Chapter 10
Constructing Social and Cultural Identities in the Bronze Age

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Introduction

The Bronze Age has sometimes been presented as the first period of 'globalisation' or 'world system' in Europe. I propose that in order to apply such terms onto the past, we first need to understand the meaning of culture and how it is constituted. I wish to propose that the concept of culture has been employed in two different ways in archeology: from 1860s to 1960s, culture was predominantly used in an instrumental way, as a means to classify the past in time and space. Typology was the method. As there existed no theory on the meaning of culture, early attempts to equate culture and people were flawed, as we know.

Ian Hodder and post-processual archeology introduced a new understanding of culture. Here, culture is socially and symbolically constructed and, therefore, carries meaning. This may be linked to a variety of social traditions, from ethnicity to cosmology (Hodder 1982). This approach was taken one step further by Thomas Larsson and myself when we suggested that a recurring set of material symbols may form a symbolic field that corresponds to an institution (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005, Chap. 1). I apply this approach in the following in order to demonstrate how social identities were constructed by selectively using material culture to define different institutions with different roles chiefly among males during the period 1500–1100 BC in northern Europe.

My paper is organised around two dialectic relationships: between material culture and materiality, and between social and cultural identity. I propose that it is only by linking the two that a more complete, historical understanding of the role of material culture can be achieved.

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From Material Culture to Materiality

In prehistoric and pre-state societies, there exists an intimate relationship between people and things, as expressed 25 years ago by Ian Hodder in saying that culture was meaningfully constituted. Later social anthropologists, such as Alfred Gell and Marilyn Strathern, explored this relationship and these insights from anthropology have gradually been taken onboard by archeologists. It is proposed here, with reference to Marilyn Strathern's and Alfred Gell's works, that materiality embodies a form of personification of material culture (Gell 1998; Strathern 1992; see also Tilley 1999). It is often derived from ritualised and sometimes divine relations between gods and humans; humans and nature; and humans and animals, where material culture acts as an intermediary that encapsulates and symbolises supernatural properties. In this way, specific objects, such as the images and symbols of gods, can be empowered through various forms of rituals. They attain what Gell called secondary agency and are infused with supernatural power and personal properties that respond to human actions. Such power may also be acquired by certain forms of prestige goods through their links to outstanding individuals such as chiefs, warriors, or priests, and the deeds they performed with the objects (e.g., famous swords, the kula rings, and shells). The consequence is that the objects become loaded with personal biographies and names (e.g., Appadurai 1986; Strathern 1992; Kristiansen 2002). Through this process, things and persons create each other and become one, and therefore, the exchange of gifts also becomes partially personal, as has been argued by Strathern (1992).

Based on this perspective, I propose that the context and the distribution of such highly powerful and personalised objects and monuments can inform us about social institutions, and the way they interacted in time and space. A case in point is the constitution in the Nordic Early Bronze Age of ritual chiefs who were characterised by a certain recurring set of objects and symbols, and warrior chiefs who had another set of recurring objects (Fig. 10.1).

The ritual chief is characterised by a special package of objects, such as campstools, and drinking vessels with sun symbols at the bottom, so that the sun would rise when lifting the cup that contained mead. Razors and tweezers are often linked to this group of ritual chiefs, which are defined by the exclusive use of spiral decoration which was the symbol of the sun cult and of Nordic identity. Their swords would often be full hilted and used for parade rather than for warfare. They are rarely sharp and rarely damaged (see Kristiansen 1984 for an empirical documentation of the use of different sword types).

The warrior chief, on the contrary, would have a highly functional, undecorated flange-hilted sword, an international type whose distribution stretched from south-central Europe to Scandinavia. It was the sword of the professional warrior, always sharp edged and often re-sharpened from damage in combat. The warrior chiefs would rarely have any of the ritualised symbolic objects of ritual chiefs, suggesting that they were not in charge of rituals. They shared with ritual chiefs a burial tradition in an oak coffin under a barrow, and a chiefly dress consisting of a cape and a

