Bojs, Karin. "Battleaxes." *My European Family: The FIRST 54,000 years*. London: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2017. 267–274. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472941480.0035>>.

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Battleaxes

The local Swedish variant of the Corded Ware culture is now known as the 'Battleaxe culture', an older name being the 'Boat Axe culture'. It came into being about 4,800 years ago, and its main distinguishing feature is its characteristic stone axes. The several thousand that have been found resemble upside-down boats, hence the older name.

In the past, it was generally assumed that these axes were used to crush enemies' skulls. Old-school historians imagined hordes of rampaging men thundering into the country on horseback, battleaxes at the ready. It is an image still conveyed today by some popular history books. However, when later archaeologists examined the facts more precisely, they found no support for this view.

For four decades, beginning in the 1960s, the archaeologist Mats Malmer published a series of extensive compilations of finds from the Battleaxe period in Sweden and Norway. These provide detailed lists of the many stone axes, terracotta pots, tools, items of jewellery and other artefacts found in hundreds of graves.

One of the points he makes is that these battleaxes were not particularly useful in a battle, being so delicate that they would have cracked if anyone had tried to use them to fight. When it came to crushing someone's skull, a good old cudgel was a far superior weapon. Nor is there any evidence that the Battleaxe period in Sweden was any more violent than any other period. The skeletons found in burials from this period all belong to people who seem to have died a natural death.

Malmer concluded that the Battleaxe culture could best be compared to a religious revival. In his view, the new ideas spread like wildfire in association with the arrival of copper axes. Admittedly, no copper axes have been found in

Battleaxe culture burials, just odd items of copper jewellery. But Malmer remained convinced that copper axes existed, and that they were so prized that they revolutionised trade and culture within a short space of time. In the past, property had been collective, and it had been bound up with the whole group and the earth. Copper axes suddenly made it individual and mobile, according to Malmer's theories. He thus stressed the significance of trade and religion. In his view, immigration had no significant impact on the course of events.

Some of today's archaeologists agree with Malmer that the Battleaxe culture was barely anything more than a gradual development among people already living in Sweden and Norway. 'The ceramics were new. But in other respects one can hardly speak of significant inward migration; it was more a continuation of an existing culture,' says Karl-Göran Sjögren from Gothenburg, for example.

Others give more credence to outside influences. One of them is Lars Larsson, a professor emeritus from Lund, who, in other contexts, prefers to downplay the role of immigration in early Swedish history. The Battleaxe culture, in his view, is an exception. Larsson believes that its exponents lived mainly as pastoralists and that they were far more mobile than the earlier farming population. Their nomadic lifestyle, he argues, explains why archaeologists have found comparatively few settlements reflecting this culture. Even small groups of immigrants may have had a major impact on development, he thinks, introducing a new economy and ideology.

Åsa Larsson from Uppsala, who wrote her doctoral thesis in 2009, turns these ideas upside down. She also thinks the Battleaxe culture was spread to some extent by immigrants. However, in her view they came not from the lands south of Skåne, but from Finland and the Baltic. And they were not men on horseback with battleaxes at the ready, but women with specialised skills in pottery. They came by boat via the Åland archipelago to marry men living in Uppland and Södermanland. From these provinces, the Battleaxe culture

subsequently spread to southern and western Sweden and to Norway, according to Åsa Larsson's theory.

Her conclusions are based mainly on the appearance of the ceramics and the burials of this culture. Within the Corded Ware culture, there are considerable similarities between Ukraine and the Netherlands. But there are also some regional differences. Corded Ware people everywhere had strict rules on how the bodies of men, women and children were to be positioned in their graves: on which side they were to be laid, in which direction the head was to face, and where battleaxes and terracotta vessels were to be placed. However, these strict rules varied somewhat from place to place. Similarly, there were subtle variations in their pottery.

