Memories in earth.
Earthen long barrows in southern Sweden

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Résumé

Bien que de longs tumulus étaient documentés au Danemark depuis les années 1970, ceux-ci étaient encore inconnus en Suède jusqu'au début des années 1990. La possible existence de ces longs tumulus est un facteur important dans l'étude des changements des pratiques mortuaires du Mésolithique tardif au Néolithique ancien.

Grâce aux fouilles archéologiques menées au début des années 1990, deux tumulus longs ont été identifiés. Ceux-ci ont été construits au cours du Néolithique ancien, c'est-à-dire autour de 4000 BC (calibré). Ils ont ensuite été utilisés comme monuments avec des rites associés jusqu'au début de la construction des mégalithes vers 3600 BC (calibré). D'autres tumulus longs ont pu être identifiés grâce à une réévaluation de fouilles anciennes et des nouvelles recherches.

Lorsqu'on compare les pratiques mortuaires du Mésolithique tardif avec celles que l'on peut entrevoir dans les tumulus longs, on observe que plusieurs courants traditionnels perdurent au Néolithique, sous une forme quelque peu transformée.

Il est peu probable que les tumulus longs aient été utilisés comme marqueurs de territoire. Ils ont plutôt été des monuments qui pouvaient être volontairement cachés ou exposés selon la voie par laquelle on les approchait.

Zusammenfassung

Trotz der Tatsache, daß man frühneolithische Langhügel seit 1970 in Dänemark beobachtet hatte, wurden vor 1990 noch keine entsprechenden Befunde in Südschweden registriert.

Bei Ausgrabungen in Schonen zu Beginn der 90er Jahre entdeckte man zwei Langhügel, die während des Frühneolithikums, d.h. um 4000 v. Chr. (kalibriert), errichtet worden waren. Weitere Langhügel konnten bei einer Durchsicht von alten Untersuchungsergebnissen und Neuuntersuchungen belegt werden.

Bis zum Bau der Megalithgräber um ca 3600 v. Chr. (kalibriert) waren diese Hügel als Monumente eng mit Ritualen verbunden. Ein Vergleich mit der Grabsitte des Spätmesolithikums bezeugt, daß sich mehrere traditionelle Züge in den Langhügeln widerspiegeln, die in zum Teil veränderter Form weiterlebten. Dadurch bieten die Langhügel eine sehr gute Voraussetzung für die Studie der Veränderungsprozesse der Grabsitte des Spätmesolithikums und Frühneolithikums, wobei das Auftreten bzw. Fehlen von Langhügeln eine wichtige Rolle bei der Interpretation spielt.

Ein anderer Diskussionspunkt ist das Erscheinungsbild der Langhügel in der frühneolithischen Landschaft. Diese dürften kaum zur Markierung von Revieren gedient haben, sondern dienten eher als Monumente, welche sich bei einer Annäherung aus unterschiedlichen Richtungen entweder verbargen bzw. hervortraten.

Introduction

The earthen long barrow is the oldest form of grave monument in Northern Europe (Ashbee 1970; Midgley 1985; Kinnes 1992). The earliest ones in south-western Scandinavia seem to have been erected contemporaneously with or shortly after the introduction of agriculture and the change of material culture from the Late Mesolithic Ertebølle culture to the Funnel Beaker culture of the Early Neolithic.

Long barrows are well known in most of the northern part of continental Europe and in Denmark as well. In the latter region the first ones were identified in 1970s (Madsen 1979; Liversage 1981). For several years this type of grave was not known to exist in southern Sweden, despite intensive rescue excavations of huge areas in south-western Scania, the southern province of Sweden, where several settlements of Early Neolithic age were found. In this area megalithic tombs were introduced in close chronological relation to the Danish tombs (Nielsen 1984; Persson and Sjögren 1996). The question was whether earthen long barrows were introduced to Scania as a stage before the megalithic graves and, if so, whether they displayed the same early appearance and the same architectural structure as in present Denmark.

