

The Danish Single Grave Culture – Ethnic Migration or Social Construction?

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In a recent article Kristian Kristiansen argues that the Single Grave Culture in Jutland “represents a classic example of a migrating, tribal people, settling within a very short period of time in a new, sparsely populated environment” (Kristiansen 1991:214). “The burden of falsification”, he continues, “now lies on the shoulders of supporters of the autonomous hypothesis” (*ibid.*).

As most other archaeological hypotheses the suggested migration of a Single Grave people can never be falsified nor confirmed (Olsen 1987; Wylie 1982). We will never know whether the emergence of the Single Grave Culture was caused primarily by immigration or by local developments. Some hypotheses are, however, more plausible than others, and Kristiansen’s challenge should not go unanswered.

THE MIGRATION HYPOTHESIS

In his introduction Kristiansen (1991:212) presents some premises for any study of migrations or, I suppose, any study of cultural change. First of all any such study should be contextualized, culturally and structurally. Secondly, it must take into account the history preceding the event in question, and, finally, the reasons for any migration have to be explained within a broader framework. I agree whole-heartedly with these premises, but feel that Kristiansen to a certain extent has failed to follow the suggested guidelines himself. Towards the end of this paper I will comment on this in more detail.

Kristiansen offers five arguments in support of the migration hypothesis (1991:212). The presentation of these arguments, or rather of the interpretations of the archaeological data that these arguments represent, reveals Kristiansen as relying on the culture historical tradition as employed by for instance P. V. Glob and C. J. Becker. Let me briefly review and comment on the five points.

1. *The Single Grave Culture appears at once and fully developed.* This is of course in line with the traditional view that culture must develop gradually and according to typological rules. Abrupt geographical or chronological discontinuity in the typological development is consequently interpreted as representing a border between two cultures, possibly a migration.

2. *The two cultures (the resident Funnel Beaker Culture (hereafter:*

TRB) and the immigrating Single Grave Culture) are mutually exclusive in the earliest phase. The validity of this argument may in fact be questioned. Rostholm’s investigations in central Jutland are resulting in the discovery of an increasing number of late TRB sites in the main habitation areas of Single Grave Culture (Rostholm 1982). Jørgensen (1985) has demonstrated that in the Vroue area most early single graves are located only a few kilometres from the TRB burial sites. Nevertheless I will accept that the settlement distributions differ between the two groups.

3. *In the few exceptional cases where geographical overlap do occur the TRB comes to a complete stop and is replaced by the Single Grave Culture.* This argument is theoretically in line with the first argument: Kristiansen does not accept abrupt typological or geographical change within a culture (although he does accept geographical movement over longer distances, these being termed migrations).

4. *There are no traces or indications of contact between the Single Grave Culture in central Jutland and the TRB groups still existing in eastern Denmark.* Material differentiation is taken as evidence for isolation and/or hostility between groups. This again is one of the main theses in the culture historical tradition (Lüning 1972).

5. *The subsequent stages of the period suggest a slowed down but continuing migration of the Single Grave people into eastern Denmark.* This is based on the fact that typologically late battle axes and Single Grave pottery are found more widely in Denmark. Kristiansen does not consider the possibility of gradual adoption of new types by the TRB groups. Apparently he believes that types developed in one group can not be incorporated in other groups, this suggesting some kind of cultural or technological barrier between different groups preventing such interaction.

It is of course perfectly valid to rely on the theories within the culture historical approach. Kristiansen’s paper, however, is written to initiate a debate on “the geographical movement of social groups” (1991:210) within what he terms modern archaeology in contrast to traditional archaeology, and he does open his paper with a critique of this. It is therefore somewhat disappointing not to be presented with any new arguments in favour of the migration hypothesis, nor with a new approach, theoretically or methodologically, to the material in the case study.

It is to Kristiansen’s credit that he opens up the debate about migrations, their identification and complexity. We need discussions and analyses of such events. Nevertheless investigations of complex problems in prehistory demand an understanding of archaeological cultures and of material culture that goes beyond that of the culture historical interpretations.

Furthermore, just as the autonomous hypothesis as presented by Kristiansen leaves many questions open, there are

a number of points which are not considered in the migration hypothesis. It does not explain why the migration into central Jutland was not more strongly resisted by the existing population or why the later continuous expansion was possible. Why did the Single Grave people settle in the immediate vicinity of the TRB (as at Vroue)? What happened to the TRB people whose settlements in central Jutland came "to a complete stop"? Where did all these people come from? And why did they migrate?

