

FORGING HISTORY

Spade-shaped currency bars, history and identity in central Norrland

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In central Norrland a large number of spade-shaped currency bars have been recovered. Currency bars have been produced since the introduction of iron technology in the late pre-Roman Iron Age, which roughly coincides with the introduction of agriculture. It is suggested that the shape of the bars is referential to the socketed axe, due to the importance of the latter during this period of change. The currency bars were therefore associated with a mythical history and local identity. The youngest ¹⁴C-date shows that the bars became part of narratives that remained relevant throughout much of the Iron Age, up until the Viking Age.

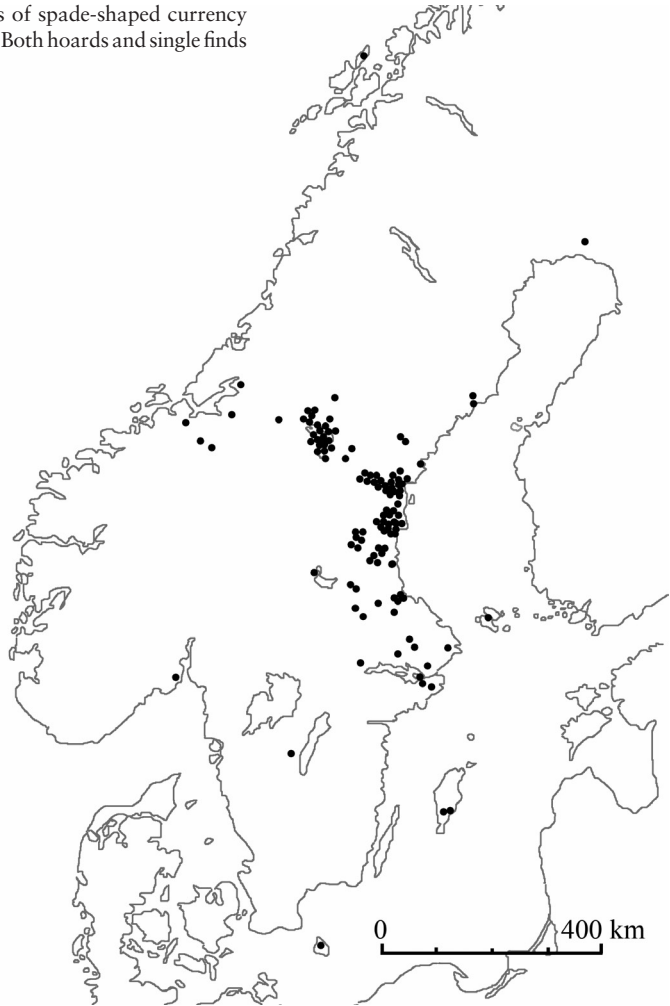
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Currency bars (Sw. *ämnesjärn*) were produced in great amounts throughout Europe during the Iron Age, in different shapes that were distinctly regional (e.g. Martens 1977, 1979; Hingley 1990, 2005; Lyngstrøm 2008). The purpose of this article is to discuss the spade-shaped currency bars of central Norrland. It has become evident that these bars cannot be interpreted solely in relation to iron technology and trade as has previously been done. In this article it will be argued that they were objects embedded with ideas connected to mythical history, origins and local identity, ideas that also came to influence the choice of place in which to deposit them.

SPADE-SHAPED CURRENCY BARS

The term “currency bar” was introduced in Britain in the early 20th century when these bars were thought to form a kind of Iron Age cur-

Fig. 1. Known finds of spade-shaped currency bars in Scandinavia. Both hoards and single finds are included.



rency (Smith 1905). This interpretation is no longer tenable, which makes the term unfortunate, but it still remains in use.

Currency bars have been defined as iron which has been hammered out into a particular shape but which cannot be interpreted as a utilitarian object (Hallinder & Haglund 1978:30). Currency bars are semi-worked iron from which an object can be formed and as such they represent a technological intermediary between the bloom produced in the smelting furnace and a completed object. The iron produced in a smelting furnace needs to be further refined to become forgeable. By re-smelting and hammering the iron, the amount of slag is reduced and

the iron is then step by step formed into a standardised shape, that is, a currency bar. The bar is then forged into an iron object.

