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An odessay to golden mica – contextualising the burial of a Bronze Age "Odysseus"

Vesa-Pekka Herva, Janne Ikäheimo, & Antti Lahelma

Abstract

The context of a rich Early Bronze Age burial found in 1998 at Hangaskangas near the city of Oulu is examined here regarding its structure and wider topographic setting. The burial is seen as a node in a Bronze Age communication and exchange network of Eurasia, in which local and supra-regional ideas about cosmology and worldview are reflected through a slab of golden mica, some water-rounded pebbles as well as its liminal location on an island in a river mouth.

Keywords: Bronze Age, cremation burial, context, cosmology, worldview.

10.1 Introduction

A cremation burial containing a rich variety of grave goods – a bronze blade, stone arrowheads and various bone implements – was excavated at Hangaskangas near the city of Oulu in 1998 (Forss & Tuovinen 2001; Lundberg 2005: 315–317). The site and its artefacts have also been featured in Professor Mika Lavento's articles whenever our friend and mentor has touched on the area of coastal Northern Ostrobothnia in his numerous reflections on the nature of the Early Metal Age and Bronze Age in Finland (e.g. Lavento 2015: 201; 2018: 143). As much of the burial and grave goods are unique for northern Finland and remain for the most part insufficiently published on (see, however, Ikäheimo 2019), this article intentionally sets aside the artefacts and cremains – identified using an osteological analysis belonging to a 20–30-year-old male (Forss & Tuovinen 2001) – to pursue other topics of interest.

These involve examining and interpreting both the structure of the burial, as well as the environment in which it was set. The task is not easy, because by the time of the excavation, the site had already been subjected to a considerable amount of post-depositional alteration, mostly due to the construction of the adjacent railway track in 1926 (Fig. 10.1). The broader context will be approached through environmental reconstruction based on the AMS radiocarbon dating of the burial and the current understanding of the rate of land-uplift in the Bothnian Bay area.

It will be shown that both the immediate context and the broader setting of the burial were imbued with meaning and significance that extended beyond the mundane to the realms of worldview

Figure 10.1. An eastward aerial view of the south-eastern tip of Hangaskangas, with highlighting indicating the burial site's location. Photo J. Ikäheimo.

and cosmology. This was expressed in the materials used for the burial – a slab of mica schist with a few rounded pebbles – as well as the setting of the burial in a particular location on an island by the mouth of the Oulujoki River.

10.2 Burial structure and finds of unworked stone

Despite severe modern disturbances, it seems likely that the cremains were placed with the grave goods in a shallow rectangular pit, measuring circa 80 x 50 x 30 cm. The pit had subsequently been partly covered with a large slab of mica schist (Fig. 10.2), which was found to be severely fragmented in the excavations. Such mica schist, with a surface displaying a golden sheen, is not native to the bedrock around Hangaskangas. Nor do such slabs occur in the overlying glacial till. The slab must therefore have been transported to the site, possibly over a considerable distance. The effort potentially related to the transport of this stone, along with its unusual luminous properties, bears witness to its imagined qualities at the time of the burial.

About half a dozen well-rounded pebbles (Fig. 10.2) were found scattered around the slab of mica schist and the grave pit. Due to the continuous postglacial land-uplift experienced around the Bothnian Bay, such pebbles are not native to littoral formations in the area, but they frequently occur in glaciofluvial formations like eskers. As Hangaskangas is an esker delta, such pebbles can be recovered with some effort from the local glaciofluvial strata, which is topped by a relatively thin layer of sand (Alestalo 1986: 156 Fig. 1.3.2). While these pebbles vary so much in shape, colour, and texture that the assemblage appears to have been put together deliberately (see also Lundberg 2005: 309), one must also bear in mind the inherent heterogeneity of glaciofluvial deposits.

This combination of unworked pebbles with a slab of mica schist covering a burial with bronze objects that does not seem accidental has been largely overlooked or is merely mentioned briefly in

Figure 10.2. A large slab of golden mica schist and a selection of rounded pebbles from the burial. Photo J. Ikäheimo.

previous publications. Yet it merits closer attention, because it may carry associations both with the emerging world of metals and traditional northern cosmological notions, with roots deep in the Stone Age past.

