seven are individuals wearing a neck-ring and a corded skirt, and they are all doing somersaults. Only one of the somersaulters is preserved, but according to the sources they all looked the same (Djupedal & Broholm 1953:30–32, 49). When the preserved somersaulter is compared with the preserved horned male and the drawings of the vanished human figures (Broholm 1949:267, 269; Glob 1970:134, 137) it is apparent that all of the figurines in the find wore neck-rings, and no obvious breasts may be seen. Only the lost figurine wearing a

long skirt has something that may possibly be interpreted as breasts – or as a fibula. The preserved figurines both have protruding and pointing chins. The sex of the somersaulters is difficult to say for certain, as they could be males taking on a female role in ritual. All the human figures seem to have a clear connection to ritual acts, including the female figure on the knife handle from Itzehoe, who holds a bowl (Broholm 1949:268) from which she seems to be serving something.

To sum up the evidence so far, there seems to be nothing to indicate a clear-cut, exclusive ritual connection for the corded skirts in the Early Bronze Age; however, most of the evidence from the Late Bronze Age seems to relate to the ritual sphere.

OTHER POSSIBLE EVIDENCE

Is there anything else in the burial record that can help us to understand the social use of the corded skirts? Below the distribution and the type of burial of the women with corded skirts is analysed.

Distribution of corded skirts

Does the distribution of the corded skirt give us any information about the wearers? As can be seen in Figure 5, most evidence of the corded skirt can be found in the older Valsømagle region (Vandkilde 1996:16–17). This difference of geographical evidence for corded skirts is probably due to small-scale regional variations in the costume tradition between Scandinavian areas where the bronze tubes were used on the corded skirts in the former Valsømagle region (Bergerbrant 2005). As seen in the three finds of remains of corded skirts without bronze tubes (Fossøy & Bergerbrant 2013:25–27), corded skirts were used outside the former Valsømagle region as well. If Engedal's (2010:112) interpretation of the slab in Kyrkje-Eide is correct then we have indications that corded skirts were used over a fairly large area. It therefore seems that the corded skirt was used in most parts of the South Scandinavian Early Bronze Age, Montelius Periods II and III, but that the use of bronze tubes to adorn the skirt was limited to a smaller region. It has been shown that the tradition of adding bronze tubes probably started on northern Zealand and spread both west and eastwards, where it was mainly used in Period III in Scania and Bornholm (Bergerbrant 2005).

Burial type

The burials are mainly found in mounds, some as the primary burial, but most as secondary burials. In the burial material there are both in-



Figure 5. Distribution of Early Bronze Age finds of corded skirts, drawn by the author.

humation and cremation burials. Four graves with bronze tubes were placed in mounds containing megaliths. We do not have good find information about all the finds; in some cases all we know is that they occurred in a mound, and for others we do not have any find information

at all (see Table 1). Two burials stand out from the general picture in terms of their placement. One with secure find information is Valleberga 5:2, which is an inhumation under flat ground placed close to a mound (Strömberg 1975:58). The grave contained one belt-plate, two arm-spirals and a large quantity of bronze tubes (Strömberg 1975:58–59). The burials cannot be classified as poor, and according to Randsborg’s definitions the individual would be a “junior member” of the cult. Why she diverges from the normal pattern and was buried next to a mound, and not in one, is difficult to say. The other example, Gyldensgård, is less secure, but it is also a probable Early Bronze Age cremation found in association with a mound. The burial contains only bronze tubes, and according to Randsborg’s criteria is of “lower rank”.

The general picture seems to indicate that the women wearing corded skirts belong to the category of people that had the right to be buried in mounds, since most of the graves are found in mounds. It also indicates that that corded skirt wearers ranged from those who were wealthy in bronze to those who were not.

CONCLUSION

This study clearly demonstrates the importance of bringing in all the available evidence when discussing different artefacts or pieces of costumes social importance. Sometimes we only have a few examples to interpret from and we have no choice but to do the best we can with the limited material.

It seems that the human figurines wearing corded skirts in the Late Bronze Age have a connection to ritual, but this does not mean that they define the function of the clothing type or should be used as the prototype to interpret all corded skirts found in burials from the Early Bronze Age, as the corded skirt appears to have been a fairly common piece of attire in the Early Bronze Age (occurring in no less than 43 of the female burials on record). In addition, it was used by a range of social categories among females. The one unifying link seems to be the right to be buried in a mound, since all but two were found in mounds, albeit some occurred in the mound of an older megalithic monument. The skirts were also used by a wide age range, indicating that the right to wear a corded skirt had nothing to do with age, marriage status, motherhood or any specific function in society. It just seems to have been a common piece of costume in the Early Bronze Age, used both in ordinary, everyday wear and by the ritual specialist. Whether the bronze tubes went out of fashion or the popularity of the corded skirt just waned in the

Late Bronze Age is difficult to say with any confidence, as the changing burial tradition leaves us with much less textile material. Based on the human figurines, it seems that the corded skirts became much shorter than they had once been, and it is possible that the use of the corded skirt died out in the early part of the Late Bronze Age, persisting as an archaic piece of costume used only in rituals.

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