BEYOND URNFIELDS

New Perspectives on Late Bronze Age – Early Iron Age Funerary Practices in Northwest Europe

Edited by
Helene Agerskov Rose, Lisbeth Christensen
and Arjan Louwen

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Billumvad urnfield and some other sites with circular ditches in the western part of Jutland

Lene B. Frandsen

Keywords: Billumvad urnfield, circular ditches, western Jutland, Pre-Roman Iron Age, intrusion into cremation graves

Abstract: Just east of Oksbøl, not far from the west coast of Denmark, the larger part of an urnfield with circular ditches was excavated in 2013. The burial site was not investigated in its entirety, but it appears that the excavated area represents the centre of an urnfield, as evidenced by the remains of a couple of Stone Age mounds, which probably formed the starting point for the Pre-Roman Iron Age burial site. The features within the circular ditches vary greatly; there are cremation graves with or without urns, bone-layer graves and pits with vessels or pottery sherds, but no bones. Remarkably, many of the pits, which are centrally placed in the circular ditches, have no cremated bones. The same types of features were also seen between the circular ditches, where a few cooking pits and postholes have been found. The design of the circular ditches also varies, both in terms of size and number of entrances. There is a long tradition of finding this kind of cremation burial site in this part of Denmark, and now and then new sites with circular ditches emerge on arial photos or in connection with excavation activity. Some of the well-known and newly discovered sites will be mentioned in a discussion about the ritual use of the urnfield.

Introduction

Archaeology West Jutland's (ArkVest's) geographical area of responsibility covers 2,734 km² in the western part of Jutland (Fig. 1). There is a long tradition of excavating urnfields with circular ditches in the area, and there is something very captivating and even magical about these areas that are covered with cremation graves and circular ditches.

My own interest in the subject started in 2008 when, together with Tine Lorange, I revisited the Årre Urnfield (Lorange 2015). It was disheartening to see how the site has been levelled out from so many years of ploughing. We carried out a rescue excavation before the laying of a new power cable for an offshore wind park which, though minor, gave us the opportunity to focus on aspects other than just the urn graves, such as what lay between the circular ditches and how the ditches differ in size and shape. In the following years, we returned for further excavations to discover the extent of the urnfield. Before 2008, we did not know the exact location of the classic Årre urnfield, but thanks to Tine Lorange's work digitising the old excavation plans, using GPS in the field, and the fact that the 2008 campaign overlapped with previous excavations, we now have a map of old and new excavations at Årre (Fig. 2).

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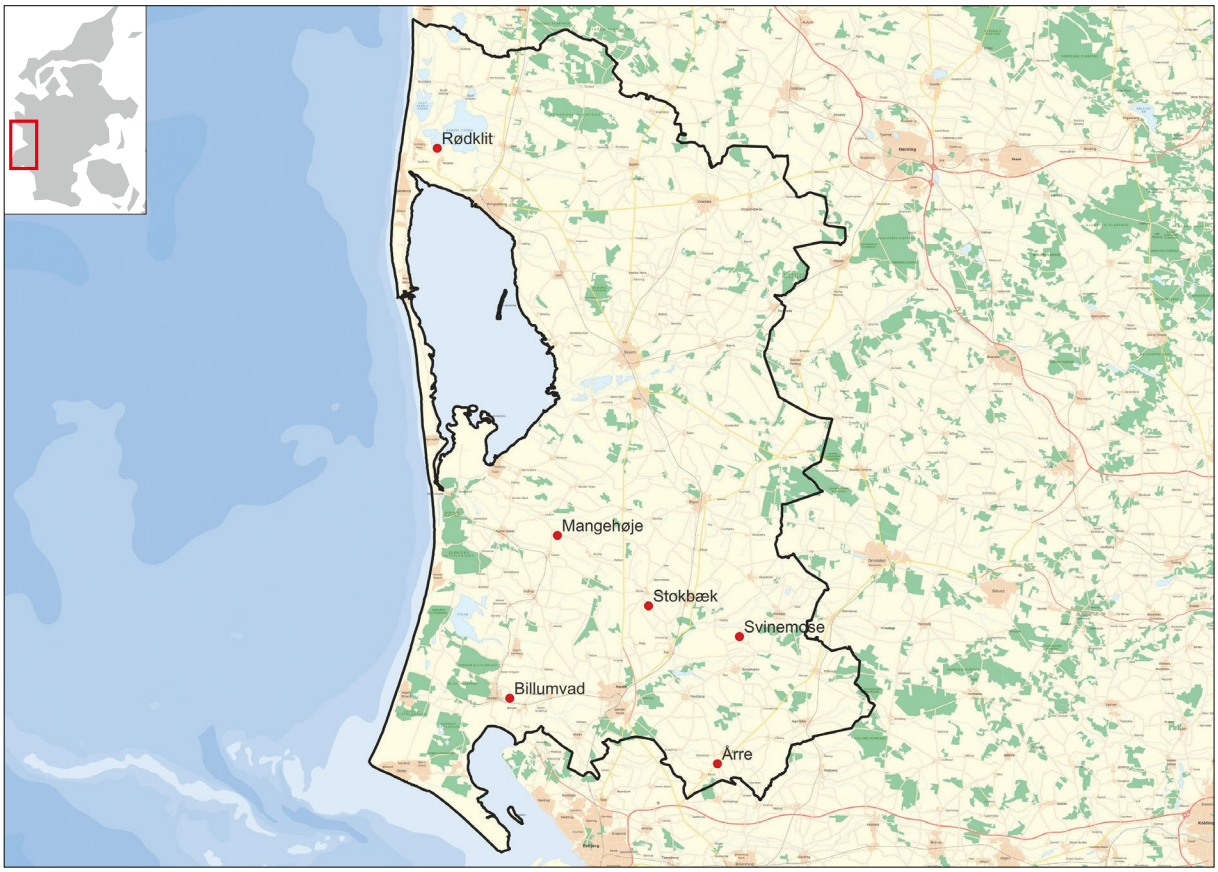