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF AN ETHNIC GROUP

As I admit to be a supporter of "the autonomous hypothesis" rather than of a migration theory I will, in response to Kristiansen's challenge cited earlier, propose a model that in my opinion accounts for the observed material changes at the transition from the TRB to the Single Grave Culture no less convincingly than Kristiansen's argument. It is not possible here to present a very detailed argument (see Damm 1991b), so I will confine myself to a more summary argumentation without detailed references to finds.

To summarize my hypothesis I suggest that the material which we associate with a Single Grave Culture is the result of local development and the construction of a distinct ethnic group, whose primary goal is social and symbolic differentiation from the TRB. This division of the TRB into two distinct ethnic groups, one in western and central Jutland and the other in eastern Denmark, originates further back in the Middle Neolithic TRB, most clearly seen in the development of two different burial customs (Damm 1991a). The underlying structure associated with the social and material patterns becomes increasingly different in the two regions. In Jutland this ultimately leads to a complete break with the traditional TRB society, while the structure in eastern Denmark is incompatible with the trends (Single Grave/Corded Ware Cultures) coming to dominate the rest of northwestern Europe. As noted also by Kristiansen these differing structures persist until Early Bronze Age. In the following I will briefly comment on some of the most important points.

EMERGING DIFFERENTIATION

At the transition from the Early to the Middle Neolithic in Denmark the number of people receiving burial in monumental graves diminished drastically. There is general agreement that the Early Neolithic society was most likely a competitive segmentary tribal society (Gebauer 1988; Kristiansen 1982, 1984; Sjögren 1986; Tilley 1984) with relatively open access to high status which was demonstrated in the burials. The many dolmens and earthen graves show that a large number of persons were receiving a conspicuous burial.

There is notably fewer of the larger passage graves constructed in the early Middle Neolithic. Offerings of pottery outside these took place only two or three times during the first century or two after the construction of the tomb (Ge-

bauer 1979; Madsen 1988) indicating that burials in the passage graves were seldom. In other words multiple burials did not make up for the smaller number of tombs. Simultaneously the size of the settlements grew (Madsen 1982; Skaarup 1985). Taken together the size of the passage graves, the size of the settlements and the fewer persons being buried in the spectacular megalithic tombs suggest that with the early Middle Neolithic less persons were acquiring more power and influence, probably legitimized through the megalithic tombs (Damm 1991a; Tilley 1984).

I consider it unlikely that the rather large group of people who were deprived of their access to status, demonstrated in megalithic burial, silently accepted this. I suggest that the dissatisfaction with the existing social order was solved differently in eastern and western Denmark.

In eastern Denmark the solution was to allow a larger number of persons (men, women, and children) to be interred in the megalithic tombs. Later the exhumed bones were sorted and placed in piles along the walls of the chamber. Each pile consisted of bones from several individuals. Some piles had limb bones at the bottom, then smaller bones such as ribs, while the skulls were put on top. In other tombs long bones were placed in one pile, shoulder-blades in another etc. The effect of this was the elimination of the individual and a strengthening of the collective (Shanks & Tilley 1982). From being the tombs of a very few leading persons, the megalithic tombs now became the burial place for leading families.

In western Denmark a different solution was chosen. In MN A II-III the first stone packing graves emerge (Becker 1967). These sets of usually two parallel graves and one mortuary house are arranged in long rows. No skeletal remains are preserved from any stone packing grave, but phosphate analyses from Øster Tørslev (Stidsing 1989) indicate that at least the final resting place for the dead was in the so-called graves, while the grave goods were placed separately in the mortuary house.

So instead of letting more people be buried inside the megalithic tombs, a number of persons were buried in individual graves, at times immediately adjacent to megalithic tombs (*e.g.* Vroue), at other times perhaps some distance from these. The idea here was probably to let more people receive a formal burial in the vicinity of the megalithic burial ground, letting some of the associated status of the latter shine on the graves outside. This, however, had a very different effect than the collective burials in megalithic tombs in eastern Denmark. While the latter emphasized the collective and the group as an indivisible whole, the stone packing graves made it possible to focus on the individual, and created a contrast between those buried in megalithic tombs and those buried in stone packing graves.

The two grave-types became catalysts for two very different structures. At the time of construction the megalithic tomb was probably meant to glorify the lineage. Through time it became the place where the ancestors were buried. The increasing number of persons being buried in megalithic tombs resulted in a pooling of ancestors at the tombs, which probably increased the ancestral power and consequently the

naturalizing and legitimizing effect, thus continuously emphasizing the collective as well as the status of the families being buried there. This left little room for the individual and reduced potential conflicts.