Earthen long barrows in southern Sweden

The study of the relations between Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic graves and cemeteries was the reason why a project was initiated in the late 1980s in order to search for earthen long barrows in southern Sweden. In southern Scandinavia several large cemeteries, including 65 interments at the most, have been excavated (Kannegaard Nielsen and Brinch Petersen 1993; Larsson 2000b). However, the number of Early Neolithic graves is small (Ebbesen 1994) and no cemeteries similar to the Mesolithic ones have been found. This makes the comparison between Mesolithic and Neolithic mortuary practice very problematic. The earthen long barrows, in Denmark erected no more than a century later than the latest Mesolithic graves, are of major interest in providing an

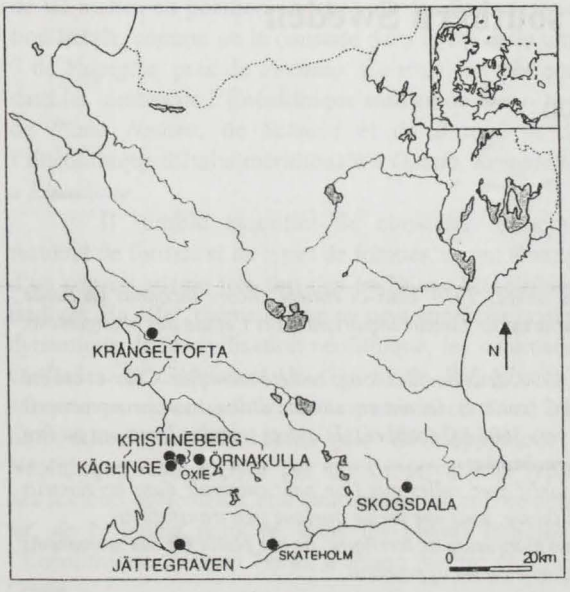

Figure 1. *The location of the south Swedish monuments (black dots) and settlements (grey dots) mentioned in the text.*

overview and representation of the mortuary practice of the Early Neolithic. The earthen long barrow is an innovation from continental Europe, but the interesting question is whether this new outlook on burials represents a marked discontinuity in mortuary practice or includes traditional elements. The relation between settlement site and burial place is another. Does the close chorological connection of the settlement of the living to the settlement of the dead from the Mesolithic continue into the Early Neolithic?

In Denmark most earthen long barrows have been identified as the primary stage of megalithic tombs. A number of dolmens in Scania, surrounded by a long and narrow frame of erected stones (Bägerfeldt 1992), might contain earthen long barrows in which a dolmen was later added as well as other structural elements such as enlargement of the barrow or new frameworks of erected stones.

Excavated monuments

A small number of monuments with a structure very similar to the long dolmens but lacking a visible chamber should be the most interesting ones to test by excavation. One of these was Jättegraven (Giant's Grave) on the coast of southernmost Sweden (fig. 1), with a length of more than 60 m and surrounded by a frame of stones but with no dolmen cist recorded (Larsson 1992; 1994) (fig. 2). Excavations revealed that it had a distinct eastern façade with an adjacent stone paving. Indications of at least one grave were found inside the barrow. An erected stone slab as the single remaining part of a cist as well as beads of amber were found at a distance of 28 m from the eastern façade. Large boulders lined by stones were found in the central part of the barrow (fig. 2). The position of the stones does not coincide with the arrangements of small orthostats for a stone cist or a dolmen chamber, nor any part of these chambers. They might instead be parts of a original stone frame later replaced by elongated erected stones or belonging to a structure predating the barrow. According to radiocarbon dating and the finds in connection with the eastern façade, the barrow was built during the earliest part of the Neolithic at about 4000 cal. BC and used in rituals for several centuries (Larsson 2000a). The pottery dates the final stage of its use to about 3500 cal. BC.