However, there is nothing to indicate that the spade-shaped currency bars served as raw material for the manufacture of iron objects to any great extent. They are time-consuming to produce and their shape is clearly unsuitable for forging most objects, apart from cauldrons and other objects that require sheet iron (Tholander 1971; Lindeberg 2009:95ff). Furthermore, spade-shaped bars are notably absent in the archaeological record from sites where iron-working was carried out. Instead they are found in hoards (Lindeberg 2009:63–73). This tradition has without doubt shaped the archaeological record and is the reason that so many complete currency bars have been preserved. Currency bars by definition largely disappear from the archaeological record when they are forged into objects and are commonly recovered as fragments.

Spade-shaped currency bars are primarily a Norrlandic phenomenon, and most have been found in a well-defined core area consisting of Jämtland, Medelpad, Hälsingland and Gästrikland. Hoards of spade-shaped currency bars have a clear connection to the farming districts around Lake Storsjön, along the river valleys and the coast (fig. 1). Closer study of the places where spade-shaped bars were buried reveals great similarities between them. This demonstrates that the places were not chosen at random; there were definite ideas about which types of locations were suitable. Generally the hoards are found on the peripheries of the settlement districts, on the outskirts of what seem to be the outermost Early Iron Age farms (Lindeberg 2009: 131ff) (fig. 2). The hoards also show a clear association with natural borders, and specifically to the places where the borders could be crossed (*ibid.*:180). A close connection between settlement boundaries and hoards of currency bars is also evident in Britain (*e.g.* Hingley 2005).

Spade-shaped bars have been notoriously hard to date since they rarely turn up in dateable contexts. Furthermore, the hoards only seldom contain other types of objects. The handful of other objects found in hoards with currency bars suggest that they mainly belong to the period AD 300–600 (Lindeberg 2009:33ff). This assumption is strengthened by the fact that settlements and graves from the Roman Iron Age and Migration period are often found in the vicinity of the hoards. However, there are two available ¹⁴C-datings that complicate the discussion, one from Torsåker in Gästrikland from 60 BC–AD 150 cal.

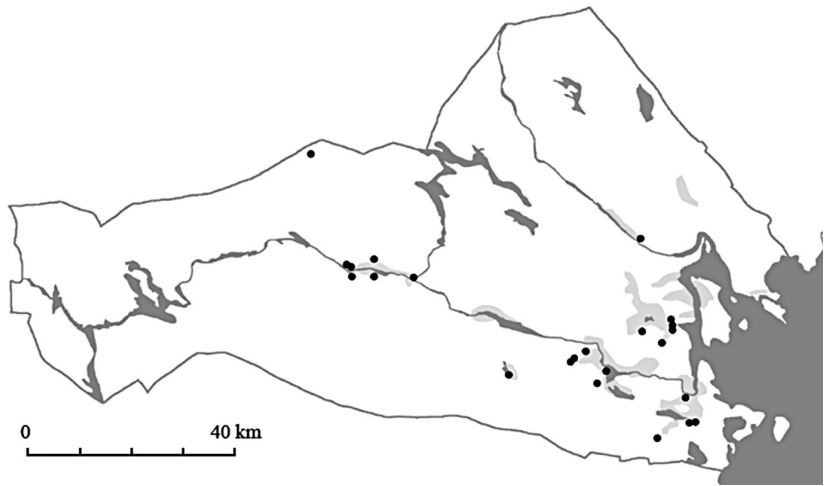


Fig. 2. The spatial relationship between hoards of spade-shaped currency bars (black dots) and Iron Age settlement districts (grey areas) in Medelpad, Sweden.

(Englund *et al.* 2001) and the other from Hackås in Jämtland from AD 774–941 cal. (Possnert & Wetterholm 1995:29). These datings indicate a remarkably long period of use. It is noteworthy that the morphology of the bars is constant over time; there is no way of distinguishing early bars from late bars simply by looking at them. This indicates that the shape was significant, as it was retained for hundreds of years.

