

THE DIFFERENTIATION OF IDENTITY: A HIERARCHY OF SYMBOLS? INITIAL THOUGHTS ON THE INFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF NORDIC BRONZE AGE MINIATURE SWORDS

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Abstract: High-ranking individuals institutionalizing force and sharing a collective 'warriorhood' identity are considered a major factor in the interpretation of Bronze Age social stratification. The innovative character of the sword as a weapon and marker of social rank was especially emphasized within this context. A change within this framework seems to have taken place during the Late European Bronze Age with the adoption of cremation burial and the reduction of grave goods. In northern Central Europe and Southern Scandinavia, this was accompanied by another local phenomenon: the functional weapon seems to have been substituted by a detailed miniature version within funerary contexts. Apparently, the symbolic meaning of the sword still played a role in the creation of identity. However, what remains to be discovered is whether the social pre-conditions which surrounded the inclusion of swords had changed or whether they were still operative on the previous scale.

Keywords: warriorhood, social identity, social status, symbolic arms, miniatures, burial ritual, hoard finds

Introduction

The appearance of the sword as innovative concept and efficient killing tool as well as its spread over the course of the Bronze Age has to be viewed in close connection not only with the practical advantages it presented, but also in terms of its wider, symbolical function. Among the attributes of warriorhood and combat which apparently characterized a selected group of (male) individuals, the sword took on a prominent role (cf. e.g. Harding 2007; Vandkilde 2006; Vandkilde 2007, 121-122). Thus, in the following, the term 'warrior' is used to describe those individuals who had obtained the right and ability to bear this kind of extraordinary weapon. While both warrior and sword may have gone through different life cycles (Fontijn 2002, 25-36; Kristiansen 2011: 202), their cultural biographies are closely linked. The archaeological record offers different possibilities for ways in which the weapon's biography may have ended: either it was buried together with the deceased warrior or it was deposited separately. A third possibility (namely, the handing over of the sword to a successor) would only mean a temporary extension of the sword's biography before invariably leading to one of the previous ends. Additionally, since the potential of smelting and recasting of objects is the major advantage of metal over other materials, the question of recycling and a recirculation of those objects might also be a concern in this context (cf. Ottaway and Roberts 2008, 213-215; Fontijn 2002, 76, 248-249; Hansen 2011, 276-278). The problem of considering the implications of this process for the sword's role in the constitution of social identity during the Bronze Age is evident. However, the large number of Bronze Age swords known from burials as well as hoard finds indicates the presence of ancient of demands and regulations which appear to have excluded certain objects (armature in this case) from the metallurgical cycle. This should be emphasized to a greater extent, as no mining activity or exploitation of lo-

cal copper sources is known from the Nordic Bronze Age¹ and, thus, all metal must have been imported from further south, making recycling an even more important factor. If swords ended up as scrap metal, the possible ideational meaning re-smelted swords may have had in Bronze Age cosmology and mythology – resurrected physically in the form of new metal objects (even arms) – would deserve further discussion in and of itself.²

Instead, this paper focuses on the representative role of swords in Bronze Age burials and depositions, illustrating the potential of a greatly-underestimated find group from northern Central Europe. When the number of grave goods decreased following the introduction of cremation burial in the Late Nordic Bronze Age, miniature swords seem to have replaced their functional counterparts and played an important role among the few remaining pieces of burial equipment nonetheless. By following this complex interrelation of the sword's utilitarian function in combat and its representative character in burials from the Early to the Late Nordic Bronze Age, this discussion aims to create a deeper understanding of prehistoric social structures.

Early Bronze Age full and flange hilted swords

Based on his analysis of Early Nordic Bronze Age swords and their role as symbols of status and prestige, Kristiansen (1984; 1999; 2002; 2011) suggested the assignation of different functions to different sword types. According to him, the frequency of re-sharpening of the swords as

¹ Regarding the potentiality of an early local copper-based metallurgy in Scandinavia, cf. Prescott 2006.

² For the complex, multi-layered meaning of swords in general, cf. Soroceanu 2012 and Pearce 2013.

well as their association with certain grave goods allows two separate Early Nordic Bronze Age social groups to be distinguished: those characterized by (Nordic) full hilted swords and those accompanied by octagonal flange hilted swords (Kristiansen 1984, 195-199). Kristiansen assumes that the swords of the first group which are chiefly found in burials which are considered 'wealthy' would not have been put to frequent, practical use in combat, as they seem to have been only infrequently re-sharpened. In contrast, the swords of the second group are generally recovered from less well-equipped burials and seem to show clear evidence of re-sharpening indicative of heavy use in combat (Kristiansen 1984, 187-188).