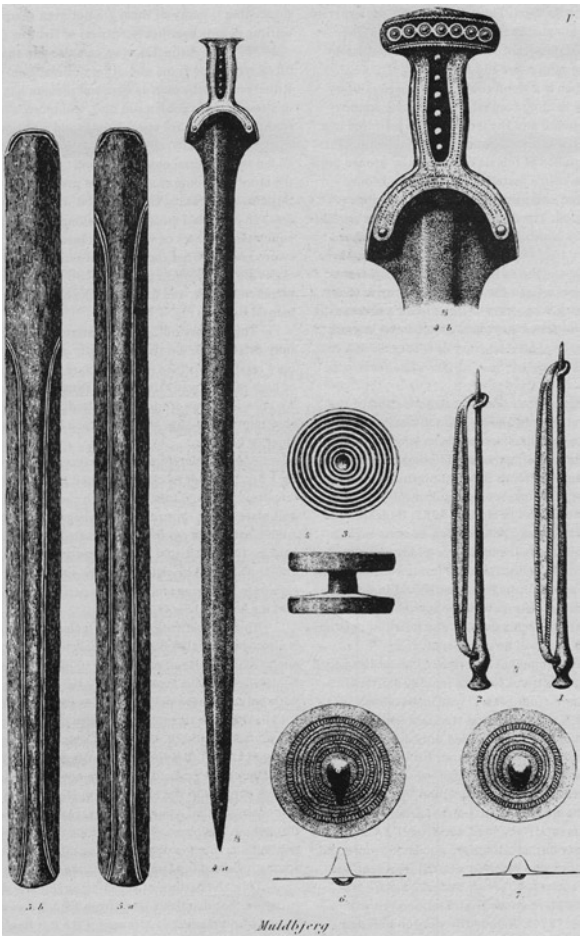

Fig. 10.1 Oak coffin burial of ritual chief with spiral decorated objects and a ritual sword of Nordic origin and a warrior chief with plain undecorated functional sword of international (non-Nordic) origin

round cap, both of which were socially distinctive of the free man of chiefly lineage. They also shared a burial tradition in a barrow, which is the corresponding ritual definition of 'free men' who owned cattle and farms, in opposition to those who had smaller houses without stalling for cattle (Kristiansen 2006).

Finally, we have a third group defined by octagonal hilted swords of south German origin, but which were also produced in Denmark by migrant smiths, as they employed a specific casting method different from the Nordic smiths (Quillfeldt 1995). Like the warriors, they do not have any of the paraphernalia of the ritual chiefs, and they share the same international distribution as the flange-hilted sword. They represent a group of people who might be linked to trade and smithing (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005).

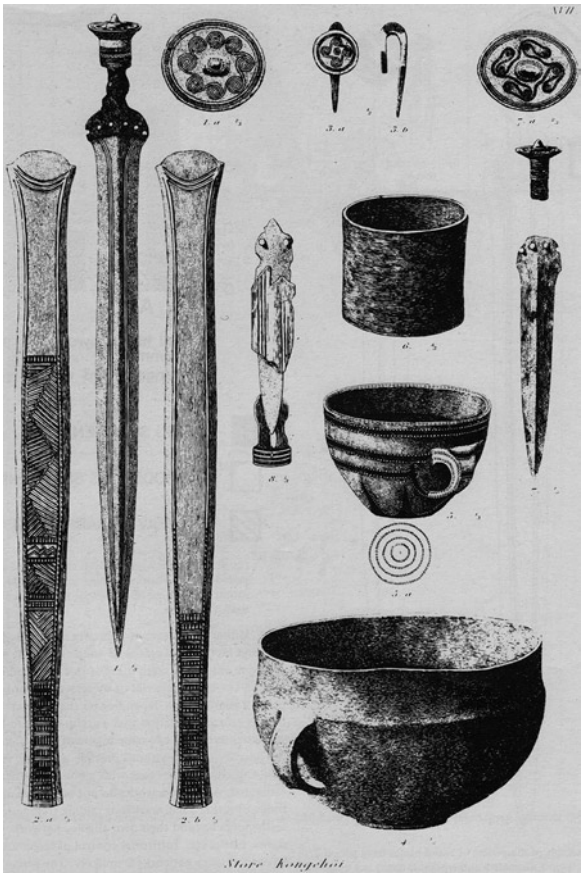

Fig. 10.1 (continued)

These three groups are represented by several hundred burials and serve as a prime example of Ian Hodder's dictum that material culture is meaningfully constituted. In a rather straightforward way, they demonstrate that different sword types in the Bronze Age were meaningfully linked to different social and ritual institutions and social identities. Hundreds of other object types from prehistory are waiting for a similar contextual interpretation of their social and institutional meaning.