In contrast to this the division between those buried in megalithic tombs and those who were not became even more conspicuous with the appearance of the stone packing graves. The more stone packing graves the clearer was the difference, and the clearer it became that those buried outside represented a larger part of the social group. The number of stone packing graves accelerated during the last phases of the TRB. The majority of the graves date from the final period, MN A V.

It must be assumed that this increasing focus on the individual, which was partly due to the stone packing graves, was accompanied by similar developments in other social relations. At several sites ox teeth have been found on the edge of the graves in the stone packing grave sets (Becker 1960; Stidsing 1989), indicating that ox heads were placed here. This suggests that cattle were important in ritual as well as social contexts. An increasing emphasis on husbandry may well have been associated also with change in the dominant economic relations. In contrast to simple agriculture, husbandry is often associated with individual ownership (Håland 1985:105). The megalithic tombs were used alongside the stone packing graves. The result may well have been a situation where one group in society based its power on authoritative resources, e.g. control of esoteric and ritual knowledge, while another groups attempted to achieve power and influence through allocative resources such as cattle.

ESTABLISHING THE SINGLE GRAVE CULTURE

During the Middle Neolithic TRB two different structures had been established, one in eastern and one in western Denmark. From being two different solutions to a social conflict the burial customs came to act as catalysts for constantly accelerating developments moving in opposite directions. In western Denmark the group represented by stone packing graves came to stand in still greater contrast to the group receiving burial in the megalithic tombs. At some point this opposition grew so distinct that the stone packing grave group in the existing society broke away and established itself as a new and independent ethnic group.

During the late TRB the contradiction between the stone packing grave group and the group associated with the megalithic tombs grew and probably resulted in the two actually perceiving themselves as different in some respects. The notion of ethnic identity involve attaching significance to perceived differences between people as well as to sensed affinities among them (Bentley 1987:34). Bentley notes that ethnic mobilization is often related to political and economic change and to change in systems of domination (ibid.:43). Ethnic movements may represent "attempts to institute new regimes adapted to changing political and economic circumstances". "Even where change occurs over many genera-

tions, it erodes this integration (of preconscious assumptions about the world) as it produces people who are disposed to perceive the world differently and so, in a phenomenological sense, live in different worlds" (ibid.: 44). Thus the emergence of a new ethnic group was not simply the strategic choice of a group of people who saw personal advantages in this. The structural basis for it had developed from the material existence of two burial types. This material division in itself created or emphasized social and emotional perceptions of distinction, all of which contributed to the development of a irreversible situation.

It was of course of primary importance for this new group to distinguish themselves from the traditional TRB society. It is therefore not surprising that the two groups are associated with very different material culture. Ethnic distinction is dependent on a "them and us" dichotomy. Ethnicity does not develop in isolation, but is a social construction arising from relations between groups, in this case a desire to differentiate from each other and therefore to stress differences. This explains why the material culture of the Single Grave Culture differs significantly from that of the TRB.

Thus when battle axes became a central symbol for the Single Grave group, battle axes, a not uncommon type in the late TRB society, disappeared completely in eastern Denmark. Instead there was an increased emphasis on well polished flint axes of type B in this region. In the Single Grave area flint axes were still common, but there was less emphasis on their manufacture, and perhaps the access to good quality flint was complicated by the break with the TRB. (The better sources for senonian flint are all located in northeastern Jutland or eastern Denmark, outside the primary territory of the Single Grave group). These examples demonstrate that important changes were taking place in the symbolic system.

Some stone packing graves were apparently still constructed during the early Single Grave period (Damm 1990). To me this only emphasizes that we should not view prehistory as made up of neat boxes. Also prehistoric people experimented or deviated from the majority. It also suggests one reason for seeking territories that did not conflict with the existing TRB areas. Although strongly diminished some TRB-groups in Jutland persisted for a while yet. The new groups therefore settled partly in neighbouring, but well-known areas (as at Vroue), partly perhaps in the less densely settled regions of central Jutland, which, if the theory of greater emphasis on husbandry and barley holds true, were indeed very well suited for this economic system, as the lighter soils of central Jutland made good grazing land and could support the less demanding barley.

