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Looking east in Swedish archaeology
Envisioning eastern contacts in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age

Carl-Gösta Ojala & Karin Ojala

Abstract

This paper explores how Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age contacts between Sweden and the Volga-Kama region in Russia have been discussed in Swedish archaeology, focusing on bronze axes of the Mälar (or Akozino-Mälar) type and Ananino type. We argue that research by Finnish archaeologists has played a central role for introducing and inspiring discussions in Sweden on interactions with areas in Russia. Furthermore, we stress the importance of including eastern perspectives in debates on the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in middle and northern Sweden.

Keywords: Late Bronze Age, Early Iron Age, contacts, bronze axes, Sweden, Volga-Kama region.

14.1 Introduction

Throughout much of the history of Swedish archaeology, the gaze of the archaeologists has mainly been turned towards the south. This has also been the case with archaeological research on the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. Still, a discussion about eastern connections during this period has existed since the early days of academic archaeology in Sweden.

In this paper, we will discuss how ideas about Bronze Age and Early Iron Age contacts with areas in the east, especially the Volga-Kama region in Russia, have been treated in Swedish archaeology. In particular, we will discuss the issue of contacts and interaction between east and west based on research concerning bronze axes of the so-called Mälar (or Akozino-Mälar) type and Ananino type. The bronze axes have been among the most debated artefact categories in discussions on eastern contacts in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age.

One point of departure for the paper is that research by Finnish archaeologists, from J. R. Aspelin, A. M. Tallgren to Mika Lavento, has played a central role for introducing and inspiring discussions in Sweden on contacts and interactions with areas in Russia, in particular the Volga-Kama region. This is a field in which the extensive work by Mika Lavento on cultural diversity and contact networks in Finland during the Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age (e.g. Lavento 2001; 2012; 2019) has been important.

In this paper, discussing mainly from a research historical perspective, we wish to stress the importance of including and exploring eastern perspectives in debates on the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in middle and northern Sweden, and to point to the need to develop more cross-boundary research collaboration.

14.2 North and south in Swedish archaeology

Since the beginnings of Swedish academic archaeology, a divide between a northern sphere and a southern sphere has been upheld. This division has been of significance in relation to all prehistoric periods and has had great impact on archaeological interpretations and the structures of archaeological research in Sweden. Much of the understanding of Swedish national identity, and Swedish self-images, have been connected and associated with the southern spheres – and the archaeological gaze has constantly been turned towards the south. The northern and eastern dimensions have often been overlooked or marginalized in earlier archaeological research. Furthermore, throughout the history of Swedish archaeology, the middle and southern parts of Sweden have received much more attention in archaeological research, which has entailed that the level of archaeological knowledge about local and regional prehistory is lower in northern Sweden than in the southern parts of the country.

Part of the background to this division is related to Swedish colonial history and relations in Sápmi (the core Sámi areas in the northern parts of present-day Sweden, Norway, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia). Sámi and Finnish identity and culture have been treated as the "Other", in contrast to Swedish identity and culture, and have to a large extent been marginalized or excluded in the archaeological narratives produced in Sweden, as part of a hierarchical thinking (see further discussions in C.-G. Ojala 2009). In recent years, scholars in Sweden have started to confront and examine these underlying structures and histories – and archaeological studies of Sámi (pre)history have increased considerably. As part of this examination, it is also important to critically examine how images and narratives of Swedish prehistory have been constructed, what has been included and what has been excluded.

Figure 14.1. An Ananino axe (left) and a Mälar axe (right). Both axes have been found in Gamla Uppsala parish, Uppland. Photos K. Ojala. Courtesy of Museum Gustavianum, Uppsala University.

Mälardalen in eastern middle Sweden is located in the northern part of the Nordic Bronze Age sphere – and has been treated by researchers both as a periphery and as a centre during the Late Bronze Age (K. Ojala 2016). Sometimes the coastal zone of northern Sweden (the Norrland coast) is also considered as a periphery of the Nordic Bronze Age area or as influenced by southern Bronze Age culture, while the inland areas of northern Sweden have been considered as a separate cultural area characterized by eastern influences (see further Forsberg 2012; Ojala & Ojala 2020). A similar division in Finland between the south-western coast, influenced by the Nordic Bronze Age sphere, and the inland areas, with more prominent eastern influences, has been discussed by e.g. Mika Lavento (2012).