From the finds right beside the border of the barrow it was established that the long barrow had been built on the top of an Early Neolithic settlement. When the barrow was erected the coastline was situated less than 300 metres to the south. Several megalithic tombs are found in the neighbourhood, and according to a map from the early 19th century a second long barrow might have been located just three hundred metres away. The barrow was built a couple of hundred metres to the west of a small river. About 1 kilometre upstream, large areas with Neolithic settlement remains have been identified on the surface. These areas are probably the accumulation of several smaller settlement sites from most of the Neolithic.

In order to get a glimpse into the land use of the site at the time of the barrow erection, samples were taken for pollen analyses. Pollen was found in the filling as well as the fossil surface covered by the barrow (Regnell 1994). The land on which the barrow is located had been used for agriculture while the filling contained pollens common in pasture land. The barrow is located at the border between sand to the south and clay to the north. So the filling should originate from the pasture land to the north of the barrow.

The search for earthen long barrows also took in the long dolmen Örnakulla in the south-western part of Scania (fig. 1). Excavations revealed it to have had an initial stage as an earthen long barrow, it too with an eastern façade (Larsson 1992; Sjöström and Pihl 2000). The first phase included the eastern trapezoid part of a stone frame. A dolmen chamber, a western frame combined with an elongated barrow have later been added. A small, trapezoid stone frame with pottery close to the façade is probably the remains of a grave within the earthen long barrow (fig. 3). Vessels were also found in the trench for the façade. The pottery from Örnakulla represents early as well as late stages of the Early Neolithic.

Radiocarbon dates from both earthen long barrows indicate that they were erected at the very beginning of the Neolithic and then used for ritual depositions at the façade for some centuries until the introduction of other offering rituals in connection with megalithic tombs. This suggests that the building of earthen long barrows began at the same time in southernmost Sweden as in Denmark. In some cases a grave might have been added to the monument, but it was mainly used as a place to commemorate the ancestors by depositing pottery. The depositions were few in number and small in size but show links to the mortuary practice related to the megalithic graves where large depositions – in some cases hundreds of vessels – are

