

Mounds Against the State? An Anarchist Approach to Mound Construction, Environmental Stress, and Centralization of Power in Viking and Merovingian Age Scandinavia

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In this article, the author explores the cooperative aspects of mound construction in Late Iron Age Scandinavia. Arguing against the outdated but widely held view that only centralized rule could organize monument construction, he investigates how participation in mound construction affected the people of Sør-Fron in south-eastern Norway. He contends, first, that repeated participation in mound construction helped create a sense of belonging and shared identity, which was maintained through centuries of major environmental and political turmoil. Second, mound construction was part of an active and conscious strategy to limit aggrandizement and prevent centralization and concentration of power. Rejection of Christianity arguably worked in similar ways. The author concludes with considerations of approaches to Iron Age monuments, emphasizing the importance of consensus and community-building and the role of communal opposition to centralized rule.

Keywords: disaster, counterpower, climate, social action, solidarity

INTRODUCTION

The Sør-Fron area in south-eastern Norway includes a site named Hundorp. The four large mounds at Hundorp are a major reason for the site being interpreted as the seat of a dynasty of Viking and Merovingian Age chiefs (Brøgger, 1916; Hougen, 1961; Myhre, 1992: 170; Jacobsen & Larsen, 2005; Gundersen, 2016; Larsen, 2016a; Sæbø, 2018; Gundersen et al., 2023). The hypothesis

aligns with how archaeologists have approached monuments since the birth of the discipline, but, if we lift our eyes away from Hundorp itself, we realize that the mounds of Sør-Fron are at odds with established narratives of monuments and centralized rule.

Large funerary monuments are commonly seen as evidence of social hierarchies, employed by elites to shape ideologies and lure people to accept oppression (Brøgger, 1916; Childe, 1951: 100–05, 114; Binford,

1971; Tainter, 1978; Trigger, 1990; Wason, 1994: 20, 146–49 with references; Skre, 1996; Kristiansen, 2007). This hypothesis assumes that only coercive elite dominance could make people do the immense work that monument construction requires. Here, I argue that the large mounds of Sør-Fron are so numerous and so widely distributed that they are hardly indicative of stable dynastic dominance. Within a new materialist approach (Ingold, 2007; Robb, 2015) to Paul Connerton's (1989) work on shared action, I argue that mound construction required large-scale cooperation that fostered group identity and maintained it through times of major turmoil. Exploring mound construction through the lens of anarchist theory (Graeber, 2004; Angelbeck & Grier, 2012), I suggest that mound construction in Sør-Fron does not represent dynastic power but conscious attempts to regulate aggrandizement and oppose centralized rule.

THE MOUNDS OF SØR-FRON

Before we explore the mounds of Sør-Fron (Figure 1), let us note that Hundorp features in a passage in the saga of the eleventh-century king Olav Haraldsson, as told by the thirteenth-century historian Snorre Sturlason (1930: 304–09). The text presents Hundorp as a site of communal assembly. The archaeologists' reading of this passage tends to favour the hypothesis that Hundorp was a centre of power (see especially Hougen, 1961), whereas historians tend to see it differently. Anton Christian Bang (1897), Gunnhild Røthe (2004), and Gro Steinsland (2005) interpret the passage as a work of fiction that carries little or no information on the political constellations of eleventh-century Sør-Fron. The relevant passage will be addressed later; for now, suffice to say that

if we read Olav Haraldsson's saga the way historians read it, the hypothesis of a centre of power at Hundorp hinges mainly on the mounds.

Sør-Fron is a small municipality in the Gudbrandsdalen mountain valley in the Østlandet region of present-day Norway (Figure 2). Most burials in Sør-Fron are small mounds and cairns in the mountains, but here I shall concentrate on the mounds in the lowland. Only one of these has been excavated by modern standards (see Gundersen et al., 2023: 168), leaving much uncertainty concerning the dates of the remaining mounds. We do know that mounds were built in lowland Sør-Fron from at least the fourth century AD onwards, as attested by a richly furnished burial mound at Kjørstad in the west of the studied area. Most of the mounds in lowland Sør-Fron were probably built in the Late Iron Age, which comprises the Viking and Merovingian Ages (Table 1) (Jacobsen & Larsen, 2005; Larsen, 2016a: 67–69; Sæbø, 2020).

