

Of maces and men Symbols in a landscape of cultural diversity

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Norms and conventions have applied to most of our material culture. This seems to be especially obvious regarding Neolithic flint axes. The distinction between the unpolished and the polished flint axe is one aspect of the symbolism that is inherent in or ascribed to the axes when they become maces, with an important position in social life. The individuals and the society become not only owners of axes but also holders of maces. Maces and man became interacting entities. Never, or very rarely, was an unpolished axe deposited in a grave, while it was fully accepted as part of a hoard. It is reasonable to work on the assumption that the Neolithic societies gave at least some parts of their material culture characteristics similar or corresponding to the human members. Axes, like humans, were integrated into everyday life, being involved in ceremonies dependent on regularly recurring characteristics. Interaction between the human and the material cultural sphere, or at least some of the material culture, seems to be much closer or even more integrated than has usually been assumed.

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Introduction

The ideas presented here emanate from the basic conceptions of practice theory in ritual studies, with the four significant concepts of practice, structure, agent and history (Ortner 1989; Sahlins 2000). Practice theory emerges from structure and its reproduction. It also has the capacity to transform the structure. Practice involves all levels of society from everyday life to highly ritualised acts, and it not only modifies the structure but also the positions of the individual actors. Thus the structure is a dynamic frame. In this theory the agent is the individual who executes practice in relation to the structure. The interaction between agent, practice and structure is being constantly recreated in stages of continuity or change in society. The theory of practice is a theory of history in which social beings with diverse motives and intentions make and transform the world in which they live. Ritual is more complex than the mere communication of meanings and values. It is a set of activities that con-

struct particular types of meanings and values in specific ways. Rather than ritual as a means of expressing authority, practice theorists tend to explore how ritual is a vehicle for the construction of relationships of authority and submission (Bell 1997). A theory of practice is a theory of the conversion or translation between internal dynamics and external forces (Ortner 1989).

Considerable parts of practice theory are shaped for what anthropologists are able to observe in their field studies. In this sense archaeologists have a total limitation. However, the material remains of ritual acts and the chronological depth involved when considering changes in the interaction between practice and structure give us major advantages.

The aspect of history provides us with an opportunity to study how ritual places both individual and collective social memory in time and space and the extent to which cultural knowledge and practice are generated, remembered and recreated in ritual (De Boeck 1995).

Culture is ideology

Mats P. Malmer ends his newly published book on the Neolithic of Southern Sweden with the statement "Culture is ideology" (Malmer 2003:184). This is so true! The question is "how is ideology expressed?", or more honestly "how do archaeologists recognise expressions of ideology?" The publication gives a good view of what most archaeologists have acknowledged as expressions of ideology and how ideology functioned within society. I intend to take some aspects of this newly published book as a basis for my argument.

There is a deeper intention behind the title "Of Maces and Men" than just to paraphrase the title of John Steinbeck's novel. The main theme of that book is the attempt by two vagabonds to find a stable existence. Could it be something similar that we are engaged in when we try to find common forms of expression linking the existing cultures – the Funnel Beaker culture, the Pitted Ware culture and the Battle Axe culture?

Malmer recognises ideology in different remains and features. Within the Funnel Beaker culture, ritual activities are linked to the building and use of megalithic tombs, the deposition of pottery, and the hoards, mainly of flint axes. Malmer states that the Funnel Beaker culture has a level of expression of ideological features that exceeds at least that of the Pitted Ware culture. However, by naming cultures one makes oneself something of a prisoner of social interaction. If research into the Stone Age had developed somewhat differently, we might have ended up with quite different sequences.

Malmer is aware that the Funnel Beaker culture, for example, displays regional characteristics, but he does not go into any more detail about that knowledge. It may in many respects be more fruitful to study ideological diversities and similarities in order to avoid the seemingly everlasting relationships between material cultures.

Intensity of axe hoarding

I will start with what most scholars have identified as the second stage in the Funnel Beaker culture, initiated by the building of causewayed enclosures (Andersen 1997), the construction of megalithic tombs (Persson & Sjögren 1996) and a major increase in hoarding (Karsten 1994). During a period that might be restricted to a couple of centuries, the markers of ritual activities are extremely well expressed. No one could

miss these exuberant, manifest and numerous demonstrations of ideology.