Once we are able to delimit symbolical fields and their institutions, it becomes pertinent to raise the issues linked to the formation of social and personal identity such as personhood and agency. Here, a theoretical discourse from psychology and philosophy that examines personhood and embodiment meets with a theoretical discourse in anthropology and archeology that examines their social and cultural conditions (Strathern 1992; Gell 1998). The works of Michael Shanks and Paul Treherne are early examples of this theoretical trajectory that employed materiality to explore the cultural construction of body, the self, and their embodied praxis (Shanks 1999;

Treherne 1995). Other theoretical approaches to materiality were developed by Chris Tilley in *Metaphor and Material Culture* (Tilley 1999), and by Colin Renfrew, Elizabeth DeMarrais, and Chris Gosden in their edited book *Rethinking materiality: the engagement of mind with material world* (Renfrew et al. 2004). More recently, Joanna Brück has critically revised the concept of materiality and personhood and suggested that it was constructed through social relations and, therefore, cannot be equated with a modern perception of the individual (Brück 2006; see also Sørensen and Rebay 2008). However, such an embedded understanding of the self and social identity moves the interpretative focus to the meaning of these larger institutional and social relationships. This takes us on to the next level of analysis: the relationship between social institutions and cultural identity.

From Social to Cultural Identity

We have long since recognised the social complexity of prehistoric societies, but not the derived complexity of culture and its employment in producing and reproducing this complexity. While we are able to delimit social institutions by a contextualised analysis of their symbolic and cultural fields of meaning, such as that which defined ritual chiefs and warrior chiefs, the next step in the analysis is to move from institutions and the constitution of social and personal identities to cultural and ethnic identity. Did the symbolic fields of meaning that constituted the institutions of ritual chiefs and warrior chiefs also carry a wider collective meaning of identity? We are here encountering the relationship between the formation of the self through a social identity and its dialectical relationship with collective identities, from social groups/classes to polities/ethnicity. While ethnicity undoubtedly played a central role in all human societies as part of a common origin and shared historical identity creating a tradition, its material expressions have been an underdeveloped field of study (however, see Bürmeister and Müller-Schessel 2007; Fuhrholt 2008). I propose that it is possible to delimit various forms of social and ultimately ethnic identity through a careful analysis of the geographical distribution of social institutions and the symbolic meaning of their material culture.

Thus, the two institutions of ritual chiefs and warrior chiefs have radically different distributions, and this informs us about their different roles in the reproduction of a complex set of regional and inter-regional identities, some of which formed a collective ethnicity and some a political identity. The ritual chiefs maintained the ritual and cosmological order of society, defined by a symbolic package of objects and by the spiral decoration. It signaled Nordic identity and a shared religious cosmology, and probably also a shared cosmological origin. They were in charge of rituals and controlled the huge corpus of religious and legal texts vital to the correct performance of rituals and to the maintenance of order. Therefore, Nordic ritual chiefs never, or rarely, moved outside the cultural boundaries defining this 'ethnic' identity. I define ethnic identity here as a shared symbolic world of cosmological origin (Jones 1997). However, the Nordic identity displayed in the spiral

style of chiefly objects refers back to a distant Mycenaean template of high culture that was not shared with other central European Bronze Age groups.

The warrior chiefs, on the contrary, were culturally defined as 'foreign', which allowed them to travel and maintain political connections outside the symbolically defined ethnic world of Nordic Culture. Therefore, they maintained and carried the inter-regional networks that constituted the flow of bronze and of foreign relations. They were part of a central European/north European international network, with a shared material culture of central European origin (Fig. 10.2).

Ethno-historical evidence of warrior cultures supports such an interpretation of warriors and traders on the move. Warriors often formed special group identities (sodalities) that linked them in a spatial network defined by rules of special behavior and etiquette. This could be employed both for recruiting war bands and for traveling to more distant chiefs to earn fame and foreign prestige good, as evidenced in Africa among the Masai, among the Japanese Samurai, and a recurring feature in the literature on warriors and warfare.

In this way, the institutions that existed took care of separate needs that were vital to Bronze Age societies: the internal maintenance of a shared cultural and cosmological world, and the external maintenance of political and commercial relations. Returning to the question of personhood and social identity, the sheer number of sword burials and the regularity they display in burial rituals and burial goods suggest that we are dealing with well-defined bounded institutions and social identities. Although small-scale variation exists, there is nothing to support Brück's (2006) suggestion of a divided, relational personhood in the Bronze Age. Social relations were imperative, but they operated within a well-defined set of normative rules linked to the long-term reproduction of political institutions with their own blueprints for social actions and heroic deeds (Kristiansen 2008). We are far beyond a New Guinean perception of personhood and 'dividuals', whose relevance for any prehistoric period may indeed be questioned (Spriggs 2008).

