

## **Swedish Prehistory** **By Oscar Montelius, 1888**

The history of the earliest inhabitants of the North was till about fifty years ago shrouded in obscurity. It was not till then that antiquarians began generally to recognize that the antiquities that are dug up from time to time. And the barrows and stone monuments which still abound throughout the country do not all belong to that part of heathen times which immediately preceded the introduction of Christianity, and of which the Icelandic sagas relate. When Ansgar first came to Sweden in the ninth century, the use of iron was universal in the country, and had been so for a long time. A careful investigation of the antiquities has shown however, that before that period, now usually known as the Iron Age, there was another, when iron was altogether unknown, in which weapons and tools were made of bronze, a mixture of copper and tin. The period, called the Bronze Age, had, as well as the Iron Age, continued for many centuries. But before the beginning of the Bronze Age, Sweden had for a very long time been inhabited by people who lived in entire ignorance of the use of metals and were therefore compelled to make their instruments and weapons of such materials as stone, horn, bone and wood. This last period is known therefore as the Stone Age.

This division of heathen times in the North into three great periods was already made and published as long ago as the last century, but it was not till 1834 40 that it had any special importance in antiquarian researches. The honour of developing a scientific system based upon this triple division – a work so important for gaining an insight in the earliest condition of the whole human race – belongs to the savants of the North. The first place among them is occupied by Councillor Christian Jurgensen Thomsen ( died 1865 ), to whose labours we are mainly indebted for the celebrated Museum of Northern Antiquities in Copenhagen. Next to him we must place as the founders of the prehistoric archaeology of the north Professor Sven Nilsson of Lund ( died 1883 ), and Chamberlain J. J. A. Worsaae ( died 1885 ). Thomsen's system was soon taken up by the Royal Antiquary Bror Emil Hildebrand ( died 1884 ), who did the greatest service by his development of the National Historical Museum in Stockholm. The “ Three Age System “ was also quickly adopted in almost every other country. The attack long made against it in Germany may now be regarded as ceased, and the correctness of this division has been generally recognized even in that country.

The thousands of finds which have come to our knowledge since this system was published, have not only proved in a striking manner that the outline of the earliest history of Northern culture which antiquarians endeavoured to draw more than fifty years ago was correct, but have also opened a new and wide field for further research. We can now form a very clear idea of the circumstances under which the first settlers of our land lived, and we can follow, step by step, the slow but sure development whereby the inhabitants of Sweden, once a horde of savages, have reached their present condition.

It is true that we meet with no line of kings, no heroic names dating from these earliest times. But is not the knowledge of these people's life, and of the progress of their culture

of more worth than the names of saga heroes ? And ought we not to give more credence to the contemporary, irrefutable witnesses to whom alone archaeology now listens, then to the poetical stories which for centuries were preserved only in the memories of skalds ?

It might seem unnecessary at present to give any special proof of the correctness of this threefold division of heathen times in the North, inasmuch as the whole account we shall give may be regarded as proving it. But as the present position of Northern archaeology depends so particularly on this division, we shall now point out some circumstances which show how well grounded the opinion is, at least so far as Scandinavia is concerned.

That there was a time when all metals were entirely unknown is clearly seen from many large finds and the hundreds of remarkable graves containing numerous relics of stone, bone, etc., but no trace of metal. That there was another period when the use of bronze, but not of iron, was known, is equally clear from the large number of hoards and graves which contain weapons, ornaments, etc., of bronze, but no trace of iron; while on the other hand bronze implements are hardly ever found with those of iron. That there was a third period in heathen times when iron was in general use we can see by the first glance at any large collection of antiquities. From this follows of necessity that the earliest history of Northern culture – the time antecedent to the establishment of Christianity – actually embraces the three great periods which derive their names from the most important material in use during each of them.

And there can hardly be any doubt of the order in which these periods followed each other. That the Stone Age must be older than the Bronze Age is self-evident, and is further proved by the fact that we often find graves of the Bronze Age in the upper part of barrows that have been raised over a grave chamber of the Stone Age which usually lies at the bottom in the centre of the barrow, while the converse has never occurred. And our earliest sources of history which throw light on the conditions of life during the last part of heathen times point only to a period when iron was in general use. It follows therefore that the Iron Age must be the last of these three periods.

How far the beginning of each period coincides with the appearance of a new race which subdues the earlier settlers of the country, is a future question which we must for the present distinguish from that which concerns only the order in which the several heathen periods followed each other.

