

Oxhide ingots in the European North?

Anthony Harding*

The above paper by Ling and Stos-Gale raises interesting questions about the extent and effects of trans-continental trade and travel in the Bronze Age. Of course, there is nothing new in the suggestion that Scandinavia was closely linked to the eastern Mediterranean in this period: Kristian Kristiansen, and before him Jan Bouzek, Klavs Randsborg and Peter Schauer have been saying just that for many years (e.g. Bouzek 1966; Randsborg 1967; Schauer 1985; Kristiansen 1994). What is new is the two-fold suggestion that metal was travelling from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia, as shown by metal analysis, and that this is reflected in the rock art by what are presented here as depictions of oxhide ingots.

On the metal transport idea, the authors do not mention what might be an important additional piece of evidence in support of their hypothesis: the identification of an oxhide ingot fragment in a hoard dating to the Middle–Late Bronze Age transition in Baden-Württemberg (Primas & Pernicka 1998). This was the first time that such a find had been made north of the Alps, and naturally it has received much attention. It has not, however, been followed by other similar discoveries (in fact the hoard was found in 1932, and only the eagle eye of Margarita Primas brought it to the world's attention). So far, most authors have considered the Oberwilfingen find to be a rare instance of eastern Mediterranean metal travelling to an area completely different from its manufacture; presumably it was incorporated into trading networks that did not merely encompass the central Mediterranean (witness the finds from Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica), but actually extended over the Alps to a different circulation area. In this connection, the finds of ingots from Bulgaria are interesting, although their contexts are uncertain (Leshtakov 2007). If Cypriot metal really was making it as far as Scandinavia, then we would certainly expect archaeological finds to reflect this—apart from analysis of the metal.

This would make the alleged depictions of ingots on rock art all the more important—but do these images really show oxhide ingots? I think that even Ling would admit that the case is uncertain, to say the least. Images on rock art are seldom clear and unambiguous in their precise outline; after all, they are pecked into the rock in a manner that defies precise definition, and modern reproduction on the page can only make them appear more certain than they really are. To add to that uncertainty, one may question whether such important objects would be depicted so small and so seldom. They are otherwise completely outside the normal repertoire of motifs or depictions in Scandinavian art.

Finds in recent years have shown beyond all reasonable doubt that during the Bronze Age the European continent was extensively interconnected, both through the movement of objects and through the movement of people. There is no need to cite doubtful evidence, or use special pleading, to reinforce that claim. That is why I would prefer to leave the

* *Department of Archaeology, University of Exeter, Laver Building, North Park Road, Exeter EX4 4QE, UK*

supposed depictions of oxhide ingots out of the equation, even if the metal analyses and their interpretation are confirmed by future work—which I, for one, would like to see before affirming my belief in these remarkable claims.

References

- BOUZEK, J. 1966. The Aegean and Central Europe: introduction to the study of cultural interrelations. *Památky Archeologické* 57: 242–76.
- KRISTIANSEN, K. 1994. The emergence of the European World System in the Bronze Age: divergence, convergence and social evolution during the first and second millennia BC in Europe, in K. Kristiansen & J. Jensen (ed.) *Europe in the first millennium B.C.* (Sheffield Archaeological Monographs 6): 7–30. Sheffield: J.R. Collis.
- LESHTAKOV, K. 2007. The eastern Balkans in the Aegean economic system during the LBA. Ox-hide and bun ingots in Bulgarian lands, in I. Galanaki, H. Tomas, Y. Galanakis & R. Laffineur (ed.) *Between the Aegean and Baltic seas: prehistory across borders. Proceedings of the International Conference, Bronze and Early Iron Age Interconnections and Contemporary Developments between the Aegean and the Regions of the Balkan Peninsula, Central and Northern Europe, University of Zagreb, 11–14 April 2005* (Aegaeum 27): 447–58. Liège: University of Liège.
- PRIMAS, M. & E. PERNICKA. 1998. Der Depotfund von Oberwilflingen. Neue Ergebnisse zur Zirkulation von Metallbarren. *Germania* 76(1): 25–65.
- RANDBORG, K. 1967. Aegean bronzes in a grave in Jutland. *Acta Archaeologica* 38: 1–27.
- SCHAUER, P. 1985. Spuren orientalischen und ägäischen Einflusses im bronzezeitlichen Nordischen Kreis. *Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz* 32: 123–95.