The ever-changing Barum grave
Hanlon, Conleth
Ingår i: samla.raa.se
Debatt

The ever-changing Barum grave

The Barum woman, an Early Mesolithic burial in north-eastern Scania excavated by Folke Hansen in 1939, is an archaeological treasure depicted in schoolbooks and, since 1943, on permanent display in the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm. The skeleton, once thought of as male, is in fact female (Gejvall 1979).

In the course of research related to excavations at Ärup just south of the town of Bromölla in the summer of 2002, we had reason to examine the Barum grave goods, consisting of a slotted bone point and a bone chisel. In the process, we found some previously unobserved inconsistencies, which call for comment. A more detailed discussion will be published in a forthcoming book on the excavations at Ärup (Hanlon & Nilsson in prep.).

The shifting microblades of the slotted bone point from Barum

Let us begin with the slotted bone point. According to Hansen’s report on the excavation (ATA 2584/1939), the bone point had 5 microblades still in their original positions at the time of discovery. Sieving produced additional microblades that were judged as belonging to the bone point. Since the excavation, the Barum bone point has been fitted with eight additional microblades. Thus, 13 microblades are currently attached to the bone point.

Examination of the bone point revealed that the microblades have been fitted with glue in a haphazard and incorrect manner. No residue of resin was observed. As a general rule, Mesolithic slotted bone points and daggers have the microblades fitted with their ventral faces oriented upwards on one side and their dorsal faces oriented upwards on the other (e.g. Voss 1961, p. 156; Larsson 1973, p. 8; Karsten & Knarrström 2003, pp. 64, 82). The reason for this is not quite clear, but may perhaps be explained both in functional and aesthetic terms.

Over the years, various archaeological publications have depicted the bone point from Barum with varying numbers and positions of the microblades. Hansen depicted the bone point with 11 microblades (1941, p. 16), Oskar Lidén (1942, p. 83) first depicted the bone point with a drawing featuring 5 microblades, and later (1948, p. 75) with a photograph featuring 13 microblades. Furthermore, only two or three of the microblades seem to be inserted at the same positions in Lidén’s two depictions. An added microblade at the base of the bone point is worth special notice. Since there is no record of exactly which 5 of the 13 microblades that were attached to the bone point at the time of recovery, there is no way of deciding the original positions of the microblades. In conclusion, the Barum bone point on display in the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm is not presented in a pristine condition.

In connection with conservational measures and transfer to improved exhibition facilities in 1996, the Barum woman was subjected to a combination of renewed analyses, among other things consisting of osteological and odontological analyses as well as analysis of isotopic diet indicators and radiocarbon dating. Moreover, the artefacts from the burial were reconsidered. The results were published in Fornvännen (Sten et al. 2000). In the article, the analysis of the bone point did not observe the problematic discrepancies in the depictions of the bone point over the years.

The microblade at the base of the bone point must obviously have been incorrectly placed since it was not present in the photograph in Hansen’s article of 1941. Close to the microblade in question four small grooves can be observed. The position of these brought about a discussion of whether they had anything to do
Fig. 1. The slotted bone point from Barum with changes in numbers and positions of the microblades. Note that Lidén depicted the bone point from two different sides. From the left: Hansen 1941, Lidén 1942 and Lidén 1948/ Sten et al. 2000. — Genom åren har flinteggspetsen från Barum tyst rekonstruerats på diverse olika sätt.

with the shafting of the bone point by lashing or if they represented some kind of sign or owner's mark. Sten et al. (2000, p. 83) concluded that the carvings had to be interpreted as a sign or an owner's mark, since a lashing would otherwise have covered the microblade. The reasoning, which concentrated on the position of the microblade, is pointless since the microblade in question had not originally been there. Regarding the carvings, they may very well be interpreted as a sign or an owner's mark.

How, then, did the bone point look originally? Hansen is the primary source in this matter. In his report, he described the bone point as being 23 cm long (in fact it measures 23.5 cm) with 5 microblades still in their original positions. There was no mention of any resin left in the slots of the bone point. If this was actually the case, we do not know. When Hansen published the results from the excavation (1941, p. 16), the bone point was depicted with a photograph apparently featuring 11 microblades. As this must represent Hansen's own interpretation, it may be the closest to the original condition of the bone point we will ever get. Hansen was one of very few people who had the opportunity to study the bone point while the 5 original microblades were still in position.

