

# Tidens landskap

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*Redaktion*

Cecilia Ljung

Anna Andreasson Sjögren

Ingrid Berg

Elin Engström

Ann-Mari Hållans Stenholm

Kristina Jonsson

Alison Klevnäs

Linda Qviström

Torun Zachrisson



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# Transcultural fostering in the Bronze Age?

## A case study of grave 4/2 in mound II at Abbekås, Sweden

*Sophie Bergerbrant*

Fostering practices are well known across Europe in the Middle Ages and even further back in time (Crawford 1999, 122; Lárússon 1959; Parkes 2006; Smith 1992). Could fostering have been an important part of Bronze Age societies as well? New scientific developments are giving us new ways into the topic of fostering in prehistory. This paper discusses the possibility of transcultural fostering in the south Scandinavian Bronze Age based on a case study of a child buried in a mound at Abbekås, Scania. Despite our knowledge of its importance in many later periods, fostering and its social implications for networks have been given little attention in research on the Nordic Bronze Age. Taking inspiration from medieval parallels, this article will explore one example which may point to the existence of transcultural fostering in prehistoric periods.

### Fostering

In the so-called Celtic areas of the British Isles, fostering was common in the medieval period (Parkes 2006; Smith 1992, 3 and ref.). Meanwhile in the Anglo-Saxon regions the term 'fostering' covered a wide range of activities, from live-in mother's help to something comparable to modern adoption (Crawford 1999, 122). In the Anglo-Saxon world it was customary to send boys away as apprentices to learn a skill or get an education, which normally happened when the child was seven or eight years old (Crawford 1999, 123). Anglo-Saxons appear to have had three main types of fostering: 1) a nurse who took care of children in elite households; 2) a child being raised in another household of equal or greater status to the child's family; 3) adoption which gave a child legal status as belonging to a new family rather than the family of birth (Crawford 1999, 122–124). The second type created mutual bonds of obligation similar to those created by marriage alliances (Crawford 1999, 122–124). In the Welsh material the second type of fostering and the ties created through it seem to have been the most important (Smith 1992, 4). Fostering in later medieval England was less common and limited to the elite, while children abandoned by the poor may have been taken in by others (Orme 2001, 56).

### Grave 4/2 mound II Abbekås, Skivarp parish, Scania, Sweden

Four mounds were excavated in Abbekås by Folke Hansen (1938) during the 1920s, revealing a range of graves with variously preserved skeletal material. The excavations uncovered features from early Bronze Age mound burials containing bronze objects to a gallery grave and a number of late Neolithic flat graves (Hansen 1938, 56–98). Some of these features have been more closely dated, showing that the area was used for burial from the early parts of the late Neolithic into Period III of the Bronze Age (Bergerbrant 2014, 527–529; Bergerbrant et al. 2017, 57–58; Tornberg 2013).

Abbekås mound II grave 2/4 (the grave has different numbers in the publication and report in ATA; Hansen 1938, 74) contains the burial of a young person around six to eight years old (Bergerbrant et al. 2017, 51, 57). The grave contained a spiral finger ring and a 'diadem' in bronze (Hansen 1938, 75). This latter object was a thin bronze sheet which had probably been sewn onto a headdress made of cloth. This is an unusual find in a Scandinavian context. One comparable 'diadem' was found in a gallery grave on Zealand, at Søsund, Frederiksborg (Aner and Kersten 1973, No. 280; Forssander 1936, 103; Lomborg 1973, 147; Vandkilde 1996, 217–218 cat. no. 622). However this artefact type is common in the Central European early Bronze Age (2300–1600 BC), and examples have been found in Alburger Hochweg, Straubing, Bavaria (Hundt 1958, 28–29, Tafel 15, 30–31) and Franzhausen, Lower Austria (Neugebauer and Neugebauer 1997), and occasionally in graves from the middle Bronze Age (1600–1100 BC) in Lower Saxony, in the Lüneburg culture (Laux 1971, 39).

The date of grave 2/4 has been debated in the literature (Bergerbrant 2007, 112–113, 2014; Forssander 1936, 209–210). New analyses undertaken within the project *Travels, transmissions and transformations in temperate northern Europe during the 3rd and 2nd millennium BC: The rise of Bronze Age societies* (known as 'The Rise') produced a radiocarbon date (OxA-29843 3309±28 <sup>13</sup>C-19.24 calibrated 2 sigma 1658–1510 BC) dating it to Bronze Age Period I (1700–1500 BC; Bergerbrant et al. 2017, 51, 57), which places the grave in a Central European early Bronze Age context.

### A child of one's own?

If the child came from another geological region, this might be seen in the strontium isotope values in the petrous bone (Harvig et al. 2014; Sørensen 1994) and/or in non-local objects or different treatment in burial. A scenario involving a foster mother in the form of a nurse (Crawford 1999, 122; Smith 1992, 11–13) or engaged in a milk kinship (Parkes 2006, 360) is probably impossible to discern within the archaeological record, and therefore that possibility is not discussed further here. However fostering in the form of adoption, making the child a full-fledged member of the new family (Crawford 1999, 123), could possibly be seen in the archaeological record in the petrous bone (*pars petrosal*) or milk teeth (Harvig et al. 2014; Sørensen 1994) if the child originated in a different geological area. The petrous bone does not change its composition after the age of two (Harvig et al. 2014), so unless the crown of the first molar initiation, which shows perinatal values (Montgomery 2010, 329), is analysed, it would not reveal any fosterage that occurred immediately after birth, only cases that occurred after the second year of the child's life. The treatment of the child in death and possible artefacts should not, however, be different from other buried children. Children who have been fostered by another family with equal or higher status in order to create mutual obligations (Crawford 1999, 123; Smith 1992, 12), or a child that is fostered in order to gain an education or learn a skill (Crawford 1999, 123), could possibly be visible in the archaeological record if we are aware of the possibility and take the time to observe relevant clues.