The number of dolmens in southern Sweden is about 100 and the figure for passage graves is about 300, of which about 200 are found in Falbygden (Malmer 2003; Sjögren 2003). There are about 7000 megalithic tombs today in Denmark, of which about 700 are passage graves (Jensen 2002). The relation between southern Sweden and Denmark is less than 1:60 for dolmens but only about 1:2 for passage graves. Even though there might be divergences concerning the destruction of tombs, that can hardly alter this disproportionality very much. And the disproportion might be ever greater between Zealand, with the majority of dolmens (Jensen 2002:365), and nearby Scania, with about half the number of Swedish dolmens, so that the ratio may be as much as 1:100.

This can be related to the number of axe hoards, i.e. depositions with two or more finds that include thin-butted axes. In Denmark 171 hoards (1 per 250 km²), with a total of about 500 axes, are known (Nielsen 1977:Fundliste I), as compared with 122 hoards in Scania (1 per 90 km²), with a total of 316 axes (Karsten 1994:55). One has to be aware that the recovery procedure for hoards might be somewhat different in these two areas, but the figures do show that interest in depositing axes was greater in the southernmost part of Sweden than in Denmark. On the other hand, interest in building megalithic tombs, especially dolmens, seems to have been much greater in Denmark (about 1 per 6 km²) than in the southernmost part of Sweden (about 1 per 130 km²), where the deposition of valuable parts of the material culture took priority over monuments to the deceased.

Norms and conventions have applied to most of our material culture. This seems to be especially obvious regarding flint axes. There already seems to have been a distinction between the unpolished flint axe and the polished stone axe in the early part of the Mesolithic, a demarcation that was not broken until the beginning of the Neolithic. This is one aspect of the symbolism that is inherent in or ascribed to axes when they become maces and thus occupy an important position in social life (gaining the attribute of a staff of office). Individuals and society become not only owners of axes but also holders of maces. Maces and men became interacting entities.

Unpolished and polished axes

The biography of the axe has experienced different stages (Strassburg 1998, 2000). The question is how

early in its lifetime was the destiny of the axe decided. In some cases the axe was just roughly shaped, while in others it underwent advanced knapping so that it was transformed into a ritualised object. In some instances it was finally shaped and in others it was actually used, perhaps heavily used, before it ended its life as a symbolic product (Olausson 1983:28).

I will present some examples. Only one out of a total of 63 thin-butted flint axes found in graves from Denmark is not polished (Nielsen 1977:Fundliste II). The single exception is a nineteenth century find from a dolmen, together with Late Neolithic artefacts that indicate a mixture. Unpolished axes have been found in tombs, but in these cases in connection with the frame of stones *outside* the chamber (Nielsen 1977:Figs. 45–46).

54% of the thin-butted axes discovered in hoards in Denmark are unpolished (Nielsen 1977:Fundliste I), and one can identify an interesting change, in that the lowest percentage of unpolished axes is recorded in hoards with axes of the earliest types (24%) and the highest percentage for the youngest axes (87%). The hoards of thin-butted axes discovered in Scania show the same percentages of unpolished axes as in Denmark (Karsten 1994:56).

The norm for selecting polished axes as grave gifts can also be acknowledged in the later Single Grave culture of Jutland and northern Germany. Out of 174 axes from 161 graves, just one is unpolished, and this is just a preform (Ebbesen 1983:123–127), unpolished thick-butted axes make up 47% of those discovered in hoards, and for thick-butted gouges the figure is as high as 76% (Ebbesen 1983:148–149).

All the grave gifts of thick-bladed flint axes in Sweden, a total of 142, are polished (Malmer 1962:390), and most of them are concave-edged, whereas 65% of those in hoards are unpolished (Karsten 1994:69).

These numerical exercises are simply intended to prove that there was a major difference in how polished and unpolished axes were handled. Never, or very rarely, was an unpolished axe deposited in a grave, while it was fully accepted as part of a hoard. The relationship of polished to unpolished axes in one hoard probably has a subtle meaning attached to it that so far has not been studied in detail. The fact that the number of polished axes in hoards found on firm ground is much higher than those in wetlands (Karsten 1994:69) hints at similarities with the practice of depositing axes in graves, where polished axes are the norm. The most important standpoint, however, is that the main norms for axes were the same in 3000 BC as they had been in 2000 BC.