In this part of Sweden a large-scale iron production was initiated in the interior around the time of the birth of Christ (Magnusson 1986; Eriksson *et al.* 2008) and the early ¹⁴C-date from Torsåker suggests that spade-shaped currency bars were being manufactured already at the start of this production. The shape of the bars was then maintained for many centuries, perhaps until the 10th century, that is, almost until the end of the Iron Age.

A GIFT OF FERTILITY

The spade-shaped currency bars have previously been interpreted as trade iron and the hoards have therefore been seen as temporary stores or hiding places where bars were deposited for various reasons in transit from producer to consumer (Enqvist 1943:72; Thålin 1967:315; Selinge 1977:377; Hallinder 1978:34). This is, however, contradicted by the sheer number of hoards that have been left in the ground and by the regularity of the find contexts, which strongly indicate that the in-

tention was to bury the bars permanently. There are also circumstances that suggest that the burial of currency bars did not take place in secrecy and that the places where hoards had been buried were known. There are examples of reuse of these places, most obviously in Torsåker where two large blooms had been deposited about four metres from the place where the currency bars had been buried. The result from the ^{14}C -analysis of one of the blooms was AD 530–650 cal. This indicates that the blooms were buried about 500 years later than the currency bars (Englund *et al.* 2001). There are no other Iron Age remains in the vicinity, and the direct geographical relationship as well as the close connection between the deposited objects strongly suggests a relationship between the two hoards.

There are reasons to believe that the burial of currency bars should be seen in connection with ritualized activities to promote fertility. Iron production in many parts of Africa and Asia has been viewed metaphorically in terms of reproduction, where the process in the smelting furnace is a pregnancy resulting in the birth of a bloom (*e.g.* Herbert 1993; Barndon 2001; Haaland, Haaland & Rijal 2002; Källén 2004:193f). Smelting furnaces were often decorated with breasts and other female symbols and were regarded as the smelter's wife (Herbert 1993:32ff). The production of iron was thus intimately associated with fertility and procreation. Terje Gansum has interpreted stanza 40 of *Voluspá* as an indication that a similar symbolism relating the production of iron to birth and death likely prevailed in Iron Age Scandinavia (Gansum 2004). This is also supported by the fact that the Norwegian word for tuyere (Sw. *blästermunstycke*) is *avlstein*, or breeding stone (Haaland 2004:16, note 6).

The placement of hoards of currency bars at what appear to be the outskirts of the outermost farms of the settlement districts is consistent and conveys the impression that the wish was to bury the hoards between the forest and the farm. At present there is very little detailed knowledge of how the landscape around the farm was organised on a micro level. Routinely graves and remains of settlements are found only in one direction from the hoards. The scarcity of these kinds of remains in the other directions suggests that these areas mainly consisted of forest, used at different levels of intensity.

The placement of the hoards on the outskirts of the farms suggests that the offerings were intended to promote fertility in the fields around the farm as well as in the forest. The forest offered a wealth of essential

resources, including the important iron ore. Over time iron ore forms anew, which means that ore can be collected from the same bog roughly once in every generation. Since there was no conception of the chemical background of how iron ore is formed, people might have equated the process of gathering ore from bogs and lakes with the way in which crops were harvested in the fields. Securing the regeneration of the forest and the continuous formation of the ore was consequently probably steeped in ritual, and this is a possible reason why the currency bars were deposited next to the forest. It is thus consistent that the placement of currency bar hoards at the edges of waterways and bogs – the places where the ore was collected – is more common inland, where the iron production took place, whereas hoards from the coastal areas are located more generally at the edges of the settlement districts.

THE SHAPE OF THE BARS

Since currency bars have been interpreted as trade iron, the standardised shape of the bars has been seen as a way to demonstrate to a buyer that the iron could be forged, in other words that the iron was of good quality (Magnusson 1986:274). Modern smiths are of the opinion that the shape as a form of quality control is well supported, but that the bars are too overworked for the shape merely to be a way to showcase the quality of the iron, as that could be achieved by simply bending the iron. Especially the sockets on the currency bars have been difficult to explain from a functional point of view (Lindeberg 2009:96f).