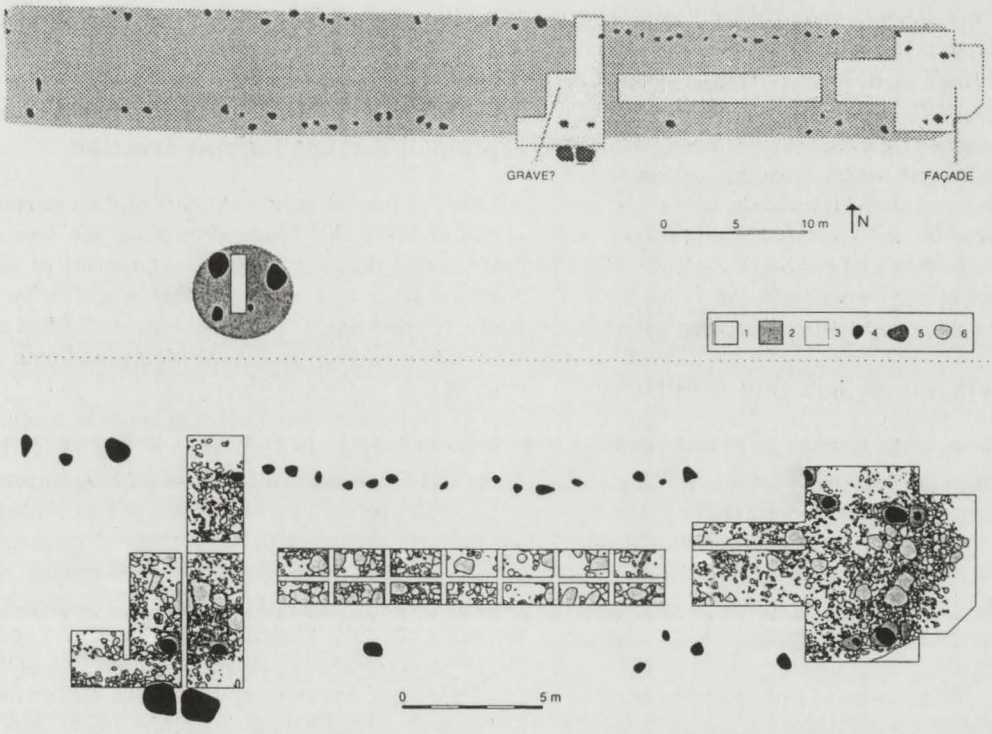

Figure 2. *The earthen long barrow of Jättegraven. The long barrow with the stone setting and excavated areas closely connected with a heavily destroyed dolmen (top) and a close-up of the trenches (bottom). Legend; 1: long barrow, 2: dolmen, 3: trenches, 4: erected elongated stones visible above surface, 5: the shape of the erected elongated stones below surface, and 6: boulders.*

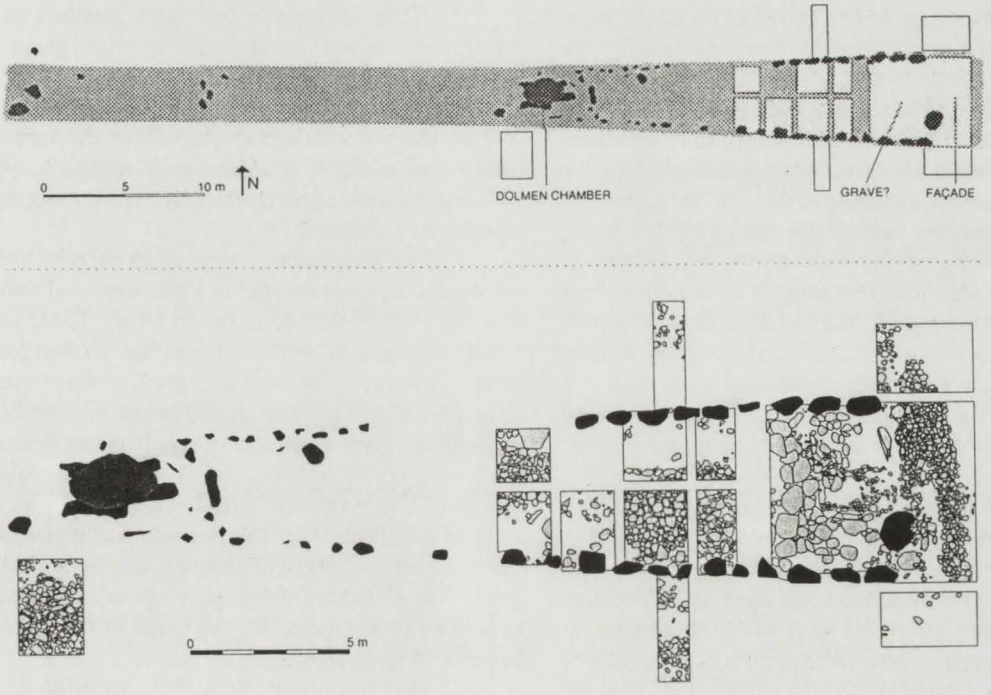

Figure. 3. *The earthen long barrow of Örnakulladösen. The total shape of the long dolmen (top) and close-up of the trenches (bottom). Legend: see fig. 2.*

found close by the entrance (Bagge and Kaelas 1950; Strömberg 1968, 1971; Hårdh 1986).

In the 1970s a partly destroyed round barrow was excavated at Skogsdala in south-eastern Scania (fig. 1). The barrow covered a long dolmen and below it postholes from a row of poles and pottery from the earliest part of the Early Neolithic was found (Jacobsson 1986). The row of poles might have formed a widely spaced palisade, but in comparison with other long barrows the façade should have been erected in the western end, not in the eastern end, which makes the interpretation somewhat uncertain.

Identified earthen long barrows

As in many other cases, the excavations and the identification of a monument not previously known to the region had productive consequences. By giving notice to the existence of earthen long barrows in southern Sweden and the remains characteristic of this type of monument, other earthen long barrows have been identified. They too indicate the early existence of this monumental grave type in Scania.