There are twenty-two mounds in lowland Sør-Fron recorded in *Askeladden*, the official database of Norwegian heritage sites. Their shapes and sizes vary, reaching more than 30 m in diameter and 8 m in height. Late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century records indicate that approximately three times as many mounds survived at the time (Larsen, 2016a: 65), i.e. more than sixty mounds existed in the late eighteenth century. The eighteenth-century historian Gerhard Schøning mentions large solitary mounds and seven locations in Sør-Fron with one or more clusters of mounds when he visited the area in 1775 (Schøning, 1980: 107–25); he lists nine locations, of which one site (Sørdorp) lies outside the current borders of Sør-Fron, and one cluster (Fron prestegård) is seemingly mentioned twice. This number is remarkable because describing mounds was far from the



Figure 1. *The southeast of central lowland Sør-Fron, seen from the north-eastern mound at Hundorp. The mound to the right is the easternmost mound at Hundorp. The obelisk on the mound was raised in 1907. Photo by Kristina Antal, reproduced with her permission.*

purpose of Schøning's journey. There are indeed many mounds known from later sources that Schøning never described and that he probably never visited, such as the cluster at Kjørstad (see Figure 2). The seven clusters that Schøning describes are thus not all the local mound groups; Schøning's clusters and the cluster at Kjørstad are merely a minimum number of clusters that had survived by 1775. Allowing for the possibility that mounds had been demolished not just after but also before the 1770s suggests that some of the clusters observed in 1775 were once part of a continuously monumentalized landscape with no clearly defined centre. Hypothetically, some of the mounds in Sør-Fron could have been built at the command of elites, but if we were to interpret all these clusters as centres of dynastic power, we would be left with a myriad Late Iron Age dynasties of chiefs

in a narrow stretch of about ten kilometres east-west (Figure 2). We should therefore either reconsider our conceptions of centres of power or, as I suggest here, reconsider assumptions about monuments and centralized rule.

MOUNDS AND DISASTERS

Increased mound construction in Sør-Fron coincided with a prolonged period of diverse and often extreme pressures. In the mid-sixth century AD, the northern hemisphere suffered an abrupt cooling of the climate that lasted for years, and summer temperatures remained below the previous average for decades (Gundersen, 2021 with references). Cold summers could cause widespread crop failure several years in a row and hence famine. Gundersen's doctoral thesis (2021) analysed the effect

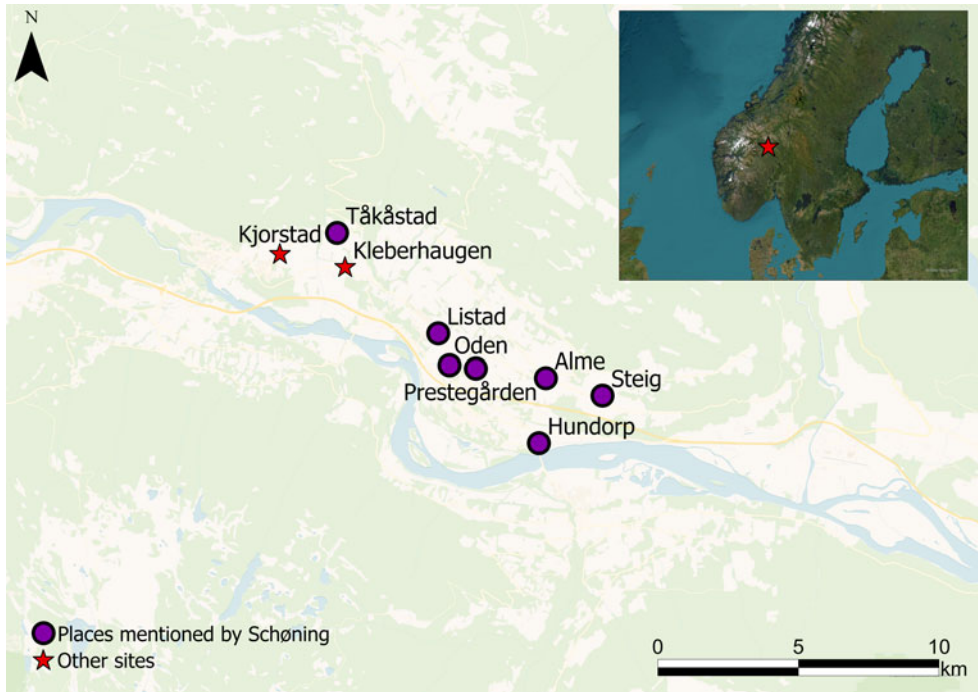


Figure 2. Map of the western parts of lowland Sør-Fron. Note that the clusters mentioned by Schøning are not all the clusters still extant in 1775, as they exclude, for instance, the cluster at Kjørstad. All locations except Kjørstad, Kleberhaugen, and Hundorp are approximate locations based on descriptions by Schøning. Map by Sjoerd van Riel and Andreas Ropeid Sæbø.

of the mid-sixth-century event in Fron (Nord-Fron and Sør-Fron) as compared to other parts of southern Norway. Based on evidence from settlements, bogs, and other kinds of agricultural indicators, he concluded that the effect of the mid-sixth-century event was more severe in Fron than in other areas he studied. This might be owed to the fact that Fron lies close to the climatic margin of crop farming so that even minor fluctuations in temperature could have dire consequences (Gundersen, 2021: 373).