Historically and in modern times, half-processed trade iron has been turned into billets and flat bars, shapes that work well when forging the iron into any kind of object. The shapes of prehistoric bar iron, on the other hand, were not chosen solely from a technological point of view. Instead the shapes referred to utilitarian objects such as axes, scythes, swords and ploughs – objects which had an important function, as well as symbolism attached to them, at the time.

The object that most resembles the spade-shaped currency bar is the socketed axe, as noted already by Jan Petersen (1918:181) and Gustaf Hallström (1934:74, note 3). There are even instances where spade-shaped bars and socketed axes have been confused in museum inventories. The bar shares all of its constituent elements with the socketed axe, but the shape has been manipulated, a mode of procedure discernible in many types of historic and prehistoric currency bars (*e.g.* Martens 1981:42; Hingley 1990:94; Svane 1991; Dupre 1995:88ff).

That the spade-shaped bars were given a form taken from the socketed axe would also provide an explanation for the socket of the currency bars. It is also worth mentioning that in the few instances where spade-shaped bars have been recovered with other types of objects, these are remarkably often objects with sockets (fig. 3).

Petersen (1918:181) assumed that the currency bars had evolved from the socketed axe, whereas Gustaf Hallström (1934:74, note 3) considered it to be the other way around. However, the relationship between the spade-shaped bar and the socketed axe should be understood in a more metaphorical way where the currency bar, by being given a shape referential to the socketed axe, also came to share some of the meanings that the axe held.

The spade-shaped bar is therefore referential to a socially significant object – the socketed axe – and this is doubtlessly also part of the reason why it was meaningful to bury such bars in the ground rather than to use them in the manufacture. I will return to the relationship between the two objects below.



Fig. 3. Hoard from Gåcksäter in Hög parish, Hälsingland, containing spade-shaped currency bars, a socketed axe and a socketed tool (Hvarfner 1952:74).

STANDARDISATION

The currency bars are surprisingly standardised and it is important to consider that it may have been unimaginable for smiths to be innovative when manufacturing currency bars. The bars looked the same for centuries, which indicates that the shape itself was important and that changing it was either undesirable or perhaps even impossible. Many theories about currency bars are based on the degree of standardisation they show. Standardisation turns our modern, Western thoughts to mass production and (proto-) industry (Budd & Taylor 1995:137ff).

Standardisation as a phenomenon is not uncommon in traditional societies, but is instead related to concepts of tradition and the handing down of knowledge. It can be seen in parallel with oral traditions. Praise and recognition are given to the one who can best tell a well-known story, not to the creator of a new one (Ong 2003; see also Barley 1994:115). Likewise pottery is extremely standardised in parts of Africa and it is not desirable to change the shape or decoration of a pot. The craft is often passed from mother to daughter according to a strict cultural tradition; and change, or rather deviation from the norm, leads to the pot being thought of as wrong or even unusable (Barley 1994:76ff, 115ff). Thus youth is subordinate to age and experience, and innovation subordinate to tradition. The pot functions as a model of society and as such it is a concrete manifestation of the transmission of cultural values and knowledge from one generation to the next. Since the technology of potting embodies knowledge about the world, improvisation or innovation is not appropriate and pottery is consequently surprisingly resistant to change (*ibid.*).

Standardisation is also common in other technological processes. Ethnographic sources from the end of the 19th century reveal that the production of copper ingots in parts of Central Africa was extremely standardised. The technology of casting bronze was handed down from father to son, and it was done in accordance with instructions that originally came from the ancestors. These were followed with the greatest accuracy, and the European officials were struck by the uniformity of the finished products (Herbert 1984:190). Materials and the forms given to them thus had to fit the template accepted by that particular society.

Regarding objects that in any sense made a social statement, it is clear that neither material nor form was a random or personal matter, and this has to be taken into consideration when looking at the spade-

shaped currency bars. There was a tradition to be considered, a definite idea about how a currency bar from central Norrland should look and how it should be used. This tradition was respected and reproduced from generation to generation. The standardisation of the spade-shaped bars should therefore not be confused with mass production or be seen as a sign of centralised or proto-industrial production. It should rather be understood as a way of dealing with tradition and history.