Fig. 1. Archaeology of West Jutland's (ArkVest's) responsibility area, with Billumvad and other sites mentioned in the text (map after dataforsyningen.dk, with additions by ArkVest).

Classic urnfield sites

In 1892, A. P. Madsen excavated 250 graves in Årre in just three weeks. The term 'excavated' is maybe wrong here – he dug a hole in the middle of each mound, pulled out the urns and brought only the intact ones back to the National Museum. In 1892, each mound was still visible, and we owe him great thanks for saving the artefacts and for a lot of important information. Madsen describes the mounds as generally 2–8 m in diameter, with a height of 30–60 cm, and, quite interestingly, he found 15–20 cm deep ditches around some of them. Each mound covered only one urn that had been placed at the bottom of the mound, in a few cases even above ground level, but generally dug into the subsoil, except for three instances where he could not find any signs of graves at the bottom of the mounds, and another three instances where he only found a few pottery sherds without any bones. He also describes an example of a mound with two complete vessels, again without any trace of cremated bones (Madsen/Neergaard 1894, 172).

C. J. Becker revisited the Årre urnfield in 1953 and 1954. At that time, there was nothing left of the small mounds from the Pre-Roman Iron Age, but some of the older and larger mounds from the Bronze and Stone Ages were still visible. Improvements in excavation techniques were an important factor by then, and Becker showed interest in features other than the urn graves themselves. An important goal of his excavation was to determine whether circular ditches surrounded all the Iron Age mounds (Becker 1961, 147). He found traces of circular ditches in the subsoil and observed that some of them were closed and some of them had entrances. By examining the typology of the differ-