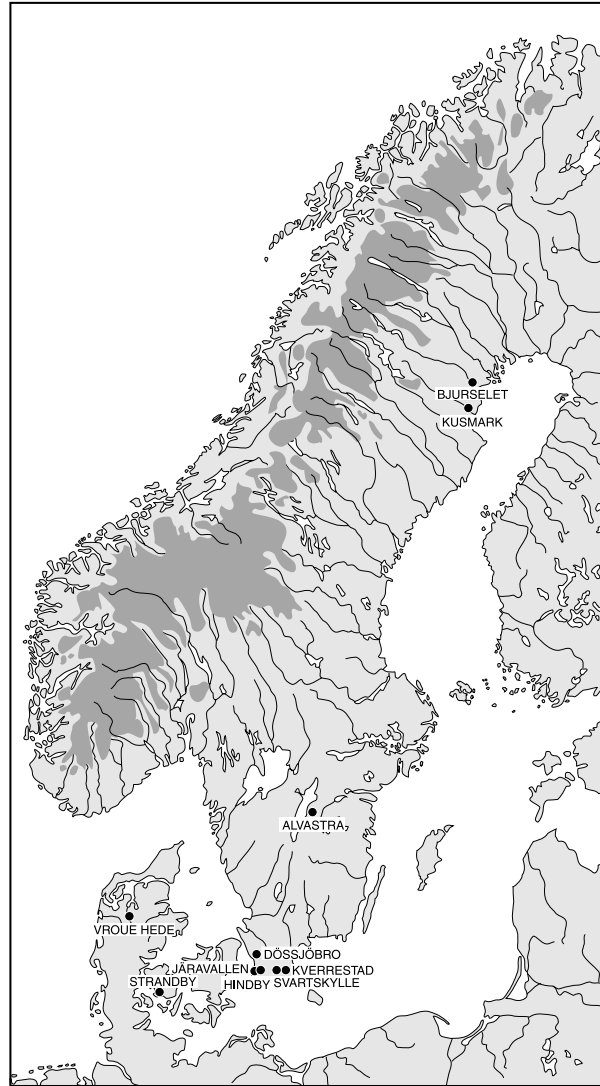


Figure 1. Scandinavia, with sites mentioned in the text.

People and axes

I think that it is reasonable to proceed on the assumption that the Neolithic societies assigned to at least some parts of their material culture characteristics that were similar or corresponding to those possessed by the human members. Axes, like humans, were integrated into everyday life, involving ceremonies that were dependent on regularly recurring characteristics.

The ritual importance of axes seems to embrace an even wider social and cosmological sphere than the body of the axe. During rescue excavations in a valley at Dösjebro in western Scania (Fig. 1), a Neolithic ritual complex was revealed on both sides of a small river. This included a henge structure, graves representing the Battle Axe culture and an area with evidence of intensive flint axe production (Andersson

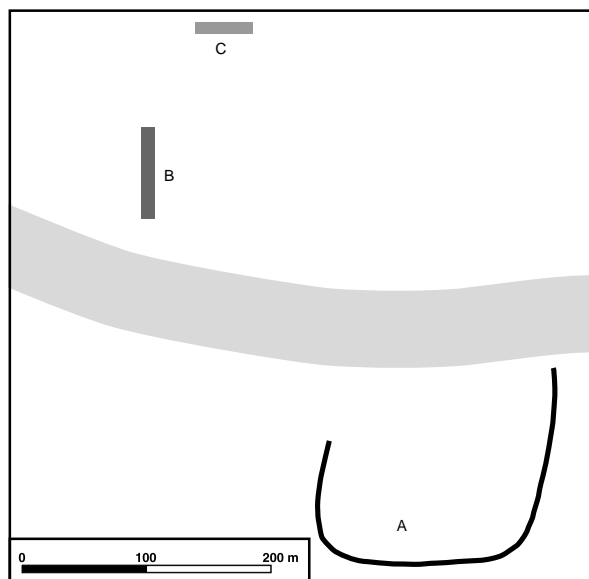


Figure 2. Relations between the henge structure dated to the late Funnel Beaker culture/Battle Axe culture (A), the cemetery from the Battle Axe culture (B) and the axe manufacturing site (C) on both sides of a small river at Dösjebro, western Scania.