In addition to crop failure, Sør-Fron and the wider Gudbrandsdalen area was exposed to flooding. The danger of flooding is particularly severe in the years following a prolonged period of cold weather, such as the cold period of the mid-sixth century, because more snow than usual accumulates (Gundersen, 2016: 324; Nesje et al., 2016: 90). To make things worse, flooding in Gudbrandsdalen was likely to cause landslides. The effects of such disasters should not be underestimated. Written sources concerning a

Table 1. Chronology of the Iron Age in the Østlandet region in Norway.

Early Iron Age			Late Iron Age	
Pre-Roman Iron Age	Roman Iron Age	Migration Period	Merovingian Age	Viking Age
500 BC–AD 0	AD 0–400	AD 400–550	AD 550–800	AD 800–1050

major flood and landslide event in 1789 document that the event led to immediate starvation. Crops and storage structures were ruined, and many fields and pastures were so damaged that it took years to restore them. Other fields and pastures were lost forever. So much farmland was ruined that the area could no longer sustain its population (Sommerfeldt, 1972).

Excavations in Sør-Fron suggest that at least one flooding and landslide incident in the early Late Iron Age was of a scale comparable to the disaster of 1789, and that flooding and landslides constituted a threat throughout the Late Iron Age (Gundersen, 2016). Indeed, a marked fall in settlement sites and other indicators of agriculture continued, and in some cases became even more pronounced in the following centuries than it was in the mid-sixth century (Gundersen, 2021: 376, see Gundersen, 2021: chapter 9.1). Combined, crop failures, floods, and landslides must have created extremely precarious conditions for survival (see Sommerfeldt, 1972; Gundersen, 2021).

JOINT ACTION IN TIMES OF TUMULT

Research on Iron Age mounds tends to treat them as representations of human beliefs and agency. For example, Sarah Tarlow (1995: 138) and Bjørn Myhre (2015: 179–80) argue that Late Iron Age mounds were used in fertility rituals. This might be part of the reason why so many mounds were built in Sør-Fron at a time when the area was exposed to landslides, flooding, and crop failure (Sæbø, 2020). However, a new materialist approach to the work of Paul Connerton (1989), building on Durkheim (1995), suggests that while mounds certainly are expressions of human beliefs and agency, they might also have played an active role in

shaping the mentalities of their makers. Connerton and Durkheim show that collective action and the process of acting together is instrumental in the creation, maintenance, and remodelling of shared beliefs, ideals, worldviews, and identities. An example from archaeological research is Swenson's (2018) study of feasting at a Late Moche ceremonial site in the Jequetepeque valley of present-day Peru. The site is on a much larger scale than anything found in Sør-Fron, but there are certain things that the two areas have in common, such as the Late Moche, just like the people of Late Iron Age Sør-Fron, living in a mountain valley that was frequently exposed to a variety of environmental and political turmoil (Chapdelaine, 2011; Swenson, 2018).

An observation by Swenson (2018: 73) which is particularly relevant here is that the feasts of the Late Moche relied on vast supplies of food and drink. The feast itself passed quickly but assembling supplies for it was a substantial task that took weeks or even months. Swenson (2018) argues that this repeated joint action—not just the actual feast but the production of supplies and other activities surrounding the feast—contributed to binding together a decentralized population and creating and perpetuating a common, shared identity.

Returning to our case, it is likely that feasts took place before, during, and/or after a mound was built (Østigård & Goldhahn, 2006). More importantly, the material properties of the mounds suggest that their construction required joint, coordinated, communal action. We do not know much about how the mounds of lowland Sør-Fron were made, but we do know that they were largely built of stones, turf, logs, and soil. These materials are heavy and bulky. Piling them up in the form of a large mound requires cooperation by many people for extended periods (Skre, 1996: 455–60; Holst & Rasmussen,

2015). For instance, the Kleberhaugen mound (Figure 2), one of the largest mounds still extant in Sør-Fron, measures *c.* 50 × 25 m on the ground. It lies on sloping terrain and is about 1.5 m high in the upper part and 5 m tall in the lower part of the slope, which suggests that it consists of over 2500 m³ of material. Bjørn Ringstad (1987: 16–19) estimates that a person equipped with Iron Age tools could build between 0.4 and 2 m³ of mound per day, which suggests that heaping up 2500 m³ required somewhere between 1250 and 6250 working days. To this, we should add the time it took to transport the materials—which studies of other mounds suggest could sometimes come from considerable distances—and that materials were often not simply heaped but carefully arranged (Myhre, 2015: 179; Cannell, 2021). While the estimate is obviously rather speculative and should only be taken as a vague indication, it illustrates that mound construction took much more time than the Late Moche feasts that Swenson describes. Depending on how many people took part in the project, mound construction might have taken weeks, months, or longer (Skre, 1996: 459–60; Holst & Rasmussen, 2015). Moreover, as in the Moche case, the people drawn to the site were but the tip of the iceberg. Considering how much time it took to make a mound, the quantity of food it took to supply each participant in a mound construction event must by far have exceeded that of the extravagant but short-lived Late Moche feasts that Swenson describes. This implies that mound construction relied not just on the hands that placed stone upon stone, turf upon turf, it also relied on the natural resources and the vast numbers of people it took to produce the food and other supplies that the mound-makers consumed. In this light, the Sør-Fron mounds emerge as bundles in a meshwork tying

together the fields in the lowland, the pastures in the mountains, and the hands that milked the cows, tilled the earth, and in other ways worked to sustain the mound construction.

