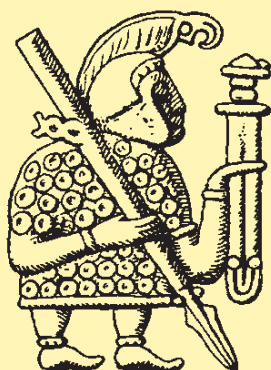


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A Place with a View

Bronze Age Depositions at Smörkull in Southwest Sweden

By Courtney Nimura and Peter Skoglund

Introduction

This is a story about a special place – a small hill near Falkenberg, Halland, southwest Sweden (fig. 1). We came to know this hill, Smörkull, through a study in which we sought to answer questions about the deposition places of Bronze Age metalwork hoards – why were certain places chosen for deposition? What could landscape contexts tell us about these hoards' functions? A summary of that project's results is discussed elsewhere (Skoglund et al. in print); in this paper, we aim to present a detailed story of a single site where a golden bowl and a sword dating to Montelius' Period 4 were found in the 1850s. This single site exemplifies the results of the wider study.

Methodology

One aim of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of historical maps and fieldwork when studying metalwork depositions. Sweden holds a rich cache of detailed cadastral maps from the 17th–19th centuries, which are housed in the Lantmäteriet (Land Survey) and are freely accessible online. Because these maps were produced to create a baseline in advance of various land reforms, which transferred commonly used land to individual ownership, they are accompanied by (sometimes detailed) written descriptions that characterise individual plots of land (Connelid & Viking-Faria 2018, pp. 173–196). Most landscapes in southern/central Sweden have changed dramatically since the mid-19th century. Therefore, these cadastral maps offer an insight into a landscape that generally has more in common with prehistoric rather than modern landscapes, which have been greatly impacted by large-scale agricultural activities.

The maps, therefore, are useful in multiple ways. They can be used for reconstructing land-

scape elements that no longer exist. They can also provide clues to where objects were found, because they inform us about the ownership of land parcels and the various kinds of activities conducted at these properties. Museum archives may give the names of people in the 19th century who found an object at someone's property, but these are rarely accompanied by maps demonstrating where this property is situated. Cadastral maps then offer the opportunity to identify these properties.

Smörkull

Smörkull hill is a well-known landmark located 7 km southeast of Falkenberg. It is part of a larger area of hills made of primeval rock, which stretches c. 10 km SW–NE and reaches towards the sea to end at the Grimsholmen peninsula. Smörkull is situated only 1 km from the coast and just north of mouth of the river Suseån (fig. 1).

Smörkull extends c. 600 m in a SW–NE direction and is c. 150 m wide (fig. 2a). The eastern side of the hill has a very steep rocky façade and is about 40 m tall. The western side is gentler and shorter, though it still requires some scrambling to access the very top (fig. 2b). The top is 52 m above sea level and provides a view of the sea – in the evening, the hilltop is a popular place for visitors to watch the sun setting on the ocean.

Smörkull's characteristic shape and proximity to the sea has made it an important orientation point for seagoing vessels. It is even mentioned in 19th century coastal navigation records:

