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## Burial in the Swedish-Norwegian Battle Axe Culture : questioning the myth of homogeneity

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The background of the cover is a photograph of a large, grey, moss-covered rock formation. The rock has several small, dark, circular markings on its surface. In the background, there is a clear blue sky, some distant trees, and a small red-roofed building. The foreground shows dry, brown grass.

# **NEOLITHIC DIVERSITIES**

**Perspectives from  
a conference in  
Lund, Sweden**

**Edited by**

**Kristian Brink**

**Susan Hydén**

**Kristina Jennbert**

**Lars Larsson**

**Deborah Olausson**





The members of the conference “What’s New in the Neolithic”, May 2013. Photo by Kristina Jennbert.

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# Neolithic Diversities

Perspectives from a conference in Lund, Sweden

Editors:

Kristian Brink, Susan Hydén,  
Kristina Jennbert, Lars Larsson & Deborah Olausson

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Cover photo: The dolmen at Hofterup, western Scania. Photo by Kristina Jennbert 2012

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# Preface

In the study of the distant human past, certain events and periods have come to represent decisive passages from one human state to another. From a global perspective, the characteristic feature of the last ten thousand years is that people in different parts of the world, and at different points in time, started to grow plants and domesticate animals. The rise and dissemination of agriculture were crucial factors for the continued existence of humankind on earth. The incipient agriculture is often regarded as the very beginning of human *culture*, as it has traditionally been perceived in western historiography, that is, as control over nature and the “cultivation” of intellectual abilities.

As a result of the increasing national and international interest in the northern European Neolithic (4000–2000 BC), combined with large-scale archaeological excavations which helped to nuance and modify the picture of the period, senior researchers and research students formed a Neolithic group in 2010. The Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at Lund University served as the base, but the group also included collaborators from Linnaeus University and Södertörn University, and from the Southern Contract Archaeology Division of the National Heritage Board in Lund and Sydsvensk Arkeologi in Malmö and Kristianstad.

Meetings and excursions in the following two years resulted in the holding of an interna-

tional conference in Lund in May 2013 entitled “What’s New in the Neolithic”. Invitations to this conference were sent to two dozen prominent Neolithic scholars from northern and central Europe.

The conference was a great success, with presentations and discussions of different aspects of innovative research on the Neolithic. The members of the Neolithic group took an active part in the discussions following the presentations.

It was decided before the conference that the papers would be published. The members of the Neolithic group also had the opportunity to contribute current research to this publication.

After the conference an editorial group was set up, consisting of Dr Kristian Brink, PhD student Susan Hydén, Professor Kristina Jennbert, Professor Lars Larsson and Professor Deborah Olausson.

A grant was received from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond for the meetings and excursions of the Neolithic group 2010–2013. We would like to thank The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities and Berit Wallenbergs Stiftelse for grants which enabled us to hold the conference “What’s New in the Neolithic”. Grants from The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, and Stiftelsen Elisabeth Rausing’s Minnesfond financed the layout and printing of this publication.



## I. PERSPECTIVES ON PEOPLE, IDENTITY AND PRACTICE

# Burial in the Swedish-Norwegian Battle Axe Culture: questioning the myth of homogeneity

Deborah Olausson

## Abstract

Archaeologists are caught in the force-field between the particular and the general. An example of this dilemma can be seen when we examine how burial customs in the Swedish-Norwegian Battle Axe Culture have been described. Mats P. Malmer emphasized the general in his extensive study *Jungneolithische Studien* from 1962. He measured and described the evidence and applied numerous quantitative and statistical manipulations to arrive at a picture of normal (in the statistical sense) behaviour. Although examples of investigations of Battle Axe Culture burials which emphasize the particular over the general do exist, Malmer's picture of homogeneity remains largely unchallenged. The aim of this short presentation is to examine the evidence from the currently known Battle Axe Culture burials in Scania in regard to Malmer's postulate of homogeneity. In many respects the results confirm Malmer's conclusions, while in others our new data and/or a different analytical approach call for a redefinition of some of the postulates.