In his interpretation, Kristiansen links this functional contrast to differences in the roles of the individuals that bore them. The full hilted swords can be seen as symbols or emblems of political-ritual leadership constituting a social group he would like to associate with the concept of 'chieftains.' The flange hilted swords, by contrast, were the real weapons of fighting 'warriors'. On this basis, Kristiansen develops the model of a stratified society rooted in two different social institutions. Based on the results of his analysis of the re-sharpening of Bronze Age swords, he assumes that political-ritual leadership lay in the hands of those that did not have control over the actual 'military' power. According to this concept, outstanding individuals who displayed highly symbolic, decorated full hilted swords attracted and assembled experienced warriors who could be characterized by flange hilted swords.

A model like this leaves some room for discussion. Whether full hilted swords were indeed suited for combat (and if so, to what extent they took place in said battles) is still very much under debate. It should be noted that a large number of the full hilted swords examined by Kristiansen do indeed have sharpened blades (Kristiansen 1984, 205f., Figures 6 and 7). From a technological and technical point of view, there seems to be no reason for them to be considered as less useful weapons. However, some scholars have expressed doubts concerning the employment of full hilted swords as slashing weapons (Drescher 1961: 64-65; von Quillfeldt 1995, 19-24). Due to the better weight ratio of blade and hilt, flange hilted swords are considered to be more balanced and more effective (Kristiansen 1984, 194f.). Nonetheless, one should revisit the question regarding differing levels of use-wear and whether they could be caused by diverging fighting techniques according to the particular (dis-)advantages of the blade characteristics involved. Additionally, the more frequent use traces on some of these swords might as well be viewed in the context of warriors who were more active temporally and regionally (Harding 2000, 280). Moreover, Harding (2007, 109-111) points out that a large number of other European full hilted swords show similar damage and use traces to those found on flange hilted swords which were most probably caused by use in combat. Furthermore, recent research has fuelled the discussion surrounding signs of abrasion by questioning its causes. The worn out impression of the decorations may

also be heavily affected by forces from within depositional circumstances, i.e. the aggressive environment of bogs or the physical force of watercourses (Bunnefeld in prep.). On the other hand, traces of repair may be hard to recognize depending on the skills of the craftsman and the degree of corrosion (pers. comm. M. Siedlaczek).

Thus, without evaluating or engaging in a detailed discussion of the far-reaching social implications Kristiansen draws from his analysis, this paper instead aims at emphasizing the multifaceted characteristics which sword seems to take early on in the Early Nordic Bronze Age, exceeding its functional character as a weapon. The Bronze Age sword acts as a visual marker and expression of a social role as well as a tool for the creation of a common identity among those individuals who were entitled to wield it. Even beyond death, this affiliation was maintained by the equipment of the deceased with a sword. Burials can only hint at individual roles which were directly bequeathed by burial customs. Trying to deduce information about a person's status within society and the structure of this society by burial evidence alone is a challenge. Any social function not expressed through burial ritual or superimposed by the affordances of representation of another function or role are no longer accessible. The number of male burials containing swords gives an impression of the significance of the social role of 'warriors' (as defined above) – at least in the orchestration of burial ritual regarding representation of status as expressed by the sword. The differing treatment and functionality of these arms (cf. also Harding 2000, 278-279) may add nuances to the complexity of social roles represented by the symbol of the sword and illustrate that the emblematic character of swords within burials may comprise a much more hierarchical spectrum. Discussion of the variation and gradation of symbols will be discussed in greater detail below. First, however, the role of the sword as burial object and its relevance for the interpretation of Bronze Age social structures shall be pursued into the periods following the Early Nordic Bronze Age as a polytomy of its symbolic meaning may be recognized beyond that time frame.

