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Nordic Bronze Age Economies

Cambridge Elements in Ancient and Pre-modern Economies

Cambridge University Press

Cambridge 2024

84 pages (16 figures)

ISBN: 978-1-009-47583-9 Hardback

ISBN: 978-1-009-42142-3 Paperback

ISSN: 2754-2955 (online)

ISSN: 2754-2947 (print)

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This newly published book on *Nordic Bronze Age Economies* by Horn et al. is part of the Cambridge University Press series on Ancient and Pre-modern Economies to provide innovative and interdisciplinary views on culture and comparative economies. With this in mind, this small book of 60 pages, including illustrations and additional references, aims to describe the basis of regional economic development in the Nordic Bronze Age (NBA –the authors use NordicBA, though the more common abbreviation of this period is now NBA, see for example Vankilde 2014). The book is divided into six chapters, where the first chapter introduces us to the NBA, its geographical scope emphasizing the ecological diversity of the region, although argued to form a relatively homogeneous cultural expression. The premise

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is the development of an interweaved relationship between domestic and political economy during the NBA (p. 1).

At first, we are briefly taken back to the earlier parts of the Neolithic in order to explain the significant changes that are to come in the NBA, emphasizing especially the development of pastoral economy around 2800 BCE, which is connected to migration of groups from the steppes in the east, and the later maritime expansion of a metal-based economy represented by Bell Beaker groups. These changes developed into a uniform Nordic Bronze Age almost a millennia later, where the primary cause for this development was the engagement in long-distance metal trade based on new boat technology and elite control. Based on this, the authors develop models of chiefdoms based on various resources and archaeological material in Scania, Bohuslän and Western Norway (Fig. 2). From there a brief description of the NBA and its periodic development is given, summarizing it down to a distinctive specialized seafaring economy based on an agropastoral economy creating an economic surplus generating domestic and political economies.

The second chapter deals with the macroeconomic perspectives where the economic condition of the NBA with a farm- and boat-based economy, and a local contrasting economy, develop into a political economy particularly based on bronze and other exotic products. Here the authors draw a historical outline from the late 19th century to the early 2000s, illustrating how different theoretical and methodological changes have influenced the understanding and interpretation of the Bronze Age economy. Based on this, the authors suggest an approach centred on independent (self-sufficient) and decentralized farms with the concept of marine mode of production (MMP) to understand the development of institutional formation. This development of micro-regional systems with low density populations is connected to the long-distance trade of metal, weapons, slaves and other valuables where the local farms and agriculture are the fundamental premises for the developments in the NBA (also illustrated in Fig. 5).

From here the book takes us to the domestic economy in chapter 3, which briefly presents selected empirical examples on farms and settlement organization suggesting among others that the increase in house size is connected to increase in social complexity (p. 18). This is illustrated by the domestic economy from plant material to herding, fishing and hunting, where the produced surplus supported the ruling elites and their social agenda.

Chapter 4 deals with the broader economic picture within the region discussed in the book. Here three different spheres of exchanges (micro-, macro-regions and long-distance contacts) for goods and interaction are suggested, highlighted with several examples such as flint, soapstone, tar, metal, amber and other products. These spheres are linked to the signifi-

cance, production and use of boats, enabling raiding as well as trading and gift-exchange. This created opportunities within the NBA societies, although there were clearly both economic and logistical challenges with long-distance travels.

In chapter 5 the issues of conflict and alliances are further described and discussed with reference to the economic perspective of the book using both economic theories as well as ethnographic examples. The Limfjord region is used as an example, illustrating that uneven distribution of resources and the strategic location made it easy to control trade and raids, which created economic imbalances within the NBA-region.

Chapter 6 follow this up with micro-regional case-studies from the Limfjord, Jæren, Inner Sogn and Tanum areas, suggesting that the Limfjord area was a major hub between the other case-regions and central parts of Europe. In chapter 7 it is described how the NBA societies developed and could have taken part in maritime expeditions encountering European communities using boats. This is exemplified by boat finds and rock carvings, and the authors concludes that the NBA societies encountered European societies by boat, in a system of domestic and political economies which developed in the NBA.