To begin with, mica has been cross-culturally regarded as a special material, often reserved for ornamental or ritual purposes, due to its sheen. The earliest evidence for the long-distance trade and use of mica in ornaments goes as far back as the Upper Palaeolithic, and it is found later in the Egyptian Neolithic, various parts of Southeast Asia, and the Hopewell Tradition of North America, for example (Khatsenovich et al. 2020). In Northern Europe, the production and trade of mica sheets or "Muscovite glass" for windowpanes was well established in North Karelia and the Kola Peninsula in the historical period (Shakhnovic & Skamnitskaya 2014). The prehistoric uses of mica in Northern Fennoscandia have been little explored, but it has been used as a temper in Comb Ware pottery, for example, possibly more for symbolic or visual than purely functional reasons.

Although from a modern perspective mica and bronze are two entirely different materials, in the premodern context, the metallic sheen and luminosity of mica may have placed it in the same category of shiny objects, invoking similar associations of wealth or otherworldly potency as metals. Mica, just like bronze, may therefore already have been an object of long-distance trade in the Bronze Age. At Hangaskangas, the placement of the mica slab may have enhanced the prestige of the buried individual or offered supernatural protection – a function associated with copper in the Sámi culture of the historical period. Furthermore, like bronze, mica may have carried semantic associations with the sun and fire, including the fire of a funeral pyre.

The round pebbles associated with the slab of mica also seem significant. As Kristiina Johanson (2018) points out, unworked smooth round stones that seem to have been deliberately brought to an

archaeological site are a recurring, but little studied and poorly understood, find occurring in various contexts from different periods of prehistory. They are obviously problematic as archaeological finds if the stones bear no marks of use and no obvious practical interpretation – e.g. slingshots, burnishers, net sinkers, or potboilers – has been suggested. Most such stones tend to be not collected at all, ignored in publications, or at best mentioned as inexplicable curiosities. Only occasionally has a "special" find context or the particularly appealing or striking shape of the stone caused the excavator to pause and collect the stone "just in case"; a number of such stones can therefore be found in museum collections (Johanson 2018).

In northern Fennoscandia, an awareness of the significance of natural stones (*sieidi*) in Sámi religion has probably contributed to a certain sensitivity to the issue among field archaeologists, even if there have been few attempts at interpretation. Yet there is an abundance of folklore sources related to the magical "power" (Finn. *väki*) of natural stones, even in recent Finnish folklore sources (Muhonen 2013), as well as in various ritual practices related to them, indicating that we really cannot afford to ignore them in archaeological contexts, even if we may have few clear guidelines on how to approach them. The pebbles found in association with the burial pit at Hangaskangas do not seem to have been grave goods such as sling stones – an interpretation readily contradicted by their heterogeneous size – but were more likely intended to form part of the grave's symbolic architecture.

As such, they invite a comparison with earlier but apparently similar finds of smooth water-polished stones from Stone Age red ochre graves in Finland. The Mesolithic/Neolithic burials of Jönsas near Helsinki are a particularly noteworthy example, as nearly all the burials there featured water-polished cobbles, often carefully arranged in a linear formation at the middle axis of the grave (Ahola 2017). Similar though less prominent use of water-polished cobbles is also documented at several Neolithic burial sites in Finland, such as Kukkarkoski (Ahola 2015) and Vaateranta (Katiskoski 2003), and the practice seems to have been widely established, because it is also known in several Stone Age red ochre burial sites in Russian Karelia (Purhonen 1998: 28).

Interestingly, Purhonen (1998: 31) points out that the stones placed in such burials may be related to their location by flowing water. She associates this with the notion of the Otherworld, in which the dead were thought to journey to a distant place (Finn. *etävainajala*) – perhaps along a river, as is often the case in northern cosmologies – as opposed to staying with the community of the living. This interpretation seems to fit the Hangaskangas burial fairly well given its geographical setting, that will be analysed in the following chapter. Generally speaking, water-worn stones can be seen to symbolically refer to the subaquatic world, which in northern myth and folklore was associated with the Dead (Herva & Lahelma 2019: 111–12). If further speculation is permitted, the non-local origin of the pebbles may also have referred to a real place that held particular significance to the community, and the pleasant tactile sensation of the smooth round pebbles may have had a soothing function in the rituals of mourning.

Other interpretations have also been offered for the stone settings at red ochre burial sites. If they covered the body of the deceased in a thick layer, as is sometimes the case, their purpose may have been to symbolically prevent the dead rising from the grave and harassing the living. The stones' purpose may sometimes have been to support or raise some parts of the cadaver to keep it in a particular position (Ahola 2015). Moreover, those graves that had an abundance of stones may originally have been visible on the ground's surface, and the settings may thus have acted as inconspicuous grave-markers (Purhonen 1998: 28).