2003; Andersson et al. 2000; Månsson & Pihl 2000) (Fig. 2). Debris from axe production was even found in some of the post-holes of the henge structure. The area in question does not have any flint nodules that would have been useful for axe manufacture, and thus the raw material would have had to be brought from the south-west, at least 20 km away. The henge structure is dated to the Late Funnel Beaker culture or early Battle Axe culture and the axes produced seem to be of the same age (Svensson 2002).

A similar connection is also evident at another henge site at Järavallen in the south-westernmost corner of Scania (Svensson 2002:38–39). The henge is located just a few hundred metres from a beach on which flint nodules are numerous. A large number of axe preforms have been found along the beach (Salomonsson 1971:80). At Hindby, less than 3 km from Järavallen, yet another henge was identified and partly excavated (Svensson 1991). Almost all the remaining parts were excavated in 2001–2002 (Brink 2003). Debris from axe fabrication was found in some of the post-holes.

The close chorological and chronological connection between a ritual structure and axe production indicates that the manufacture of axes, or part of the manufacturing process, was included in communal ceremonies related to a sacred area in both the initial part and the later part of the Middle Neolithic Funnel Beaker culture.

In this case the fabrication or creation of axes was connected with wooden structures, which might open up a special perspective on the biography of axes. The relationship between the softer wood and the harder stone has been presumed to encapsulate an important dualism between birth and death, when the human body grows harder with time and is transformed into stone after death (Parker Pearson & Ramilisonina 1998a:313; 1998b). A considerable number of flint axes end up in megalithic tombs, either as grave gifts within the chamber or as depositions outside.

I will go on now to concentrate on something that could be seen as the death or passage of an axe (Bradley 1990). Axes, like humans, became integrated into the part of the conceptual world that concerned those who had physically left the community, although they were still active as agents between worlds.

Fragmented axes

Most axes, like humans, ended up in anonymity, the former as raw materials for other tools some of the latter at best as fragments within megalithic tombs, causewayed enclosures (Andersen 1997) or other sites of ritual importance (Malmer 2003:103). Both humans and axes were deposited in their entirety or as fragments in wetlands (Koch 1998:155). There are bog finds with hoards of axes as well as humans (Bennike & Ebbesen 1987:96). Our knowledge of fragmented finds of humans and axes in wetlands is somewhat scanty, however, and one example might give a hint that they were more common than may previously have been thought. The excavation of a small bog, Hindby, in south-western Scania (Fig. 1) revealed the same situation: remains of votive practice were found running through the Late Mesolithic, most of the Neolithic and into the Bronze Age (Svensson 1993). There are examples of axes deposited in pairs, but it is more common to find combinations of tools, sometimes broken up before deposition, and also bones of animals and humans, such as the deposition of a burnt fragment of an axe, two human bones and three pig eye-teeth. These show that fragmentation by cracking and burning followed by sorting was carried out before deposition.

As the depositions with fragmentation are the most difficult to recognise, they may well have been much more common. The simplicity of the artefacts makes it difficult for the layman to identify some of the objects as parts of intentional votive depositions.

This can be supported by the results gained from surveys of an area of about 20 km² in the southernmost



Figure 3. Finds within a small bog dated to the Late Middle Neolithic. From left to right: polished flint axe, part of a polished stone axe, core with a shape resembling an axe, and a polishing stone. Scale 1:3.

part of Sweden, where about 80 hoards were recognised (Larsson 2001; 2004). Most of them were found in farm collections, but some included fractured tools, and objects of indeterminate types were identified during the surveys. For example, a hoard with a flint axe of a type typical of the Battle Axe culture, a fragmentary stone axe of the same type, a flint core with a shape resembling an axe and a small polishing stone were all recovered in a small bog (Fig. 3).