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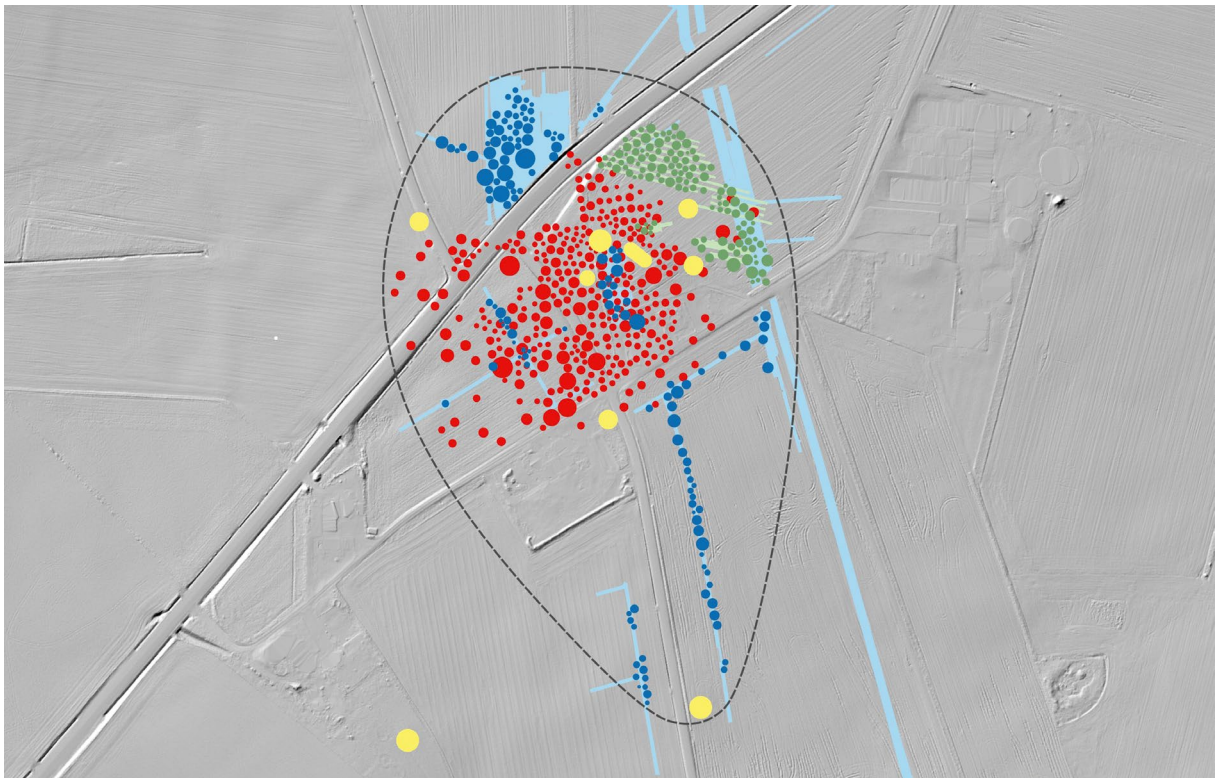


Fig. 2. LiDAR-scan of Årre urnfield showing the different excavations. Black dotted line: supposed extension of the urnfield; yellow: older mounds; red: excavations by A. P. Madsen in 1892; green: excavations by C. J. Becker in 1953/54; blue: excavations by Varde Museum and ArkVest 2008–2023 (map after dataforsyningen.dk, with addition by ArkVest).

ent types of urns and small finds, he hypothesised a horizontal development of the urnfield. The urn graves closest to the Stone Age mounds were the oldest ones, and he noticed that the circular ditches belonging to them were often closed, larger and more irregular. The younger ones were smaller and had entrances. This was verified by excavations in 2010 and 2012 (Lorange 2015).

Today, we only know of one urnfield in our area where the circular ditches are still visible: Mangehøje (also known as Langsiggaarde; cf. Becker 1961, 118; Møller et al. 2020, 16 fig. 5). In 1902, A. P. Madsen excavated 14 of the minor mounds from the Pre-Roman Iron Age situated there between large mounds from the Stone or Bronze Ages. Thanks to early heritage protection, a small part of this urnfield has survived until today.

Billumvad urnfield

The Billumvad urnfield is situated between Varde and Blåvand in the Oksbøl area. Varde Museum (later ArkVest) has, over the last 30 years, excavated a large number of settlements (Møller 2013) and a few Iron Age burial sites (Frandsen/Westphal 1996; Frandsen 2001; Fisker/Andresen 2017). The excavation in 2013 was prompted by the landowner's wish to deep plough the area.[1] Fortunately, we knew from aerial photos that an urnfield was situated there (Fig. 3), but its extent and preservation were unknown. We uncovered around 5,000 m² and found that the majority of the area

1 Billumvad J. Nr. VAM1787. Fund og Fortidsminder: 190714-195. Excavated by Lene B. Frandsen and Sara Gerlevsen.

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Fig. 3. Billumvad urnfield. The circular ditches are clearly visible as crop-marks (photo L. H. Olesen, Holstebro Museum).

was covered with circular ditches (Fig. 4). The northeast boundary of the urnfield seems to have been determined now, while the site continues beyond the excavated area in all other directions. A trial trench was dug in a southeasterly direction without reaching the full extent of the urnfield.

A total of 71 circular ditches were found, with 46 of these within the excavated area which were uncovered in their entirety. However, not all were complete as some had been partially ploughed away. Their diameters vary from 1.6 m to 14 m. It seems that the starting point for this burial site must have been three Stone Age mounds, which have been totally levelled out today. There is great variation in the size and shape of the circular ditches; some are closed and others have from one to four entrances. The closed and largest circular ditches are situated nearest the Stone Age mounds. Circular ditches with two entrances are the most common and, with a few exceptions, the entrances are located opposite each other and oriented approximately north-south. In some cases, the entrances are connected so that some of the mounds seem linked together with a passageway going straight through two or three of them. The depth of the circular ditches is up to 43 cm, and sometimes a change in colour of the subsoil was the only detectable trace. Stones were found in about ten of the circular ditches, which in some cases seemed to have been placed at the bottom on purpose, but the majority were probably deposited there many years later, when the ditches were levelled. Pottery sherds in the fill were few, but a secondary vessel was apparently carefully placed in one circular ditch. No postholes were found in any of the ditches.