Corded Ware pottery differed in several respects from that of earlier cultures. The pattern, embossed with twined cords, was new, and it was applied in a very uniform fashion. The most common type of vessels, by a long way, were small hemispherical cups.

Another typical feature was that the Corded Ware people mixed clay with crushed fragments of pottery from older pots. Mixing clay with hard material is known as adulteration, and potters have used different types of material for this purpose almost since the birth of ceramics: sand, grit, crushed seashells, chaff and so on. Incorporating crushed pottery, however, is a typical feature of the Corded Ware/Battleaxe culture.

Researchers in Finland with whom Åsa Larsson collaborates have shown that Finnish pots from the Battleaxe period sometimes contained crushed pottery from Sweden. And the same applies in reverse; there are Swedish ceramics incorporating fragments of pottery from Finland. Such pottery, made of clay from Sweden mixed with pottery fragments from Finland, has been found as far south as the area around Kristianstad. Åsa Larsson believes the Corded Ware people saw a deeper meaning in mixing crushed fragments of old pots into new ones. This was a way of making links with older and dead kinsmen and of imbuing ceramic vessels with eternal life.

To be nitpicking, Åsa Larsson has relatively little support for her view that it was women who produced the terracotta vessels of the Battleaxe culture and migrated over the Baltic Sea. She, however, thinks this was the case, partly because women are the main potters in contemporary cultures that anthropologists have studied.

A number of researchers, including Marija Gimbutas, have claimed that the early Indo-European cultures of the steppes were strongly male-dominated societies. Finds from the eastern regions of the steppe support this view; the finest graves belong almost exclusively to men. By contrast, the burials of the Swedish Battleaxe culture show no difference in status between the sexes. Both were given grave goods in the form of terracotta vessels, bone and stone tools, and haunches of roast venison and mutton.

The big difference seems to be that only men and boys were buried with battleaxes. Men were accompanied by large, beautifully polished axes and small boys by miniature versions. Women, on the other hand, seem to have been given jewellery such as amber rings and beads, and, in a few cases, copper bracelets and beads.

Kristian Kristiansen is Danish but works as a professor of archaeology in Gothenburg. At least four other archaeologists warned me about him. 'He has a very broad-brush approach,' is the most diplomatic comment. 'He has his theses which he wants to try and prove,' says one. 'He was good when he was younger, but now he's lost himself in Vedic scripts,' claims another.

I read a series of articles and a substantial book by Kristiansen before going to Gothenburg to interview him. The comment on his broad-brush approach turns out to be true; he seeks to discern patterns across millennia and extensive geographical areas. In other respects, however, I think his peers' judgements are unfair. Kristiansen is exceptionally well read. I find him less dogmatic than many

other archaeologists I have met as regards his views on both migrations through history and DNA. And I like the fact that he does not speak ill of his competitors – unlike many of them. The most critical remark he makes is that some of his peers ‘have a very local perspective’.

Like Lars Larsson, Kristiansen thinks the Battleaxe culture was associated to some extent with immigration, but that the immigration was limited in scale. The immigrants nonetheless became very important through their networks with similar Corded Ware cultures elsewhere in Europe. The people who arrived with the battleaxes brought with them new deities, new rites, new tales and songs, and a new relationship with property, inheritance and rights – in short, an entirely new social structure.

The people of the Battleaxe culture came to Sweden by water, and they may have arrived from different directions. Åsa Larsson may be right; some may have come from Finland and the Baltic countries. But others came from the south, from Poland, Germany and Denmark. Kristiansen believes that an Indo-European language arrived in Sweden at around that time and that it was probably an early form of Gothic. Mastery of that language was part and parcel of belonging to the new network.

Personally, I would like to leave open the question of whether this language was Gothic. After all, we are talking about a period almost 5,000 years ago, and the oldest samples of Gothic are only about 2,000 years old.