Before we now make an attempt to set before our readers a picture of the life in Sweden during heathen times, we must observe that if that picture shall prove imperfect and blurred, it is partly perhaps owing to the insufficiency of our sources of information about a period so wanting in written historical materials. It is doubtless true, and should be gladly acknowledged, that we have discovered much richer documents dating from heathen times than we had any right to expect; but by far the majority of the antiquities preserved to our own day are naturally works of stone, metals, and the like, while it is only by an exceptional conjunction of specially favourable conditions that such

perishable materials as wood, bone, leather, cloth, etc., have been able to survive. It follows that we must have very imperfect knowledge of furniture, stuffs, and clothes made out of such materials; yet these formed incomparably the greater part of the belongings of the heathen Northmen.

But even of metal and stone objects used in those days our knowledge is very imperfect. Only a small part of what once existed was buried in the ground; only a small part of what was buried has escaped the destroying hand of time; of this part all has not yet come to light again; and we know only too well how little of what has come to light has been of any service for our science. Almost all the finds of past centuries have disappeared without a trace, and even much of what has been discovered in the present century has been destroyed.

We can easily realize the importance of these facts if we imagine that an antiquarian some thousand or two thousand years hence should attempt to represent our own manner of life, and had scarcely any other material for the purpose beyond the verdigrised and rusty remains of our metal works, and so could not complete the picture of the nineteenth century by the help of works of literature and art. The comparison shows how cautious we should be in our attempt to trace the civilization of heathen times, the earliest part of which was several thousand years before our day.

### **The Bronze Age and Bronze Age Costume**

Before the Stone Age ended the inhabitants of Sweden had raised themselves considerably above the savage state; but, so long as they were completely ignorant of metals, it was impossible for them to reach a higher degree of civilization. But at last the fruits of the civilization attained by cultured races of the East spread to the distant reaches of the North; and through the knowledge of metals, at first only bronze and gold, there began for those lands a new era known as the Bronze Age.

By these words is understood that period in the earliest civilization of the Northern races, when they made their weapons, tools, etc., of bronze, a mixture of copper and tin. Besides bronze, they knew of only one metal, namely gold. Iron, steel, silver, and all other metals were completely unknown in these countries.

Before we go further we must call attention to the inaccuracy of an opinion which not unfrequently finds expression, that all antiquities of bronze should be referred by antiquarians to the Bronze Age. Vessels, rings, buckles, needles, and the like were, as we might have supposed, still made of bronze after the end of this period, just as they are even in our day, but generally of a somewhat different composition from that used in the Bronze Age. To this age belong only weapons and edge-tools made of bronze, and such vessels and ornaments as are usually found with them.

With respect to the important question *how* the Bronze Age began in the North, different opinions have been expressed. Some have supposed that it was due to the immigration of a Celtic race, others to a Teutonic immigration. Professor Nilsson has endeavoured to

show that the North is indebted to Phoenician colonists for the earliest knowledge of metals, where Herr Wiberg, in Gelfe, regarded the Bronze Age to have begun in the North through the influence of the Etruscans. Also Professor Lindenschmit of Mainz, who does not believe in the existence of a Bronze Age in the sense understood by Northern antiquarians, considers that most of the bronze works in question were Etruscan.

It seems to us that there are strong grounds for the opinion that the Bronze Age in Scandinavia was not connected with any immigration of a new race, but that the people of the North learnt the art of working bronze by intercourse with other nations. The resemblance of the graves during the last part of the Stone Age and the early part of the Bronze Age, as well as other circumstances, point to such a conclusion. From Asia the “ Bronze Culture “ if we may so express the higher civilization dependent on the knowledge of bronze, had gradually spread itself over the continent of Europe in a northerly and north-westerly direction, until at last it reached the coasts of the Baltic.

We have already mentioned that the end of the Stone Age, and therefore the beginning of the Bronze Age, in the North, must be regarded as having taken place 3,500 years ago. The latest investigations have shown that the Bronze Age proper came to an end in these regions in the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. It lasted therefore about a thousand years.