Miniature swords of the Late Nordic Bronze Age

The transition from inhumation to cremation burial in the northern Central European Bronze Age and in Southern Scandinavia from Period III onwards marks a major change with far reaching consequences in the treatment of the dead. In large parts of Europe, the custom of cremating the dead had implications. At first glance, the unification of burial rites and a decrease of grave goods seem to indicate the evening out of social hierarchies. However, the adjustment of wealth in burial furnishing does not necessarily imply the existence of egalitarian society, but could equally hint at a shift in their mode of representation (cf. Thrane 1981; Metzner-Nebelsick 1997). While the number of burial objects did, indeed, decrease during the Late Nordic Bronze Age, an increase of in the number of objects in hoard finds is notable. To evaluate whether both

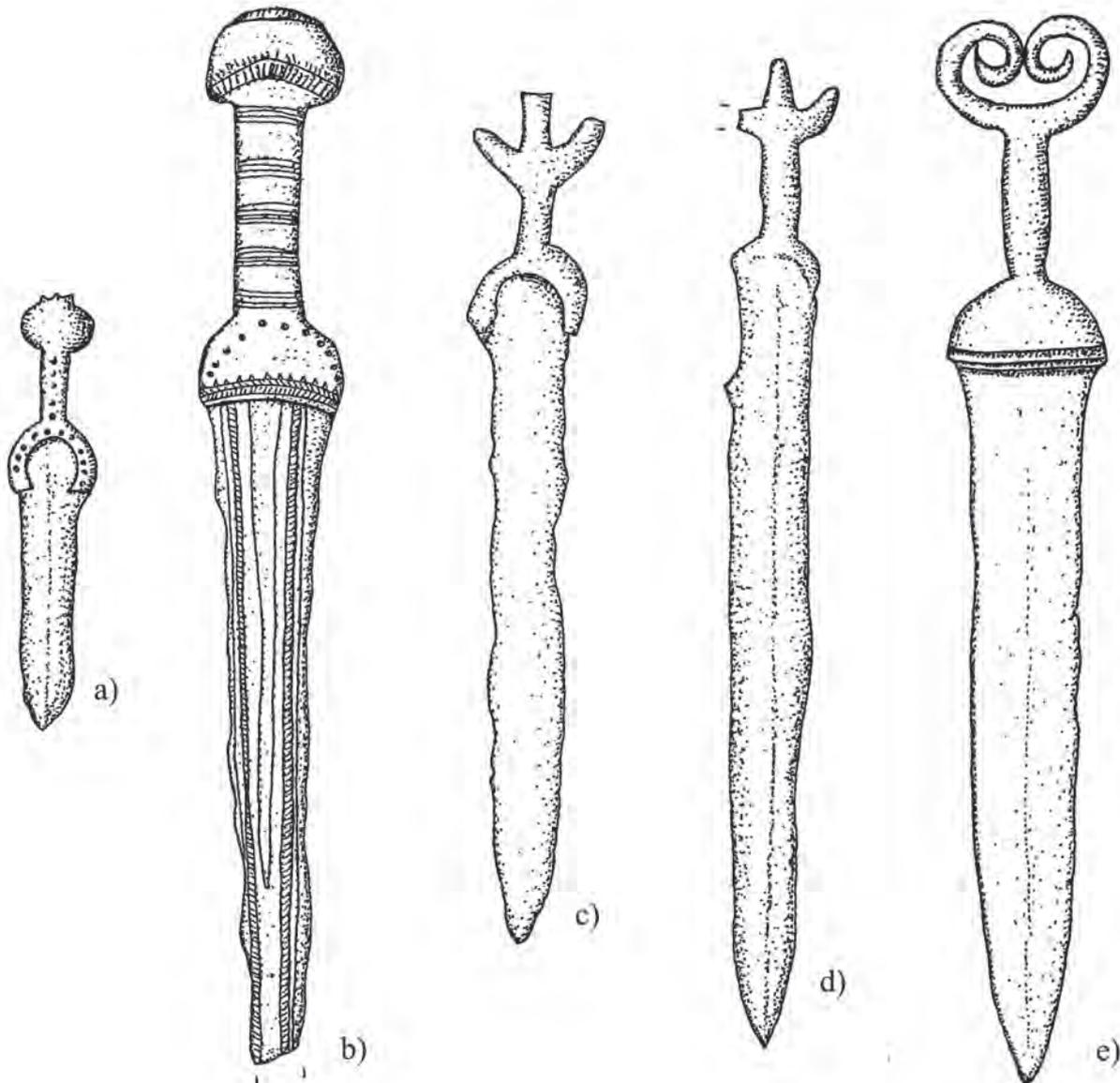


Figure 1: Examples of types of Nordic miniature swords: a) miniature sword with kidney-shaped knob, exact find spot unknown; b) miniature sword with kidney-shaped knob, Hvedholm (Funen); c) miniature sword with horned knob, Falkenhøj (Zealand); d) miniature sword with horned knob, exact find spot unknown and e) miniature sword with antenna knob, Kjeldbymagle (Zealand). All drawings by the author.

phenomena express basic social change (cf. e.g. Wüstemann 1974; Levy 1979; Gilman 1981; Thrane 1981 and Smith *et al.* 1995), it seems suitable to attempt to follow the sword's role as an indicator of social status into the younger Bronze Age periods as well.