However, the story continues. The year after Hansen published his article, the Barum bone point was included in Oscar Lidén's (1942) work on slotted bone points. In a drawing, Lidén depicted the bone point with the other side facing the viewer as compared to Hansen. Lidén depicted the bone point with only 5 microblades inserted and curiously enough in very different positions from Hansen 1941. Furthermore, Lidén stated that the bone point measured 18.5 cm, a reduction in length by 5 cm. He also compared the Barum bone point with a "point of precisely the same size and type" (1942, p. 52) from Lake Råbelövsjön. The two bone points were depicted side by side as of identical size with their respective lengths clearly stated (Lidén 1942, p. 83). Peculiarly, the bone point from Lake Råbelövsjön, referred to by Lidén, measures 18.5 cm (cf. Ahlén 1879, fig. 283; Montelius 1917, p. 7, fig. 63). Lidén seems to have confused the facts.

When Lidén in his article of 1948 discussed the subject again, the bone point had undergone yet another transformation. By now, the bone point had 13 microblades and the strangely positioned microblade by the carvings at the base had been added (Lidén 1948). This is also the
current state of the bone point. The conclusion to be drawn from this review is that the changes the bone point from Barum has been subjected to took place between the years of 1941–1948. Remarkably, these changes were not in a single instance commented upon or explained and have until now never been noticed. Lidén seems to have contributed substantially to the controversy surrounding the Barum bone point. However, exactly how and in which way the bone point was changed, the record does not tell.

**On the position of the slotted bone point in the Barum burial**

The story of the slotted bone point from Barum does not end with the incorrect positioning of the microblades and the incorrect depictions. On examining the facts more closely, the position of the bone point in the reconstructed grave struck us as oddly placed. This gave rise to questions regarding the reconstruction of the burial as such.

Not only the bone point has undergone a metamorphosis, but also the Barum skeleton on display in the Museum of National Antiquities has undergone considerable changes since the excavation. In connection with the various preservation measures taken over the years in the care of the grave, the positions of the skeleton and the grave goods in the display-case have gradually been changed. The most extensive change occurred in 1996 when the grave was completely reconstructed due to a new view of how the grave should be interpreted. As a curious fact, the stones present in the original grave were not added to the reconstruction until 1996, and then they were incorrectly positioned.

In 1943 when the grave was exhibited for the first time, the skeleton was placed in an upright sitting position with the arms folded in a high position in front of the chest with the hands close to the shoulders. The bone point was placed on the right-hand side of the pelvis.

At some time in the late 1970s or early 80s, the first changes are evident. The alterations consisted of a lowering of the right arm and hand to a position in front of the chest and a slight re-positioning of the left arm and hand so that it rested against the left knee. The bone point was moved to an almost horizontal position on the right shoulder (Burenhult 1982, p. 93; 1999, p. 231). Burenhult seems to be the only one who has explicitly discussed the reasoning behind the changes in writing:

“In a detailed study of the old excavation report it has also been established that the woman has been sitting in a more reclined position than was previously reconstructed, and that the spear with flint insets rested against her right shoulder” (Burenhult 1982, p. 90. Authors’ translation).

This informs us that the bone point was seen as having been shafted when deposited in the grave and that it was interpreted as belonging to...
a spear and not an arrow. We also learn that a detailed investigation took place, which, however, was apparently never published.

The repositioning in 1996 resulted in the skeleton being arranged in a slightly more reclining position with the arms folded in the lap. In the process, the bone point was moved to an almost vertical position by the right shoulder of the skeleton, thus giving the impression that it had been shafted. Why these changes were deemed necessary is hard to tell. In our opinion, the rearrangements of the grave have no support in the facts presented by Hansen in his report.