The site of Kristineberg is located just a few kilometres to the west of the excavated barrow at Örnakulla (fig. 1). It was excavated in the late 1970s but not identified as an earthen long barrow until the analyses of the excavation of the site started in 1998. In spite of heavy disturbances by features from later prehistoric activities, a pit filled with stone marking the trench for the façade as well as a primary grave and a secondary grave were recognized (Rudebeck 2000). The barrow was erected on an Early Neolithic settlement. According to the radiocarbon dates the erection of the long barrow is directly related to the abandoning of the settlement

Just a few metres apart, features like a pit filled with stones might be the remains of a second earthen long barrow. In that case the barrows were close and parallel, a well-known situation exemplified by the long barrows from Barkær on eastern Jutland (Liversage 1992).

The results of the excavation at Käglinge in south-western Scania just one kilometre from Kristineberg may be of some interest (E. Rudebeck personal information). A stone frame of a size and shape similar to those at earthen long barrows was documented and Early Neolithic artefacts found. However, due to changes in the planning of the area the excavation was stopped before any features were investigated.

In 1999 a prehistoric monument was found by a rescue excavation at Krångeltofta in western Scania (fig. 1), which shows similarities to an earthen long barrow. In this case pits covered by stones containing Early Neolithic artefacts have been interpreted as graves (Ericson Lagerås 1999). Two elongated pits filled with stones could be trenches for two façades, both related to frames of small stones; the dimensions of these frames are not known because of the restricted excavation area. The stone frames have one long side in common, a feature not known in Scandinavia, which should mean that the long barrows were built and used in a time sequence. The number of Early Neolithic artefacts is small and the dates give proof of activities from the Mesolithic until the Bronze Age.

Mesolithic mortuary practices and the conception of earthen barrow erection

We have to keep in mind that most of the examples presented of Mesolithic mortuary practice are several centuries earlier than any earthen long barrow of southern Scandinavia or of Continental Europe (Midgley 1985). However, there might be some common tradition of mortuary practice in western Europe during the fourth millennium BC.

Certain elements seem to provide a connection between Mesolithic mortuary practice and the world-view of the societies which built the earthen long barrows.

During the Late Mesolithic certain constructions were erected above graves, as has been demonstrated for cemeteries such as Skateholm, southernmost Sweden (Larsson 1989). Their primary object was connected with activities directly related to the mortuary practice. However, constructions above the Mesolithic graves are small, similar to wooden constructions in earthen long barrows which resemble houses (Rønne 1979). Just as the wooden constructions associated with earthen long barrows were often burnt down (Midgley 1985), the structures above Mesolithic graves were set alight. We do not know of the cover of the Mesolithic graves, but it cannot have been very obvious, just some kind of small marking. The barrows were less than a metre high, which did not make them very visible.

The evidence of a huge post, almost 1 m in diameter, was found in connection with grave 20 at Skateholm (Larsson 2000b). This reflection of the mortuary practice might be linked to the presence of a palisade as a façade, which is a characteristic of the earthen long barrows of southern Scandinavia (Kristensen 1991). In both examples the posts are the only visible marking of the grave from a distance.

The Mesolithic graves at Skateholm and other cemeteries are concentrated in some long and rather narrow areas within the site (Larsson 1993). These areas are similar in shape as well as size to the earthen long barrows. However, Mesolithic graves from southern Scandinavia have not been found below or directly beside earthen long barrows. In a few cases barrows were erected on Late Mesolithic site. In at least one case – at Bjørnsholm in northern Jutland – a barrow was erected close to a shell midden. The time interval between settlement and barrow might be short (Andersen and Johansen 1992). The elongated shape of most shell middens could have been an inspiration for the shape of the earliest long barrows (Whittle 1996).

The transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic meant a change of settlement structure from large sites used for centuries to small hamlets for a family or two, occupied for just one or two generations (Larsson 1998). During the Late Mesolithic the settlement sites itself was a permanent marker. Life became more mobile

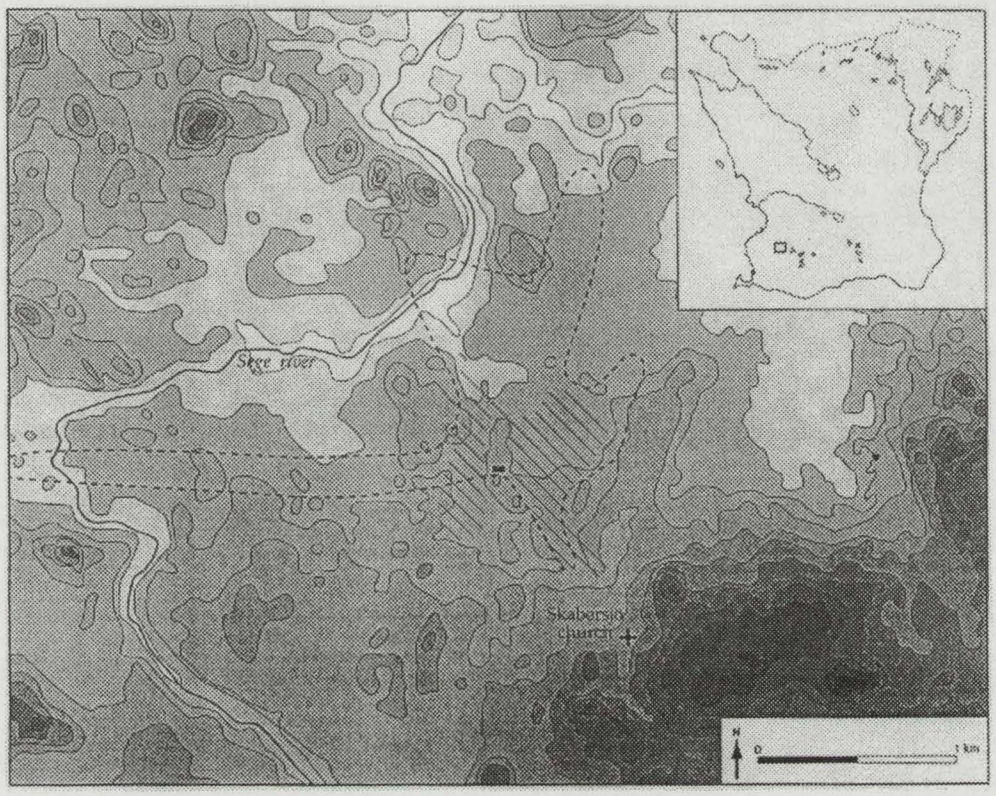

Figure 4. *The location of an Early Neolithic long earthen barrow (marked as a filled rectangle) at Örnakulla in south-western Scania. The visibility of the monument is marked by the broken line. The wetland in the vicinity of the barrow is shown as a hatched area.*

in the Early Neolithic which may have meant a quest for permanent markers within the region.

The custom of erecting conspicuous monuments intended to survive for future generations meant a changed view of the link between the past and the future. The building of earthen long barrows may also indicate a questioning of the oral tradition linked to the ancestors. In a hunting-gathering society with permanent settlements and a long social tradition, the memory could more easily be maintained. The narrative traditions of the Mesolithic were replaced by a physical feature during Early Neolithic. By building monuments some kind of immortality was guaranteed not only for the person for whom the grave was erected but also, and perhaps more important, their presence in the landscape may have been a guarantee of the continuity of a particular view of society for a long time after they were built (Bradley 1993). The earthen long barrows thus played a major role in the shaping and development of the conceptual world of early agricultural society.