The following discussion will focus on material from the Danish islands, which is sensible for two reasons. It allows for the creation of a comparable dataset for both phases of the Bronze Age covered by this paper and also can query the continuity and discontinuity in the manner in which those individuals whose burials included swords were represented.³ Furthermore, this spatial focus also marks the core area of the phenomenon which shall be characterized below.

³ Kristiansen drawing on Aner and Kersten's catalogues for the Early

A tendency for the reduction of grave goods (particularly those of metal) was common during the Later northern Central European Bronze Age, just as was the case in other parts of Europe. However, a certain conventionalism regarding the tradition of equipping the burials of specific individuals with a sword should be noted. Possibly under the influence of the then-reduced dimension of urn cremation burials⁴, a large number of these attributed swords must

Bronze Age (cf. Kristiansen 1984: 189, ann. 8). Information on Later Bronze Age finds discussed below are mainly derived from Broholm's compilation (Broholm 1946) and the examination of objects at the National Museum of Copenhagen (with thanks to Dr. Flemming Kaul and other colleagues from the museum and its magazine at Ørholm).

⁴ One should keep in mind the fact that the early cremation burials of this region intentionally imitated older inhumations; they maintained traditional burial rules at the start of cremation practices by burying cre-

be characterized as being impractically small or, rather, ‘miniaturized’. The miniature sword phenomenon in this peculiarity and occurrence is a genuine Nordic development⁵. Surprisingly, the miniature swords of the Nordic Bronze Age, although not low in number, have gained only minor research interest, as Thrane (1968, 189-199) already noticed more than 40 years ago in his comprehensive study on Nordic and foreign sword types. Nonetheless, the intervening decades have not altered the veracity of his statement. Yet, this still has not changed much.

Nordic Bronze Age miniature swords are detailed, non-functional imitations of corresponding larger examples. Often only a few centimetres large, the practical use of these objects as daggers or knives seems rather unlikely. However, the level of detail provided for the weapons allows for a typological classification which corresponds to those larger sword types known from the archaeological record, thus illustrating that nearly all larger sword types were also imitated in miniature (Figure 1). However, these miniature swords did not completely replace their larger counterparts in burial ritual, as was suggested by older research (Müller 1897; Hundt 1955; Brøndsted 1962). While it should be noted that the majority of functional large swords are known from depositions rather than from burials, it can also be stated that a significant number were still enclosed with burials.

This co-existence of both functional and miniature weapons among grave furniture is reminiscent of earlier thoughts on the diversity of the symbolic connotation of the sword as discussed above: the correlation of different sword types with different social roles. At first glance, it seems reasonable to connect the large, functional sword with the real, fighting *function* of the warrior, while the symbolic miniature sword expresses an ideal *status* connected to warriorhood. The numerical ratio of both groups (Figure 2), on the other hand, makes the miniature variant the far more common of the two (especially when the chronological range is taken into account). While this would somehow seem to be consistent with the picture indicated by Early Bronze Age finds (Figure 3; and while still remaining mindful of a certain ambiguity regarding the social structure implied by Kristiansen’s interpretation), it also brings into question whether any pattern represented by arms offered in burials really expressed social stratification between sword-bearing individuals.

Symbolic arms?

The act of enclosing swords in the burials of certain individuals is, first of all, an expression of the custom of furnishing the dead with material goods. Against the back-

dated bones in wooden coffins.

⁵ Similar traditions are known from other periods and cultures as well; for the Bronze Age, the cremation burials with miniature objects (arms as well as tools) of the Pilyu Culture of northern Hungary and Slovakia (cf. Patay 1995) merit mention here without implying any direct relation or line of tradition.