Concerning the Hangaskangas burial, little can be concluded about its appearance above the ground due to modern disturbances. Yet we cast doubt on the previous hypotheses on the presence of a monument – a cairn, a mound, or a stone circle, as well as the exploitation of a natural sand dune for this purpose (Forss & Tuovinen 2001) – at the site. Judging by the well-documented context of a

very similar Bronze Age burial found near the city of Umeå in northern Sweden (see Lundberg 2005), it is more plausible that the burial was not visible at all on the ground's surface. From this perspective, previous attempts at reconstruction appear to stem from the need to fit the site with the prevailing typology of Bronze Age funerary monuments.

10.3 A contextual mapping: places, journeys, and entangled worlds

When the site is contextualised by mapping connections and associations between the burial and the world around it, near and far, it needs to be considered in the context of the diverse sociocultural phenomena and cosmological concepts related to the Eurasian Bronze Age world – in this instance, only by identifying angles and themes that are potentially relevant for understanding the site and its finds. The burial is "anomalous" in that it is currently the only certain Bronze Age cremation burial in northern Finland. Both eastern and western influences have been identified in the metal finds, but defining the finds – or the burial – as an expression of either "Scandinavian" or "Arctic" bronze culture is not especially useful here. Instead, the site needs to be regarded as a node in the vast communication and exchange networks spanning Eurasia that emerged in the Bronze Age from the fourth millennium BC onwards, connecting the eastern Mediterranean and southern Scandinavia (Kristiansen & Larsson 2006), for example. Among other things, the Bronze Age world system was characterised by long-distance mobilities of people and things, as aptly illustrated by the wanderings of Odysseus, and involved engagements with distant places that carried mythical and otherworldly dimensions (Helms 1988).

The Hangaskangas burial indicates that the area of the Oulujoki River estuary by the eastern shore of the Bothnian Bay was also connected to that world, and while its "place" in these networks may elude us, it can still be reconstructed and reviewed as a place. By combining the local land-uplift rate (ca. 8.065 mm/year) and the median value for marine transgression (1.4 mm/year) with the new

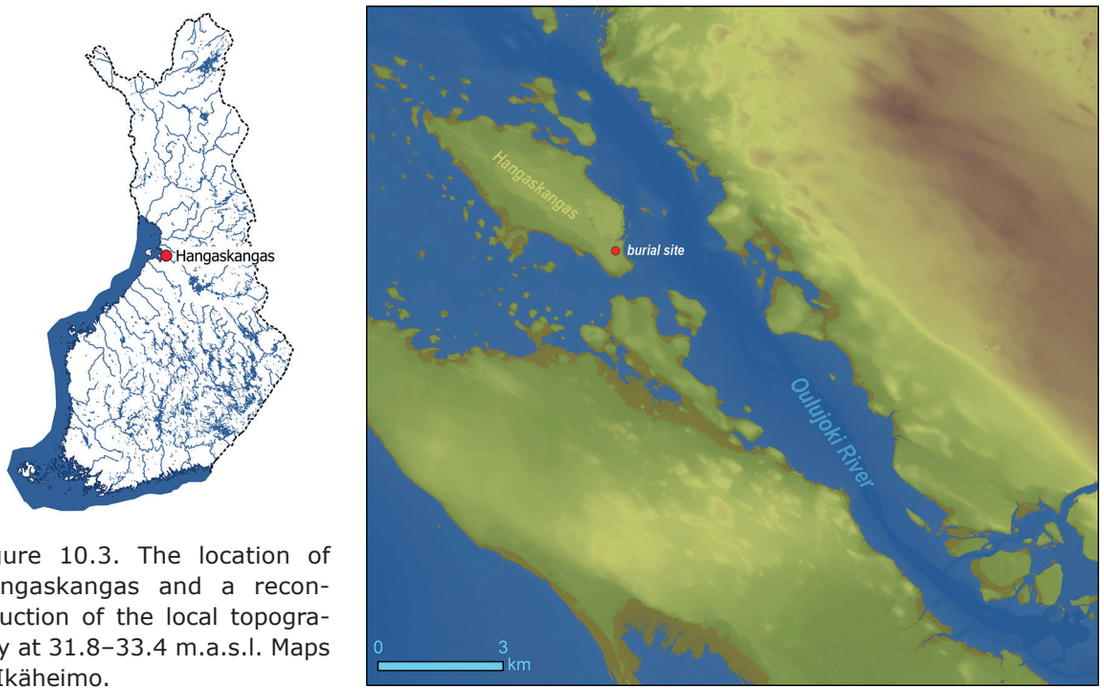

Figure 10.3. The location of Hangaskangas and a reconstruction of the local topography at 31.8–33.4 m.a.s.l. Maps J. Ikäheimo.