It might be that the people who took part in the actual building of the mounds were affected the most. Settlements were dispersed and day-to-day interaction with people from outside the household was naturally restricted (Eriksen, 2019: 111), but to make a large mound, large numbers of people had to cooperate, toil, sweat, and live together for prolonged periods and meet face to face in other ways (Holst & Rasmussen, 2015). Those who stayed behind were also affected as they saw parts of their community leave and eventually return with tales of the event. Mounds significantly affected the rhythm of daily life for everyone who worked to sustain mound construction. It is possible that not all the people involved ever met. Still, as they went about producing the supplies needed to build the mounds, they must have known that the project they were engaged in involved many people. And just like in Late Moche Peru, this did not happen once or twice. Over and over again, resources and people became enmeshed in mound construction in what must have seemed one long project.

The ideas and ideals embodied in the process would probably vary from person to person, from mound to mound, and through time. At the most basic level, it is likely that the act of working together for a common goal for a prolonged period created an idea of belonging, of being part of the same thing (Holst & Rasmussen, 2015; Swenson, 2018). This suggests that repeated participation embodied a feeling of belonging and, possibly, of solidarity, and maintained and developed such sentiments throughout centuries of major turmoil. Thus, by viewing mound construction in Late Iron Age Sør-Fron as

one long project we gain the impression that the mounds made society as much as the other way round.

MOUNDS THE OTHER WAY AROUND

A literature study by Lund et al. (2022) argues that while pre-processual archaeology, processual archaeology, post-processual archaeology, and post-post-processual archaeology are often presented as opposites, they are strikingly similar in how they approach prehistoric social action. Notably all tend to see social action as a constant struggle for domination. A premise in leading works of processual archaeology and other forms of social evolutionary theory is that voluntary cooperation for mutual benefits can only work in small groups of people, such as bands and extended families (e.g. Service, 1962; Dunbar, 1996). Service (1962: 5) describes concentration of power as ‘progress’. To him, only a concentration of power could organize large-scale interaction. We have seen that large monuments require large-scale interaction. To social evolutionary studies, this implies that centralized rule is at the core of monument construction, and that the size of the monument indicates the extent of the ruler’s power (e.g. Tainter, 1978; Skre, 1996: 460).

Where processual archaeology tended to treat monuments as somewhat generic expressions of elite ideology, post-processual archaeology was more inclined to treat monuments as symbols of power unique to their historical context (Lund et al., 2022). Emphasis shifted, but the premise remained that monuments were evidence of elite agency. The full range of issues with this approach cannot be addressed here (but see e.g. Kienlin, 2012; Lund et al., 2022), but two aspects are particularly relevant here.

First, a growing number of studies suggests that groups without central

leadership are perfectly capable of organizing complex systems of interaction. Examples include warfare, trade, and major construction works initiated ‘from below’ and organized by mutuality, consensus, and cooperation (see e.g. Graeber, 2004; Angelbeck, 2016; DeMarras, 2016; Ikehara, 2016; Borake, 2019; Sanger, 2022). Obviously, this does not mean that no monument has ever functioned as a symbol of elite power, but it challenges the hypothesis that large-scale public action is *de facto* evidence of coercive rule. Some even argue that mutuality and voluntary cooperation have capacities for mass mobilization that elite power does not have, because voluntary work for the greater good might increase self-esteem and prestige in ways that forced or paid work may not (Kienlin, 2012: 22).

Second, a range of studies argues that concentration of power is not universally sought (e.g. Shennan, 1993; Osborne, 2007; Scott, 2009; Angelbeck & Grier, 2012; Kienlin, 2012). A collection of essays called *Societies Against the State* by the anthropologist Pierre Clastres (1989) was influential in this respect. Clastres argued that the stateless societies he studied remained stateless not because they lacked the ability to ‘develop’ but because they found strategies to actively and consciously prevent the concentration of power. One such strategy was, as later anarchist-theoretical studies explored, to engage in large-scale public rituals that were carefully monitored so as not to allow would-be rulers to aggrandize themselves (e.g. Graeber, 2004; Angelbeck & Grier, 2012; Sanger, 2022). The mundane character of the artefacts from the Late Iron Age mounds in Sør-Fron is interesting in this respect, especially when compared to the fourth-century mound at Kjørstad in the same area (location on Figure 2).