THE ART OF "BRICOLAGE"

The characteristic material that constitutes what we term the Single Grave Culture is, as all agree, not primarily of local origin. The set of types that make up the pan-european horizon consists of battle axe, corded beaker, and amphora. Characteristic is of course also the individual graves with the

dead placed in "hocker". The widespread distribution of this set of elements has been one of the main arguments employed by those favouring migration, and is rarely mentioned by the autonomists other than as representing fashions. It is, however, evident that the pan-european elements are not evenly represented in all regions where the Corded Ware/Single Grave/Battle Axe Cultures appear. Amphoras are rare in both Denmark and Holland, while they are numerous in Central Germany. The early battle axes are on the other hand particularly common in Denmark, and only here do they constitute a clear chronological horizon. Also the burial custom differs somewhat between regions. In all areas individual inhumation graves dominate, but they may be orientated east-west or north-south, may be flat graves or covered by mounds and may or may not include children's graves. There are few circle graves or ring ditches in Central Germany, instead stone cists are numerous. Crypt graves are known from Poland. The hocker position is common to all groups, but may be more or less extreme. In fact the diversity in combinations of elements is remarkable.

It has not been possible for the migrationists to establish the area of origin or the mother culture precisely because the prototypes for all these elements are nowhere found together. The regional diversity is usually explained as the result of rapid adaption to local conditions (Kristiansen 1991:215). I will instead suggest that the similarities across the North European lowland is the result of widespread processes of bricolage and mutual borrowing between groups.

It appears to me as if processes of differentiation similar to those in Jutland were in progress several other places in Europe. Investigations of the period contemporary with the latest TRB in Denmark reveal, for example, that in Holland some late Havelte settlements are found in earlier apparently uninhabited areas, and individual burials become increasingly common during the Havelte period (Bakker & van der Waals 1973; Fokkens 1982). In Central Germany single graves with the dead in hocker position appear on the periphery of the distribution of the Bernburg Culture, in fact in the Nordharz region where also the earliest Corded Ware is found. Also in the Globular Amphora Culture in Central and Northern Germany there are examples of single graves and hocker position.

It is inconceivable that the various groups in Northern Europe did not have mutual contact. Rather than assuming a migration from the Eastern European steppes I consider it likely that a break with the existing society in one of these groups lead to general uprising and the emergence of a new social and material order in large parts of the North European lowland. When creating their new ethnic identity these groups partly built on important existing symbols and partly borrowed from other groups with similar structures and ideas.

"Bricolage" is french for the act of using and adapting existing elements in a fresh manner (Tilley 1990:27). The term was introduced to the social sciences by Levi-Strauss in "The Savage Mind" (1966) and originally refers to a sort of handy-man, who uses whatever is at hand to achieve a given

end. The objects employed may not be directly related to the purpose for which they are used.

I suggest that the Single Grave/Corded Ware groups when establishing their new ethnic identity used bits and pieces from existing symbolic structures in a process of bricolage. Basically no new elements were introduced: but elements from a wide geographical area were combined in a new way. The new symbols partly referred to the old structure in the local region and partly introduced new symbols, which on the one hand demonstrated the opposition to the traditional system and at the same time stressed connections and solidarity with other groups.

Thus, as the curved beaker is earlier in Holland than anywhere else (Lanting & Mook 1977) it probably originated there, while it is natural to assume that the origin of the amphora lies in Central Germany in the Globular Amphora Culture. The use of the battle axe as a symbol in the Corded Ware/Single Grave Culture may originate in the Danish region. The battle axe was clearly an important symbol in the TRB culture. In the late TRB it is found in increasing numbers in megalithic graves as well as in stone packing graves. It is my assumption that the axe was related to the symbolic marking of leading persons in society, and that its presence also in stone packing graves indicates that persons in this subgroup of society were becoming more influential and powerful. This would again provide additional understanding for why and how it was possible for part of society to break with the existing society and establish itself as a new ethnic group.

ADAPTING TO NEW TRENDS

The structure in eastern Denmark was, with its emphasis on the collective, incompatible with the general trend where the individual played a more prominent role. Things were, however, not as before. It was not only imperative to relate to new ethnic groups, the Single Grave/Corded Ware groups, but in addition developments were taking place on another front. We understand very little of what the Pitted Ware material in Denmark represents. One thing, however, is clear: it was becoming influential in the late TRB and its presence is undeniable in early MN B, contemporary with the early Single Grave Culture. Either the Pitted Ware material represents a third ethnic group that was in close contact with the Danish TRB, or it indicates developments within the TRB. In any case the TRB was of course not a static society, nor did it develop in a vacuum.