As the Bronze Age comprises so long a period, attempts have naturally been made to distinguish the antiquities belonging to its earlier and later parts. Such attempts might have been supposed almost useless, when we consider that among the thousands of finds of the Bronze Age in the North as yet known, there is not a single coin, or any other object, with an inscription, either native or foreign. Nevertheless, by a careful and thorough examination of the many antiquities and graves of the Bronze Age now known, it has fortunately proved possible to distinguish in it six consecutive periods. But as it would take us too long to describe separately each of these periods, we must restrict ourselves to mentioning which of the antiquities belong to the earlier, and which to the later, portion of the Bronze Age.

The works of the earlier part – the Earlier Bronze Age as it is called – are decorated with fine spiral ornaments and zigzag lines. The graves generally contain remains of unburnt bodies. The antiquities of this period found in the North ( which appear to be almost without exception of native workmanship ) are distinguished by artistic forms, and point to a highly developed taste in the working of bronze. They generally surpass in this respect the relics of the Bronze Age found in almost all other European countries.

On the other hand, the works belonging to the latter part of the period, the so-called Later Bronze Age, are characterized by a very different taste and style of ornamentation, though even they are often the result of great skill. We do not find in them spirals, of the same shape as the Earlier Bronze Age, engraved or beaten in with a punch, but the ends of rings, knife-handles, and the like, are often rolled up in spiral volutes. During this period the dead were always burnt.

Still more surprising are some discoveries made in Denmark. In 1861, in the so-called “Treenhoi”, a barrow at Havdrup in the Ribe amt, a coffin was found made out of a cloven and hollowed trunk of an oak. In this coffin, which fortunately was examined by experts, a warrior had been buried with his sword and with all his clothes. The still perfectly preserved clothes of simply woven wool consist of a high cap, a wide, roundly-cut mantle, a sort of tunic, and two small pieces of wool which probably covered the legs; at the feet were seen some small remains of leather, which were possibly once shoes. The cap, which has no shade, was made of thick worsted wool, and the outside was covered with projecting pieces of worsted, all ending in a knot. The inside of the mantle was also covered with pendent worsted threads. The tunic was kept together by a long woolen belt, which went twice around the middle, was knotted in front, and had two long ends hanging down and decorated with fringes. They also found in the grave a second woolen cap and a woolen shawl decorated with tassels; half of the latter lay rolled up as a pillow under the head. The whole contents of the coffin were enclosed in a hide, probably that of a cow. Although the woolen clothes were so remarkable well-preserved, the body had almost completely perished; even the skeleton had crumbled away. Only the black hair and the brain, protected by the cap were preserved; the form of the brain, could still, curiously enough, be easily recognized. By the left side of the body lay a bronze sword, in a wooden sheath lined with skin. At the foot stood a round wooden box containing a smaller ox of the same kind, in which lay the last-mentioned woolen cap, as well as a horn comb and a bronze knife. The knife, which is in shape like a modern razor, had possibly been used for the same purpose.

The value of this remarkable find – and others like it have since been made – is greatly increased by the discovery ten years later in 1871, of a complete woman’s dress of the same period, in another Danish barrow, Borum-Eshoi, near Asrhus in Jutland. In this case also the body was also buried in a coffin made out of a cloven and hollowed trunk of an oak. An untanned hide, probably of a cow or an ox, enclosed the fragments of the coffin. That it was a woman who was here buried, was clearly shown by the well-preserved skeleton. The very long hair had probably been fasted up by a horn comb which was found in the grave. Upon the head was a well-knotted worsted net. There were also found remains of a second similar net. The body too was clad in a complete dress of woolen stuff, consisting of a jacket with sleeves and a long robe. The weaving was of precisely the same kind as that of the clothes found in the graves of Dommestorp and Treenhoi. The jacket was sewn together under the arms and upon the back, and open in front, where it had probably been fastened by a string or a little bronze fibula found in the coffin, unless the latter had been used for the mantle. The coarse seam on the back of the jacket shows that it used to be covered by the mantle. The robe was kept together round the body by two woolen bands, one of coarser, the other of finer work. The latter band, or rather belt, was of wool and cowhair mixed, woven in three rows, of which the middle appeared to have been of a different colour from those on the sides. It ended in thick, ornamental tassels.

The other bronze ornaments taken out of the coffin,, besides the fibula already mentioned, were a spiral finger-ring, two bracelets, a torque, and three round, beautifully decorated plates of different sizes with points projecting from the middle. A comparison

with similar ornaments recently found in other graves proves that they were decorative plates belonging to belts. Strangely enough, there lay by the side of this woman's body a bronze dagger with a horn handle.

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