This burial mound was demolished in 1867. It yielded more than twenty-four

artefacts that archaeologist Bjørn Hougen later described as ‘one of the stateliest finds from fourth to fifth century Norway’ (1947: 116; my translation from the Norwegian). The grave goods included three finely crafted gold rings, a Roman glass vessel, a Roman bronze dish, a ceramic container from south-western Norway, pins and brooches of silver and bronze, as well as two swords. Another burial at Kjørstad of roughly similar date, possibly a grave without mound, contained another gold ring (Gundersen, 2016: 322). In contrast to the Early Iron Age graves, a Late Iron Age mound at Kjørstad contained a sickle, three arrowheads, and a fire steel. The most remarkable assemblage of known provenance comes from a Late Iron Age Sør-Fron mound at Prestegården/Kjørstad nordre, with two oval brooches made of bronze, a single-edged sword, and a bridle (see Table 2).

Given that most mounds in Sør-Fron were demolished without archaeological oversight, it is likely that artefacts were lost in the process. Nonetheless, the pattern shown by the artefacts that have survived is intriguing. At the Late Iron Age mound at Kjørstad, the symbolic dimensions of the sickle, arrowheads, and fire steel may have been complex (see Sæbø, 2020), but, at a basic level, sickles and arrowheads referenced farming and hunting, i.e. skills, knowledge, and lived experience that were widely shared in Iron Age Gudbrandsdalen. The long-distance imports and other prestigious artefacts of the fourth-century Kjørstad burial, on the other hand, reference the exclusive, extravagant world of an extra-local elite (see Hedeager, 1990). In other words, the difference between the fourth-century mound and the later mounds is not just quantitative, but also qualitative. The former speaks of exclusivity, while the message of the latter is arguably much more inclusive. This chimes with the

large-scale export of iron, pelts, antler, and other products from Late Iron Age Sør-Fron and the wider Gudbrandsdalen area (e.g. Larsen, 2016a, 2016b; Pilø et al., 2018). If these resources were exported, it is reasonable to suppose that something was imported in return. Irmelin Martens’ (2009) study of imported swords in Vågå and Lesja in northern Gudbrandsdalen suggests that access to long-distance imports was good, and there are indeed examples of prestige artefacts from Late Iron Age Sør-Fron. Most notable among them is an assemblage of artefacts found in a field near Hundorp in 1921, commonly interpreted as grave goods (Larsen, 2016a: 71); it included two finely crafted oval brooches and a gilded rectangular brooch, two ceramic beads, one glass bead, and a spiral bead made of silver. As far as we know there was nothing to suggest that the grave had been covered by a mound, although modern techniques to detect traces of demolished mounds were not available at the time. In any case, this assemblage, and Martens’ (2009) study of imported swords, indicates relatively easy access to long-distance imports and other forms of prestigious objects. Ready access to such objects suggests that choosing to deposit mundane artefacts was not because imported goods were scarce but because mundane objects were deliberately selected as appropriate for deposition in a mound. If the brooches and beads from Hundorp were indeed buried in flat ground, it might also suggest that deposition of exclusive artefacts was reserved for graves that were *not* to be covered by mounds. Given the lack of professional excavations of mounds in Sør-Fron, this argument cannot, however, be taken further. Instead, I will turn to the difference in character between mound construction and artefact deposition.

Something that has puzzled Norwegian archaeologists is that the largest Iron Age

Table 2. Late Iron Age artefacts from mounds in lowland Sør-Fron, from the digital catalogue of Norwegian archaeological museums (<http://www.Unimus.no>). The list excludes artefacts that, for various reasons, never entered museum collections. All dates are based on the typological dating of the artefacts found in the mounds (for discussion of the dates, see Sæbø, 2020: 36–37).

Location	Museum catalogue ID no. (www.unimus.no)	Artefacts	Dating
Kjorstad	C4159–4178	Over twenty-four artefacts, including three ornate gold rings, other ornate personal adornments, a Roman dish, a Roman glass vessel, two swords, and a ceramic vessel from the west coast of Norway	Late Roman Iron Age (AD 200–400)
Kjorstad	C15732	Belt buckle made of stone	Fourth–seventh century AD
Graffer	C3230 and C3231	A sickle and nine arrowheads	Third–seventh century AD, probably sixth century
Prestegården/ Kjorstad nordre	C25051a–d	Two oval brooches, a single-edged sword, and a bridle	Viking Age (AD 800–1050)
Alme nedre	C28046	Axe head	Viking Age
Kjorstad nedre	C30253	Spearhead	Viking Age
Grytting nordre	C54660	Oval brooch	Viking Age
Kjorstad	C6419–6421	Three arrowheads, fire steel, and sickle	Late Iron Age (AD 540–1050)

mounds have produced few or no artefacts, whereas wealthy burial assemblages have turned up in small mounds and in burials without mounds (e.g. Myhre, 1992; Larsen, 2016a). Late Iron Age ship burials are an obvious exception, but we do not know of any such burials in Sør-Fron.

