

LATE BRONZE AGE
FLINTWORKING FROM
RITUAL ZONES IN
SOUTHERN SCANDINAVIA

Mirosław Masojć

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Back cover illustration: Barrows, vicinity of Sundstrup, Hjarbæk Fjord, central Jutland
(Photograph by the author)

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Introduction

In 2009 Swedish archaeologist Anders Högberg published his doctoral thesis in the British Archaeological Reports (BAR) International Series, which was devoted to the examination of flintworking during the Scandinavian Late Bronze Age. The book was already in print a season earlier when, during a meeting at the Malmö Museum where Anders was working, we were discussing the occurrence of flint artefacts in various cultural contexts during the Metal Ages. While sharing my observations concerning the assemblages from northern Jutland, I mentioned the presence of flint artefacts in cult structures of the Thy region. We soon realised that he had overlooked this phenomenon in his outstanding¹ thesis (Högberg 2009). Even though the first flint collections from cult houses had been stored by the Malmö Museum (the earliest flint assemblage was discovered in 1978 during the excavation of the Høghs Høj cult house in northern Thy), none had been analysed, and no reports had been published. Knowledge of these flint collections was confined to the relatively small circle of individuals who had acquired them. Publications concerning the structures described as cult houses did not include any information about the density of flint artefacts found in some of them (Nielsen 1999, 2000; Nielsen & Bech 2001; Victor 2002; Kaul 1993, 2006). The presence of flint artefacts typical of the Late Bronze Age was only briefly mentioned in Bjarne Henning Nielsen's and Jens-Henrik Bech's (2001) publication that focused on the cult houses in the Thy region.

From the conversation in Malmö there was only one step to my involvement in the research of flint assemblages occurring within the cult structures of the Late Bronze Age in northern Jutland and resigning from the original purpose of my work in Scandinavia, which was the comparative study of flintworking at the turn of Metal Ages in southern Scandinavia and central Europe emphasizing areas in modern-day Poland. The results of the research are presented in this book, and the interim results were also presented elsewhere (Masojć, Bech 2011; Masojć, Bech, Kufel-Diakowska 2013).

My interest in flintworking in southern Scandinavia has its beginnings in rescue excavations conducted by the Wrocław Section of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences during the construction of the A4 motorway in the province of Opole. The excavations were carried out in collaboration with Jarosław Bronowicki (Bronowicki, Gediga, Masojć 2002). At that time my research interests primarily focused on prehistoric hunter-gatherer communities (Masojć 2004). When the excavations revealed disparate and specific flint artefacts occurring at practically every site within the context of settlements from the Lusatian

¹ Reviews: McLaren A. P. 2011; Werra D. 2009, 2011.

culture, we studied them with great interest. Our analysis of the Lusatian flints and the resulting interpretation of the cultural attribution of those very 'late', as we then thought, flint assemblages was viewed with moderate optimism by professor Bogusław Gediga. It was only after we found two backed knives situated near an overturned vessel from the Lusatian culture in feature 91B from Zakrzów 41 in the district of Krapkowice (Bronowicki, Masojć 2010, Fig. 8) that our principal investigator became convinced as to the accuracy of our observations. Reports on the Lusatian flint material from the province of Opole were favourably received by our colleagues specialising in 'stone' matters. While presenting the results of our work at the 15th Congress of the International Union of Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences (UISPP) in Lisbon we realised that our finds fit perfectly within the framework of flintworking production from the Late Bronze Age in northern Europe (Bronowicki, Małecka-Kukawka, Masojć 2006). For example, artefacts analogous to ours had been found in the British Isles (Ballin 2010), Scandinavia (Eriksen 2010) and even in the Near East (Rosen 1996). Thus, my studies on flintworking associated with the cult structures in Jutland arose from the desire to examine closely the Scandinavian assemblages and compare them with the material from Zakrzów.

All this became possible thanks to the Danish Government Scholarship (2008) and the scholarship from the Kazimierz Salewicz Foundation (*Kazimierz Salewicz og hustru Marit Jensens Studiefond*) awarded twice – in 2010 and 2012. Palaeoecological analyses of the Grydehøj cult house, radiocarbon dating and the analyses of the function of the flint artefacts were carried out with the support of an annual grant from the Polish National Science Centre in the third edition of the Opus programme (2013).