There is yet another interesting aspect in the relation between graves and settlement site between the Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic. In the Mesolithic the graves seem to be easily incorporated in the home of the living. Earthen long barrows were often built on the settlement site. The erection of an earthen long barrow caused a total change of site use and forced members of the living society to move away. This difference might relate to change of how the society regarded the deceased. A close connection between settlements and graves as in the Mesolithic might mean that the transitional phase from living to death was a rather unproblematic process of no major effect to the living. In a society where the internment of the dead involved the abandoning of the settlement, the process from a physical to a metaphysical stage might have involved conceptions of the dead which could have had negative effects on the members of the society. They had to move away, but judging by the location of younger settlements the move was short. Other factors such as the agricultural system or supernatural relations initiated moves of the settlement as an accepted and regular form of behaviour in the Early Neolithic societies. The erection of an earthen long barrow might just have been one of many reasons for moving the settlement and hence the relations between the dead and the living were not necessarily in confrontation. This might also be connected to

the monument itself with a shape similar to early Neolithic houses of continental Europe (Hodder 1984; Bradley 1998), not the houses used by the people of southern Scandinavia (Nielsen 1997) but similar to the houses for the ancestors in a remote time and a remote area.

Long barrows – markers of long duration

An interpretation of the monument at Krångeltofta, mentioned above, as an earthen long barrow may be questionable. This is due to the fact that trapezoidal frames of the same shape and size as earthen long barrows are known as ritual structures during the Late Bronze Age (Kaul 1987).

Several of the well-dated earthen long barrows of southern Scandinavia have a use as markers for graves and cemeteries during a considerable period covering the Bronze Age as well as the Early Iron Age. Without a good find situation the age of the structure may therefore be questioned. Another aspect of this somewhat problematic situation of dating is that the earthen long barrows are monuments whose importance was not only restricted to the Early Neolithic but the interest as a focal object was recognized as an important part of mortuary practice throughout most of prehistory. It is one example of how a monument could serve as a symbol not only of the generations who knew its purpose but for many later generations as well. By erecting a monument like an earthen long barrow, the landscape was given a new dimension – certain areas were ritualized. Certain areas might have had a specific meaning for the society already in the Mesolithic, but by changing the earth the importance of the site became more obvious.

The visibility of long barrows

Archaeologists have also become more aware of the way that people's world-view has changed along with changes in the landscape: a landscape with narrow forests paths between open areas gives a completely different notion of the surrounding world than being in an open landscape where one can survey a considerable part of the environment (Barrett 1994).

In some cases the earthen long barrows have been interpreted as territorial markers. As such the monument should be easily visible within a considerable area. In order to study the visibility, the long barrow at Örnakulla was chosen as an example. Even in the present-day open landscape with very few trees and other obstacles, the barrow had a location with a very varying visibility (fig. 4). From the west, even with a considerable amount of vegetation, the monument was visible within a narrow corridor even across a major river for more than two kilometres. From the south, however, the monument was not visible until one had passed a hill less than a hundred metres from the barrow.

If one follows the long corridor to the west, one will end up at Oxie (fig. 1), the largest site known in southwestern Scania from the earliest part of the Neolithic (Larsson, M. 1985). The long barrow at Kristineberg and the plausible one at Käglinge are situated within a short distance to the west of the Oxie site, in a raised location. The people living at Oxie thus had the monument in constant view, whereas those who approached it from the south, the only way to reach the structure dry-shod, did not see it until they were virtually right beside it.

That settlers at Oxie might have been able to watch the earthen long barrow at Örnakulla could have some importance – it might even have been built on a site away but still in vicinity of the settlement. That does not mean that the people at Oxie used the barrow, but its access might have been in their control.

When people approached the earthen long barrow at Örnakulla from the south, the intention of its localization should have been to hide the monument rather than make it visible. The visitor could have been taken by surprise when approaching the monument. The only part which might have been visible to the south would be the posts which, judging by the depth of the palisade trench, could have been four to five metres high. The same is true as regards the location of the long barrow of Jättegraven. In that case, however, the hidden direction was to the north-east while it was easily visible to the south and from the beach nearby.

The long barrows did not function as territorial markers easily visible from a distance. Their location was directed by other needs of the society. We have to keep in mind that most barrows were erected on abandoned settlements. So in order to understand the location of long barrows we should try to acquire a better knowledge of the settlement system.

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