LATER CURRENCY BARS AND ANALOGIES

It is obvious that the intermediary form that currency bars represented, over wide areas and long periods of time, had significance beyond what could be directly connected to metalworking, and that the bars were socially and symbolically linked to other aspects of society.

Large quantities of iron were previously produced in sub-Saharan Africa. As in prehistoric Europe, there was a multitude of types of currency bars, most of which had a restricted distribution outside their area of production (Guyer 1986:587; Dupre 1995:83). The iron production dwindled as the 20th century wore on, as imported iron replaced the local production. This also meant that the local production of currency bars gradually ceased (Herbert 1993:111)

Anthropological studies from large parts of Central Africa have shown that currency bars in these areas were historically often used in social rather than in economic transactions. Because iron production was intimately connected to ideas about procreation and fertility, currency bars were mostly exchanged in transactions related to marriages, mainly as bridewealth (Herbert 1993:112; Bisson 2000:133). As a consequence, in some communities more people were involved in the production of iron than in agriculture and hunting (Herbert 1993:112). In some areas the same word was used for currency bars as for wives (Guyer 1986:578; for a more extensive discussion on this topic see Haaland *et al.* 2000, where hoes are related to the fertility of the field and the fertility of women).

Just as in prehistoric Europe, the shape of the bars was as a rule referential to utility objects, for instance arrow- or spearheads, axes, hoes or knives. However, even very vague shapes were explained as having been fashioned in the shape of a specific tool. The iron-producing sub-Saharan Africa is a vast area with great variations, but generally each type of currency bar only circulated in a defined geographical region. Both iron-producing groups and groups that did not make their own

iron manufactured their own types of currency bars and these were only used within the group (Dupre 1995:86). Currency bars were only rarely part of long-distance trade and did not leak out of the regional systems in any significant numbers since they were not culturally acceptable outside the local area (Dupre 1995:83; Webb 1999:37f). In fact, it was unusual for most people to even recognize currency bars from other areas (Guyer 1986:593). There was a high level of standardisation of the currency bars from each area, both in terms of iron and shape (Dupre 1995:78). The shapes and qualities of different types of currency bars could be similar, as well as the names of the different types, but they must not be interpreted as “dialects”. The names differed because the objects differed (Guyer 1986:587).

The currency bars could theoretically be worked into objects, but most remained unchanged within the exchange sphere. To work these types of bars into finished objects was considered either impossible or so highly undesirable as never to happen. When the bars were taken out of circulation around the 1930s they were simply thrown away in many areas, suggesting that reforging was not an option (Guyer 1986:589). These anthropological examples can give us some perspectives on the interpretation of the archaeological material from central Norrland.

A CHANGING WORLD

The dating of the currency bars from Torsåker parish to the period around the birth of Christ suggests that the shape of the bars came into existence at the same time as a local iron production was introduced in Norrland. The dating is surprisingly early and presently this hoard is the only one that can be attributed to this early stage. The find nevertheless indicates that the shape and its significance were then reproduced for an incredibly long time, referring as they did to the introduction of iron itself. Although the chronology is not altogether clear, the introduction of iron production in Norrland coincides roughly in time with the introduction of agriculture and the establishment of permanent settlements prior to the birth of Christ – events that would have deeply changed the lives of the Iron Age people. These profound changes would also have impacted on how people perceived themselves, their mythical history and their place in the world.

Chris Gosden and Gary Lock (1998) make a distinction between two co-existing ways of dealing with the past: genealogical history and mythical history. In genealogical history the past is created through

links to ancestors, and although forefathers and -mothers occasionally can be named surprisingly far back, the genealogical history rarely goes back further than 500 years. Beyond the genealogical history there is a mythical history that relates to the beginnings of the world, the structure of human society, mythical origins, identity and people's place in the world. I suggest that the profound changes in the period around the beginning of the first millennium required the creation of a new mythical history, and that the spade-shaped currency bars came to be associated with these mythical beginnings.

