Settlement and Landscape
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Reflections on landscape and settlement transformations

Mats Widgren

The first session of the conference dealt with the transformations of settlement and landscapes during the two last millennia BC, while most other sessions had their focus on the Scandinavian Iron Age and the first millennium AD. In a Scandinavian perspective the periods preceding the Roman Iron Age have been seen as formative for the more settled and stable Iron Age settlement structure. The search for ‘origins’, which is discussed from a Scandinavian point of view by Pedersen and Rindel in this section, reflects this striving to find a starting-point for a landscape that we can recognise from later history. Basic to our understanding of the transformations that led to the Scandinavian Iron Age societies is thus the idea that settlements, farming systems and landscapes after these changes had more in common with the pre-industrial landscapes of the 18th century than they had with the Neolithic. When it concerns the material basics of agrarian production, there still seems to be general agreement on that (Welinder 1998, 233).

Why transformations?

During the last half-century our understanding of these transformations has passed through different explanatory frameworks. The ‘findless period’ during the Pre-Roman Iron Age was once seen as reflecting climatic changes. The introduction of indoor stalling of cattle and more stable settlement was also seen in this context. In a later stage, theories of agricultural intensification flourished (1970s). In the 1990s the ruling paradigm was an endeavour to look for cultural and symbolic aspects of changes in landscapes and settlement (see, for example, Cassel 1998).

When applied to a local situation, or to a narrow Scandinavian perspective, these explanatory frameworks may all have worked well. Common to all theses relying on only one of these explanatory approaches is, however, that they can easily be refuted by referring to a larger geographical area or to a larger number of cases. The provincial bias in the writing of Scandinavian settlement history has been one of its major drawbacks and continues to be a problem. A broader outlook and new data have now placed some of these explanations of the Pre-Roman transformations on the garbage heap. The emphasis on climatic change is one such oversimplification that no longer stands up when seen in a broader North European perspective (see, for example, Myrdal 1984, Pedersen & Widgren 1998, 239ff.).

The meaning of the agrarian transformations

The intensification paradigm seemed to have a broader and less provincial basis than earlier explanations. But for the beginning of the Iron Age there was also an unsolved contradiction between the Scandinavian data and the data from the Continent. In Bradley’s overview of prehistoric field systems in Northwest Europe the introduction of Celtic field systems during the Late Bronze Age was seen as connected with a major leap forward in agrarian intensification (Bradley 1978; for a later and more
comprehensive overview see also Fries 1995). In the Scandinavian perspective on the other hand, the decisive intensification and the leap towards a more stable settlement structure was at the same time seen as having occurred when Celtic fields and similar field systems were abandoned. Lindquist, for example, saw the replacement of the Celtic fields on Gotland by a supposedly more intensive and more stable form of agriculture in the Roman Iron Age as decisive for both social organisation and farming systems (Lindquist 1974, see also Carlsson 1979). A similar model of development was forwarded by Myhre for southwestern Norway (1978). Also in the more recent studies of clearance-cairn fields the extensive nature of agriculture in the last part of the first millennium BC has often been emphasised (Gren 1989).

Recent findings in Scandinavia have cast new light on the contradiction between the Continental and the Scandinavian view of the last millennium BC. This is most clearly shown in the results of the Ystad project, where the Late Bronze Age is emphasised as a period of intensified land use. Large parts of the plains of Southern Scania then took on their present state of an open and intensively farmed and grazed area (Berglund 1991). Furthermore, changes in the range of crops during this period have been interpreted as reflecting intensified tillage and manuring (Engelmark 1992). There are also strong indications that the collection of winter fodder from hay meadows started on a large scale during the early parts of the first millennium BC (Gaillard et al. 1994). These indications of intensive agriculture have also raised doubts about the supposedly extensive nature of the clearance-cairn fields in Sweden and Norway (see Widgren 1997, Pedersen & Widgren 1998, Pedersen this volume). The contradiction between the view from the Continent and the Scandinavian results thus seems to have been partly solved.

A major problem within the intensification paradigm has, however, been the assumption that stages of agrarian organisation follow upon each other in a pre-set developmental sequence. This idea has deep roots in evolutionary thinking and was first developed with reference to European agrarian landscapes by Krenzlin (1958). Hannerberg (1984) and Welinder (1975) placed the model on Swedish ground, and it influenced many archaeologists in the early 1980s. After that, however, the discussion on farming systems and society has not been developed among Scandinavian archaeologists. With the questioning of the evolutionary models, that debate was almost dropped like a dead mouse. Instead one has to turn to developmental studies and political ecology to find interesting discussions on the historical development of farming systems (see, for example, Niemeijer 1996). Within the approaches to landscape studies that are forwarded in these fields, it is now common knowledge that farming systems are best understood in their political, cultural, symbolic and material contexts. Among those who study farming systems and field patterns in a historical perspective, there are few who see them as stages in a preset development and still fewer who see them as simply symbolically determined (as some tended to think in the late 1990s). There is thus today much scope in approaches that attempt to see the connections between the material, political and symbolic aspects of settlement and farming systems.

The papers presented in this session all consider different aspects of such an approach. Those by Bech & Mikkelsen and Kaul were presented at the conference in short versions as posters and have here been developed further. The investigations at Grønøft have inspired students of settlement archaeology and farming systems already for almost 30 years now. Becker’s preliminary report from Grønøft is one of the more quoted titles, and his findings have been used to shed light on settlement problems in the whole of Scandinavia and Northern Europe. The present process of publication of the Grønøft investigations, of which Rindel’s paper in this section is a part, is therefore welcomed by a large group of scholars. Vestervig is another investigation that has awaited publication. Kaul’s work on it sheds light on the phenomenon of the village mound. Bech & Mikkelsen summarise results of the Thy project, indicative of a Late Bronze Age agricultural intensification comparable to what has been laid forward by the Ystad project. Pedersen shows how new evidence in Norway can be used to reformulate the old Norwegian question of the origin of the farm. Fokkens in his paper shows how symbolic meanings and material realities of agrarian production are intimately inter-
woven. The discussions following the presentations of these papers in Århus in 1998 reflected a readiness to re-evaluate and to understand material realities expressed in settlements and landscapes from a broader contextual viewpoint. Hopefully some of this flavour is communicated in the papers presented here.

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