We have elsewhere argued for the need to critically examine the historical construction of the border between north and south in archaeology in Sweden and to find ways of working across this border. One important aspect of the division between north and south is how eastern contacts have been viewed in relation to the northern and the southern areas (Ojala & Ojala 2020) – an aspect that we will explore further below.

14.3 Bronze axes between east and west

In discussions on eastern contacts in Late Bronze Age Sweden, one of the most debated artefact categories are bronze axes, especially the so-called Mälar axes and Ananino axes (Fig. 14.1). The "origin" of these axe types and the meaning of their distribution patterns have been debated for a long time in archaeological research.

The two different axe types, the Mälar axes/Akozino-Mälar axes and the Ananino axes, have been found in a vast geographical area, stretching from the Volga-Kama region in Russia in the east to Scandinavia in the west. The origin, distribution and dating of the axes have been studied by several researchers in Sweden, Russia, Finland and other countries. As the Mälar axes and the Ananino axes generally have different distribution patterns in Sweden, with core areas located in middle Sweden respectively in northern Sweden (and thus being associated with what has usually been seen as different "cultural areas" in Sweden during the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age), they have often been treated separately in earlier research, either from a northern perspective or a central Swedish perspective.

Although both the Akozino-Mälar axes and the Ananino axes occur in large numbers in the Volga-Kama region they have somewhat different distribution patterns within that region (Kuzminych 1996). However, Ananino axes and Akozino-Mälar axes have in several cases been found at the same burial sites (Meinander 1985). The relation between the two axe types has been a topic of debate in Russian archaeological research (see e.g. Kuzminych 1996; Yushkova 2012).

Outside the "core" areas in the Volga-Kama region in Russia and central Sweden, Mälar axes/Akozino-Mälar axes have also been found in other countries such as Finland, the Baltic countries and Norway (e.g. Kuzminych 1996; Lavento 2019). Within this vast area there is a substantial variation within the group of Mälar axes/Akozino-Mälar axes.

In Sweden, more than 80 Mälar axes are known, which have mainly been found in the central parts of the country, with a concentration in Mälardalen and the province of Västergötland (Baudou 1960). This distribution pattern is different from most of the other categories of bronze objects from the period, where the main concentration is in the southernmost regions of Sweden. The special distribution pattern of the Mälar axes was noticed by archaeologists early on. In the beginning of the 20th century, many archaeologists regarded the Mälar axe as a local type of bronze axe and considered that the axes which had been found in Finland were of Mälardalen origin (e.g. Lindqvist 1913; Salin 1905).

It was through the works of the Finnish archaeologist A. M. Tallgren that Swedish archaeologists became aware of the similarities between the Mälar axes found in Sweden and axes found in the Volga-Kama area in Russia (Tallgren 1916). The similarities of the northern Ananino axes with eastern axes had already been noticed in the late 19th century. In 1871, an Ananino axe was found in northern Sweden that showed similarities to axes found in Siberia and Russia (Montelius 1874, referring to J. R. Aspelin). In Oscar Montelius' view, this northern axe type was connected with the "Sámi or Finnish" Bronze Age (Montelius 1874).

In several works, Tallgren discussed the distribution of both the Mälar axes and the Ananino axes. He also addressed the question of contacts between the Volga-Kama region and Mälardalen, as well as contacts between the Volga-Kama region and northern Sweden during the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (see e.g. Tallgren 1916; 1937). Tallgren's interpretation was that the Mälar axe was of Scandinavian origin and that its distribution was a result of contacts between Mälardalen and the Volga-Kama area. These contacts did not only occur through trade, but in Tallgren's opinion there must also have been Scandinavian colonies in the Volga-Kama area (Tallgren 1916: 370). In several publications Tallgren makes clear parallels to the Viking Age expansion towards the east:

> One has to, a priori, imagine that this connection was not sustained only through long trading voyages. There must have been Scandinavian colonies in Russia during the Late Bronze Age, just as during the Viking Age. (Tallgren 1916: 370; our translation.)