Pottery and grave goods

Only nine of the cremation graves contained grave goods, mostly small pieces of bronze or iron that were too fragmented to be identified. The best preserved are two circular heads of pins dated to the Pre-Roman Iron Age period I.2a/I.2b (Jensen 2005). The few vessels with preserved rims or handles

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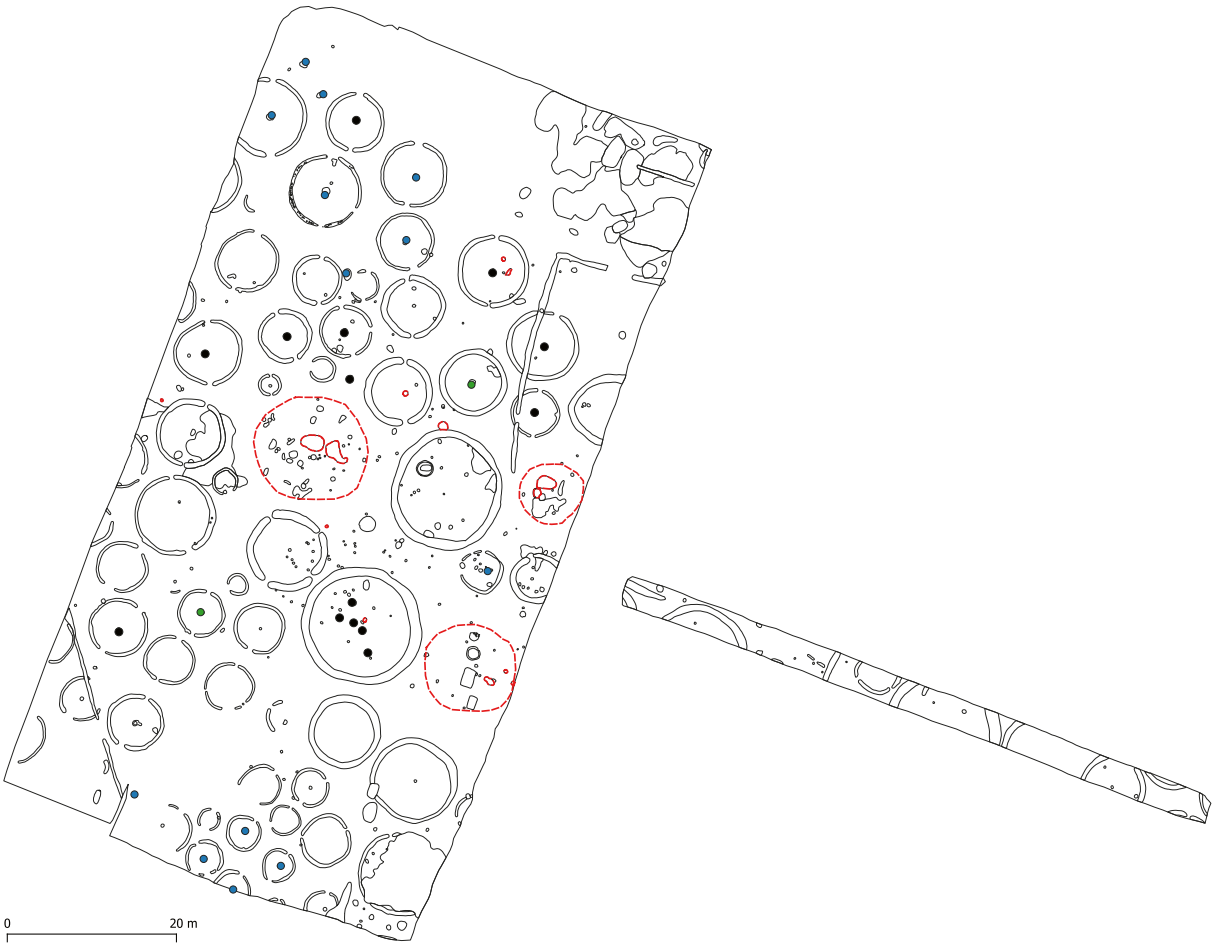


Fig. 4. Billumvad urnfield. Red (dotted) lines: Stone Age features and encircled areas interpreted as three poorly-preserved Stone Age mounds; black dots: vessels with cremated bones (urns); blue: vessels and fragments of vessels without cremated bones; green: cremated bones only (bone-layer graves) (graphics L. B. Frandsen).

can also be dated to the Early Pre-Roman Iron Age. The overall impression is that the site dates to period I of the Pre-Roman Iron Age. One notable exception is a cremation grave with a bronze fibula dated to the Late Roman Iron Age, which falls completely outside the suggested use-period. This grave was found inside the largest circular ditch at the site, which encircled four other cremation graves. The urn was, however, not placed in the centre of the ditch, which indicates that this was a secondary grave incorporated into the monument several hundred years later.