It should also be observed that the relationship between ritual chiefs and warrior chiefs could become strained and competitive if foreign relations collapsed. Also, in periods of warfare, the warrior chiefs would be able to amass more power; but if they could aspire to become ritual/political chiefs through their deeds, then the strain could be eased. However, this would also be dependent upon the numerical relationship between the two groups. During the centuries from 1300 to 1100 BC, flange-hilted swords become more numerous, whereas Nordic full-hilted swords become less numerous. It suggests that the warrior group could threaten the role of ritual chiefs. But it may also indicate that ritual chiefs had strengthened their power and created larger political entities with lesser opportunities for warriors to achieve high office as ritual leaders.

This double institution also represented a clever division of power that we meet in many societies, both in the anthropological literature and in early historical texts (Dumézil 1988). The later Spartan double kingship may be taken to represent an inheritance from the Bronze Age where it was widespread, as my example from northern Europe suggests. During Mycenaean times, this dual leadership was designated by the term 'wanax' (the political/ritual leader), and 'lavagetas' (the

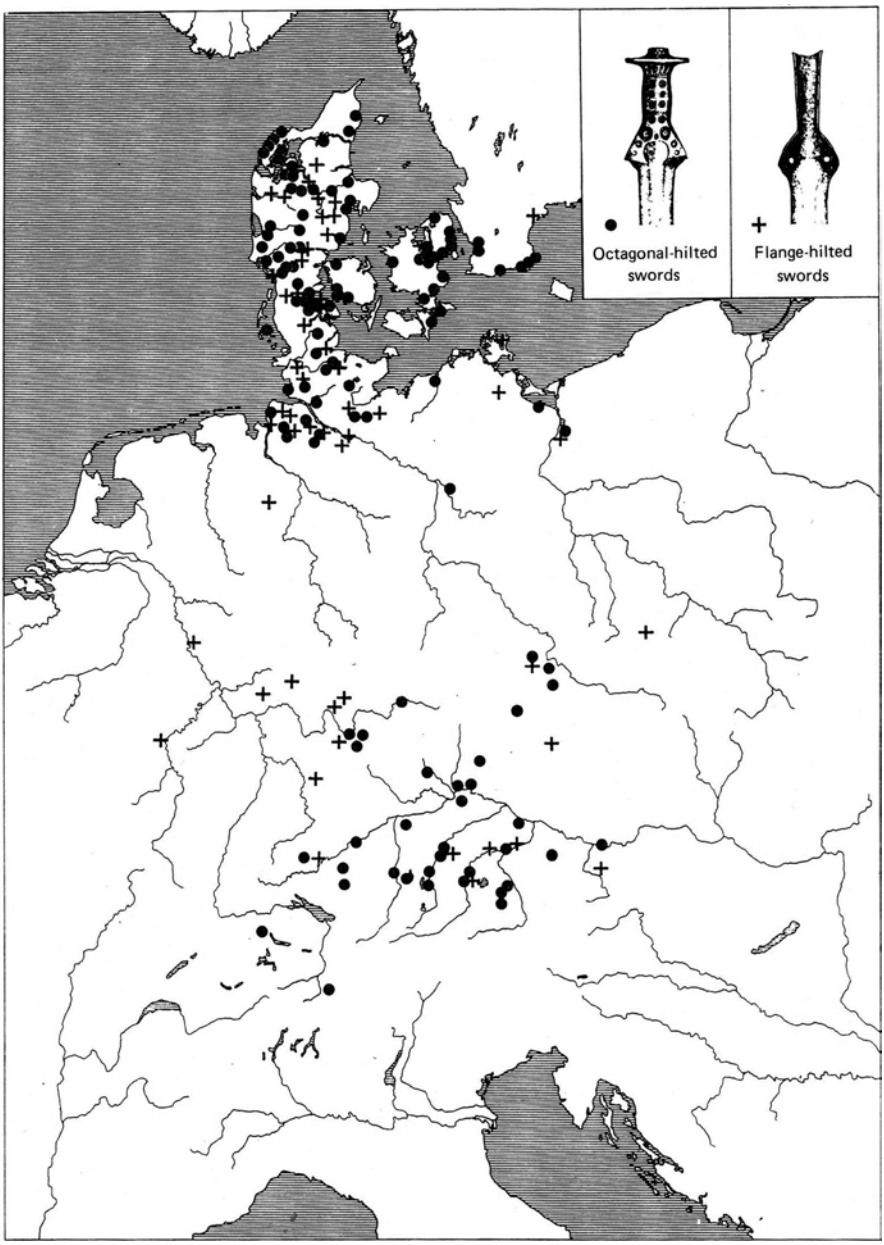

Fig. 10.2 Distribution of foreign swords connecting south Germany and Denmark, versus the distribution of Nordic full-hilted swords