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## Introduction and aim

ARCHAEOLOGISTS ARE CAUGHT in the force-field between the particular and the general. An example of this dilemma can be seen when we examine how burial customs in the Swedish-Norwegian Battle Axe Culture have been described. Mats P. Malmer emphasized the general in his extensive study published in 1962. *Jungneolithische Studien* was a definitive work in which he attempted to collate all known empirical evidence for the Swedish-Norwegian Battle Axe Culture. He measured and described the evidence and applied numerous quantitative and statistical manipulations to arrive at a picture of normal (in the statistical sense) behaviour. Thus, although he acknowledged anomalies, his primary aim was to discover patterns and regularities in the empirical record.

Malmer's approach, emphasizing the general over the particular, was typical for the movement which came to be known as processual archaeology. Scientific method, hypothesis testing, and the use of quantitative and statistical methods characterized this approach. In their analyses of Battle Axe Culture burials, Christopher Tilley (1982) and Helena Knutsson (1995), who used an approach characterized by compilation and analysis of statistical data, can be said to comprise further examples.

The reaction to this, which came to be known as post-processual archaeology, espoused emphasizing the particular over the general. Looking again at studies of Battle Axe Culture burial, During (1989) and Berggren & Brink (2010) are two examples using this type of approach. Ebba During carried out an oste-

ological analysis of three of the burials from the Lilla Bedinge cemetery. Her analysis illustrated the highly complex nature of the burials and yielded a picture of great variety in burial practices. Archaeologists Åsa Berggren and Kristian Brink applied a practice perspective in their analysis of three Battle Axe Culture burials from the Malmö area in 2010. Through detailed study of each aspect of the material record they were able to suggest the order of events involved in the funerary rituals for these burials. Such an approach allows us to understand complexity and variation in burial practices; variation which undoubtedly was significant for the people who carried out the ceremony (Berggren & Brink 2010, p. 293).

In spite of the exceptions described in the preceding paragraph, I maintain that Malmer's weighty tome from 1962, with its emphasis on homogeneity, still influences our understanding of the Swedish-Norwegian Battle Axe Culture (cf. Larsson 2003, p. 155). Malmer himself remained true to the tenants of his book throughout his career, as is evident in his discussion of the Battle Axe Culture in *The Neolithic of South Sweden. TRB, GRK, and STR* (Malmer 2002), published five years before his death. Here he writes: "The professionally investigated or otherwise well documented grave finds nevertheless paint an unambiguous picture of strictly regulated, conservative burial customs, ..." (Malmer 2002, p. 137).

The aim of this short presentation is to examine the evidence from the currently known Battle Axe Culture burials in Scania in regard to Malmer's postulate of homogeneity. If we focus on variation rather than similarity when we look at the whole population, we can search for correlations which may enable us to find new aspects of the norms of burial practice but at a finer level of detail. Recent archaeological activity provides an augmented empirical basis for testing Malmer's conclusions and osteological analyses have provided new information on

e.g. age and sex of buried individuals (Johanson & Mårtensson 1976; Persson 1976; During 1989; Arcini 1990; Jantsch & Ranåker 2001) and isotope analyses can shed light on dietary and health issues (Lidén *et al.* 2004; Fornander 2013). In most cases I will use Malmer's postulates as my starting point.

## Methods and material

I have compiled a database of burials containing skeletal remains in Scania ascribed to the Battle Axe Culture. Information has been culled from published sources, the most important being Malmer 1962; 1975; 2002; Winge 1976; Edenmo 2000; Lagergren 2008; Brink 2009; Berggren & Brink 2010; and Fornander 2013. In cases with bones from multiple individuals in one grave I have listed each individual as one case. Cases from Malmer's original list (1962) where a single artefact is considered to represent a burial are not included. The database contains 144 examples of graves containing bones interpreted as one individual; 105 of these are listed in Malmer (1962). Finds included are only those found in association with the buried individual(s); finds in the filling are not included. Grave structures were not included in the analysis.