The pits and cremation graves found in the centre of each circular ditch vary greatly with regard to form and preservation, from well-preserved urns to pits with neither burned bone nor fragments of vessels. The lack of osteological analysis prevents us from knowing anything about the gender and age of the people buried at Billumvad. Even though the cremated bones have not been studied intensively, the overall impression is that there is a general lack of cremated bones at the urnfield at Billumvad (Fig. 4: blue dots). It is remarkable that so many centrally placed pits did not contain any cremated bones and also that a large urn (Fig. 5a) contained so few cremated bones.

What did they do with the cremated bones?

Where are the rest of the cremated bones? Were they kept for other rituals or were some of them dug up again and removed? Locating the urn in the centre of the mounds would have been easy. Interpretation of the intrusion into Early Roman Iron Age inhumation graves, documented in many cases,

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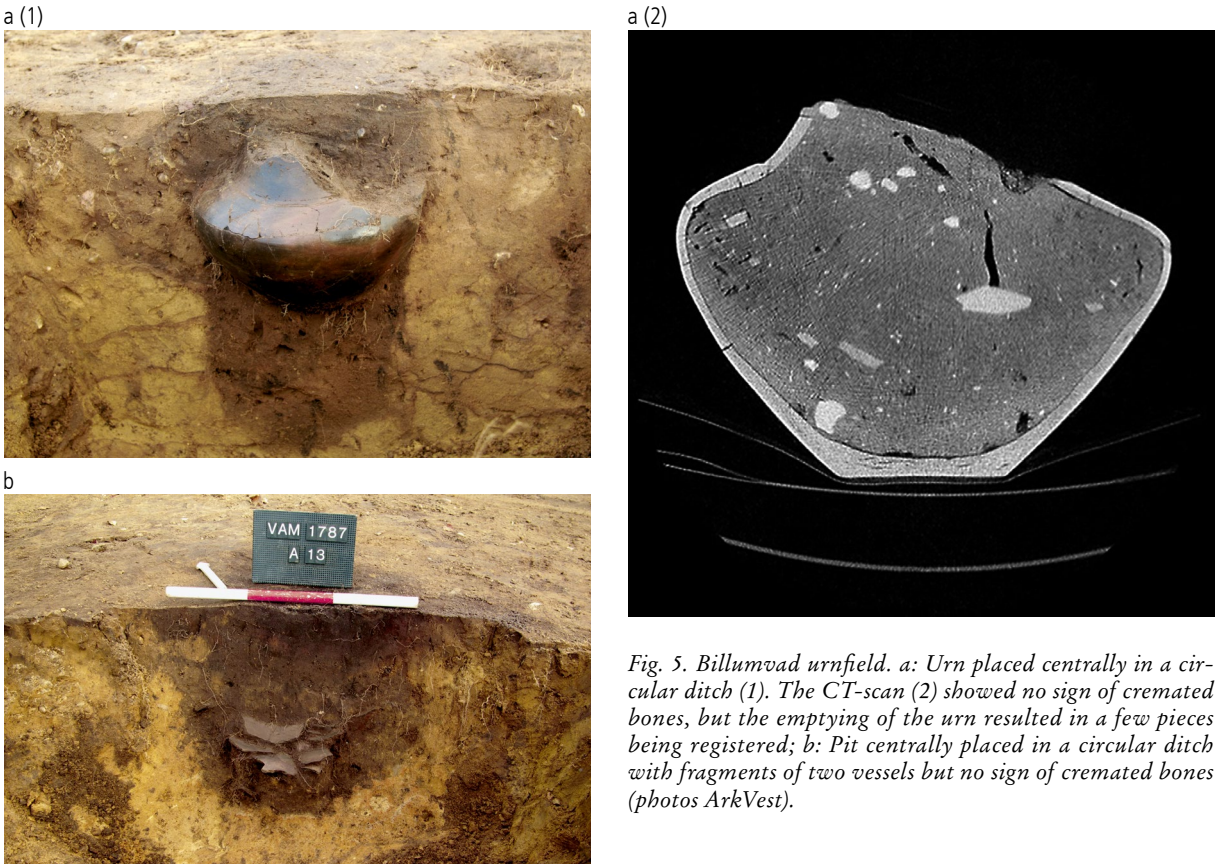