It seems as if processes of bricolage started also in eastern Denmark, although they proceeded with varying success. Certainly in the second half of MN B elements from the Single Grave Culture is found more widely in Denmark, and the Single Grave Culture itself was also modified.

Many of the elements that most distinctly differentiated the Single Grave Culture from the TRB disappear. There are no longer any amphoras, no ring ditches or circles graves and

the hocker is gradually replaced by the ordinary stretched position. Although there are still strong similarities between the various Single Grave/Corded Ware groups these are less conspicuous than in the establishing phase. On the other hand the distinctions between eastern and western Denmark are reduced.

In northwestern Jutland, most notably Himmerland, new and old structural principles are combined with great virtuosity. Here there are single graves in mounds, but also newly constructed stone cists in which successive burials took place. In contrast to the excarnation of megalithic tombs, these are ordinary inhumations. Battle axes and beakers are usual. Some are identical to those found in Single Graves, while others are primarily of types intermediate between axes/beakers of central Jutland and the Danish islands. Tanged arrowheads from the Pitted Ware group are also incorporated.

On Funen and Zealand there are but a few stone cists. Otherwise burials continue in the megalithic tombs. Battle axes and beakers are now appearing, although of slightly different types than those in Jutland. The number of axes and beakers is however still rather insignificant, and suggests that the adoption of these objects was never a success.

It would appear that northern Jutland, although lingering behind central Jutland, nevertheless was sympathetic to the development. It should be remembered that stone packing graves are known from numerous sites in the region, and also that several of the stone packing graves that must be contemporary with the earliest Single Graves (with objects such as type B flint axes or Pitted Ware arrowheads) are found here on the periphery of the Single Grave area. Thus the groups in this area had participated in the development that ultimately lead to the emergence of the new social and ethnic identity. For some reason they did not go along with this immediately, but only shortly afterwards constructed an associated and partly parallel phenomena.

This was not the case on the islands. This was the stronghold of the original TRB society. The B flint axes bear witness that the TRB society did not disintegrate, but otherwise the groups persisting on the islands are materially very inconspicuous. The tanged arrowheads typical of the Pitted Ware group are rather common in megalithic tombs in the northern regions. It may be assumed that these demonstrate a more profound integration of marine hunting (and possibly fishing) and what social effects this may have had, but we can not exclude the possibility that they are instead evidence of the presence of a third group, the Pitted Ware Culture, in the region. Whatever the case, it would appear that the traditional authoritative system could not be maintained. On the other hand it could not simply be substituted by the Single Grave Culture, which was structurally incompatible with existing and deeply embedded principles, as in fact it had emerged and been constructed as an opposition to the TRB.

EVALUATING REMARKS

Let me now return to the premises Kristiansen laid down for studies of cultural change/migration. Starting with Kristiansen's final point he calls for explanations for any migration, rather than letting migration be an explanation in itself. With regard to the Single Grave/Corded Ware Culture this is not possible at the moment, as the origin of the migration can not be determined. This of course weakens the hypothesis. Kristiansen appears to favour a Central European origin with Kurgan influences (1991:215), and later suggests that social and economic constraints caused the full scale movement of these social groups (ibid.:219), although he does not describe or analyze these.

As his second premise Kristiansen reminds us to take into account the history preceding the proposed migration. In his own case study this is unfortunately done only by general comparisons between the TRB and the Single Grave Culture (predominantly through the five points described earlier). No attempts are made at a more detailed analysis of the developments leading up to the transition to the Single Grave Culture.

Finally Kristiansen stresses that migrations should be contextualized, culturally and structurally. Of course Kristiansen does briefly summarize typological similarities and other cultural elements of relevance, but in my opinion not sufficiently to say that the Single Grave/Corded Ware cultures are contextualized culturally. He does not appear to consider structural contexts at all, no matter how you interpret the word "structure".

With regard to both of the last two premises I feel that Kristiansen has not thoroughly considered the nature and the cultural and structural contexts of the TRB, nor of the Single Grave/Corded Ware cultures. He has not fulfilled his own premises. The hypothesis of the Single Grave Culture as a migrating social group fails to convince me, not least because these points were not developed further in the case study.

In my own interpretation of the transition from the TRB to the Single Grave Culture, the period preceding the actual transition is of primary importance for the understanding of the events. The whole argument builds on the concept of structural change and structural incompatibility, and the role played by various cultural elements is emphasized in the discussion. I have thus followed the premises set by Kristiansen.

I have not proved that the Single Grave Culture was the result of an autonomous local development. I have, however, demonstrated that such a hypothesis is at least as plausible as a migration theory.

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