Burials are located in most of Scania with the exception of the northwest quadrant, see Fig. 1. Of the 56 burials which could be archaeologically dated, four belonged to Malmer's period 3, 24 to period 5 and 28 to period 4 or 5. Organic material from 23 burials has been radiocarbon dated. The earliest C14 date is 4540 ± 35 BP (N. Hyllievång A14169; Ua-33977; Brink 2009, p. 175) and the latest is 3730 ± 50 BP (Vellige, RAÄ 17; Ua-5361; Söderberg 1990).

## Number of individuals in the burial

Malmer defines the most common type of Battle Axe grave in the following way:



Fig. 1. Map of Scania showing the distribution of the burials in the database.

Flat-earth graves containing one or two skeletons in flexed position together with objects belonging to the Battle Axe Culture, either lacking a subterranean structure or with such a structure consisting exclusively of unworked stones with an average length of 20 to 40 cm (Malmer 1975, p. 35; my translation).

As Malmer points out (1975, p. 35), the definition contains an element of circularity because only burials containing material culture identified archaeologically as belonging to the Battle Axe Culture will be placed in this

category. Table 1 confirms that single burials are by far the most common form in Scania. However, they are not unique; six burials contain two individuals and at least four contain more than two.

Kastanjegården Anl. 105 contained the remains of a woman whose age at death was 30 years and two children aged 5–7 years. They were laid in what was interpreted as the remains of a wooden coffin. Two pots, seven amber beads, one flint axe, four flint blades, two scrapers and five flint flakes were found in association with the skeletal remains (Winge

Table 1. Number of individuals per burial, in those burials where traces of skeletons permitted a determination.

Number of individuals	Number of cases
One individual	57
Two individuals	6
More than two individuals	4
Total	67

1976; Johanson & Mårtensson 1976; Persson 1976; During 1989).

Burial 8184 at Dösjebro appears to have contained three to four individuals, including a child. Gravegoods were comprised of four pots, two battle axes, three flint axes, four flint blades, four amber beads and an amber ring (Lagergren 2008, pp. 100 ff.).

Lilla Bedinge grave 49 contained the remains of three adult males and two infants. The males were placed in a sitting position and the children lay between two of the adults. The only gravegood consisted of a bone needle. Malmer suggested grave 49 represents remains from a human sacrifice (Hansen 1934, pp. 142 ff.; Malmer 2002, p. 141).

A burial at Uppåkra attributed to the Battle Axe Culture contained a cranium from an adult and teeth from two children (Söderberg & Pilz Williams 2012, p. 43).

## Body placement and position of the face

Malmer maintains that there were strict conventions for body placement in single and double graves. According to him, the deceased is always buried lying in flexed position on his/her side with knees drawn up, and the face of the deceased always faces east, never west (Malmer 2002, p. 139).

Body placement could be determined for 52 individuals. Certainly this study corroborates that the crouched posture was preferred, with 81% in this position. However, six of the individuals (12%) registered in the present study were placed in a supine position in the grave and four (7%) in a sitting position. Three of the seated individuals are from the same burial, Lilla Bedinge grave 49 (Malmer 1962, p. 163).

The direction the individual was facing could be determined for 44 individuals in the database. Thirty-four of them (77%) were facing

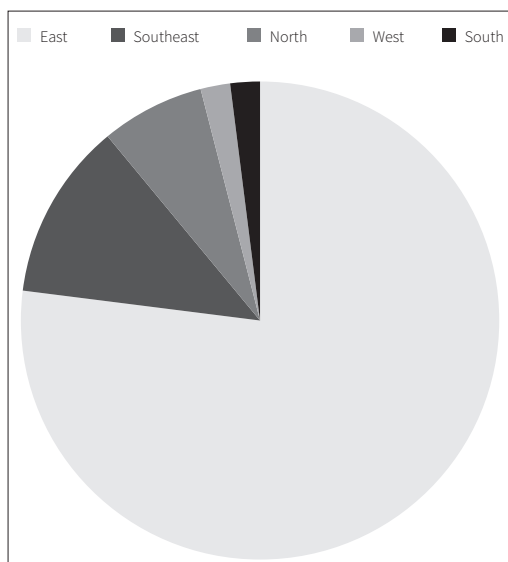


Fig. 2. Position of the face for 44 individuals.

east, five were facing southeast, three were facing north, and two were facing west and south, respectively (Fig. 2). The conclusion here is that regarding both body placement and position of the face, Malmer's observations are true in the majority of cases; however, some deviation was apparently permissible.