One of the major premises in this book is the issue of domestic economy, that is used as a point of departure to understand the significant investments in building houses and agriculture, as it is perceived as generating an agropastoral basis for self-sufficiency and surplus production diverted to political economy (p. 15). We are presented with a view that the NBA-societies were driven by rational societies where individuals were acting by their own economic interest in order to optimize wealth and prosperity (larger crew, more cargo, technological development) as a *homo economicus*. Here we are really at the core of NBA-economies, and what would constitute pre-modern economy and wealth, and did (all) NBA societies really optimize their production and technological development? As it is clearly stated throughout the book that questions regarding economy are political, it is surprising to find that the book lacks major explanations and discussions of what economy is in this specific pre-monetary setting. No doubt, the NBA is a time of transition in large parts of Scandinavia, but the book fails to bring forward alternative economic models, as we are left with an extreme focus on economic rationality. As the authors point out in the beginning, this region of Europe was highly diverse, but did this diversity lead to cultural and economic homogeneity? Were there other means of wealth and values beyond creating an economic surplus and a built-in (cultural) desire for material prosperity? Here the issue of complexity is relevant, as the authors present us with complex decentralized chiefdoms and complex constellations. As the cases presented represent very different

ecological, cultural and geographical contexts, one would expect different modes of social and political complexity. All societies are complex social, economic and political systems irrespective of social organization or size. Here we are left with arguments suggesting that complex boat construction and seafaring created a distinctive and complex economy (p. 7–8). We are presented with a picture of a political economy and complexity going hand in hand, while it would be useful for the reader to discuss the concepts of complexity more broadly, especially in the context of NBA and the diversity both in terms of ecology and culture within this region and how this change over time. It is an oversimplification to state that increase in house size indicates increase in social stratification (p. 17), as there are a number of factors which affects the size of a house such as local climate, the geographic setting, resources, household size, etc.

This brings me to the second issue with this book, who is this aimed at? The authors states that this book will ‘[...] provide a readable and easy-to-use account that helps to understand the economies of the NordicBA [...]’ (p. 1). If the receivers and readers of the book are students, the book would have benefited from being more consistent and precise with references also using page numbers. This would clearly help others to navigate and check references for further readings. In addition to this, some of the references are actually wrong cited. To point out one familiar example, metal finds in (Western) Norway are not found in settlement context, nor is the Veim hoard found in loose gravel, but in a scree (p. 49). My point here is that the level of precision clearly could have been better, but this is also seen in the way the interpretations are presented. Too often we are presented with tentative or loose interpretations not well funded using ‘perhaps’ (41 times), ‘could have’ (34 times), ‘may have’ (48 times) which leads to sentences like this; ‘People caught up in hostilities were perhaps killed or injured, including the elderly woman who could have played an important role, for example, as mediator or expert in the proper, that is, customary conduct of such encounters.’ (p. 54). Precision, reliability and accountability are significant values of research which we all should aim at.

The book would have benefitted from a much tighter editing of the text presented, the structure of the book, and indeed the illustrations and maps. Names on the maps are hardly readable in the physical book nor in digital format, while other names in the text do not occur on the maps (e.g. Stjørdal and Alta). Other placenames on the map are not relevant for the text (e.g. Lappvallen?), and illustrations are sometimes hard to understand and lack clear descriptions (e.g. Fig. 2).

Archaeology, like any other science, must dare to challenge prevailing perceptions and push and present new knowledge. Unfortunately, the book is neither innovative in their approach to Nordic Bronze Age Economies,

nor highly interdisciplinary, as much of what we find in this small book the authors have written elsewhere, and the interdisciplinary approach is not well funded neither in economic nor ethnographic studies. That is a pity, because a book like this should clearly dig deeper into this highly important theme in one of the most formative periods in Scandinavian prehistory grasping the complexity and diverse economies.

Reference

Vandkilde, H. 2014. Breakthrough of the Nordic Bronze Age: Transcultural Warriorhood and a Carpathian Crossroad in the Sixteenth Century BC. *European Journal of Archaeology*. Vol. 17(4), pp. 602–633, doi:10.1179/1461957114Y.0000000064.