The pre-Roman Iron Age is still rather badly known in central Norrland and therefore it is uncertain exactly how the transition from a mobile society to a sedentary agricultural society took place. The transition was not synchronic and occurred at different times within the region, and there are big differences between the north and the south and between the coast and the interior. The discussion that follows mainly concerns the coastal areas, the river valleys and the district around Lake Storsjön, areas where agriculture was introduced during the course of the Iron Age and where the majority of the spade-shaped currency bars have been recovered.

There is a general lack of archaeological finds from the pre-Roman Iron Age and the first part of the Roman Iron Age in central Norrland. In early research this was seen as a sign of depopulation caused by a deterioration of the climate (*e.g.* Hallström 1929). Today a few pre-Roman settlement finds have been identified in Tuna and Attmar in Medelpad and in Hög in Hälsingland, that is, in central districts during later parts of the Early Iron Age. Hearths, a longhouse and burnt grains have been recovered which point to the existence of a sedentary agricultural society in these parts of central Norrland before the birth of Christ (Broadbent 1985; Lindström & Olsson 1986; Liedgren 1988:87ff; Baudou 1997). The pre-Roman Iron Age is still unidentified in Gästrikland where the earliest known Iron Age settlement remains date from the Roman Iron Age (Eriksson *et al.* 2008:27f). However, iron was produced in the area from the time around the birth of Christ and, as mentioned earlier, the spade-shaped currency bars from Torsåker were dated to the same period (Englund *et al.* 2001; Englund 2002:306).

Pollen analyses from central Norrland offer a fragmentary picture of the process. The earliest signs of localized permanent agriculture are found along the coast, in the central parts of Hälsingland from about 400 BC and in Medelpad from around AD 1 (Engelmark 1997:50). In

the interior the pollen analyses indicate a long period of forest grazing, starting from the time around the birth of Christ in Medelpad (Engelmark 1978). There are some indications of cereal cultivation in the Storsjö area in Jämtland during the early Iron Age, but it is not until the Vendel period that a marked agricultural expansion is visible in the pollen diagrams (Påhlsson 1989; Wallin & Oskarsson 2002). Animal husbandry and forest grazing were most likely the foremost mode of subsistence in large parts of the interior up until the Late Iron Age or Early Middle Ages (Wallin & Oskarsson 2002; von Stedingk & Baudou 2006; Magnusson & Segerström 2009). In Jämtland, however, as in Gästrikland, there are a great number of prehistoric iron production sites and the ¹⁴C-datings show that this production was introduced during the later parts of the pre-Roman Iron Age (Magnusson 1986: fig. 96).

The haziness of the period before and after the birth of Christ differs strikingly from the subsequent period. By about AD 200 the transition was completed in the coastal areas, and there was a strong emphasis on cultivation and a settled lifestyle as manifested in the landscape through numerous mounds and houses with stone foundations. The course of events that led up to this is still not altogether established, but it was sometime during the later parts of the pre-Roman Iron Age – when forests were cleared to give way to plots and fields in the coastal areas and when a local iron production was introduced in the interior – that the socketed axe became symbolically associated with this new way of life. This coincides with the emergence of the spade-shaped currency bars. Ideas connected to history and origins were invested in the spade-shaped bars and were preserved through mythological narratives.

THE SOCKETED AXE

The socketed axe was of paramount importance in the new way of life that came into existence around the time of the birth of Christ in central Norrland, and I suggest that this is why that shape was chosen for the currency bars. The currency bars, through the axe, came to be associated with what was considered the origins of the society: iron working and the clearing of the forest to create agricultural land.