Tallgren's work had a great impact in Swedish archaeology and several Swedish archaeologists wrote about the distribution of the Mälar axes in the east, based on Tallgren's work. Mälardalen was perceived by many archaeologists as an important, prosperous central region during the Late Bronze Age. Therefore, the interpretations of eastern colonies fitted very well with this view. Birger Nerman writes that "Tallgren's discoveries of the Swedish settlement in eastern Russia during the Late Bronze Age are among the most beautiful that have been made in archaeology in recent years" (Nerman 1918: 196; our translation).

However, the interpretation of Scandinavian colonies in the east did not go unchallenged. In the middle of the 20th century, the earlier theories of the form and content of contacts between Mälardalen and the Volga-Kama area were questioned (Baudou 1960; Meinander 1954), but no new interpretations of the relationship between the axes in Sweden and Russia were put forth by archaeologists in Sweden in connection with this criticism.

It was not until the end of the 20th century and the early 21st century that the issue of the origin of the Mälar axes and the eastern connections again became a topic of discussion within Swedish archaeology, by archaeologists such as Hans Bolin, Eva Hjärthner-Holdar and Thomas Eriksson. By this time, many more Akozino-Mälar axes were known in Russia than Mälar axes in Sweden. However, it was also noted that there was a variation among the Akozino-Mälar axes found in Russia and that only some of the sub-types closely resembled the Mälar axes in Sweden. The new knowledge about the complexity of the axe type led to new discussions about the origins and development of the axes, but also to more general debates about interaction and contacts across the Baltic Sea and eastern influences in Mälardalen.

As previously noted, Tallgren was not only interested in the distribution of the Mälar axes but also the distribution of the more northern Ananino axes. The interpretations of the distribution pattern of the Ananino axes and other "eastern objects" in northern Sweden were very different from the interpretation of the Mälar axes in central Sweden.

As mentioned above, the Ananino axes and the moulds for Ananino axes found in Sweden have a more northern distribution than the Mälar axes. Only three Ananino axes (and one possible fragment

of an axe) have been found in Sweden. However, the number of casting moulds is greater than the number of known axes. Two of the known axes are from the inland regions in the north of Sweden. Interestingly, the third known Ananino axe from Sweden was discovered in Uppland in central Sweden (Fig. 14.1), a region where a large number of Mälar axes have been discovered (K. Ojala 2016).

Contacts with the Ananino cultural area have played a significant role in discussions on northern Swedish prehistory. This has also been an important theme in discussions on the ”origins” of the Sámi people or the emergence and development of an early Sámi ethnicity (see further C.-G. Ojala 2009).

According to Tallgren some of the bronzes of east Russian character that had been discovered in the northern regions were locally produced while others were imported (Tallgren 1937: 14). In Tallgren's view:

> The “Lapland” civilization was dependent on the East Russian. Metal came from there. But it became partly independent: several of the socketed axes possess special local features, unknown in East Russia. (Tallgren 1937: 22.)

Gustaf Hallström discussed the Ananino axes and moulds found in northern Sweden, in connections with ideas of an immigration of the Sámi population to Sweden (an idea which is not supported by research anymore):

> It is the first time in the prehistory of northern Sweden that we are facing such clear and tangible evidence [i.e. the Ananino axes and moulds; our comment] of the advance on present Swedish ground of a foreign culture and in this case also a foreign people. (Hallström 1929: 81; our translation.)

The contacts with the Early Iron Age centers in the Volga-Kama region did, however, continue to play an important role in archaeological discussions dealing with the emergence of an early Sámi ethnicity in Sápmi, for instance in works by Evert Baudou (1995) and Lars Ivar Hansen and Bjørnar Olsen (2014).