Axes and transformation by fire

A special form of fragmentation is the effect of fire. Finds from settlement sites indicate that ritual burning of flint artefacts was well known throughout the Neolithic. The alteration of tools by fire is relatively frequent at Neolithic sites (Karsten 1994; Malmer 2003:41, 74). This burning of flint axes could have been accidental, but at several sites the percentage is too high, often greater than 20%, to be caused only by normal activities (Karsten 1994:159). Most sites show marked differences according to the types of tools affected by fire, but axes are more frequently affected than any other type at almost every site. This phenomenon is chronologically independent – extending from the earliest Early Neolithic to the latest Late Neolithic. Alteration by fire seems to be most common during the Middle Neolithic, however, and specifically during the latest part, including the late Funnel Beaker culture and the Single Grave culture.

A special and so far rare type of site with examples of fire-altered flints may be found on a plateau within an area of approximately 70 × 70 m at Kverrestad, south-eastern Scania (Larsson 2000, 2002a, 2002b). Excavations have revealed a number of pits of varying size and

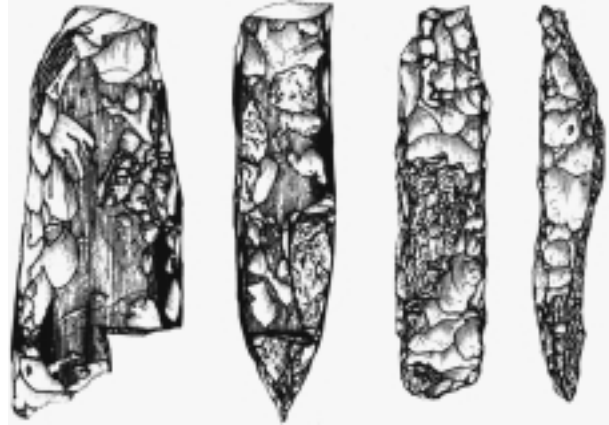


Figure 4. Artefacts from Kverrestad. Fragment of a thick-butted flint axe (left) and a chisel (right), both damaged by fire. 1:3.

depth in which flint artefacts affected by fire had been deposited together with a considerable amount of fragmentary pottery. The largest pit was about 4 m long and the shortest less than 0.5 m. Finds were made throughout the filling, which shows that the artefacts were deposited during the entire process of filling the pits. Fragments from about a hundred thick-butted concave-edged axes and chisels have been found, as well as arrowheads and other flint and stone tools (Fig. 4). A small number of burnt human bones, intentionally cracked into small pieces, were also found, providing another example of the combination of humans and axes. The finds are dated to the late Battle Axe culture.

As an interesting aspect of the “life cycle” of axes, it should be stressed that the axes at Kverrestad included rough, unpolished examples where the form was just about shaped as well as examples with very well executed polishing of the entire body.

The choice of axes for burning, as recorded at settlement sites, is also obvious among the finds at Kverrestad. While more than 90% of the axe finds display changes attributable to fire, two-thirds of the scrapers, half of the tanged arrowheads and one-third of the arrowheads made by pressure-flaking have the same alteration by fire. These marked differences indicate an intentional selection of which type of tool to put into a fire and which not.

This type of site is known at two other locations, at Svartskylle just 17 km west of Kverrestad (Larsson 1989) and at Strandby, southern Funen (Andersen 2000:34). These two sites are dated to the Early Neolithic/Middle Neolithic transition and the earliest Middle Neolithic. In both cases preforms were found as well as polished flint axes.

It should also be noted that the direct alteration of flint by fire provides different products of fragmentation from those found at certain sites. Axes had to be heat-treated before they were placed on the fire (Larsson 2000), otherwise they would have shattered into small pieces and not into the large parts that are normally found. Thus the intention was not to destroy the axes but to keep them in as large pieces as possible even after their transformation by fire.

Flint tools affected by fire occur in many instances in relation to megalithic tombs. Burnt tools seem to be less common in burial contexts dated to the Early Middle Neolithic, but during the late part of the Funnel Beaker culture axes destroyed by fire are frequently found outside the entrances to tombs (Tilley 1999:Fig. 1.35).