The project would not have been completed without the exceptionally friendly attitude of Danish archaeologists with whom I had the privilege of cooperating. First and foremost I should mention two prehistorians from museums in Jutland – Jens-Henrik Bech from the Thisted Museum and Martin Mikkelsen from the Viborg Museum, who allowed me access to the flint materials and guided me through the archaeology of the Bronze Age. I am deeply impressed by their academic knowledge combined with many years of field experience. I would also like to thank my colleagues Klavs Randsborg (University in Copenhagen), Poul Otto Nielsen and Flemming Kaul (National Museum in Copenhagen), Jørgen A. Jacobsen and Mogens Bo Hendriksen (Odense City Museums), Mikkel Kielsen (Viborg Museum) and Anne Loise Haack Olsen (Thisted Museum). They were all very helpful during my Scandinavian studies. I would like to express my special thanks to Lisse and Knud Hove (Thisted) for their hospitality during my stays in Thy and also for their kindness. I am also indebted to Jerzy Piekalski from my university for his continuous encouragement to accomplish this work.

Without the professional and administrative assistance of the people and institutions mentioned above I would have been unable to accomplish the task which I set for

myself in this work. Of course all the potential errors and shortcomings are only mine. I also hope that this monograph, which is the culmination of a few years of study, is not going to be the last stage of my Danish and more generally Scandinavian encounter with prehistory.

1. On the phenomenon of flintworking at the end of the Bronze Age and beginning of the Iron Age

For hundreds of thousands of years of human prehistory, until the technology of the use of metals emerged and subsequently became widespread, fissile rock had been the most important raw material in tool production and economy of prehistoric societies. From the earliest records of the use of stone as a tool by early hominids, it had a basic practical function, but it also carried cultural and symbolic meanings. The symbolism and extra-utilitarian character of knapped stone implements are seen in the Stone Age (Fiedorczuk *et al.* 2007; Płonka 2012). They constitute permanent and essential elements of funerary rites and many other extra-utilitarian aspects of life (Gamble 1999). It is especially apparent in the Neolithic and even more so in the Early Bronze Age, when 'fanciful' bifacially retouched flint daggers and sickles were produced and distributed in Europe (Apel 2001; Libera 2001).

It is a common conviction that the end of the Bronze Age in Europe brought about a slump and decline in the technology of flint production. The simplest explanation would be the increase in the dynamics of circulation of metal tools, effectively replacing 'obsolete' stone tools. Some proponents of this opinion argue that popularity of metal objects hindered production of stone tools, in principle used only for utilitarian purposes, depriving them of aesthetic and symbolic qualities (Humphrey 2004). Because of the use of metal, advanced flintworking techniques were to sink into oblivion. Flint was still used by Late Bronze Age communities, but reduced solely to opportunistic, ad hoc forms. The range of formal tools gradually decreased to a minimum with flint products retaining a strictly functional and utilitarian character, while more technologically advanced metal tools acquired symbolic meaning (Edmonds 1995).

The arguments and conclusions presented in this work go against the thesis presented above. I will try to prove that the indisputable technological change in flintworking, which occurred between the older and younger Bronze Age, did not deprive it of its metaphysical qualities. It is quite possible that the opposite happened, as it is during this time that the presence of dense flint assemblages in ritual contexts is observed.

I am of the opinion that despite the widespread belief that the significance of flint implements was only of a marginal nature, their presence in and impact on the culture of the societies at the end of Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon – from a purely utilitarian character (it is an element of the economy of that time with its specific system of raw material acquisition, its distribution, flint production and use of flint implements) to the extra-utilitarian aspect (presence of flint in symbolic culture), exceeding the limitations of ordinary

consumption and economy (Lech 1997a). With flintworking during this transitional time during the Metal Ages and the assumption of its multifaceted nature in mind, I will try to familiarise the reader with a so far unknown aspect of flint production from the Late Bronze Age in Scandinavia – the ubiquity of flint artefacts in ritual contexts, including the so-called cult houses, situated at the foot of the barrows of northern Jutland.

I will try to illustrate the significant role that flint played in community life, both as raw material and artefact, not only as the material used in everyday activities of daily life, but also as an important component of rites and observances strongly connected with the religion and rituals of the end of the Bronze Age in Scandinavia.