The socketed axe originated in Bronze Age axes and generally belongs to the early Iron Age (Welinder *et al.* 1998:335). The chronology of these axes is not conclusive, mainly because the majority of axes are stray finds (Hvarfner 1952:7) but also because dating based on ty-

pology is unreliable for socketed axes (Serning 1966:15). On the European mainland the socketed axes were replaced by axes with shaft-holes before the birth of Christ, and from then on the socketed axe was a strictly Scandinavian phenomenon. Whereas it was replaced in southern Scandinavia during earlier parts of the first millennium, it was kept for a much longer time in Norrland, where it is occasionally found even in medieval contexts (Hvarfner 1952:83ff, 113ff). In Norrland the socketed axe was predominant up until the Vendel period, with the exception of a few axes with shaft-holes recovered in Migration period contexts (Hvarfner 1952:113ff, 122ff; Liedgren 1992). It is thus established that the socketed axe was used significantly longer in the areas where spade-shaped currency bars are found, and it disappears from the archaeological record at what seems to be roughly the same time as the currency bars. There is thus a strong spatial and temporal association between socketed axes and spade-shaped currency bars.

The spade-shaped bars have not spread into Norway to any great extent, but most of the Norwegian finds have been recovered in the neighbouring counties of Trøndelag and Møre (Martens 1981:41f) (fig. 1).

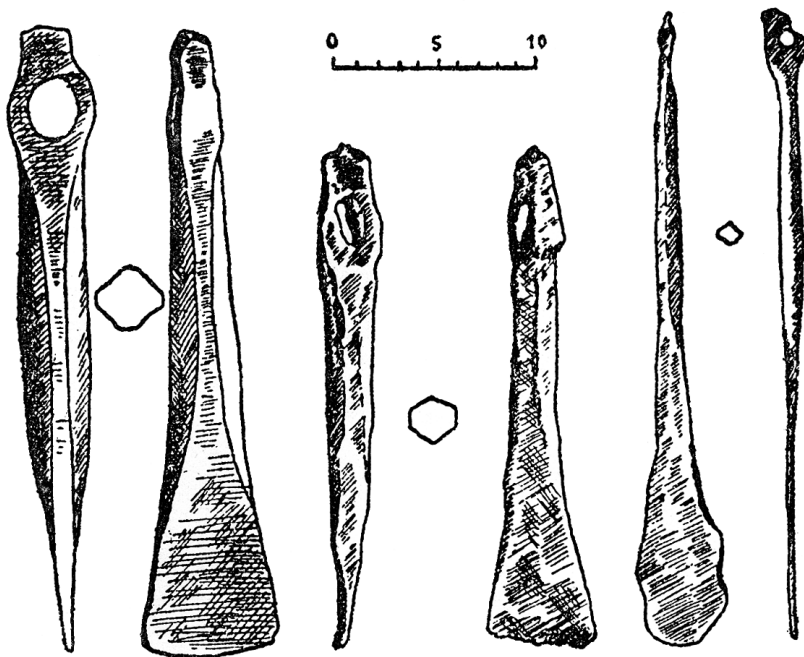


Fig. 4. The relationship between Norwegian axes and currency bars of type R438 (Nihlén 1939:108).

As in Norrland, the socketed axe is prevalent in this area throughout most of the Iron Age. In Norway the common type of currency bar is the axiform bar of type R438 which is referential to the octagonal axe (No. *bleggøkse*) (Martens 1981; Svane 1991) (fig. 4). This type of bar has a distinct distribution area in the eastern parts of Norway, centred around Oppland, Hedmark and Buskerud, consistent with the east Norwegian distribution of the octagonal axe (Resi 1995:136). The same decided geographical compliance between spade-shaped bars and socketed axes as in Sweden can thus be recognized in Norway too, and this also applies to the R438 bars and the octagonal axes.

The socketed axe was an all-round axe primarily used for felling trees and other kinds of woodwork. As other types of axes became more common the function of the socketed axe became more specialized, and it was used primarily as a barking spud (Sw. *barkspade*) (Hvarfner 1952:109ff; Myrdal 1982:88f). The socketed axe could also be shafted differently and thus be turned into a hoe. Hoes were primarily used when uncultivated land was prepared for farming (Welinder, Pedersen & Widgren 1998:349ff). Finds of socketed axes in almost every metalwork hoard from Norrland also suggest that they were used in connection with smithing. This has also been put forward by Birgit Arrhenius in her discussion on grave 39 from Hovgårdsberg, Vendel parish (Arrhenius 1979:411). Furthermore, this type of axe can also indirectly be connected to the production of iron since it was used to fell trees for the production of charcoal needed for fuel in the smelting furnaces.

