

Abstract

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Östergötland's only hitherto known megalithic tomb is located in Alvastra, Västra Tollstad Parish. The tomb was blown up by mistake in 1916, when it was regarded as an obstacle to cultivation. The blast exposed a quantity of human bones. Otto Frödin from the Museum of National Antiquities, who was then leading the excavations of the nearby pile dwelling in Alvastra, was given the task of investigating the site of the blast. He interpreted the antiquity as a medieval place of execution, supposedly connected to the royal estate of King Sverker the Elder in Alvastra during the twelfth century. King Sverker was murdered by his stable boy on the way to Christmas matins in 1156. Frödin relied on an old tradition which told of how King Sverker's murderer was executed on the site. A colleague, T. J. Arne, claimed however that the antiquity was a Stone Age grave. A new excavation in 1980–1983 found that it was a megalithic tomb, probably a dolmen. Besides human bones, there were finds of pottery, flint, and amber.

One of the skeletons from the tomb, a man >60 years old, was dated by three radiocarbon analyses to the Mesolithic (c. 6300 BC). Finds of quartz artefacts on the site also proved to be from the Mesolithic. The hypothesis is that there was once a Mesolithic grave on the site where the megalithic tomb was later built (c. 3200 BC) and that the skeleton in it may have been perceived as an ancestor and was therefore placed in the dolmen.

The construction of chambered tombs represents the first stone architecture in Sweden. An important discussion concerns which models might have inspired the architecture and which persons had the specialist knowledge required to build with stone. The nearest area with megalithic tombs is the Falköping district in Västergötland, on the western side of the large lake of Vättern. The pottery that was deposited in the Alvastra tomb in various ritual contexts was probably made in Västergötland, suggesting close interaction between these two areas with megalithic tombs.

The discussion of the amber objects found in the megalithic tombs considers whether they could be imitations of objects in macro format, which in turn are assumed to represent important technical knowledge about the handling of stone, ore, and metal.

The question of whether there was any link between the TRB society

of the megalithic tomb and the society of the pile dwelling has been debated. Geographically the distance between the two sites is not much more than 1,500 m. It is assumed that the wetland of Broby spring mire was already being used for ritual ceremonies at the time when the megalithic tomb was built. The timber causeway – possibly more than one – was probably the first structure in the wetland. Some potsherds of the same quality and origin as the pottery from the megalithic tomb have been found along the course of the causeway. Amber, axes, and other objects are also assumed to have been sacrificed in the wetland before the pile dwelling was later built alongside it. The idea of the megalithic tomb and the link to the wetland and its ritual roles in TRB society, as a stage before the construction of the pile dwelling, is also of vital interest for the interpretation and understanding of the entire large assemblage of finds from Broby spring mire.

On different occasions, several osteologists have analysed the heavily fragmented bones from the exploded megalithic tomb. The assessment of the number of buried individuals, their age and sex, has varied. In Wilhelmson and Ahlström's analysis, which is the most recent, it is estimated that the number may have been about 34 individuals. Both women and men, young and adult, are represented, so there does not appear to have been any discrimination on account of age or sex.

Key-words: Megalithic tombs, architecture, artefacts, amber, flint, quartz, pottery, Funnel Beaker culture (TRB), Pitted Ware culture (GRK), Falbygden, Rössberga, Alvastra pile dwelling, Mesolithic, Neolithic, osteology.