



Book Reviews

SAGAHOLM: NORTH EUROPEAN BRONZE AGE ROCK ART AND BURIAL RITUAL BY JOAKIM GOLDHAHN

Oxbow Books. 2016. 140pp, 90 illus incl 16 col plates, 10 tables, ISBN 978-1-78570-264-8, pb £36

It is a different experience to review a book that was written over fifteen years ago. This is perhaps the first thing that readers should know about *Sagaholm* – it is the first English-translation of Joakim Goldhahn's (1999) Swedish PhD thesis (transl. by Cheryl Jones Fur). However, this fact should not deter readers. I would argue that knowing this adds to the enjoyment of reading the book; it gives a sense of the research origins of this author, who has since made seminal contributions to Scandinavian rock art research. The eponymously named monograph is an in-depth study of the Sagaholm Bronze Age barrow (1500–1100 BC), which contains the largest group of rock art from a burial context in Northern Europe. And as Richard Bradley states in his brief yet applauding foreword, this English version of the book is most welcome.

Because of the nature of this publication, it is perhaps most fruitful to begin at the end. The Epilogue summarises the book's shortcomings from the author's point of view years later, and quickly points out that very few updates have been made to the text (there are a few new references, but the majority are pre-1998).

Sagaholm is well organised and concise; it has nine chapters which broadly follow a typical thesis structure: literature review (Chapters 2–3), presentation of data / fieldwork (Chapters 4–6), analysis and interpretation (Chapters 7–9). Chapter 1 introduces the structure of the volume and its contents. Chapter 2 is a thorough review of the antiquarian scholarship of the site, which reads like a turn of the century soap opera. Goldhahn includes amusing quotes and images from archival material that tell the story of the first scholarly work to take place at the barrow. This chapter also introduces the main characteristics of Sagaholm, its construction and contents. What makes this 22 m diameter/ 3–4 m high barrow so important is that it incorporated a kerb of sandstone slabs, many of which were adorned with figurative rock art. The history of the documentation of this rock art and a review of the more recent academic literature are the subjects of Chapter 3. The previous recordings will especially be a point of interest for rock art enthusiasts.

Chapter 4 presents the new recordings undertaken by Goldhahn and colleague Lasse Bengtsson (veteran rock art recorder based at the World Heritage rock art site in Bohuslän). These recordings represent a massive step forward from the previous documentations. However, as they were undertaken in the late 90s, the techniques used are somewhat out-dated. This is recognised by the author in the Epilogue, but one cannot help wishing that at the very least, new photographs would have been used for this publication, as those included in the volume are not very illuminating. Nevertheless, the documentation is still valid, and these older drawings will prove even more useful when studied in combination with newer methods in the future. Alongside the new slab-by-slab documentations, Goldhahn's interpretations and descriptions of the imagery are methodically presented. From here he argues for the significance of a number of different patterns in the data, the most interesting of which regards the relationship between technique and motif. This he specifically refers to in his Epilogue, noting that he would revisit the 'relationship between the social context and choice of technology' (p.123). Now many years later, he would argue that the distinctive production techniques employed in making the rock art represent the work of a variety of individuals, and that this emphasises the involvement of different people in the burial rituals.

Sagaholm represents a unique opportunity to study a rock art site within a secure context (the majority of rock art in Sweden is 'open air', created on exposed rock outcrops). This is one of the most appealing aspects of this book,

as it presents the rock art alongside the secure context in which it was found. In Chapter 5 Goldhahn revisits and reinterprets the 1971 excavation via primary source material and his own conversations with the original excavator, then-undergraduate student Anders Wihlborg. He reassesses the morphology of the barrow and the chronology of its phasing, and then embarks on a comparison between Sagaholm and other barrows in Sweden. There are other more theoretical musings included, such as an analysis of labour. Goldhahn (p.69) postulates that it would have taken 50 people 12–16 days to construct Sagaholm, and that this devotion of time and raw materials signifies a social imperative to create this rock art and burial in this specific way. Chapter 6 draws on the material presented in the previous chapters to present a chronology of the barrow and its contents.

The final three chapters – which are the more theoretical interpretations of the rock art and barrow and their social and religious significance – revolve around a main theme: ‘metaphorics’. As defined by Goldhahn (p.83), these are formed ‘based on the material culture’s structural similarities, in cases where different phenomena replicate each other in form or content, and/or through contextual links between them’. This concept is introduced in detail in Chapter 7, where he reviews multiple interpretations of the rock art and burial monument in terms of narratives based on their ‘structural and metaphorical associations...’ (p.36). The key theory, which is then expounded in the final chapters, is that Sagaholm is an *axis mundi* or hierophany, the embodiment of a sun mythology that is often discussed in regards to Bronze Age Scandinavia (see Kaul 1998).

This leads to the ideas presented in Chapter 8, which contemplate the significance of the burial rituals and how they are related to the enactment of this sun mythology. Goldhahn employs a number of theories about burial rituals, largely those by sociologist Robert Hertz and ethnographer Arnold van Gennep. Here time and tradition are the focus. Goldhahn reminds that from the Early to the Middle Bronze Age, significant social changes took place. These would have been associated with changes in religion, which would in turn affect burial rituals and the treatment of the body. The main comparative example he gives is the shift from collective burials in the Early Bronze Age to more monumental individual burials in the Middle Bronze Age. Most importantly, he argues that in the Middle Bronze Age there is an increased emphasis on the afterlife, rebirth and regeneration after death, and succession of power.

The theories and observations made in the previous chapters are further explored in Chapter 9 within the structure of Van Gennep’s three phases of burial rites: exclusion, liminal / transition, incorporation. In the first phase, exclusion, the body is prepared and internal gifts bestowed. The second phase, liminal / transition, is surrounded by the most rites and taboos. This is when the rock art kerb was created and an important ‘metaphoric’ established between the sandstone kerbstones and the sun, further enacting the sun mythology. In the last phase, incorporation, the barrow is closed and incorporated into the landscape while the soul of the deceased takes on a ‘new metaphysical state’ (p.122).

The book concludes with the Epilogue, in which Goldhahn dutifully points out most of the weaknesses that can be found in *Sagaholm*. In some ways this volume is dated (e.g. recording techniques) and in others it is as relevant as it was in 1998. The timing is also fitting, as throughout this book are comparisons with Bredarör on Kivik, another significant burial monument containing rock art in Sweden, which Goldhahn (2013) has recently published. Non-Swedish readers who have read other works from Goldhahn’s corpus will find it interesting to revisit this older piece, as here are the beginnings of some of the tenets of his later work. We will likely see the impact of this new (older) addition as it makes itself available to a wider audience.

References

Goldhahn, J. 1999. *Sagaholm – hållristningar och gravritual*. Umeå: Studia Archaeologica Universitatis Umensis No 11

Goldhahn, J. 2013. *Bredarör på Kivik - en arkeologisk odyssé*. Kalmar Studies in Archaeology IX. Kalmar: Linnéuniversitetet

Kaul, F. 1998. *Ships on Bronzes: A study in Bronze Age religion and iconography, vol. 3*. Publications from the National Museum: Studies in Archaeology and History. Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark

Courtney Nimura

Griffith University

Review submitted: May 2017

The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor