

Stone ships show signs of maritime network in Baltic Sea region 3,000 years ago

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In the middle of the Bronze Age, around 1000 BC, the amount of metal objects increased dramatically in the Baltic Sea region. Around the same time, a new type of stone monument, arranged in the form of ships, started to appear along the coasts. New research from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden shows that the stone ships were built by maritime groups.

The maritime groups were part of a network that extended across large

parts of [northern Europe](#). The network was maintained largely because of the strong dependence on bronze.

[Archaeologists](#) have long assumed that bronze was imported to [Scandinavia](#) from the south, and recent analyses have been able to confirm this notion. The distribution of bronze objects has been discussed frequently, with most analyses focusing on the links in the networks. The people behind the networks, however, are only rarely addressed, not to mention their meeting places.

"One reason why the meeting places of the [Bronze Age](#) are not discussed very often is that we haven't been able to find them. This is in strong contrast to the trading places of the [Viking Age](#), which have been easy to locate as they left behind such rich [archaeological material](#)," says the author of the thesis Joakim Wehlin from the University of Gothenburg and Gotland University.

In his thesis, Wehlin has analysed the archaeological material from the Bronze Age stone ships and their placement in the landscape. The stone ships can be found across the entire Baltic Sea region and especially on the larger islands, with a significant cluster on the Swedish island of Gotland. The ships have long been thought to have served as graves for one or several individuals, and have for this reason often been viewed as death ships intended to take the deceased to the afterlife.

'My study shows a different picture. It seems like the whole body was typically not buried in the ship, and some stone ships don't even have graves in them. Instead, they sometimes show remains of other types of activities. So with the absence of the dead, the traces of the survivors tend to appear.'

One of Wehlin's conclusions is that the stone ships and the activities that took place there point to people who were strongly focused on maritime

practice. Details in the ships indicate that they were built to represent real ships. Wehlin says that the stone ships give clues about the ship-building techniques of the time and therefore about the ships that sailed on the Baltic Sea during the Bronze Age.

By studying the landscape, Wehlin has managed to locate a number of meeting places, or early ports.

"These consist of areas that resemble hill forts and are located near easily accessible points in the landscape – that is, near well-known waterways leading inland. While these areas have previously been thought to be much younger, recent age determinations have dated them to the Bronze Age."

The thesis offers a very extensive account of the stone [ships](#). It also suggests that the importance of the Baltic Sea during the Scandinavian Bronze Age, not least as a waterway, has been underestimated in previous research.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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