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A miniature in amber of a battle-axe from the Battle-Axe Culture

Abstract

In the mid 1930s an amber object shaped like a miniature battle-axe was found in the northern part of Öland, an island in the Baltic Sea. The object is a very detailed copy of a true battle-axe in stone dating from the Battle-Axe Culture of the late Middle Neolithic. Miniature battle-axes in stone are not rare, but this is the only example made of amber. The findspot was situated in deep water during the Middle Neolithic, and so an alternative interpretation of the origin is presented. Although this is the only battle-axe in amber, other amber objects, such as ornaments, are known from the same cultural complex in southern Scandinavia. The paper also includes a survey of miniature battle-axes in amber from other cultures during the Neolithic in southern Scandinavia.

Keywords: battle-axe, Neolithic, Öland, amber, miniature

Introduction

A small amber object was found in the mid 1930s on the farm of Svartvik in Nörra Böda Parish, in the northernmost part of the Baltic Island of Öland, after the demolition of a stable, followed by harrowing (Jörbäck 2003) (Fig. 1). Unfortunately it broke when collected, but the two pieces could be fitted together. The findspot lies within a sandy area; interestingly, it was found at an elevation of about 10 m.a.s.l.

The object copies a battle-axe from the Battle-Axe Culture of southern Scandinavia, which is included within the larger Corded Ware Culture context (Malmer 1961, 1975). The amber axe can be identified as belonging to Malmer's type D2. This means that it belongs to the middle phase of the Battle-Axe Culture at about 2400 cal. BC and to the Late Middle Neolithic (MNB) according to Swedish chronology.

Fig. 1. The find location, on the island of Öland, of the battle-axe in amber. Drawing by Lars Larsson.

The miniature amber battle-axe and the find location

The battle-axe is 4.4 cm long and 1.4 cm wide (Fig. 2–3). It is shaped with the in-

Fig. 2. The battle-axe from above. Photographs by Leif Bjelm.

tention of distinguishing all the elements of a battle-axe of the period, including a distinct ring around the shaft-hole on the upper side and a pronounced cone at the neck. Unlike ordinary battle-axes, it has a rounded, keel-shaped edge.

Although the surface has been polished, it is still possible to identify same traces of manufacturing in the form of parallel striations transverse to the longitudinal axis of the object. These are very similar to the marks that may be observed on bone objects and probably result from the use of a flint edge for cutting (Fig. 3). In addition there are a number of shallow depressions in the surface, showing that the axe was not made by a person skilled in processing this material. Most obvious are the mistakes close to the edge (Fig. 4). On one side of the neck there are some small circular depressions.

Stone battle-axes of this kind are shaped to resemble axes in copper: this is the reason for the collar around the shaft hole, which is easier to shape in metal. The stone axes normally have a small groove along the back. On the amber object this groove is found on the front of the axe. The groove indicates the seam remaining on a copper casting when two moulds were used for fabrication. In Sweden the name 'boat axe' is sometimes used, as the battle-axe resembles a kayak. Compared with ordinary axes in stone, the various parts of the amber copy are similarly proportioned.

This object is unique, as no other amber copy has been found of a battle-axe from the Battle-Axe Culture. Miniatures of battle-axes from the same culture have been found, but these are made in stone.

Another mysterious circumstance is the find location, situated about 10 m a.s.l. The site must have been below sea level dur-

Fig. 3. The battle-axe from the side. Note the ring around the shaft-hole and the keel-shaped edge. Photograph by Leif Bjelm.

ing the Middle Neolithic when the axe was manufactured. At that time the sea level was at about 17 m a.s.l. Various explanations for the location may be offered. One is that the object was deposited in the water. There are other examples of objects from the Battle-Axe Culture that have been found in a situation indicating unintentional or deliberate deposition in water. In the latter case, we would be dealing with an object dropped as an offering. This kind of deposition is very common in southern Scandinavia during most of the Neolithic. But in this case the water depth was far too great for intentional deposits.

Another explanation for the find location might be that the object was deposited on a settlement or burial site and was washed out to sea during a heavy storm.

Yet another alternative, perhaps the most plausible, is that the object was found somewhere else by people during the Iron Age and placed in a grave feature. Close by the findspot a number of graves from the early Iron Age have been excavated. There are low cairns, some of which, in addition to cremated remains and Iron Age objects, also included objects of Neolithic Age, such as flint items and pottery (Fallgren 2001; Fallgren & Bäckström 2010). In these cases objects of exotic origin had been collected and placed in a much later grave. This seems to be a local tradition, as Neolithic objects are rarely found in other Iron Age graves.

One more possibility is that the object, or at least the idea of making battle-axes of this kind in amber, originated in the East Baltic region, as the findspot on the island of Öland is rather close to the Baltic Sea. However, no similar objects have been identified.