AMS radiocarbon date obtained for the cremains (3380±30 BP [Beta-614810], δ13C= -23.3), we can estimate that the shoreline was located at an elevation of 31.8–33.4 metres a.s.l. at the time of the burial. The projection of these values on a 10 x 10-metre digital terrain model (DTM) shows (Fig. 10.3) that the burial was made by the eastern shore of a large island, close to its southeasternmost tip. While it certainly had a commanding position over the estuary of the Oulujoki River, both the location on an island and its position within it may have been chosen for reasons that went beyond mere visibility in the landscape.

A coastal island itself may have been meaningful in two ways. First, the sea was probably associated with death and (travel to) the underworld; second, islands themselves were considered liminal places between the worlds and hence "appropriate" places for burials (see further e.g. Herva & Lahelma 2019: Ch. 6). Although we do not know how death was conceived by the community with which the Hangaskangas burial is associated, Scandinavian Bronze Age archaeological material and later northern ethnography and folklore suggest that it was regarded as a form of travel to the underworld that was simultaneously geographical and spiritual (e.g. Herva & Lahelma 2019: 111–127).

The cultural meanings of islands, coastlines, and the sea were probably complex and multidimensional in the prehistory of northernmost Europe, and associated not only with death, but cycles of life more generally. For example, some Scandinavian Bronze Age iconography appears to show the sun travelling across the sky during the day and underwater at night, to rise again from the sea in the morning (Kaul 1998), which provides one, but probably not the only, context for associating the sea with the land of death. Moreover, bronze itself may have been associated with the sun's materialising on earth (Engedal 2010: 273), which in turn suggests a set of potentially relevant associations between the Hangaskangas burial, the bronze finds, the sun, and journeying.

It is particularly interesting here that pyrotechnology is integral to both bronze working and cremation: the mastery of fire towards a transformation of substance is central to both practices, and Goldhahn (2007) has argued that a "ritual specialist" skilled in the techniques of transformation by fire may have overseen both bronze working and cremation in the Bronze Age, which in turn had cosmological dimensions. Importantly, the Hangaskangas burial is not an isolated case here, because there is a complex of sites around it. They include the nearby site of Halosentörmä, which has produced evidence of bronze working (Ikäheimo 2020), at a very early date by Finnish standards, possibly even to the first half of the second millennium BC.

The location of the burial on an island on a river mouth, albeit by no means anomalous, is interesting here not only in cosmological terms, but also from the perspective of the broader and longer-term cultural dynamics in the northernmost Baltic Sea region. The bronze blade from the burial seems to be of an "eastern" type, which does seem to echo with particularly prominent cultural connections with Russian bronze cultures; eastern connections had already been important in the Neolithic, as evidenced by the Typical Comb Ware material culture, for example. Northern rivers were central to this interaction in affording connections from the Baltic Sea northwards and eastwards for millennia, making northern river mouths natural hubs of contact and interaction between different cultures and communities over vast areas in the Baltic Sea world, Central Europe, and Russia (e.g. Kuusela 2013). The bronze finds from the Hangaskangas burial echo these interactions. It is therefore plausible that the person buried with these bronzes was a "trader" or "traveller" (cf. Wentink 2020) involved in the networks of long-distance mobilities of people and things, though due to absence of stable isotope data, this remains speculation.

In any case, the Hangaskangas site is not just an anomalous outlier as an odd example of a Bronze Age cremation burial in northern Finland. Its history testifies to the significance and "special status" of river mouths. Northern rivers connected worlds that were geographically, culturally, and cosmo-

logically significant; they were places of encounter between these different worlds. Accordingly, river travel was simultaneously a physical and spiritual practice of journeying between different worlds. Perhaps such considerations had something to do with the Hangaskangas burial being found in this particular topographical location on an island in a river mouth, with its associated liminal and cosmological notions.

10.4 Conclusion

To summarise, both the structure and the setting of the Hangaskangas burial seem to echo the symbolism inherent in the landscape setting and its position on the periphery of the Bronze Age world. The site and its finds is therefore a particularly rewarding window to the complex networks and cosmological strata of Bronze Age northern Fennoscandia. It affords a fleeting glimpse of a time when the broad cultural spheres of the east and west came into a close contact in which millennia-old northern cosmological traditions persisted alongside those deriving from the Bronze cultures of the Mediterranean, and in which the societies of Europe's northern extremes were actively involved in the contact networks of an emerging Bronze Age world.

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