

Among trees, bones and stones

The sacred grove at Lunda

Gunnar Andersson

Ængin skal affgubum blotæ, ok ængin a lundæ æller a stenæ troæ.

“No one shall sacrifice to idols, and no one shall believe in groves or stones”

THE UPPLANDIC LAW, 1296 AD¹

The existence of sacred groves in pre-Christian societies in Europe and Scandinavia has been commonly accepted by scholars of disciplines such as history of religion, onomastics and archaeology (cf. Hultgård 1997:38; Brink 2001; Ellis Davidson 2001:86; Vikstrand 2001:278ff, 2004:326ff; Näsström 2002:114ff). In the literary sources we encounter the groves as early as the first century AD in the works of the Romans Cornelius Tacitus and Lucan. Tacitus writes about the tribes in northern Europe and Germania and mentions that tribes such as the Semnones and the Nahanarvali worship their gods in sacred groves, and Lucan describes hideous offerings in a grove among the Celts living in the vicinity of the present-day city of Marseilles in the south of France (Tacitus: chapter 9, 39,43; Vikstrand 2001:278). And from a Scandinavian perspective we recall the very famous description that Adam of Bremen gives us when he claims that a sacred grove existed at the Svear centre in Gamla Uppsala in the late eleventh century AD (Adam of Bremen: book 4, chapters 26–30; Hultgård 1997). The above examples are only some of the most well known. In the folkloristic material from late historic times, there are numerous accounts of holy or sacred groves in present-day Scandinavia and Finland (cf. Haavio 1963; Vikstrand 2001:279f; Bertell 2003:94f). Yet, from an archaeological point of view, for obvious reasons they are not that easy to discover in the present landscape. Although I have not checked properly I am pretty certain that there is no “sacred grove” registered in the vast Swedish register of ancient monuments. To my knowledge there is only one archaeological site in Sweden that has been interpreted as the remains, or possible remains, of a sacred grove: the cultural layer below the old church at Frösö in Jämtland, northern Sweden (cf. Hultgård 1997:33; Näsström 2002:112f; Vikstrand 2004:327 with references). A couple of years ago it was high time for yet another one to reappear underneath the soil and through the mists of history.

The grove and its surroundings

In 2001 and 2002 the National Heritage Board conducted archaeological investigations at Lunda farm, located just outside the town of Strängnäs in central Sweden. Here, on a conspicuous hill, we found what I believe are the remains of a sacred grove, even though some of the features also resemble these found in more ordinary cemeteries. The grove, however, may be of a slightly different kind from the ones Adam, Tacitus or Lucan write about.²

The archaeological context at Lunda contained a settlement



Figure 1. Map showing the location of Lunda in central Sweden.

and a cemetery from the Iron Age but also fragmented remains from the medieval and post-medieval settlement. Regarding the Iron Age settlement there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that Lunda at least from the fifth century AD was not an ordinary farmstead. An approximately 50 metre long and 10 metre wide three-aisled hall, traces of metalworking and bronze casting, and finds which included sherds of imported glass beakers, loom weights and three small phallic figurines – two cast in bronze and gilded, one in solid gold – identifies the place as a so-called magnate farm where aristocratic ritual ceremonies most probably were held (Andersson et al. 2003; Andersson et al. 2004; Beronius Jörpeland et al. 2004). It is typical that the settlement – at this place clearly visible even in the turf through its many stone terraces – and the nearby cemetery already had the status of ancient monuments in the register of ancient monuments. The grove did not.

Yet we were lucky for the chances of discovering a grove at this place were extremely good, so to speak. We had a place-name – Lunda – with a somewhat uncertain meaning. A common opinion is that it indicates cultic activities, especially when it occurs together with a god’s name – which it did not here – for example, as in Torslunda or Fröslunda, even though place-name scholars stress that it should not be taken for granted since the name also denotes a landscape or an area where a specific type of vegetation is cultivated and harvested (cf. Strid 1993:99f; Vikstrand 2001:278–291).



Figure 2. Aerial photograph of the Lunda complex during excavations in September 2001. The hill with the grove can be seen in the foreground to the right. The settlement with its huge hall has not yet emerged but was located on the terraces at the top to the far left of the picture. Photo: Michael Lyckholm, Sky Movies.