Fig. 5. Billumvad urnfield. a: Urn placed centrally in a circular ditch (1). The CT-scan (2) showed no sign of cremated bones, but the emptying of the urn resulted in a few pieces being registered; b: Pit centrally placed in a circular ditch with fragments of two vessels but no sign of cremated bones (photos ArkVest).

ascribes this to ritual activity rather than to plundering (Lorange 2015; Eriksen/Egeberg 2021). If we take a closer look at the section of the large urn which contained very few pieces of cremated bone (Fig. 5a), it was situated quite deep in the pit and we cannot be certain that the missing neck and rim were ploughed away. An explanation could be that the urn was dug up, emptied of its bones, and maybe the neck and rim broken before it was put back. The same could be the case with two fragmented vessels in a pit (Fig. 5b). These were handled more harshly before the repositioning. The contents of another pit consisted of four vessels and a spindle whorl; these were found in a centrally placed pit within a circular ditch in the northern part of the site. There was no sign of any cremated bones. This might illustrate the same act of reopening a cremation grave, carefully removing the bone remains and either intentionally or accidentally damaging parts of the vessels. It is recommended that attention is paid to traces of Iron Age disturbances, comparable to observations made at Søhale urnfield (Møller et al. 2020, 26).

The role of Billumvad urnfield

Billumvad is not totally excavated, which hinders our understanding of its development. It is obvious that the starting point was the ancient Stone Age mounds and the urnfield then developed in all directions. The strategy for choosing the next point of burial is, however, not clear, but it is possible that the living place or family ties were decisive factors. The gathering at the burial field, when digging the circular ditches and creating the mounds, could carry a meaning beyond burial and the worshipping of ancestors. It was also an opportunity to meet other people, especially if there was a tradition for visiting the place at certain times, e.g. around the half or full moon. The circular ditches seem to have a magical atmosphere. The circle is a powerful symbol, a shape that is found repeatedly throughout prehistory, expressed as stone circles or on rock art and pottery ornamentation, maybe

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reflecting the natural world, moon, sun, etc. The ancient conception of time was cyclical; the seasons went in circles, repeating themselves year after year. Perhaps the circle is a physical representation of the boundary between life and death?

The Iron Age people invested a lot of work into digging the circular ditches and creating the mounds. It seems that the circular ditches were left open on purpose. When creating a new ditch, they avoided filling the older ones. The fill from the ditches was most likely used to create the mounds, though the fill from the circular ditches, especially of the larger mounds, did not contain enough material for this purpose (Becker 1961, 164).

Cremation graves and pits with or without pottery are also found in between the circular ditches, but there is no explanation for why some people were buried outside the 'magic circle'. Perhaps they had a weak connection to the local territory, the individual's status did not require their own mound or they were out-casts in some other way. Cooking pits are also found between the circular ditches, which demonstrates that eating or maybe feasting took place there. The funeral gathering is an old tradition and can have many other aspects than just the burial of the dead (Henriksen 2015, 207; Lorange 2015, 31).

Interpretations of newly discovered sites with circular ditches

For a while, some circular formations at Nørholm Hede were interpreted as an urnfield (Møller et al. 2020, 48). A system of circular structures resembling ditches was observed on Denmark's Elevation Model at Nørholm Hede, northeast of Varde, in 2017 and registered as such. Once the location had been spotted, it could also be distinguished on orthophotos. But in 2021, Torben Egeberg at ArkVest discovered that these structures are in fact modern charcoal kilns.[2]

Stokbæk is a newly discovered site that was excavated in connection with the Viking Link power cable in 2020 (Lerke/Andersen 2021).[3] Only weak traces of six circular ditches remained, the smallest measured only 2 m in diameter, the others 4.4–6.6 meters (Fig. 6). Not a single piece of pottery from urns nor any cremated bones remained.

During the same excavation at the site of the Viking Link power cable, another quite interesting location with circular ditches was found at Svinemose, a low-lying wetland area with a subsoil of precipitated pale sand.[4] The preservation was a little better here. The circular ditches were clearly visible in the subsoil, and cross sections show that they have slowly filled up with windblown sand and possibly, intermittently, with water (Fig. 7). There were no remaining signs of burials in the centre of any of the circular ditches. Atypically, there were signs that the ditches at Svinemose might have been maintained by letting some ditches intercut and by the re-digging of the same circle several times. It is not completely clear, but it seems that the inner circle is the oldest and it presumably surrounded a mound, which was later enlarged with a new ditch placed further out than the first one.