In recent years, research in Sweden has addressed issues about early iron technology in Northern Fennoscandia and the transfer of technological knowledge in networks stretching east-west in the northern areas. This research represents interesting new attempts to deepen the understanding of metal-working and eastern interactions in the Early Iron Age in northern Sweden (see Bennerhag et al. 2021).

14.4 The eastern “unknown”

One could argue that the eastern cultural entities have often played the role of the “unknown” in archaeological interpretations of contact networks in the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in middle and northern Sweden. Although ideas of eastern contacts have played an important role in archaeological interpretations, these connections have seldom been examined in-depth in earlier research in Sweden.

The studies of eastern contacts have been affected by the historical and contemporary national borders and political conditions. One problem is that archaeological research and archaeological material in Russia and the Soviet Union have been so little known among archaeologists in Sweden. Language difficulties, and the lack of interaction and exchange due to the political situation during

the 20th century, with the Iron curtain cutting through the archaeological landscape, have contributed to this situation.

In general, most of the attention paid to issues of east-west interaction in Swedish archaeology has concerned the Viking Age, especially in relation to the Scandinavian expansion eastwards towards Russia, Byzantium and the Arabic world. In recent years, after the fall of the Soviet regime in the Baltic countries, research concerning contacts across the Baltic Sea has also gained in importance.

During Soviet and post-Soviet times, much archaeological research has been carried out in the Volga-Kama region and neighbouring areas, concerning the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age. There exists an extensive body of scholarly works devoted to the Ananino cultural area and related cultural groups in Russia (see e.g. Kuzminykh & Chizhevskiy 2009; 2014). Still, much of this scholarship remains unknown to Swedish archaeologists.

However, some of the relevant archaeological research carried out in Russia during pre-revolutionary, Soviet and post-Soviet times have been introduced and presented to Swedish archaeologists through the works of Finnish archaeologists, such as J. R. Aspelin, A. M. Tallgren and later C. F. Meinander and Mika Lavento. Timo Salminen has in a wide range of publications discussed archaeological studies in Russia and the Soviet Union by Finnish archaeologists searching for Finnish, Finno-Ugric and Uralic roots in the late 19th and early 20th century (see e.g. Salminen 2003; 2007). As mentioned above, Mika Lavento has in several works addressed issues of eastern contacts in relation to archaeological material in Finland and Russia, including ceramics and bronze axes (e.g. 2001; 2012; 2019).

14.5 Crossing borders between east and west

As discussed in this paper, ideas about contacts with the Volga-Kama region have been activated in archaeological discussions on Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age societies in both northern and middle Sweden – but from different perspectives. In northern Sweden, the cultural influences have mostly been seen as coming from the east, from a "superior" eastern cultural centre, and have been considered as significant for the development of an early Sámi ethnicity. When discussing middle Sweden, the influences were earlier seen as coming from the "superior" western region, and scholars talked about Swedish/Scandinavian colonies in the east, but more recently influences and interaction in both directions have been discussed, with an increasing focus on the Baltic region and less focus on the Volga-Kama region.

Importantly, research by Finnish archaeologist has been central for the understanding of eastern contacts in Sweden. The work by A. M. Tallgren has been particularly influential for the ways in which eastern contacts in the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age have been discussed among Swedish archaeologists – concerning middle Sweden as well as northern Sweden.

The case of the Mälar-Akozino and Ananino axes discussed in this paper can also serve as an example of the interrelations between archaeology and politics, and the importance of borders in archaeology, which have affected – and still affect – archaeological interpretations of prehistoric material culture and how prehistoric contacts and networks are envisioned.

In our view, there is a need for renewed discussions on eastern interactions in middle and northern Sweden in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, which embrace archaeological research not only in Sweden and Russia, but also in the areas in-between. Here, Finland holds a key position. As Mika Lavento has argued, "Finland can be described as a border zone between Scandinavian and eastern cultural phenomena during the entire Early Metal Age (Bronze Age)" (Lavento 2019: 36).

There is a great potential for future research in developing scholarly exchange and cooperation across the present-day national borders. Turning the archaeological gaze not only towards the south, but also towards the north and the east, promises to contribute to a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age societies in Sweden and their interaction with the world outside.

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