As I see it, the landscape also had several cosmological features. The settlement was situated in a valley, surrounded on three sides by higher terrain. In the fourth direction, however, to the north-west, the landscape opens up and is very flat. During prehistoric times this area was wetlands. But the dominant view to the north-west – seen from the Iron Age settlement, that is – is the large hill that rises or shoots up from the surrounding lowlands. Like the surroundings – but completely reversed – the hill had steep slopes in three directions, except to the north-west where it flattens out. Just west of the hill runs a small stream in a north/north-west direction. All in all, the landscape of Lunda provides a strong contrast between “high and low”, “land and water”, “open and closed”, and so on. It seems reasonable to suppose that all this had an effect on people’s way of interpreting the living landscape in a pre-Christian framework. The north running

water is, for instance, an element of mythological status that we encounter in folklore tradition.

On the hill, people had constructed a large number of stone settings, lit fires and crushed – or tried to split – large boulders. In the flatter areas of the hill they also constructed what could be called “floors” or “carpets” of smaller sharp-edged stones. But that is not all: everywhere over the hill, fragmented burnt bones, small pieces of burnt clay and tiny drops of resin were dispersed, all in very small fragments. The bones, measuring 2–5 millimetres in size, and the clay seem to have been crushed. Apart from this burnt and crushed material, unburnt and intact material in the form of colourful beads and assorted edged tools, such as arrowheads and knives, had also been dispersed, but to lesser extent.

The different materials were very homogeneous in that they almost everywhere occurred together, even on the steep slopes. In other words: where there were bones, there was also burnt clay and drops of resin, and most of the times, beads.

Although in many ways very similar to ordinary graves, the stone settings did not contain what we usually refer to as a grave, that is, a clearly visible deposition of human remains and artefacts. Instead we found the same dispersed material over, inside and underneath them, as we did in areas of the hill where there were no stone settings. Some of them were also constructed of different kinds of stones: for instance, one large boulder that had on one side a neat setting of “ordinary” stones, while the other side was made of small sharp-edged stones, covered with burnt bones. A few others had a semi-circular form so that they were “open” in the direction of the surrounding landscape.

An interpretation

Now what on earth took place here? And why? If this place was what I here propose and think it is, the material remains certainly do not look like anything I expected to find in a sacred



Figure 3. Map of the hill. The red dots mark the stone settings, black marks hearths, grey marks exposed bedrock and boulders, green marks “standing tree”.



Figure 4. Categories of find material and features from the grove. Top left: beads and arrowheads. Top right: burnt bone, burned clay and drops of resin. Bottom left: "stone carpet" with filling of sooty cultural layer containing bones, etc. Bottom right: One of the stone settings from the top of the hill.

grove. On the other hand, I only have Adam of Bremen's, Lucan's and Tacitus' words for what was going on in these places.

One thing is clear, though. It is not an ordinary cemetery, or even an aspect of the burial traditions. As I see it, the find material is far too homogeneous for that. If, for instance, the scattered and dispersed material were from burials, we surely also would have encountered fragments of combs and other fragments of bronze objects; artefacts that were common in the contemporary graves. Instead I believe the hill is a purely ritual place where the actions – constructing the stone settings, etc, as well as the dispersion of bones and other materials were a part of a ceremony, perhaps of a votive kind. From this angle the stone settings could be seen as a kind of altars,³ equivalent to the features that, for example, Lucan mentions, but here – at Lunda – perhaps the offerings were not that hideous.

So far only a small amount of bones have been examined osteologically. Since the fragments are so small, we should not expect too much from future analyses when it comes to identification. Of 369 fragments collected by the trial excavation, only some 7 were possible to determine. These were from two kinds of animals: sheep/goat and pig. No bones of human were detected in this rather small amount of material, mostly deriving from the very top of the hill. An interesting fact, though, clearly visible even to someone who is not a professional osteologist, is that the bones are very worn and eroded, sometimes almost round. They are not sharp-edged in the way they normally are in, for instance, grave contexts. A possible explanation for this is that they have been trampled on and exposed to rain, snow and wind as if they have been left on the ground, not deposited beneath the soil or in other ways concealed with earth. Another explanation could be that they were slightly ground.