Research into the late Funnel Beaker culture has provided us with a much more detailed knowledge of the deposition of material culture than of the deposition of human corpses. We actually know more about how axes were treated and placed in megalithic tombs than about the human mortuary practices represented by tombs of the same. Human remains in megalithic tombs have been dated to an early use of the tomb or a much later use during the Late Neolithic, but almost nothing is known about how human remains were deposited during the middle part of the Neolithic.

That axes and fire can be agents for different rituals connected with a wider aspect of mortuary practices is exemplified in northern Jutland. Here a special type of individual grave – the stone setting grave – is used. The majority of such graves are dated to the late Funnel Beaker culture (Jørgensen 1977; Fabricius & Becker 1996). Despite a predominance of flint axes in the graves, none has been affected by fire, although the megalithic tombs connected with the stone setting graves at Vroue Hede did have burnt axes of the same period as those in the graves to be found outside the entrances (Jørgensen 1977:55, 123), indicating that the axes were burned in ceremonies related to collective manifestations, while the axes connected with individual interments were buried unaffected.

The phenomenon of burning is evident in other parts of Sweden as well. The Middle Neolithic pile dwelling at Alvastra, western Östergötland, includes remains of ritual activities. The site is dated to about 3120 BC and includes artefacts characteristic of the Pitted Ware and Funnel Beaker cultures (Malmer 2003:103). Several entire flint axes or large pieces of axes show the effects of alteration by fire (Browall 1991), and a large number of fireplaces and tinder hearths have also been found (Browall 1986). Carbon-

ised grains and apples and hazelnut shells are frequent in the dwelling. Firing was evidently of special significance at the site.

Evidence of alteration by fire on flints has been found at sites in northern Sweden such as Kusmark. In this case flint was a very exotic raw material, because it had to be transported more than 1,000 km from the south. The axe fragments from Kusmark are remains of axes or chisels affected by fire (Knutsson 1988:86). The largest find of axes, at Bjurselet, contains about two hundred axes of the same type as at Kverrestad. The finds have been identified as ritual depositions, as the axes were placed in special formations (Knutsson 1988, Fig. 40). Some of the Bjurselet axes were deliberately affected by fire (Christiansson 1989:21).

Final remarks

Many more examples could be presented to indicate that the ritual use of flint axes was greatly affected by norms and conventions.

All four significant concepts of practice, structure, agent and history presented initially as parts of practice theory have now been considered, with the possible exception of the agent. The title of this article uses the word “men”, but the allusion is not intended in any sexist way. It merely has to do with the paraphrased original. Although axes are more frequent in male graves, they do occur in female graves as well, suggesting that they may have been regarded as belonging to the mental world of males or of both sexes without restriction.

The most interesting aspect is that these norms and conventions seem to be less affected by cultural diversity and much more by traditions regarding how, when and where axes were handled in ritual practices. Stability seems to be of more importance than innovation, although old axe types were replaced by new ones, mainly with a slight change in form.

How much the altered shapes of axes had to do with functional aspects and how much with aesthetic reasons is difficult to state. The most important alterations seem to be linked with a new way of shafting the axe, the shift from thin-butted to thick-butted axes. Other changes can be explained with reference to features of a symbolic nature.

The world-view involving axes seems to have continued largely unchanged, however. The meaning of ceremonies, or at least the knowledge of how ceremonies involving axes should be performed, was transferred from generation to generation without much change.

Axes have sometimes been linked with megalithic

tombs, as orthostats in some parts of Western Europe may have a shape that resembles that of the axes in the same area (Larsson 1998). This does not refer exclusively to the Scandinavian situation. However, ideas in a somewhat changed version could have been introduced as a package of rules and beliefs linked to the use of megalithic tombs. Tombs have also been considered to mirror the human body. In such cases humans are directly linked to structures and material culture.

The interaction between the human and material cultural spheres, or at least some of the material culture, seems to be much closer or even more integrated than has usually been assumed. As we have seen, many axes were deposited in an unpolished state, as samples, just as children and young people seem to be the groups in society that were used for sacrifices. In some, albeit not many, instances humans and axes shared a common final deposition.

English language revision by Malcolm Hicks.

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