

Åsa M. Larsson

Breaking and Making Bodies and Pots: Material and Ritual Practices in Sweden in the Third Millennium BC

Aun 40

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Kim von Hackwitz

Längs med Hjälmarens stränder och förbi – relationen mellan den gropkeramiska kulturen och båtyxekulturen

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Review by Björn Nilsson

During 2009 not less than three doctoral dissertations explored the Swedish Middle Neolithic. Two of these research efforts are reviewed in the following. Åsa M. Larsson's and Kim von Hackwitz's books encompass the same theme: the relationship between the so-called Pitted Ware culture and the Battle (or Boat) Axe culture. The two projects are very different in their premises, their research methods, and their conclusions.

Larsson's dissertation is a large and great work. The approach is both theoretical and empirical, and might be a bit demanding even for an archaeologist whose main focus lies outside the Scandinavian archaeology of the Middle Neolithic. Since the work is a dissertation this should not be considered a problem. And since the writing style is very

good, sometimes in a journalistic manner, even the most elaborate technical discussions are quite easy to follow. In order to understand – or explain – the relationship between the Pitted Ware and the Battle Axe culture, the thesis deals with several archaeological and anthropological super-themes: technical change and (material) cultural diversity, the relationship between the social and the technical, between nature and culture, body and being, everyday practices and occasional rituals. The field is vast, but since Larsson focuses on pottery and mortuary practices, the scope becomes sustainable throughout the book, which is divided into five parts.

Part I positions the work and its premises, and after a short introduction to archaeological and anthropological theories of culture and change Larsson outlines a socio-technological theoretical approach that is focused on embodied experience and cognition, and influenced by both phenomenology and practice theory. Furthermore, Larsson reclaims an anthropological archaeology as a study of the “real everyday life”. Part II presents the late Middle Neolithic (MNB) in Scandinavia and its research history. Larsson concentrates mainly on pottery traditions, and offers insights into the archaeological use of style and typology. Part III is entitled “Living Bodies” and spotlights the actual making of material culture. Craft and tradition are viewed through both anthropological and archaeological lenses. The outline is straightforward, down-to-earth and empirically distinct. Larsson reveals differences between Pitted Ware pottery and Battle Axe beakers. Regarding the latter Larsson stipulates that the Battle Axe pottery is novel and suggests that the new elements must be due to a relocation of potters. By means of style and technique Larsson proposes that the Battle Axe pottery was introduced into eastern middle Sweden by a group of Middle Neolithic people from the area of south-east Finland. Larsson defies the conclusion that a completely new population would have settled in eastern Sweden. The local continuity in stone craft, certain uses of raw material, and patterns in the use and re-use of the landscape all suggest that the pottery tradition descends from a small and distinct relocated group of people, most likely a result of interregional exogamic relations. The argument for cultural distinction between the Pitted Ware and the Battle Axe culture is reinforced in the following part which is devoted to the “Dead Bodies”. Here Larsson’s osteo-archaeological skill is evident, and through the examination of the Bollbacken (Pitted Ware)

and Turlinge (Battle Axe) mortuary houses, and the bodily remains on the two sites, more arguments for a cultural-dualistic interpretation of the Middle Neolithic of Sweden are put forth. The last and fifth part synthesizes everything: the reader is almost forced to be convinced by Larsson's logical reasoning, the detailed yet universal study and empirical penetrations, and the writings of a truly devoted researcher.

von Hackwitz's study is not as large as Larsson's, which by no means should be seen as a disadvantage. On the contrary, von Hackwitz's dissertation is quite exemplary in extent and scope. The focus is on the relationship between the Pitted Ware culture and the Boat Axe culture. The approach is somewhat more local; the geographical research area is 6800 km² and covers the prehistoric Lake Hjälmaren and part of the Littorina coast and sea. von Hackwitz declares in the first sentence that her thesis is about "humans and landscape, history and interactions, material culture and change". Pretentious keywords, of course, but I think von Hackwitz is serious – and interesting – in the sense that she enters the Pitted Ware/Battle Axe minefield with the intentions of writing landscape and settlement archaeology, rather than getting stuck in revisions of archeological ordering of the Middle Neolithic material culture. It is brave, and already after some 20 pages von Hackwitz announces that her main goal is to fight down Middle Neolithic cultural dualism. Throughout the thesis von Hackwitz uses the concepts of Pitted Ware and Battle Axe as two different sets of material culture, proactively used by the Middle Neolithic people in the Hjälmaren area. She comes to the conclusion that the Pitted Ware sites are of a ritual character, anchored in their past. The Battle Axe sites are found on Early Neolithic settlements and along landscape routes. The Battle Axe material culture is thus interpreted as the remains of an internally emerging social group, formed by travels and long-distance alliances. Von Hackwitz's study uses data predominately extracted from site and stray-find registers in the archives of the Museum of National Antiquities (SHM), and digital data from the national survey of heritage sites (FMIS). Basic GIS-operations are made, such as viewshed analyses and coastline manipulations. Accordingly, the approach in the three main case studies is rather distanced from the material. This detachment is not a problem per se; rather, it is unavoidable in general landscape or settlement studies. The problem arises if the researcher treats the national data from the FMIS databases or SHM collections as a true pre-

historic representation, instead of as the complex and messy antiquarian record it really is. von Hackwitz's study suffers from this, which has led to an incoherent dataset with a handful of minor and some major errors. Even though the main results withstand these faults, it is annoying. The data could easily be corrected and published in an abbreviated version. Until then it is a bit difficult to use the thesis. And that is a disappointment, since the ideas – and results – are of great interest.

The two books are dissimilar in many ways. Larsson's work is a major effort and is meticulously done. Her interest in the making and altering of material culture, in technological practices, and detailed empirical studies of archaeological objects provides a basis for her to prove that the dissimilarities between the Pitted Ware and the Battle Axe culture are a result of internal change and contact between other people. von Hackwitz's work is a bit clunky, yet tantalizing. In her Middle Neolithic landscape another cultural history is told. Here the different material cultures were actively used to mark differences internally. On the other hand both studies are similar. Each connects the Pitted Ware culture with tradition, and the Battle Axe culture with the new and the geographically distant. They both use the conventional definitions or categorizations of Middle Neolithic archaeology. I suppose that is necessary in this vast field of research, but as times goes by, archeological suggestions have grown into prehistoric facts. After a while it is hard to detect circular reasoning. One must not forget that the relation between the Pitted Ware and the Battle Axe culture during the Middle Neolithic is something totally anachronistic – a complex archeological composition of scientific aims and wishes, and some inviting material remains.