Considering the fact that we have no evidence so far of any human sacrifices at Lunda, we might draw the conclusion that the offerings here give a somewhat different impression from what the literary sources tell us. If we were to categorise it we would perhaps call it some kind of burnt offering, or the continuation of offerings connected to a burnt offering.

Burnt offerings in Old Norse religion are a kind of ritual activity that – as far I know – are practically unknown in the literary sources. We know very little about whether they were practised at all, or if so, in what forms. In the archaeological sources, however, the (sometimes) vast systems of hearths that occur, mostly in southern Scandinavia and in continental Europe as well, have been interpreted as remains of cremation offerings. Sometimes these hearth systems are located on conspicuous hilltops or even mountains and the burnt bones that they contain are usually from cattle, sheep/goats and pigs (cf. Thörn 1996:135ff, with references). Thus we can see some similarities in the ritual activity between Lunda and these other places. One difference, though, is that at Lunda the activities seem to have consisted of a greater variety of actions than at the south Scandinavian or continental hearth sites.⁴ If we look at the whole context at Lunda, the grove seems structured in more complex and fixed way, which applies to both features and find material. Although culturally, geographically and chronologically very distant, the grove at Lunda resembles more the picture one gets from descriptions of what sacrificial sites looked like in the ancient Mediterranean religions than the prehistoric ritual hearth systems from south Scandinavia and the continent (cf. Thörn 1996:142f, with references).

Among the activities that took place at Lunda there are, however, several that we can recognise from Old Norse mythology, and even from more modern folk belief. The crushing of stones and large boulders, for instance, is something that is associated with Thor's impulsive behaviour (Ellis Davidson 2001:74). What the iron knives and arrowheads represent in the prehistoric context is not clear, but from modern folk belief there is evidence of edged tools of iron and steel (knives, nails, scissors, etc.) as warding-off symbols, as protection against evil. The crushing and possible grinding of bones and clay suggests to the conception about the big cosmic mill of Grotti, as described in for instance *Grottasöngur* in the Poetic Edda and in Snorri's Edda (cf. Bertell 2003:157ff; Zachrisson 2004:361ff).

The purpose of the ritual is a matter that needs to be exam-

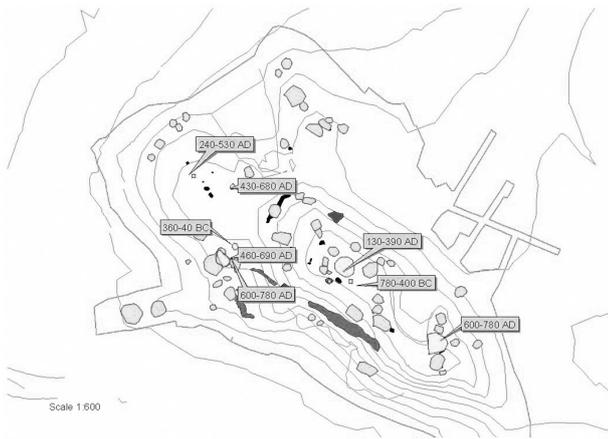


Figure 5. Map of radiocarbon dates. Apart from the oldest date there is no evidence of horizontal chronology; instead the whole hill seems to have been used simultaneously, at least during the later periods.

ined more closely in the future. However, at this early stage I would like to propose a tentative hypothesis. Cremation offerings in the Mediterranean religions were usually addressed to deities from the lower regions, that is, the underground, or various fertility gods. Deities connected with prosperity and fertility were, as we know, also worshiped in Scandinavia. Here it is of course of interest to take into consideration the three little ithyphallic figurines found at the Lunda settlement. With their gestures, attributes and the material they are made of, they clearly represent the fundamental values of the society (Andersson et al. 2004).

A purpose in line with conceptions like this fits quite nicely with the character of the material remains from the grove. Conceptions about fertility are also evident in ordinary funeral practices, hence the construction of stone settings on the hill. The crushed and dispersed materials could be interpreted as seeds, sown for future prosperity, health and wealth.