Another possibility that we have to face is that the object is a fake. However, if we taking into consideration that it was found in the 1930's and given to a local museum, we may regard this suggestion as very improbable. The fact that amber is not found locally is also an important indication of its authenticity.

The Battle-Axe Culture and miniature battle-axes

The Battle-Axe Culture is well represented on the island of Öland by graves and loose finds. As everywhere, settlement sites are indicated by pottery finds. Battle-axes have been found in the neighbourhood of the amber find, and there are even pieces cor-

Fig. 4. Detail of the front of the battle-axe. Photograph by Lars Larsson.

responding to the type that the amber axe represents (Malmer 1961).

The miniature battle-axes in stone, meaning axes shorter than 15 cm, have been regarded as children's grave goods (Christiansson 1953, 1956). Miniature battle-axes have been found in children's graves in central Sweden (von Hackwitz 2009). However, in southern Sweden they seem to appear in wetland deposits. This kind of axe has also been interpreted as a symbolic object intended for a kind of mortuary practice involving cremation. This idea is based on finds from northern Germany as well as Norway.

Miniature axes are not rare (von Hackwitz & Lindström 2004; Edenmo 2008; von Hackwitz 2012). Nine percent of all battle-axes in central Sweden are regarded as miniatures. A distinction is made between short battle-axes of a late type, which may be shorter than 15 cm, and true miniatures. The various types of battle-axe are regarded as status symbols for males, while the true miniatures might have had a more magical and protective function. That there is a difference in function is exemplified by a grave from central Sweden in which both an ordinary battle-axe and a miniature were found. Despite their magical and protective function, some miniature axes have traces of pounding on the neck – traces that are rarely found on ordinary battle-axes. They might have been used as mortars for crushing some substance.

The ordinary battle-axes are all found in male graves. However, the true miniature battle-axes seem to be related both to men and women.

A table of the length-width indices of miniature battle-axes from Central Sweden, including the amber axe, shows clearly that none of the stone axes are as small as the amber axe (Fig. 5). However, a couple of stone axes are rather close in size to the amber axe.

Amber objects in the Corded Ware context of southern Scandinavia

It is somewhat mysterious that the amber miniature in question is the only example

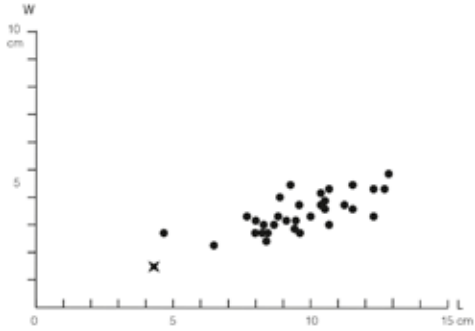

Fig. 5. The width-length relationship for miniature battle-axes in stone from central Sweden. The amber battle-axe is marked with a star.

from the Battle-Axe Culture. Other objects in amber are represented. Rings, discs, long cylindrical beads and pendants are rare (Malmer 1961). On the other hand, short cylindrical beads are more common. Most of the decoration in amber also appears in bone. Constituting a special type of decoration are beads in bone and amber imitating perforated incisors. Despite a number of differences between the Battle-Axe Culture of eastern Scandinavia and the Single Grave Culture of southwestern Scandinavia, most of the amber ornaments in the two cultures are similar. Concerning the number of amber ornaments, some of the objects from eastern Scandinavia, like discs, rings and long cylindrical beads, were most probably fabricated within the area of the Single Grave Culture (Ebbesen 2006). If we consider the distribution channels, we see that most of the objects arriving in eastern Scandinavia originate from present-day northwestern Germany, which also falls within the area of the Single Grave Culture. However, as the battle-axes of the Single Grave Culture are of a different shape, this piece must have been made within the Battle-Axe Culture.

Another question is: how might it have been carried? There is a 'shaft-hole' with a diameter of 0.6 cm, which could hardly accommodate a functional handle. It would be very suitable as a perforation for attaching the amber object to the owner's dress or equipment. However, even though small splinters have detached from the edge of

the shaft-hole, no obvious use wear of the walls or edges of the hole were identified. In such a soft material even a short period use of the object should have caused wear. This might be an indication that the owner was young and had not carried it for long enough to develop visible traces of wear. Judging by the position in which miniature stone axes have been found, it would seem to have been attached to the front of the dress.