To Larsen (2016a: 63), negative correlation between mound size and grave goods appears paradoxical. He interprets lavish grave goods and large burial mounds as expressions of the same thing: power. He would expect them to correlate, but, if we consider the actions involved in the deposition of an artefact and the construction of a mound, artefact deposition and mound construction appear as opposites. The deposition of prestigious artefacts requires wealth. At the very least, one must possess the artefacts that are to be deposited. Deposition of long-distance imports requires contact with the outside world. This may suggest that depositing imports in some cases worked to devalue

local skills and knowledge (Blanton et al., 1996; Skoglund, 2009). Hypothetically speaking, artefacts could have been deposited by one single individual, although obviously this may not have been the case. Large mounds, on the other hand, could only be made by large numbers of people. This suggests that the different kinds of mounds—small mounds with wealthy grave goods and large mounds with few artefacts or mundane artefacts—might have worked in radically different ways. The latter relied on everyone doing their share of the hauling of materials and can have served as a regulator that evened out differences between people who did and people who did not have access to exclusive artefacts.

In Sør-Fron we have two richly furnished graves from Early Iron Age Kjorstad on the one hand, and large mounds on the other. We do not know what most of the large mounds in Sør-Fron contained, but two large mounds have been excavated, in

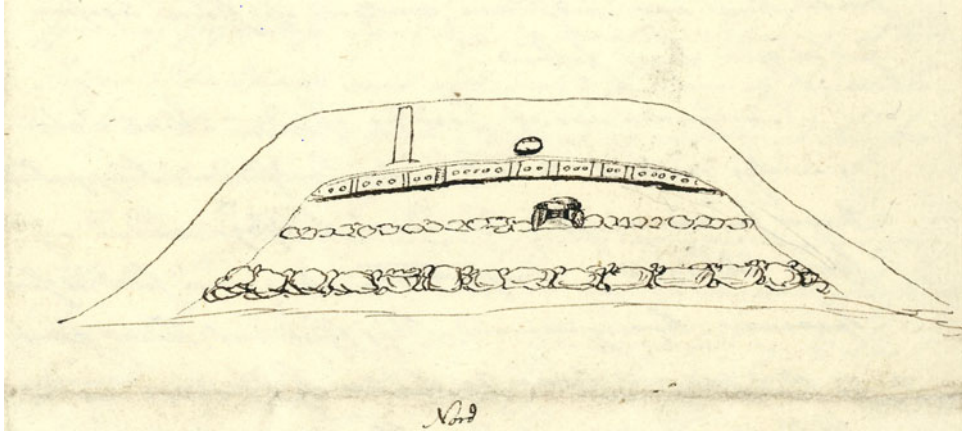


Figure 3. Cross-section drawing of the southern mound at Hundorp, from the excavation in 1829–31 (Anon., 1831). Reproduced by permission of the Museum of Cultural History in Oslo.

1785–86 and 1829–31 respectively. The earlier excavation found no grave and no artefacts (Hiorthøy, 1990: 69). While this might indicate a lack of competence on the part of its excavator, it may be that the mound never contained a grave, as excavations of some mounds in other parts of Scandinavia have shown (see e.g. Gansum, 2004: chapter 7). In the mound excavated in 1829–31 (Figure 3), preservation was so good that a layer of birch bark was well preserved, and there was nothing to suggest that the mound had been opened prior to the excavation. The excavation was extensive and revealed a chamber containing burned bones but no artefacts (Anon., 1831). The project of building the mound was probably imbued with countless layers of meaning. There was, however, no room for deposition of portable wealth.

STUBBORN SØR-FRON

The archaeological record of Iron Age Scandinavia bears evidence of at least two distinctive forms of feasting. Feasting is important, because the feast was a centre

for political discussion, ritual life, and production of public memory (Herschend, 1993; Eriksen, 2010). Outdoor feasting, which is traceable archaeologically as cooking pits, was of a public, collective, and, arguably, inclusive nature (Narmo, 1996; Gjerpe, 2001; Bukkemoen, 2016). Written evidence, though ambiguous, suggests that it involved public discussions and consensus-making (Tacitus, 1999 as analysed by Gjerpe, 2001: 8). Indoor feasting, on the other hand, was exclusive, and carried out in the halls of kings, chiefs, and other aggrandizers (Herschend, 1993; Eriksen, 2010).

During the Iron Age, feasting moved indoors, but the process took place at different times in different parts of Scandinavia. In many parts of the Østlandet region, the change from outdoor to indoor feasting corresponds roughly with the transition from the Early to the Late Iron Age (the mid-sixth century AD) (Bukkemoen, 2016). In areas like Vestfold on the coast of the Østlandet region, it seems that the change occurred much earlier, as the use of cooking pits declined from the fourth century AD onwards (Gundersen et al., 2020). In lowland Sør-Fron, outdoor

feasting continued at least until the late tenth century (Gundersen et al., 2023: 169), possibly into the eleventh century, which marks the end of the last part of the Iron Age, namely the Viking Age.