In Hansen’s report the bone point is described as having been found inside the right-hand part of the rib cage. However, a photograph and a drawing from the excavation clearly show that the bone point was lying just beside the ribs on the right-hand side of the pelvis pointing towards the head. The most important observation is, however, the indisputable fact that stratigraphically, the bone point was situated below the arms and rib cage, the same region in which the bone point was originally placed in the display case. Had the bone point been shafted when deposited, the rate of decomposition of the wooden shaft would have been considerably slower than that of the body. This would have resulted in the bone point being situated stratigraphically above the arms and rib cage since the chest cavity would have
Debatt 229

collapsed before the shaft disintegrated. Therefore, on stratigraphical grounds the Barum bone point cannot originally have been shafted nor placed by the right-hand shoulder.

Over the years, the position of the bone point has been a subject of discussion. One view that has been expressed is that the bone point possibly killed the woman (Larsson 1982, p. 9; Edgren 1997, p. 32; for a critical discussion cf. Karsten & Knarrström 2003, p. 127). This hypothesis was primarily based on comparison with the male burial from Stora Bjärs on Gotland, in which a fragment of a slotted bone point was found. Injuries to the jaw and skull of the deceased were seen as proof that the man had been deliberately killed, and that the bone point could have been the cause of death. The fragmentation of the bone point in combination with the well-preserved skeleton supports such an interpretation (Arwidsson 1979; Larsson 1982). Comparing the Barum burial to the one from Stora Bjärs, the Barum bone point is intact, which speaks against a violent death. Had the woman been shot, the bone point would most likely have been fragmented given its brittle nature. No further indications that the Barum woman was deliberately killed have been discovered (Sten et al. 2000).

A brief examination of parallel cases where slotted bone points have been present in graves suggests an interesting pattern of Mesolithic burial practise.

One example comes from the Tägerup excavation where a slotted bone point was found in a double burial, placed in the abdominal region of a man with the tip orientated towards the head. At a glance, the placing of the object might suggest that it had caused the man’s death, like the interpretation of the burial from Stora Bjärs. However, in this case it was seen as unlikely since the bone point was found on top of a sooty, humic layer which covered both bodies. The find was interpreted as a grave gift and a last gesture towards the couple before the grave was filled in (Karsten & Knarrström 2003, p. 81).

Another parallel is grave 4 at the Bøgebakken cemetery on Zealand. There a slotted bone dagger was found placed on the lower part of the chest of the deceased pointing towards the head (Albrethsen & Brinch Petersen 1977, p. 7 f; Sørensen 1996, p. 73). When one compares the positioning of the bone points and the bone dagger from the Barum, Tägerup and Bøgebakken burials, the similarity is indeed striking and indicates that we are in fact dealing with a Mesolithic burial custom. In this tradition, the bone point can be seen as a status symbol, used by both men and women (cf. Karsten & Knarrström 2003, p. 84f).

However, the tendency to position grave goods in the lower chest region during the Mesolithic does not pertain solely to slotted bone points. Bone spatulas and flint blades have also been found in this region (e.g. Albrethsen & Brinch Petersen 1977; Larsson 1984; Kjällquist 2001, p. 51 ff; Karsten & Knarrström 2003, p. 80 ff).

In conclusion, there are few facts or parallels in support of the present reconstruction of the Barum grave in the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm. Furthermore, the reconstruction gives rise to problems of a more ethical nature. How unrestrained should archaeologists and curators be in their interpretations of the archaeological record without explicitly presenting the line of thought leading up to a certain reconstruction? The present reconstruction in which the woman seems to be holding a shafted bone point constitutes a static picture, which is no doubt perceived by the public as an unadulterated and true picture of the grave. From a scientific point of view, the reconstruction can be seen as the uncritical transferral of modern values and beliefs onto Mesolithic people, thereby intensifying the notion of the Barum woman as an active hunter. The problem is not the perception of the Barum woman as a hunter – she most probably was involved in hunting of some kind. Rather it is the uncritical way this conclusion was arrived at. A distortion of facts in order to convey a certain message is not good conduct. Statements about the distant past must be firmly rooted in the archaeological record.

References


Conleth Hanlon & Björn Nilsson
Riksantikvarieämbetet UV Syd
Åkergränden 8
SE-226 60 Lund
conleth.hanlon@raa.se, bjorn.nilsson@raa.se

Fornvänn 99 (2004)