Ringing stones in Sweden and Norway

TRADITION AND FOLKLORE

Folk tradition in Scandinavia offers much information on both stone slabs and blocks being used as percussion instruments because of their metallic sound when struck. Their traditional names are quite often onomatopoeic or refer to bells or singing, such as Klokksteinen (The Bell Stone), Sangsteinen (The Song Stone), Syngsteinen (The Singing Stone), Klingasteinen (The Sonorous Stone), Klungsletten (The Sonorous Slab), Ballerstenen (from Old Swedish balla: making noise), Dønnsteinen (from Old Norse dýlu: making sound).

Some of these stones with a position in folk tradition cannot be linked to prehistoric contexts. At other times, however, a connection to ancient activities might be indicated when the tradition insists that a stone has its roots back to pagan times. Furthermore, stones might be connected to prehistory in a more direct way, for example with the presence of cup marks.

A cup mark, the type of rock carving found on most ringing stones, is a cup-formed depression that has been carved into mountain slabs and boulders. It is as a rule 3–10 cm in diameter and up to 5 cm in depth. The cup marks are thought to date from such an extended period of time as that between the late Stone Age and the late Iron Age. If we let the cup marks constitute the criterion for dating the ringing stones it will be a broad dating.

In Swedish popular belief cup marks are usually called dönnvarn (dju, diva, in Swedish, means elf, and kvarn means windmill). There are here a great many tales and legends, and even today there are transmitters of tradition still alive who can tell about how the cup marks were used in former times. According to these beliefs, the cup marks were, to exemplify, bowls for offerings in connection with fertility and death cults, symbols of the earth goddess (the carving of the cavities was to symbolize the union of the earth goddess with the god in heaven), or they were made by shamans of the Bronze Age and the stone was a kind of "shaman drum".

Perhaps it was the case in prehistoric times that cup marks were used to indicate that a stone was a sound tool, that is a ringing stone, and/or they were signs to tell where the sounds were the "best" for certain purposes. Was any intrinsic value of a magical/ritual nature possibly attributed to the sounds that were caused by the manufacturing processes, and/or to the fact that the stones were sonorous? Maybe the making of cup marks was a resounding way to communicate with someone or something that was supposed to be inside the stones, such as the spirits of the ancestors, an idea discussed by the Swedish archaeologist Helena Vittor. Or perhaps cup marks told people that here is a ringing stone for signalling, please ring the "bell"?

ACOUSTIC FUNCTION

An interesting question is why some stones are "sonorous", i.e. sound metallic and can thus be called ringing stones, while similar stones are mute. We have taken up this question with several geologists, but they have so far not been able to give any unambiguous explanation of this phenomenon. From a geological point of view, ringing stones should not be confused with the species of rock called "phonolite". A common designation in German seems to be Klingstein, in French pierre sonore. In Scandinavian languages the common term, also used in our project, is klingsten, translated into English as ringing stone.

Ringing stones in Scandinavia were for a long time a neglected field of research. They were mentioned and discussed by some archaeologists in the 20th century, but no systematic research was carried out until after the year 2000. This was done at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, by dr. Helena Vittor, and by some archaeology students. One of the students, Maja Hultman, has made comprehensive contextual and archaeoacoustic analyses of ringing stones on the Swedish island of Öland. In Norway there has been no research on this topic before.

Since we started our Swedish-Norwegian collaboration project (2009), we can provisionally now identify forty-two ringing stones in Sweden and twenty in Norway. The record is based on data in ethnological, literary and archaeological sources as well as our own inventories.

This pilot project aims to make a survey of ringing stones in Sweden and Norway, collect traditional information about them and discuss their significance in ancient societies. Revitalizing of these music-archaeological artefacts is also an important part of the work. The project (2009–2010) is funded by the Foundation for Swedish-Norwegian Co-operation.

Cajsa S. Lund (Sweden) and Gjermund Kolltveit (Norway)
WHO, WHEN, WHY?

- Who performed the ringing stones and for whom did they do it?
- Were they used together with other sound tools and vocal sounds, as well as dancing?
- Could anybody see and hear the ringing stones or were they reserved for a special group in the society?
- How far away were the ringing stones audible – or meant to be audible?
- Did the range of the sound indicate territorial boundaries of any kind?
- Were the ringing stones so sacred and/or taboo that they could not be used by any person, at any time, in any way?
- Did both the ringing stone and its sounds signify something in a larger, complex “cosmological” system, in which sound was of less importance than the actual signs – the stones and/or the cup marks?

There are a few facts but many questions regarding ringing stones in prehistoric societies. All questions, however, of how and what, who, for whom, etc., bring us down to the essential problem: why and in what context were the ringing stones used?

It is unlikely that ringing stones served purely practical functions. They produce weak sounds, compared to other sound tools, as well as the human voice. It is more reasonable that these stones were used on special occasions with a specific purpose.

In her contextual study from 2007 Maja Hultman concludes that prehistoric people seems to have preferred to put up some of their constructions close to the ringing stones, that is, the stones had some kind of closer relation to the rest of the cultural landscape. Moreover, she finds that ringing stones were consciously placed close to communication routes in the landscape and mentions a recent theory that the ringing stones were possibly used like the Greek herms and the Swedish offerkas where travellers plead with different kinds of higher beings to ask for good luck during the journey.

CLASSIFICATION

All stones make sound when they are struck. Some stones, however, produce more or better sound than others. We can never prove that a stone, with good or less good sound, has been used in prehistory with the primary purpose of creating sound. To sort this mixed material, we suggest this classification.

- Stones used as ringing stones according to local traditions, but without particular indications of prehistoric use
- Stones with cup marks, situated in a context indicating prehistoric use
- Stones that produce a clear sound, but without any connection with traditional use or indications of use in prehistoric times

REVITALIZATION

In Sweden and Norway, ringing stones are relatively unknown as a phenomenon to the general public, scholars, musicians, schools and children. One of the next steps of our project will be to make known and bring to life for children as well as adults, scientists as well as laymen, ringing stones in Scandinavia on the basis of a documentary, combinations of them in sound, words and images.

In collaboration with musicians, archaeologists and the official authorities of cultural heritage, we will demonstrate the sounding possibilities of the ringing stones in various ways, from educational programmes at the sites in question (e.g. sounding lectures and sound happenings) to multimedia music programmes (e.g. TV documentaries, school material, etc.).

Cajsa S. Lund is a music archaeologist, primarily connected to the University of Lund in southern Sweden. Her profile is to make the results of her research come alive for the general public. She is also a music producer and has in particular formed Ensemble Mare Balticum, which is the regional institution Musik i Syd’s ensemble for early music.

Gjermund Kolleivt is a free-lance music archaeologist, ethnomusicologist and musician, living outside Oslo. His doctoral dissertation Jew’s Harps in European Archaeology is about the early history of the jew’s harp in Europe based on archaeologi- cal materials. Music-archaeological activities through his website www.musark.no.

LISTEN!

Listen to the Sangeltstain on Gotland. It was recorded in 1984 for the phonogram The Sounds of Prehistoric Scandinavia. Press play on the MP3 player to start.