The excavation team, Line Lerke and Rachel F. Andersen, do not interpret Svinemose as an urnfield (Lerke/Andersen 2021, 206), but rather compare the site to the circular ditches found at Nørre Rødklit on the Holmsland Klit (Fig. 8), excavated by G. Hatt in 1946 (Hatt 1954). Because of the excellent preservation on the Holmsland Klit, which was covered with sand-drift, it was clear that the circular ditches here enclosed small mounds, but there were no signs of cremation graves buried in the subsoil. This led Hatt to conclude that the circular ditches could not be urnfield enclosures, because

2 Mølholm Hansen 1932, 117 already mentions finds of charred material in the ditches. Surveying there took place in 1922 according to map attachments in the dissertation.

3 Stokbæk J. Nr. ARV 343. Fund og Fortidsminder: 190803-240. Excavated by Line Lerke and Rachel Facius Andersen.

4 Svinemose J. Nr. ARV 343. Fund og fortidsminder: 190802-133. Excavated by Line Lerke and Rachel Facius Andersen.

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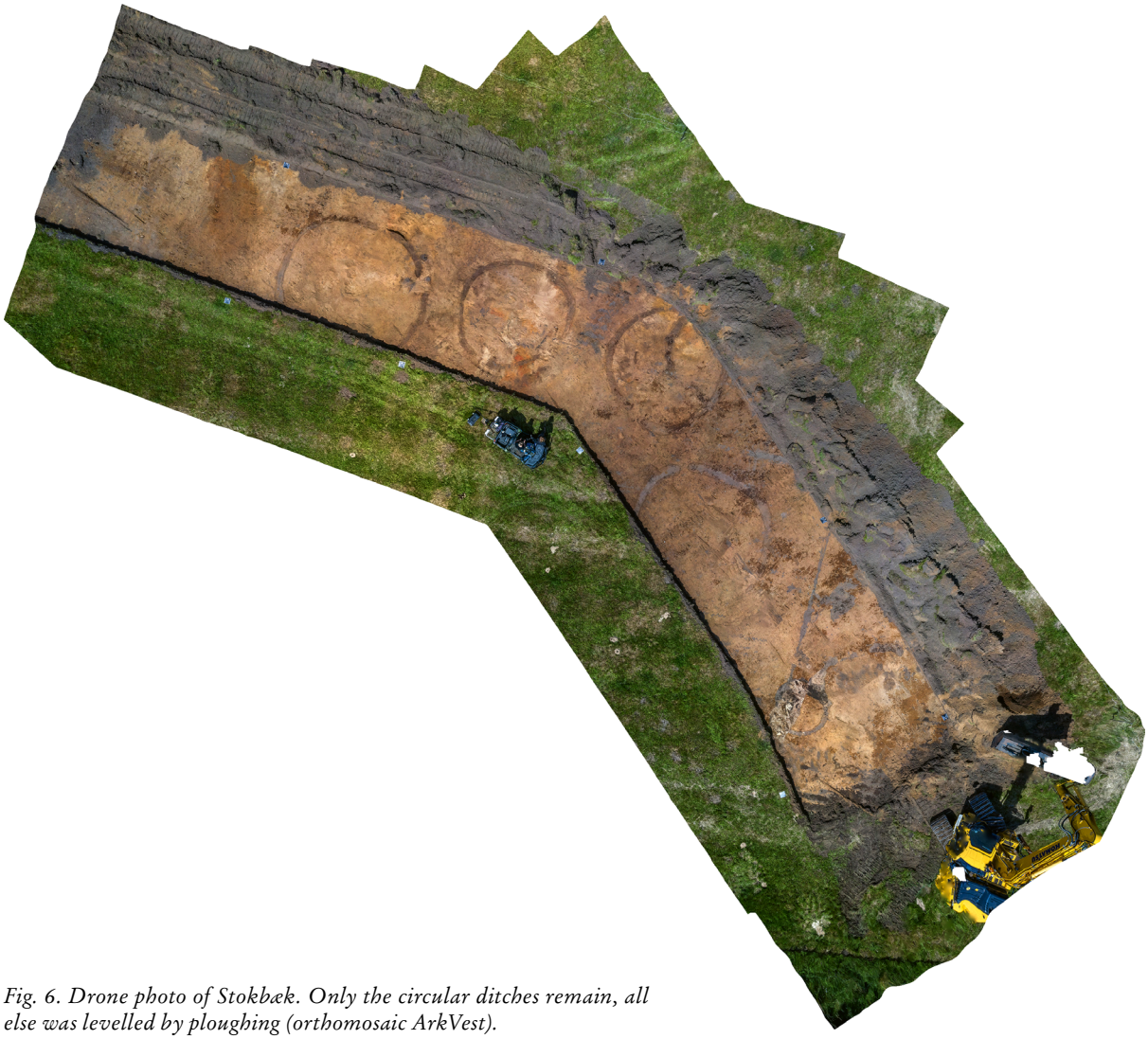