## The relationship between the biological sex of the individual and other burial characteristics

In the absence of biological sexing of individuals in burials, Malmer proposed a hypothesis stating that weapons signify male burials while jewellery signifies females. He defined weapons at battle axes, antler daggers, pointed antler weapons, and projectile points. As confirmation for his hypothesis he lists the artefacts accompanying three osteologically sexed individuals. In grave 185, Linköping Bergsvägen, the male was associated with a battle axe and an antler dagger, the female with jewellery made of amber, copper, or bone. Grave 53 at Lilla Bedinge contained a biologically determined



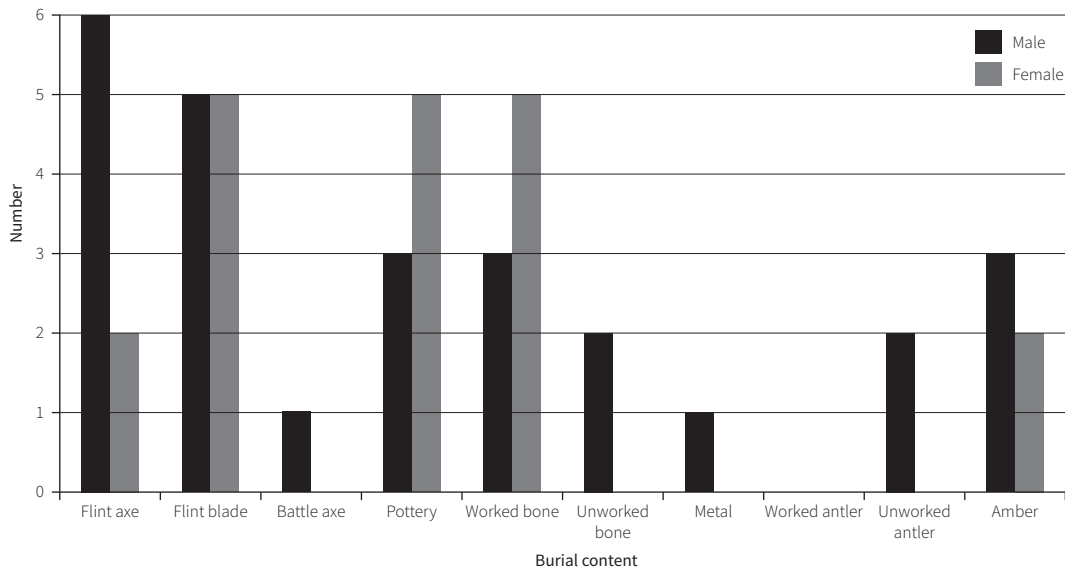


Fig. 3. Burial content for osteologically sexed individuals.

male accompanied by a pointed antler weapon. Further confirmation, according to Malmer, is that both weapons and jewellery never occur in association with the same individual (Malmer 1962, pp. 219 ff.; 2002, p. 141). Pottery, bone awls, flint blades and scrapers, and unworked bone can occur in association with both males and females. This is also true for flint axes, but they are more common in male burials, according to Malmer (1962, pp. 221 f.). Knutsson's statistics, where the individual's sex was determined by osteology or by grave content, indicated that battle axes only occur in male burials, but that jewellery can be found in both male and female burials (Knutsson 1995, p. 193).

Although Malmer does not identify principles governing the relationship between sex and body position, a consensus regarding this relationship is evident in published accounts. This dictates that for individuals placed in flexed position, those lying on their left side are males, while right side indicates females (Andersson *et al.* 1995, p. 34; Knutsson 1995,

p. 193; Olausson 2000, p. 36). However the rule of thumb rests on shaky empirical ground, as the sex determinations cited are in some cases osteological but in others based on grave goods.