Concerning Late Viking Age Sør-Fron, the saga literature presents Gudbrandsdalen as the antithesis of the missionary kings and other representatives of the new religion (Steinsland, 2005). In the saga of the early eleventh-century missionary king Olav Haraldsson, posthumously known as St Olav, the final, decisive victory over the heathens takes place at Hundorp in Sør-Fron (Sturlason, 1930: 304–09).

Steinsland (2005) argues that the tale of the confrontation at Hundorp is a fairytale partly or completely made up by Christian historians. This suggests that Christian historians deliberately selected Sør-Fron as the scene of the symbolic defeat of the most stubborn resistance to Christianity and royal rule in Norway, which might indicate that the people of Gudbrandsdalen were among the last in southern Norway to convert to Christianity (Steinsland, 2005). Archaeology confirms that the people of Sør-Fron were reluctant to give up the pagan cult, as pagan burial customs were maintained for significantly longer in Sør-Fron than in most other parts of southern Norway (Nordeide, 2011: 234).

Steinsland (2005) points out that the conservatism of Gudbrandsdalen is intriguing. Gudbrandsdalen was the main route of land-based communication between the Østlandet region, the Trøndelag region, and the northern parts of the Vestlandet region. This suggests that Sør-Fron and Gudbrandsdalen would be readily exposed to new ideas and impulses, yet, as we have seen, people were inclined to retain traditional ritual practice. From an anarchist-theoretical perspective, observing that the people of Sør-Fron were

aware of the new religion but continued to bury their dead in pagan ways suggests that the people of Late Iron Age Sør-Fron consciously rejected the new religion. This matters in the context of the present discussion because of the political implications of the new religion. Nordeide's (2011: 324) discussion of the reasons why the people of Agder in the very south of Norway were slow to convert suggests that the position of the local elites was intertwined with the pagan cult to the extent that they risked losing their power-base if they gave up paganism. I suggest we go one step further. Steinsland (1997: 155–67) argues that the pagan cult was centred on communal rituals. Considering my earlier discussion of the cooperative aspects of mound construction, mounds might seem like an archetype of such communal rituals. The Christian religion, on the other hand, centred on the individual, and was used by the emerging Scandinavian kingdoms to legitimize centralized, coercive rule (Steinsland, 1997; Nordeide, 2011). Of relevance to the Sør-Fron case-study, note that early Christian law in Norway made it illegal to build and venerate mounds (Robberstad, 1952: 44), which suggests that the mounds and the pagan cult that the mounds represented were seen as a threat to the religion of the emerging kingdom. In this respect, it is intriguing that human bone from the centre of the only mound in lowland Sør-Fron that has been professionally excavated was dated to the late tenth or early eleventh century, which is surprisingly late for pagan burials in Norway (Gundersen et al., 2023: 170; see Nordeide, 2011: 279–80). Keeping in mind the argument presented above, this may indicate that in Sør-Fron, rejection of Christianity and mound construction were parts of the toolkit of people who actively worked to counter aggrandizement and resist concentration of power.

AN ISOLATED PHENOMENON?

Bill Angelbeck (2019: 80) once argued that anarchist-theoretical perspectives on small-scale societies can ‘provide alternative and useful interpretations for cases in Scandinavian cultural history’. It is therefore appropriate to ask to what extent the tendencies described above were unique to Sør-Fron.

The contrast between richly furnished graves from the latter half of the Early Iron Age and sparsely furnished graves from the first half of the Late Iron Age is not unique to Sør-Fron. Unprecedented amounts of gold and long-distance imports were deposited in graves and other contexts dated to the late Early Iron Age in Scandinavia. This ended abruptly in the mid-sixth century AD, which coincides rather suggestively with the mid-sixth-century climatic event (Axboe, 1999; Price & Gräslund, 2015). At roughly the same time, people in Scandinavia started to build mounds of an unprecedented size (e.g. Price & Gräslund, 2015: 121).

A vigorous debate in Scandinavian Iron Age archaeology concerns the social impact of the mid-sixth-century event. Some argue that the mid-sixth-century event worked as a major leveller, while others take the exact opposite position (e.g. Iversen, 2016 with references). The former hypothesis is based on aspects such as an absence of gold and long-distance imports, a standardization of jewellery, a reorganization of the agricultural landscape, and analogies with the effects of the plague of the fourteenth century AD. From a social evolutionary perspective, the large mounds of the early Merovingian Age and terminal Migration period are the main pieces of evidence that disproves the hypothesis of major levelling in the mid-sixth century (Iversen, 2016: 71). The discussion above suggests that it is the other way around. The large mounds in Norway

dated to the early Merovingian period and terminal Migration period have not yielded richly furnished graves (e.g. Myhre, 1992; Larsen, 2016a). Some contained no grave or graves that were a millennium older than the mound (e.g. Gansum, 2004; Gaut, 2016: 210), which might suggest that the mounds signified not so much the position of selected individuals as the agency of the group (see discussion above and Leverkus, 2021).