Fig. 6. Drone photo of Stokbæk. Only the circular ditches remain, all else was levelled by ploughing (orthomosaic ArkVest).

there was no sign of cremation graves and because the ditches did not seem to have any connection to each other, and in some parts were remade: 'It looks as if the laying out of a Ring-ditch was a ceremony – the making of something that was similar to a grave, without being a human grave' (Hatt 1954, 23). Hatt's conclusion was made before excavations on other urnfields had shown that there are other explanations for the lack of centrally placed cremation graves (Becker 1961; Lorange 2015; Møller et al. 2020). Urns or graves could have been ploughed away because they were not situated deep enough in the subsoil. Maybe the circular ditch marked a cenotaph – a burial place for a person who died far away or maybe was not even dead yet? The fact is that quite a lot of the circular ditches excavated today have no central grave, and the lack of cremated bones gives rise to speculation among archaeologists. I think it likely that some of the graves have been revisited and some, if not all of the ancestors' cremated bones, have been removed in connection with a ritual action. Svinemose is indeed an interesting site, and further excavations might qualify the lack of graves.

Despite the danger of misinterpretation, as seen in the case of Nørholm Hede, there is a huge potential in the study of aerial photography and LiDAR scans (Olesen/Mauritsen 2015, 64). I think that most of the sites as seen today have been levelled by ploughing and it takes great luck to find a well-preserved urnfield. The best places to look will probably be on remote heathland or maybe under the inland sand dunes near the west coast.

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Fig. 7. Aerial view of the circular ditches at Svinemose (photo ArkVest).

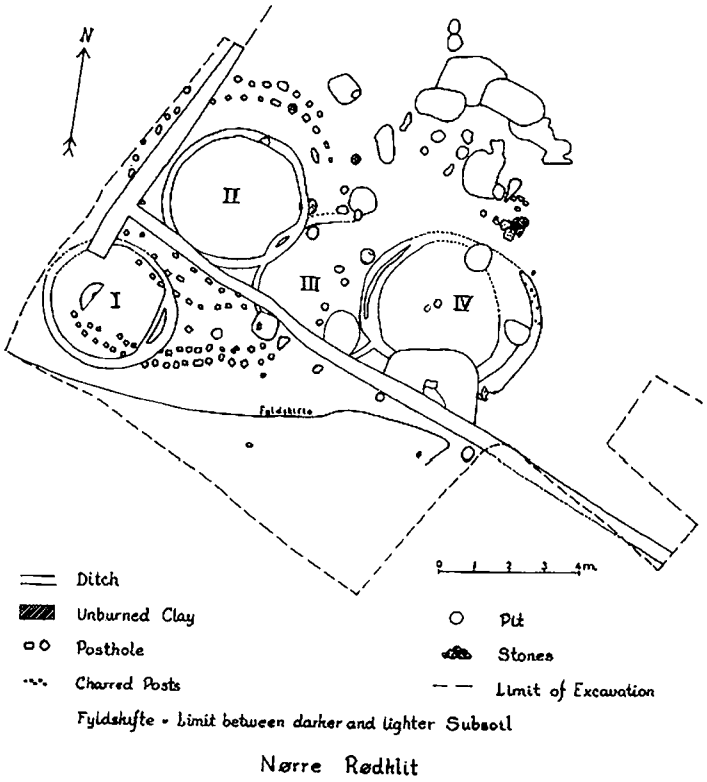


Fig. 8. Traces of circular ditches at Nørre Rødklit (after Hatt 1954, 19).

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This volume presents the results of an international network project on Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age urnfields from northwest Europe.
Individual chapters present the archaeological material and its research history within a local, regional, or supra-regional context, demonstrating the wide range of nuances contained by the funerary phenomenon. The volume provides the first comprehensive overview of the urnfield funerary phenomenon in northwest Europe and forms the foundation for future research across national and disciplinary boundaries.
This volume successfully demonstrates that the inconspicuous urnfields of northwest Europe are not as anonymous as previously assumed but hold valuable information about life and death in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age.

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