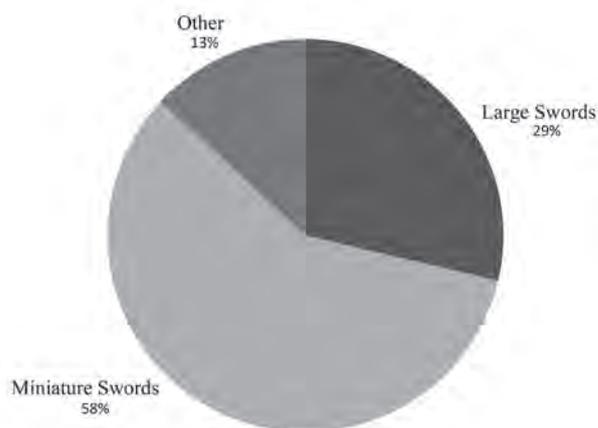


Figure 2: Ratio of swords in Period IV and V burials from the Danish islands (n=115); ‘Other’ refers to a number of ‘miniaturesque’ objects like daggers and lancet-shaped knives which were probably related to the miniature sword phenomenon, a find group which has still not yet been conclusively analyzed.

ground of the apparently symbolic Later Bronze Age miniature swords, one must wonder whether the swords that were offered in Early Bronze Age burials were the same ones that were carried in life by the people with whom they were interred. The demands of a burial ritual which sought to express a rather abstract warrior *status* could, perhaps, have also been satisfied with mere symbolic arms.

Abrasion marks on the hilts of full hilted swords as well as the sometimes heavy evidence of re-sharpening of flange hilted swords both negate the idea that arms were created for funeral use alone. Both groups indicate that the swords from burials were treated differently than those which were deposited elsewhere. Rather few swords from Early Bronze Age hoards show damages which resulted from combat (i.e. damages, which were not repaired) or, to consider another possibility—damages deliberately inflicted upon the sword prior to deposition. On swords known from burials, such defects are carefully mended (Kristiansen 1984, 194); traces of actual use are therefore *de facto* no longer visible⁶. This does, in fact, indicate special treatment for those weapons intended for burial ritual.

After all, the functionality of an object (in this case the usability and use of swords) does not exclude the existence of symbolic meaning for the same object. Bringing together two rather opposing concepts within the psychology of perception (the *direct* perception of an artefact’s affordances and the *indirectly* present associative facets of its meaning), Knappett (2012) introduced the ‘situated semiotic’ perspective into the discussion of miniaturized or small-scale artefacts. Accordingly, a secondary semantic level (‘second hand experience’, cf. Reed 1996, 94; Wind-

⁶ However, Kristiansen notes that he did not record a number of swords which showed abrasion without re-sharpening (Kristiansen 1984: 188, cf. annot. 7).

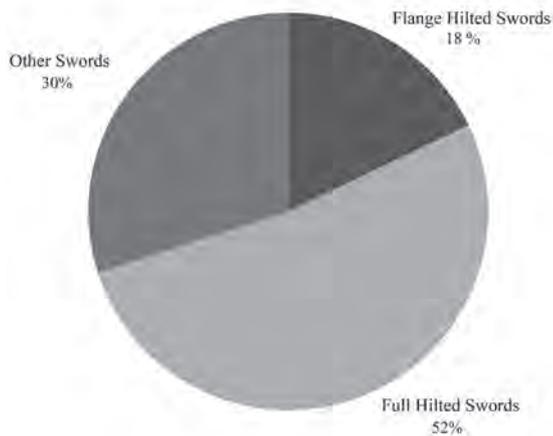


Figure 3: Ratio of swords in Period II and III burials from the Danish islands ($n=280$; after Kristiansen 1984, 205-208, Appendix: list 1-3).



Figure 4: Percentage of large swords in Period IV and V burials and depositions from the Danish islands ($n=129$).

sor 2004, 180; Knappett 2012, 87-88) has to be considered next to the primary and direct functional level of an item, which is obviously accessible through its formal design features ('first hand experience', *ibid.*). This subliminal meaning given to an object is present for those individuals familiar with its cultural background and traditions and its context of interaction. However, the unlocking of those complexities is not only laborious, but also without any guarantee of success for any outsider (naturally, as archaeologists we must allocate ourselves to this category in our approach of prehistoric culture) with a limited knowledge of the corresponding cultural context (cf. Knappett 2012).