Much changed from the beginning of the Merovingian Age in the mid-sixth century to the end of the Viking Age some 500 years later, including the gradual emergence of early states. However, while some Viking Age mounds were exceptionally well furnished, other mounds were still made in the old manner, in the sense that they contained little or no grave goods (e.g. Gansum & Østigård, 2004). This might indicate that a group-oriented ideology that flourished in the early Merovingian Age was still maintained and even promoted, though increasingly contested, well into the Viking Age (see Borake, 2019 for similar conclusions based on other data). This suggests a situation that was much more complex and much *messier* than any neat, evolutionary scheme might suggest. In other words, it seems that Sør-Fron was not an isolated phenomenon but an example of trends that might be identified, though sometimes in a less pronounced form, on a larger geographical scale.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In Late Iron Age Sør-Fron there were so many large mounds that, if we were to see every cluster of mounds as solid evidence of centralized power, the word ‘centralized’ would lose its meaning. I have taken a different approach, and re-examined the role that mounds might have played in Late

Iron Age Sør-Fron. The conclusion is two-fold. First, the extensive cooperation that mound construction required worked to create and recreate shared identity and, possibly, solidarity, which might have been particularly relevant in the face of major environmental turmoil. Second, mound construction encouraged a communal ethos as it relied not on personal wealth but on cooperation. It even seems, although the evidence is incomplete, that the deposition of exclusive artefacts in mounds was seen as inappropriate. It is interesting to note that mound construction was part of a collectively oriented pagan cult that was increasingly being challenged in Late Iron Age Scandinavia but stubbornly maintained in Sør-Fron. The mounds may attest to a mentality that differed widely from, and might even have deliberately opposed, the ideology of the Late Iron Age Scandinavian states.

What I have presented ties in with publications that suggest that centralized rule was not a necessity for large-scale cooperation. Indeed, large-scale ritual activity could in some cases have served counter aggrandizement. I offer this article as a contribution to a growing body of research that takes established narratives of prehistoric social organization and turns them upside down.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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Les tumuli contre l'état ? Construction, détérioration du climat et centralisation du pouvoir en Scandinavie aux époques viking et mérovingienne dans une perspective anarchique

L'auteur de cet article explore la construction des tumuli de la fin de l'âge du Fer scandinave sous ses aspects collaboratifs. Il conteste l'opinion largement partagée mais dépassée que seuls les pouvoirs centralisés auraient pu organiser la construction des monuments en examinant comment la création des tumuli affectait les communautés de Sør-Fron dans le sud-est de la Norvège. Il soutient que la participation répétée aux activités de construction créait un sentiment d'appartenance et d'identité commune maintenue au cours de siècles qui connurent de vastes changements climatiques et politiques. La construction des tumuli aurait fait partie d'une stratégie active et délibérée de limiter la glorification, la centralisation et la concentration du pouvoir. Un refus de se convertir au Christianisme aurait aussi pu jouer un rôle. L'auteur conclut avec certaines considérations sur les monuments de l'âge du Fer et met l'accent sur les activités consensuelles et communes ainsi que sur l'opposition à un régime centralisé. Translation by Madeleine Hummler

Mots-clés : désastre, pouvoir, climat, action sociale, solidarité

Grabhügel gegen den Staat? Grabhügel, Klimaverschlechterung und Machtzentralisierung im Merowinger- und wikingzeitlichen Skandinavien in anarchistischer Sicht

In diesem Artikel werden die kooperativen Aspekte der Errichtung von Grabhügeln in Skandinavien in der späten Eisenzeit erforscht. Am Beispiel der Teilnahme im Aufbau von Grabhügeln bei den Gemeinschaften von Sør-Fron in Südost-Norwegen wendet sich der Verfasser gegen eine weitverbreitete, aber überholte Auffassung, dass nur zentralisierte Gesellschaften in der Lage waren, Denkmäler zu bauen. Er ist der Meinung, dass die wiederholte Teilnahme beim Bauen ein Gefühl der Zugehörigkeit und eine gemeinsame Identität förderte, welche durch Jahrhunderte von Klimaverschlechterung und politischer Unruhe überdauerte. Die Errichtung von Grabhügeln hätte zu einer aktiven und absichtlichen Strategie gehören können, welche die Verberrlichung, Zentralisierung und Machtkonzentration zu beschränken versuchte. Vielleicht wurde die Christianisierung auch ähnlich abgelehnt. Der Verfasser schließt mit einigen Überlegungen über Auffassungen von eisenzeitlichen Denkmälern und unterstreicht die Bedeutung von Konsensus, Gemeinschaft und gemeinsamen Widerstand gegenüber zentralisierter Macht. Translation by Madeleine Hummler

Stichworte: Katastrophe, Macht, Klima, soziale Maßnahmen, Solidarität