Today osteological sex determinations are available for 18 individuals from Battle Axe burials in Scania; 11 males and seven females. Are the above postulates confirmed if we use only osteologically determined sexing?

The battle axe, sometimes considered the symbol of masculinity *par excellence*, occurs in only one osteologically sexed burial in the database, a male. Data concerning the total contents of osteologically sexed burials are shown in fig. 3. Pottery occurs in association with three males and five females. Flint blades have been found in association with five male and the same number of females. Unworked bone was associated with two male individuals, while bone awls (worked bone) were found in association with three male skeletons and five females. These data all confirm Malmer's hypothesis. However, amber beads were pres-

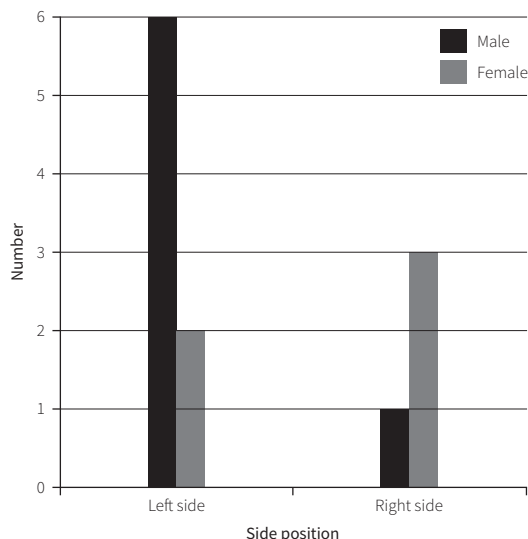


Fig. 4. Side position, when known, of osteologically sexed individuals. Twelve individuals total.

ent in three male burials as well as two female burials, in contradiction to his model which predicts that jewellery will only be present in female burials. In conclusion, for all variables except amber beads, Malmer's predictions for preferences in grave goods included in male or female burials, respectively, are confirmed even when only osteologically sexed individuals are considered.

The rule of thumb regarding a relationship between biological sex and side position is not corroborated when strictly osteological sexing is applied, however. Fig. 4 shows the side position for 12 of the 18 sexed individuals. Six of the eight individuals placed on the left side are males, as predicted, but two are females. Nor is there 100% correspondence between female sex and burial on the right side.

### Battle Axe burials in dolmens and passage graves

In his original publication (1962, Tab. 32), Malmer quantified the presence of Battle Axe artefacts in association with megalithic tombs.

Although much of the contents of these tombs is poorly documented, he nevertheless concluded that Battle Axe culture was present in a very large number of them (Malmer 1975, p. 50). Malmer suggested that Battle Axe artefacts associated with the tombs should be interpreted as burial remains, although he also pointed out that we lack examples of undisturbed Battle Axe burials in any megalithic tomb (Malmer 1962, pp. 246 ff.; 2002, p. 143). The evidence is ambiguous, since the contents of the tombs have been disturbed, destroying any contextual information which may have enabled us to identify burial activity. In a recent article (Olausson 2014) I have published the results of a re-examination of the evidence from Scania. I concluded that there is little convincing evidence that the artefacts found in and around megalithic tombs are remains of disturbed Battle Axe Culture burials. Rather, I suggest that in most cases the finds can be ascribed to ceremonial behaviour not necessarily related to mortuary practices, perhaps in connection with ritual destruction (Olausson 2014).

### Interment vs. cremation and human bones outside of the primary grave

The typical burial form for Battle Axe Culture is interment, according to Malmer (1975, p. 35). However, he also describes six possible cremation burials, one of which lies in Scania: Västtra Hoby 15 (II). This was one of four BAC burials lying in a linear arrangement but it was somewhat damaged before Hansen arrived in 1916, making the contextual information difficult to interpret. Hansen first suggested that the cremated human remains belonged to an Iron Age secondary burial intruding into the BAC burial (Hansen 1917, pp. 77 ff.). However, in his 1937 article he revised this interpretation in light of subsequent finds of cremation burials from the Late Neolithic, suggesting that the cremated bones, Battle Axe pottery

and burnt flint axe belonged to a Battle Axe burial (Hansen 1937, pp. 206 f.). In his discussion Malmer commented that most aspects of the burial context in which the cremated bones were found, such as the size and shape of the pit, the stone packing, and the position of many of the gravegoods, follow the typical BAC pattern. His conclusion, however, was that it is unlikely that the cremation is a Battle Axe Culture burial. In support of this he cited the other 200 known Battle Axe Culture burials, none of which contain cremations (Malmer 1962, pp. 227 f.). Here again he emphasizes homogeneity over difference.