The longevity of the socketed axe in Norrland indicates that it also acquired special significance which may have created a resistance against accepting new forms of axes. Furthermore, it is likely that the outstanding practical importance of this type of axe was the reason why the spade-shaped bars were fashioned in a shape derived from it. The considerable changes that occurred at the end of the pre-Roman Iron Age were made possible because of the socketed axe; and by giving the spade-shaped bars a shape that alluded to this axe, ideas about mythical beginnings and identity became embedded in the spade-shaped bars.

HISTORY AND MYTHICAL BEGINNINGS

Mythical narratives are often intimately entwined with the landscape, and it is not unlikely that the places where hoards of currency bars have been found were important nodes in the socially constructed landscape. The concentration of currency bars to the areas where they

were produced, in conjunction with the places chosen to deposit them, indicates that they were related to and significant for the local history and identity. The individual places where hoards have been found are not identical but there are obvious similarities between them. This is a clear indication that the placement of the hoards in the landscape was meaningful and that the currency bars and the surrounding environment should be seen as parts forming a totality.

Hoards of spade-shaped currency bars occur over large parts of central Norrland. As mentioned earlier, central Norrland is a large area with great differences, primarily between the coastal areas and the densely forested interior. Spade-shaped bars, on the other hand, have been found both in the interior and along the coast.

In the coastal areas there are numerous burial mounds and houses, manifestations of an identity firmly based on agriculture. These types of constructions are more or less absent in the interior during the Early Iron Age. There are graves in the interior, too, but in smaller numbers and in specific settings; often they are found on narrow headlands in lakes. This lack of graves has sometimes been taken to mean there were no settlements in the interior. However, the large number of iron production sites, and other traces of activities connected to iron production, clearly demonstrates that the interior was inhabited, but by people who expressed their presence in other ways than through burial mounds and houses with stone foundations (Sandqvist 2004:22). Instead it is more than likely that the identity of the people of the interior was somehow connected to their roles as iron producers.

During the Migration period there was a marked settlement expansion, and agricultural areas similar to the ones along the coast were for the first time visible in parts of the interior areas, primarily in the Storsjö area and along the river valleys. It is probable that the majority of the hoards of currency bars can be seen in conjunction with this stage when new farms were established over larger areas than before. Although there were still differences between the coastal and inland areas, the same kinds of constructions were now found in both areas although in fewer numbers in the interior. During the course of the Iron Age, iron production sites also appeared in the coastal areas, a few in Hälsingland and in greater numbers in Gästrikland. It is at this point that the symbolic importance of the spade-shaped currency bars emerged and it became expedient to deposit them. The social meanings held by the currency bars, coupled with ideas about the origins of so-

ciety – opening up the landscape, clearing forests for farming and iron production – were so broad as to appeal to people in different parts of central Norrland. It was possible, through the lens of the currency bar, to conciliate these different activities and ways of life to a narrative of origins and identity. The currency bars spoke to the worldviews of coastal dwellers and their inland counterparts, and could therefore bind them together, just as they bound together the forest and the farm.

CONCLUSION

The spade-shaped currency bars were socially significant objects, which, when buried in the ground, firmly fixed history to the present in the landscape at the same time as they offered assurance of a good future. Through the shape, referential to the socketed axe, the currency bars were associated with narratives about the origins of the society and local identity, and the forging of currency bars, as well as the deposition of them, probably constituted important ways to pass down this knowledge over the generations. When spade-shaped currency bars were forged, in effect history and a local identity were forged, providing a constant in a changing world. The hoards were probably deposited by people from the nearby farms and were subsequently incorporated into the social memory of the society. Although the hoards were invisible above ground, their tendency to cluster in close proximity to each other is evidence of just how active and long-lasting this tradition was, not least at a place like Kråknäset in Torsåker where 500 years separate the two depositions. The spade-shaped currency bars offer a glimpse of a worldview different from our own, one in which the intermediary form that the bars represented bestowed on them a much fuller significance than did their place in the production process.

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