The pattern was far clearer in Jutland, says Kristiansen. Pollen analyses conducted there show a dramatic change in the landscape that started about 4,800 years ago. In the course of only a century or so, large quantities of trees disappeared and were replaced by open grassland – exactly what you would expect when an expansive pastoralist culture becomes prevalent.

The burials typical of this culture emerged during the same period. The Danes call their local variant of the Battleaxe culture the ‘Single Grave culture’. The name is based on the obvious difference between burials belonging to this

culture and those of the earlier farming culture, in which the same burial chamber was used for a group of people. Graves belonging to the Corded Ware/Single Grave culture mostly held just one individual or at most a very few people. Researchers generally interpret this different burial pattern as signifying that individuals and their immediate family were starting to play a more important role, while the group and collective interests were declining in importance.

Although Kristiansen is nearing pensionable age, he is definitely not one of the band of older archaeologists who regard DNA technology with suspicion. In fact, he has applied for and been awarded a huge EU grant in cooperation with leading DNA researchers from Copenhagen.

These researchers have analysed over 100 individuals from Europe and Asia. In June 2015 they published their results in *Nature*. The Danish–Swedish team confirms the picture drawn by their competitors in Boston a few months previously: about 4,800 years ago, a substantial wave of immigration reached central Europe from the Russian steppes. With it came a whole new culture and, almost certainly, Indo-European languages. Pastoralists from the Yamnaya culture of the steppes migrated both westward and eastward, even reaching China. This was followed somewhat later by southward migrations that dispersed Indo-European languages to India, Afghanistan and Iran.

The Boston team and their competitors from Gothenburg and Copenhagen have reached exactly the same conclusion: European prehistory can be summarised in terms of three substantial waves of immigration.

The Danish–Swedish team has also been able to provide information about the Battleaxe culture, the subject of disputes between archaeologists for many decades. The 100-odd individuals whose DNA they analysed include several from Sweden, one of whom was a man buried about 4,500 years ago in a Battleaxe culture grave in Viby, near Kristianstad.

This man has genetic traits resembling those of people from the Yamnaya culture. His DNA shows he originated from the steppes of eastern Europe, just like the Corded Ware

people of Poland and Germany. His Y chromosomes belong to haplogroup R1a. The material also includes a slightly more recent member of the Battleaxe culture from Lilla Beddinge near Trelleborg. He, too, shows strong Yamnaya genetic traits and belongs to haplogroup R1b.

This means the legendary archaeologist Mats Malmer was mistaken. DNA researchers have finally settled the old controversy that divided Swedish archaeologists for so long.

It is now clear that immigrants brought the Battleaxe culture to Sweden. There may not have been large numbers of incomers initially, but they played a decisive role in the fundamental social changes that began to take place. With their common origin, culture and language, they were able to maintain networks extending over vast distances.

It is unclear whether the first Battleaxe people in Sweden actually brought horses with them. Only a few horse bones have been found, and it has not been established that they belonged to domesticated horses. The knowledge we have today means the old image of hordes of violent men riding into Sweden with their battleaxes at the ready needs to be taken with a large pinch of salt.

Yet the arrival of these people really did herald the start of a new age and a completely new way of life. That lifestyle was based on large herds of livestock and ox-drawn wagons in which herders could spend the night for long periods. The package also included metal, woollen fabrics and mead, and powerful men with numerous offspring. More than half of the men in today's Europe – perhaps closer to two thirds – are the direct descendants of such clan chieftains.

'Ragnar', the man from the Battleaxe culture who was my forefather and the forebear of every sixth Swedish man, probably still lived outside Sweden 4,500 years ago. He is most likely to have lived in Jutland, as part of the expansive pastoralist culture that had taken over there. This is shown by the genealogical tree of haplogroup R1a, which my uncle, Anders, and other amateur family history researchers have contributed.

It is likely that several centuries passed before Ragnar's descendants made their way over to Sweden. However, once they had taken that step, they changed society at least as radically as the first farmers had done a few millennia earlier.