Smörstacken, beläget 1 mil SSO från Falkenberg och invid kusten, är ett min-

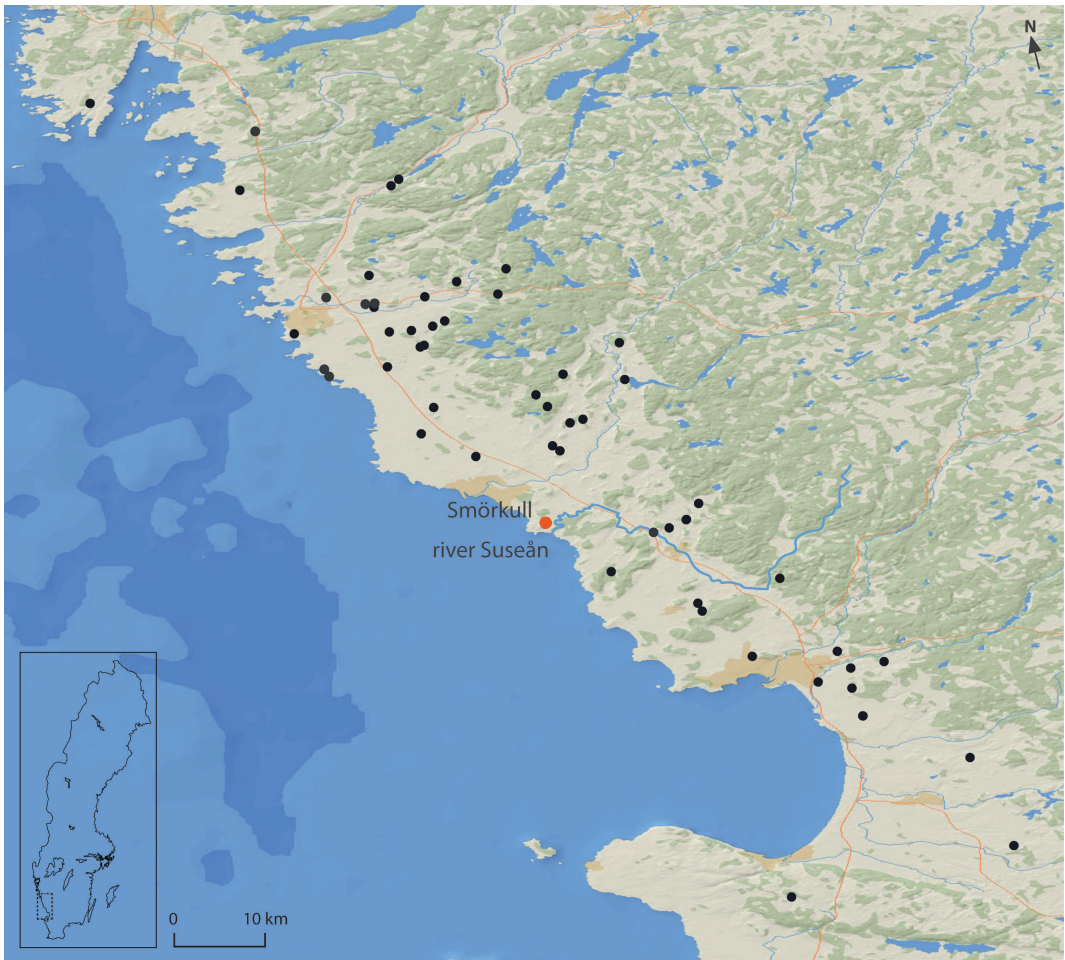


Fig. 1. Map of Halland showing Smörkull and the river Suseån. Black dots = locations of the Bronze Age metalwork hoards with a known location. Background Map Sources: Esri, USGS | Esri, TomTom, FAO, NOAA, USGS.

dre men högt och brant berg, som synes temligen väl till sjös, serdeles då man står i SSW derifrån [Smörstacken, situated 10 km SSE from Falkenberg and at the coast, is a smaller but rather high and steep hill, which is rather easy to identify from the sea, especially when you view it from SSW] (Arwidsson 1869, p. 42).

It is reasonable to think that these characteristics – the view of the sea and its use as an orientation point – are somewhat timeless and could also have been appreciated in prehistory.

Fig. 2. Smörkull's domed shape is demonstrated in these photographs from the mid-1920s: a) the eastern, steep façade; b) the smaller, gentler western side. The vantage point is marked by the clods on the hilltop. Photos: Johan Wilhelm Ingman, Hallands Konstmuseum.





Fig. 3. Important places in the Bronze Age landscape: 1) presumed landing place; 2) vantage point; 3) sheltered place with natural springs; 4) Bronze Age monuments. Sources: RAÄ, Fornsök; SGU, Strandförskjutningsmodell; Lantmäteriet, Laga skifte Boberg 1851 akt 13-skr-43.

Smörkull's maritime landscape

South of Varberg, the Halland coast provides very few natural harbours; therefore, river mouths must have acted as nodal places for seafarers travelling along the coast. This would have been the case at the mouth of the river Suseån, which provides a safe harbour. In the Bronze Age, when the sea was c. 4 m higher than today, the inlet was even more sheltered – it was wider and constituted a small bay (fig. 3, no. 1) (SGU: Strandförskjutningsmodell, c. 1000 BCE).