All children buried at the Abbekås site are buried in a similar manner (Hansen 1938, 56–98). The child buried in Abbekås grave 4/2 in mound II differs from other children at the site and in Scania in general only due to the objects found in the grave (Bergerbrant 2014, 527–528). The child in 4/2 grave is the only child in Abbekås who was buried with bronze artefacts, and a few of the adults are buried with bronze objects; when they are, these are just a few items (Hansen 1938, 56–98). This suggests that the area in Period II was both rich and well-connected enough to build a number of mounds and place bronze artefacts in the graves of at least some of the deceased, but the burials are not those of the top tier of the elite. The child's artefacts, especially the bronze diadem, indicate a non-local connection (see Bergerbrant 2007, 112–113, 2014, 527–528; Forssander 1936, 103).

The interpretation of the strontium isotope values for Scania has to be considered as preliminary as no comparative baseline has been established for the area. Eleven individuals from the site were analysed within the Rise project, and based on the majority of values an assumed local baseline was created. All the analysed children can be regarded as local based in the strontium isotope values (Bergerbrant et al. 2017, 51). The value for the child in burial 4/2 mound II 0.71056 is the highest among the ones set as the local range (Bergerbrant et al. 2017, 51,

57–58). This strontium isotope value is also observed in other areas, such as Denmark (Frei and Frei 2011), parts of southern Germany (Maurer et al. 2012; Oleze et al. 2012) and parts of Britain (Evens et al. 2010).

Hence the strontium isotope values do not exclude a non-local origin for the deceased child. In the Franzhausen cemetery (early Bronze Age) diadems are found mainly with adults, but also with children under the age of twelve (Neugebauer and Neugebauer 1997). In Lower Austria it has been shown that from around the age of 14 girls wear adult women's dress (Neugebauer-Maresch and Neugebauer 1988, 30). This indicates that the diadem is not an exclusive part of the attire of an adult woman in Central Europe, and strengthens the connection of the deceased child with the Central European early Bronze Age culture. Similarly in the middle Bronze Age (1600–1100 BC) Lüneburg culture diadems are found with adults, with one possible exception (Laux 1971, 39 and catalogue). Children in the Nordic Bronze Age are seldom buried with bronze artefacts, but in cases where objects are present, arm-rings are the most common item. The child in Abbekås grave 4/2 has a finger ring, whereas the other individuals had arm-rings of different types (Bergerbrant 2014, 531–532). The diadem found in the gallery grave at Søsrum, Frederiksborg is securely dated to Period IA (Lomborg 1973, 147), showing a contact between the two regions. There seem to be solid indications that the child buried in grave 4/2 in Abbekås had strong connections with Central Europe.

What is the relationship between this child in 4/2 and the Abbekås area? The strontium isotope value indicates that the child could be local, and if so may have been the subject of a planned marriage alliance and dressed according to the area of origin of the intended companion. Research indicates that in Central Europe girls could be regarded as adults around the age of 14 (Neugebauer-Maresch and Neugebauer 1988, Siemoneit 1996), but the age of adulthood in the Nordic Bronze Age is difficult to determine due to low bone preservation. However, analysis of the hair of the woman found in an oak-log coffin at Skrydstrup, Denmark, shows that she moved away from her area of origin to Skrydstrup at around age 13–14, and then did not travel to another geological region in her last years (Frei et al. 2017), indicating that the Nordic Bronze Age start of adulthood was likely to have been similar to that in Central Europe.

The child in grave 4/2 in Abbekås is thus probably too young to have moved there for marriage. Instead, the proposal here is that the deceased may have been part of some kind of fosterage. As shown there are a number of possible forms of fostering that could be playing a role here. The strontium isotope values may be local, indicating that this may have been a case of long-term fosterage, where foster parents take on long-term responsibility from when the child was born until adulthood, as seen in some cases in the medieval period (Crawford 1999, 122–124; Smith 1992, 12). The strontium isotope values could also come from Central Europe, where there are many areas with similar values where women are known to have worn

similar diadems. This could indicate fostering at a later stage in the child's life, e.g. fostering for education, as also seen in the Medieval period (Crawford 1999, 122–124).

Further studies of the status of children with similar artefacts in Central Europe will make it possible to discern whether this was a possible fosterage between equals. It is not unlikely that there were social networks across large areas of Europe among the middle-ranking elites. Thus, there are indications that some kind of foster system existed as early as in the Bronze Age, and it is worth keeping this possibility in mind as scientific sourcing methods develop and more relevant material comes to light.

## Conclusion

In this paper it has been argued that the child buried in grave 4/2 in Abbekås may have been fostered. A number of different possible forms of fostering have been suggested. It seems that fosterage was a part of Bronze Age society as well. The potential for further research on the fostering in prehistoric periods has been demonstrated. Knowledge about fostering in the Viking and Medieval periods could be a useful tool in order to help us understand by analogy the different possible models for fosterage systems – and what material traces they may leave for the archaeologist.