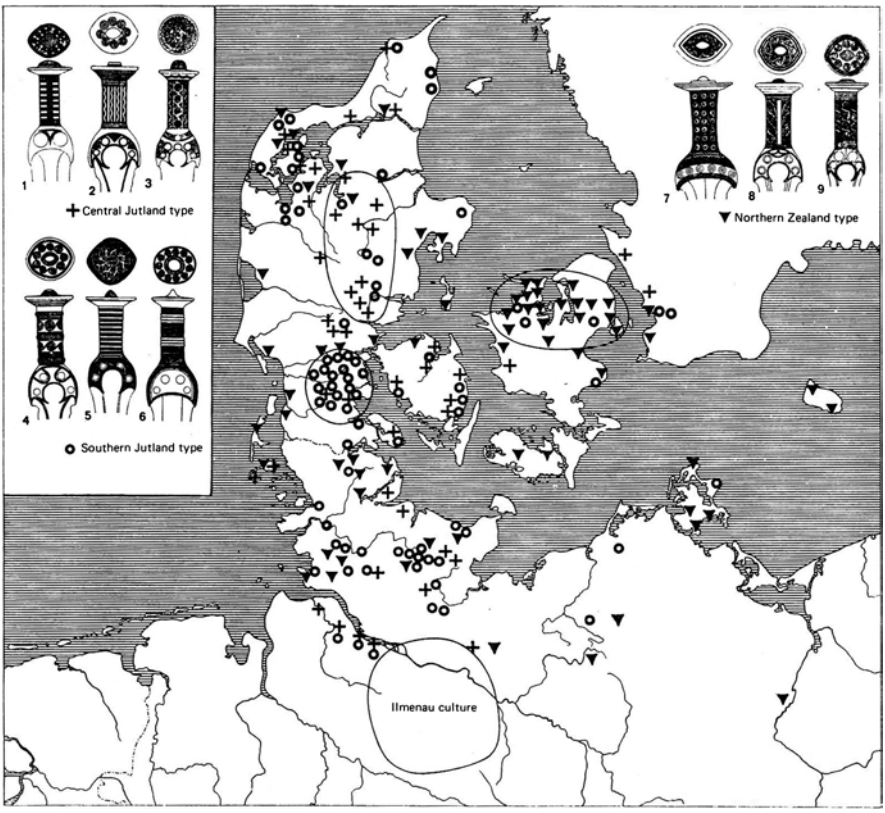

Fig. 10.2 (continued)

war leader). In the Iliad's catalog of ships, two leaders represent each kingdom/ethnic group. Neither in Greece nor in Scandinavia, however, is there any doubt that the ritual/political leader was over and above the war leader, but that did not imply that tensions could not arise between them, as indeed exemplified in the Iliad by the opposition between Agamemnon and Achilles.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated that in the Bronze Age, there existed symbolic fields that corresponded to institutions with different roles and geographical distributions. It speaks about societies that were highly complex, with a capacity to maintain parallel, coexisting forms of identity, some linked to a larger 'foreign' political world and some linked to a more ethnic and ritual world of 'national' identity. In this, the Bronze Age is not vastly different from what we know from slightly later

periods, such as Archaic Greece, which exhibits similar developed forms of identity and ethnicity, also testified in written sources (Finkelberg 2005, Hall 1997, 2002, Renfrew 1998). Although the jury is still out as to the existence of larger, shared ethnic identities in the past, our example suggests that by the Bronze Age, we see the emergence of new forms of more bounded ethnic commonalities. They were based upon a shared cosmology and shared institutions, which would, in all probability, also imply some measure of a shared language. Thus, prehistoric material culture holds the potential to unfold social institutions, political and ethnic identities, if unlocked with proper historical and anthropological insights and interpretative strategies.

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