Lilla Bedinge grave 47 represents a radical departure from the single burial norm as described by Malmer. Osteologist Ebba Düring subjected the remains to intensive scrutiny, allowing us to understand some of the complicated practices carried out. She identified the remains of at least 10 individuals in connection with the grave. The primary burial contained a supine female whose age at death was 19. Her left humerus was shorter and less robust than her right and both fibulae had osteitis. Three skull fragments and one wisdom tooth from an adult were also found in the primary grave. On and above a stone packing overlying the primary burial lay a collection of human bones. Five crania were also part of the inventory (Düring 1989; Malmer 2002, p. 141).

In a recent article, Åsa M. Larsson reported on a search for examples of secondary burial practices in the Middle Neolithic (Larsson 2003). She describes the V. Hoby case but also mentions one other possible example from Scania at Löderup 15 no. 78. Here a hearth containing burnt human and animal bones and possible BAC potsherds was found in a feature containing a wooden cist (Larsson 2003, p. 157). She has not limited her search to features interpreted as graves, however. The so-called mortuary house excavated at Turinge parish in eastern middle Sweden is attributed to the Battle Axe Culture.

The structure includes a trench with some 15 pits filled with charcoal, pottery, stone tools and cremated bones. Human bones from at least seven individuals of both sexes and all ages have been identified in the pits. The Turinge mortuary house is interpreted as a decarnation house where the bodies were stored before the bones were burned (Larsson 2003, p. 158, p. 161). While nothing similar to the Turinge mortuary house has yet been found in Scania, I mention it as an illustration of alternative treatment of human remains in BAC context.

It would appear from these examples that, once again, some deviations from what might have been regarded as normal practice were present. Indeed, given the limited number of buried individuals, it is obvious that other forms of post-mortem treatment were being practiced. Perhaps we should be applying more effort to finding evidence for them.

## Finding what we are looking for

In the above discussion I have ignored both chronology and chorology and concentrated on the contents of the burials. The aim has been to test the validity of archaeologists' somewhat stereotypical view of Battle Axe Culture burial as rigid and formalized. Mats P. Malmer's definitions have been instrumental in forming our thinking about Battle Axe Culture burial. They are based on empirical examples but tend to emphasize homogeneity. Using his definitions causes us to ignore possible cases which fall outside them. In almost all cases classification as Battle Axe Culture relies on type fossils defined as BAC, so that burials lacking such objects will not be part of the data set.

Malmer emphasized characteristics which unite the burial practice; in this short article I have tried to dissolve some of the rigidity in order to investigate how much variation is present. In many respects the new data confirm

Malmer's conclusions, while in others our new data and/or a different analytical approach cause us to redefine some of the postulates. Confining sexing to osteological analysis of the skeleton, rather than using assumed cultural norms to sex burials, has shown that previous assumptions regarding a correspondence between left or right side and biological sex do not hold. Amber beads are associated with both males and females. A renewed look at Battle Axe presence in megalithic tombs in Scania failed to confirm Malmer's suggestion that tombs were used for burial by the Battle Axe Culture. While the majority of the skeletons have been placed in flexed position, there are also examples of placement on the back or in a sitting position. Interment in a pit containing a single individual is confirmed as the most common choice, but others are possible and there are examples of both burnt and unburnt human bones outside of the primary burial context.

Burials constitute expressive arenas for conveying social identity (cf. Berggren & Brink 2010, p. 274). Looking in more detail at how mourners have arranged the contents of the grave will reveal patterns which undoubtedly would have been significant to them. In such an analysis the particular as well as the general are of interest.

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