Miniature amber battle-axes in the Neolithic of southern Scandinavia

The occurrence of miniature axes in ambe varies during the course of the Neolithic (Ebbesen 1995). During the Early Neolithic (4000–3500 BC), although there are a number of battle-axes of different shapes, there are no battle-axes made in amber. However, during the first part of the Middle Neolithic (3500–2800 BC), a considerable number of double-edged battle-axes in miniature form are found, especially in megalithic tombs (Larsson 2001; Taffinder 2001; Axelsson & Strinnholm 2003). Some of them are easy to recognize as axe miniatures. But in some cases the blade has been reduced, so that they look more like double-ended clubs.

An important site permitting the study of such amber objects in direct relation to individuals is the cemetery at Borgeby in western Scania, with 18 children's graves, 11 of which contained amber (Runcis 2002). Eight of these had the double-edge type, varying in number from one to more than 40 (Fig. 6). The double-edge type is the most common, and in some graves it is the only type represented. Due to poor preservation, only the teeth of the interred person were found. The age has been established with some precision: between 3 and 6 years. No sex identification could be made. However, the association between males and battle-axes could indicate that most

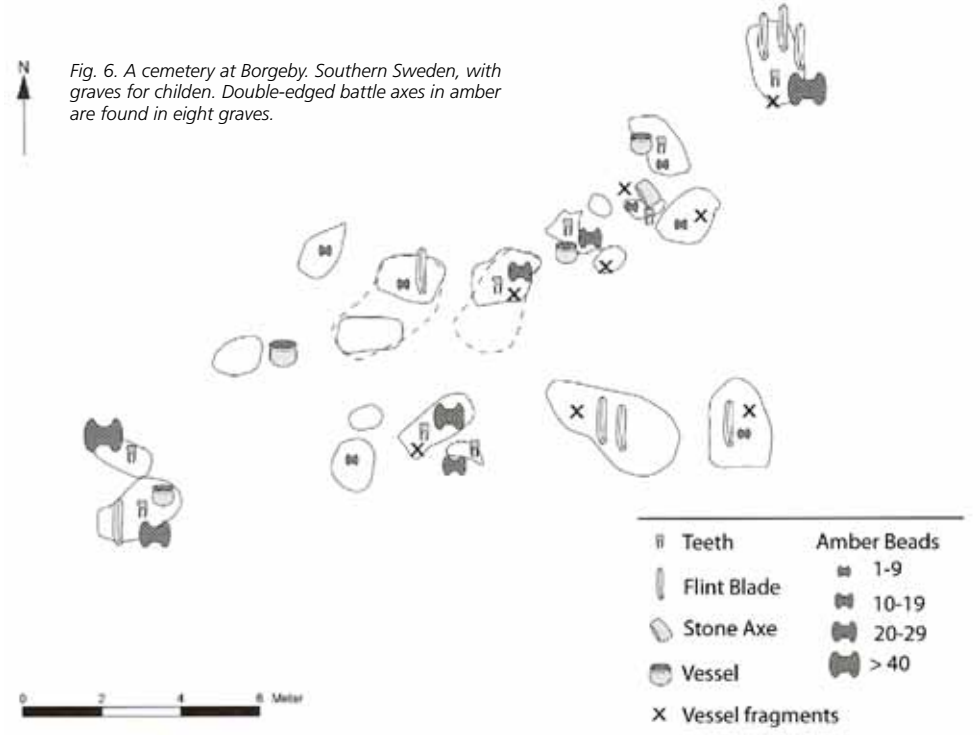

Fig. 6. A cemetery at Borgeby. Southern Sweden, with graves for childen. Double-edged battle axes in amber are found in eight graves.

Fig. 7. A battle-axe probably dated to the Late Neolithic from Instön, western Sweden. Photograph by Sara Kusmin, Statens Historiska Museum.

of the burials were those of boys. Double-edged stone axes are dated to the early Middle Neolithic (Ebbesen 1975). However, most of the amber miniatures seem to date to an earlier part of the same period.

During the Late Neolithic (2200–1800 BC) the number of amber ornaments is high. Only one find shows some similarity to a battle-axe. This is a loose find from Instön, Bohuslän, at the west coast of Sweden (Fig. 7), a rather large object with a length of 12.4 cm and a width of 3.5 cm (SHM 8632). It has similarities with a stone battle-axe of the time, having a pronounced neck but without markedly broadened cutting edges. The most numerous stone axe type of the Late Neolithic is the so-called simple shaft-hole axe without a broadened cutting edge but with a straight-cut neck. In Denmark miniatures of this type are present, which makes it more convincing that the find from Instön, despite its singularity, imitates a battle-axe.

Summary

Even if the miniature battle-axe in amber from Svartvik is a unique find, it fits well into the material culture of the Battle-Axe Culture in terms of miniature representations of battle-axes as well as the use of amber. It shows a clear connection with the area of distribution of the culture in eastern Sweden. As a battle-axe in amber, it fits within a tradition of miniatures that is extremely well represented during the Middle Neolithic.

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