Compared to other harbours, this place had obvious advantages. Only 500 m from the Bronze Age shoreline, Smörkull was both a landmark and vantage point, (fig. 3, no. 2), and as the prevailing wind flowed west to east, Smörkull and the neighbouring hill Långabjär provided shelter from these winds. The Boberg 1846 cadastral map also describes the location of several natural springs (Laga skifte Boberg 1846 M52-3:2) (fig. 3, no. 3). For seafarers, Smörkull would have marked the location of a sheltered place

with freshwater and a vantage point from which weather and incoming boats could be observed.

The importance of the Suseån outlet is also emphasised by several clusters of cairns and stone settings on the Grimsholmen peninsula (fig. 3, no. 4). Although not yet excavated, some of the cairns' monumental size indicate an Early Bronze Age date, c. 1700–1100 BCE. One is a ship-shaped stone setting measuring 7 x 2 m (RAÄ Fornsök: L1997:9738) found with a 23 m-diameter cairn, both about 100 m from the Bronze Age shoreline (RAÄ Fornsök: L1997:9198); another cairn is 18 m in diameter and 150 m further inland (RAÄ Fornsök: L1997:9739).

It was in this environment that a Bronze Age gold bowl and a bronze sword were lain to rest, later to be discovered in the mid-19th century.

The finds and their contexts

The bronze sword (fig. 4a) was found during quarrying under a large stone slab in Smörkullberget by the worker Per Tobiasson from Boberg. The land reform process in Boberg lasted from 1846 to 1856, during which stone walls were constructed in the outfields to divide swathes of land into individual plots, by gathering nearby stones and stone slabs. The stone wall that runs across Smörkull was constructed sometime between the summer of 1850 and the spring of 1853 (Laga skifte Boberg 1851 akt, 13-skr-43: p. 144), before the sword was delivered to the authorities in January 1855. We have no more details about the find circumstance, but this type of sword from this period is more often found in non-burial contexts, such as bogs (Sprockhoff 1934, pp. 28, 97–98). The construction of the new stone walls could easily have led to the discovery of the sword from under a stone slab.

The flange-hilted sword is 75 cm long and 5 cm wide (SHM 2115) and is dated to Montelius' Period 4 (1100–900 BCE) (Sprockhoff 1934, p. 97, cat. no. III.a.2). Interestingly, the sword was broken into two parts before deposition, which fit together to form a complete sword. As experimental archaeology has shown, it is possible to damage a sword without leaving any tool marks on the broken pieces (Knight 2019, p. 264), so the Smörkull breakage could have

been intentional. The lower part has also been honed or ground to change its surface, which supports this theory.

The gold bowl (fig. 4b) was found in 1859 by a soldier's widow, Anna Beata Larsdotter from Grimsholmen, who, according to local folklore, found it while potato picking in a field (Svensson 1985, p. 105). The National Heritage Board's database gives a rather precise location, 60 m north of Smörkull (RAÄ Fornsök: L1997:5354), and it was found about a 1/4 cubit below ground near a stone slab (SHM 2604).

The gold bowl is 9 cm in diameter and is one of only two such objects found in Sweden, even though more objects are known from Denmark and Germany (Armbruster 2012, pp. 425–426).



Fig. 4. The Smörkull finds, both dated to Period 4: a) the sword; b) the gold bowl. Photos: Helena Bonnevier (a), Ulf Bruxe (b), Historiska museet/Statens historiska museer.

It has qualities that emphasise its relationship to Smörkull, which, although speculative, are worth describing. When turned upside down, its shape mimics the shape of the hill, an observation we made when standing at the find spot. It is ornamented with concentric circles, which are typically interpreted as solar symbols (Armbruster 2012, p. 375), recalling the setting sun that can be viewed from atop the hill.

Today, the immediate area of both findspots consists of woodland, cultivated fields, and summer cottages, but the landscape was very different before the agricultural reforms of the mid-19th century. The 1846 cadastral map shows a varied landscape with bogs, smaller water pools, dry ground, and rocky hills (fig. 5). The gold

bowl was found at the edge of a bog that had existed along one side of Smörkull hill, but which today is drained and cultivated (fig. 5, star). The find place of the sword is less certain, but if it was found during the building of the stone wall, it was deposited near natural springs (fig. 5, dark red line). In both cases, the records agree that the objects had a clear relationship to Smörkull hill.