The chronology

So what about the chronology? How long were these activities or actions carried on? Is everything a result of more or less a single event where all the different features and materials are synchronous, or is it a result of a long period of activities? To help us answer these questions we have the artefacts and radiocarbon datings of burnt bone and charcoal. So far we have received nine radiocarbon results: four from bone and five from charcoal.

If we start with a closer look at the artefacts it seems pretty clear that it is not a question of a single event but not a very long period of ritual action either.

The shape, colours and motives on the beads, as well as the type of the arrowheads, suggest a dating to the seventh, eighth and possibly also the ninth century AD. In Scandinavia this is the late Iron Age; Vendel Period and early Viking Age. The radiocarbon datings, however, indicate a far longer period of ritual activity: from approximately 500 BC to AD 1500. If we exclude the late dating and regard it as irrelevant for the prehistoric events, it is possible to distinguish the sixth and seventh centuries as a vital period for the activities. Bones as well as charcoal from different features and contexts and from different parts of the hill have been dated to this time.

I am not sure yet how we are to interpret the radiocarbon results. The oldest radiocarbon dating is from the Late Bronze Age/ Early Iron Age (800–400 BC, calibrated age), but there are no other signs of activities such as settlements or burials at Lunda during this time. Since the altitude of Lunda is not very high, most of the landscape in the valley must have been under water at this early time. The dating also derives from burnt bone found at the very top of the Lunda hill, which at that time would have been a very small island situated in a narrow bay. Thus there is no reason to question the dated bone as such, but does it originally belong to the same context as the others? We cannot rule out the possibility that the small island – that is, what later came to be the top of the hill – was the site of a small cairn burial during the Late Bronze Age and that the cairn was later torn down when the other ritual activities began. Even though this dating for the moment is to be regarded as isolated, there are also other early datings from around 100 BC to AD 300 that indicate a very long period of use, far longer than what the artefacts tell us.

We simply need further datings from bones, charcoal and drops of resin before we draw any more specific conclusions about the chronology. There is also the question whether it is a matter of continuous activity or if there is a gap in the events. But *if* this long time span is correct, it seems that we have ritual whose basic form remained unchanged for many hundreds of years, perhaps as long as approximately 1,000 years. Its main features were crushed and uncrushed stones, fire ceremonies and dispersion of burnt bones, clay and drops of resin. Some time during the seventh century something happened and things changed somewhat. The ritual was expanded to also include colourful beads, arrowheads, knives and other such sharp-edged tools of steel, all untouched by fire. The reason for these changes and why they came to include these artefacts too will probably remain unknown, but the era and the transition between the Early and the Late Iron Age is characterised by changes in the ritual practice, something that is also visible in ordinary grave contexts.

Conclusion

There is a great deal to suggest that the hill at Lunda actually was a holy grove where a specific ritual was carried out. The place-name, the topographic surroundings, the contemporary archaeological context all point in that direction. The material remains on the site also show extraordinary signs of a repetitive behaviour or pattern, which is very characteristic of many religious ceremonies, regardless of time and age. The context also shows an apparent dualism in many ways. In the landscape the contrast between high and low, water and land, open and closed, is very prominent. Even in some of the stone settings it was possible to get a glimpse of this dualism between open and closed, unarranged and arranged, or if one prefers: nature–culture. In the find material we can see this in the fact that it is either burnt and fragmented or unburnt and intact.

Gunnar Andersson
National Heritage Board,
Archaeological Excavations Department, Hågersten
gunnar.andersson@raa.se

Notes

- 1 Translation from Brink 2001:89
- 2 The interpretations presented here are in some respects to be considered as preliminary. Further analysis concerning osteology and radiocarbon dating remains to be carried out. Also the interpretation of the site in line with theories of ritual behaviour and Old Norse religion is a matter that needs closer study before we can draw any more specific conclusions.
- 3 The interpretation of stone settings – even from ordinary cemeteries or grave contexts – as a kind of altars has previously been proposed by Anders Kaliff in his study of eschatological beliefs and mortuary practices during the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age in Östergötland, Sweden (cf. Kaliff 1997:69).
- 4 Another difference is that the hearth systems that Thörn and other scholars discuss seem to be firmly rooted in the late Bronze Age and/or early Iron Age, c. 1500–50 BC. At Lunda the time span is different.

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