The understanding of swords in Bronze Age burials as discussed here, suggests that they functioned as a kind of index--as symbolically understood identity markers--which could just as easily be applied to functional swords which showed traces of actual use. Similarities in the treatment of those swords have already been noted with reference to the condition of Early Bronze Age blades from burials. In contrast to hoard finds (in which swords often show notches and other traces of combat), swords from burials are mostly processed, i.e. (re-)sharpened and (re-) whetted. For the younger periods, one should also note that functional swords (the useable, larger ones) were far more often connected with hoards than with burials (Figure 4). Furthermore, this raises the question of whether differences should be expected between the large swords enclosed with burials and those from Period IV and V hoard finds as well. Still, further analysis is necessary to complete this picture, considering that Müller's 'symbolic swords' include a number of normal-sized blades with apparently unpractically small hilts (Müller 1897, 419) and Brøndsted's similar thoughts on swords with specially-attached framed hilts (the so-called Rahmengriffschwerter) (Brøndsted 1962, 174).

In discussing the continuity of social and ritual structures over the course of the Nordic Bronze Age, the introduc-

tion of cremation burial marks a major shift. It should be reconsidered against the background of these premises. Undoubtedly, swords in burials served as markers of identity and status. With the adoption of a new burial ritual which demanded the cremation of the corpse, an impression of social equalization was created, especially since as this treatment concerned most parts of society (at least those present in the archaeological record). The contemporary increase in the number of objects in depositions (previously invested in burials) and the quantity of hoard finds generally reveals that this seeming equalization was apparently undermined by the reorientation of deposition ritual. If seen as a reference to an older tradition of status representation in burial ritual, the Late Nordic Bronze Age miniature sword phenomenon may have functioned as a link in the developmental change noticeable from Period III onwards. Representative behaviour shifted from burials to hoards and from caring for the dead (and constructing identity) towards offerings for numina (somehow de-constructing individual identity). Thus, investments in hoards were pushed further, while established burial traditions could still have been satisfied with symbolic arms. This describes a development which finally led to the complete withdrawal of swords from burials over the course of Period V and a noticeable climax in depositional activity (Baudou 1960, 120-123; Kristiansen 1996, 256; Verlaeckt 2000).

The apparent continuity of symbolism does not necessarily imply continuity of the same elites. However, it does indicate an overall continuous cultural framework into which the new customs are adapted. Recurring with the not consistently congruent biographies of warrior and sword mentioned above, the often noted unusable (damaged in the course of combat or intentionally prior to deposition) state of swords in hoard finds unmistakably marks the end of the sword's biography, whereas the symbolic weapon in the burial still characterises the warrior even beyond the end of his life's biography.

Conclusion

This paper has assembled a number of thoughts which query the continuity of social structures and the representational mannerisms of elites in the Nordic Bronze Age based on the concept of ‘warriorhood’ and the treatment of swords in burial and other depositional contexts. Changes in burial ritual and burial equipment can be noted with the adoption of cremation during Period III. In addition, the appearance of detailed miniaturized swords in Southern Scandinavia and northern Central Europe has to be evaluated against the background of this development.

During a phase in which hoarding activity increased, the slow replacement of large functional swords in burials by miniature ones intimates that there was a continuation of an older tradition despite changed religious motivations (at least, this is what the shifting presentation of material values from burial equipment to offering goods seems to suggest). In particular the symbolical value (which is expressed by the sword’s inclusion into grave equipment detached from its real use and function) has to be noted in this context. Of course, putting the focus on swords already strongly limits the lot of social actors. Especially in the earlier periods (II and III), one must assume that the persons who bore this new and innovative weapon represented some kind of elite whose role in combat and society should be separated from those men who were interred with other armaments (cf. e.g. Schauer 1979: 72f.; Harding 2000, 281-283).

However, the symbolic value of the sword itself as connected to an ideological concept must not necessarily have involved a hierarchical structure which applied to varying expressions of the same symbolism. Considering that the emblematic character of the token acted as an index for complex social processes, it initially represented a certain amount of power and prestige. When transformed into a symbolic asset, a reduction of this index’s physical size must not have involved a degradation of its analogue’s meaning (Notroff 2011, 258).

To understand to what extent Bronze Age swords in burials and depositions were a symbol of an ideologically established warrior status or the identity marker of real warrior function (while both, however, do not have to exclude each other in any case), it is still necessary to determine whom actually had control over these arms, who owned them and under which circumstances a sword was offered or buried. ⁷

This rather short outline illustrates that miniature swords are a spuriously underestimated find group of the Nordic Bronze Age. Due to their potential as an indicator of the changing ideological concepts of Southern Scandinavian elites during the Later Bronze Age, they clearly merit further examination.

⁷ This is an issue to be re-addressed in detail in the frame of my dissertation currently in process and dealing with exactly these topics.

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