The hill in the distance

Smörkull, as we have described it, is a place of converging characteristics. The hilltop affords a clear view of land, sky, sea, and sunset, which serves the practical purpose of viewing sea traffic but also provides a special experience of the landscape. The area around the hill offered fresh

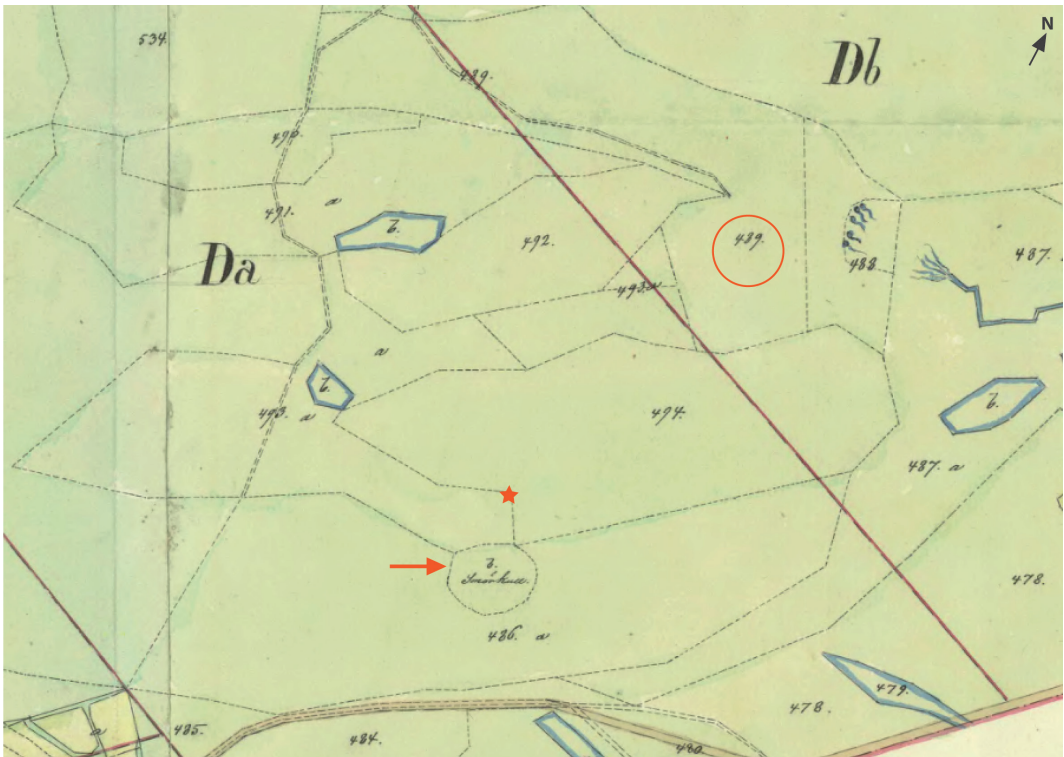


Fig. 5. Map of Smörkull and its surroundings from 1846: 486a) southern part of the hill; 486b) smaller hill; 487a) bog; 487b) water; 488) gravelly ground with spring water; 489) gravelly ground; 491a) bog; 491b) water; 492) smaller hill; 493a) bog; 493b) open water; 494) larger hill. Dark red line = stone wall built in the 1850s, where we believe the sword was discovered; arrow = vantage point; circle = a place sheltered from wind with access to water and the vantage point; star = presumed find place of gold bowl. Sources: Lantmäteriet, Laga skifte Boberg 1851 akt 13-skr-43; Laga skifte Boberg 1846 M52-3:2.

water and shelter from wind. These qualities ensured the importance of Smörkull, where both the gold bowl and bronze sword were most likely deposited in Period 4. The Smörkull depositions exemplify how topography, place, and deposition can be entwined, something that could not have been understood without interrogating historical maps and shoreline displacement reconstructions, utilising archival records, and visiting places in the field.

Sites with ‘complex topographies’ – where land, sky, and sea were represented – clustered in Period 4 (Skoglund et al. in print). This is not entirely surprising, as these different environments have been related to a Bronze Age worldview that emphasised a three-tiered cosmology based on land, sky, and sea. The evidence for this has been largely based on bronze razors, which appear in Period 4 (Kaul 1998), but is also supported by rock art (Lahelma 2005; Bradley & Nimura 2013). The Period 4 iconography in rock art and on metalwork could mark the beginning of this way of understanding the world. Smörkull, therefore, combines ‘practical’ and ‘ideological’ matters that may have influenced the decision to deposit these special objects around this iconic hill.

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