

Chapter 15

A Road to the Other Side

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ABSTRACT An excavation of a Viking Age road/bridge which was situated next to a Viking Age grave-field aroused many questions concerning roads, bridges, graves and phenomena connected to their role and significance for the people who actually used them and the grave-field. Based on a combination of different sources such as rune-stones, Norse mythology and excavation data, this article deals with the road and the bridge and its role as a means of transport to afterlife.

In 2004 the author had had the opportunity to excavate a bridge lane in Broby, Täby parish Upland, Sweden. Broby is situated about 25 km north of Stockholm in an area with a great deal of ancient, mostly Iron Age, monuments.

The excavation revealed that the bridge was about 36 m long and 2 to 5 m wide, widest on its southern part. It was entirely built of stones, even if some stones were placed upon a kind of organic material that *could* be twigs or wood chips, probably in order to protect the stones from sinking into the muddier areas. Smaller stones and stone material were used as filling to level out the surface of the bridge, making it even and thus easier to walk on. The edges were marked with larger stones or boulders every 1,6 meters, possibly just for aesthetic reasons – a specific detail that makes this bridge more or less a look-a-like to the well known Jarlabanke bridge in Central Täby, about 2 km northeast of Broby (figs. 1 and 2). As we can see in fig. 2, the Jarlabanke Bridge had both rune stones at the ends as well as upright stones or boulders built into the stone rows at the edges. The construction details and the typology dated the excavated bridge lane in Broby to the Viking Age, about 700-1050 AD (Grön 2005:12pp).

One special detail is yet to be mentioned: a foundation for a rune stone. It showed similarities to a large paved posthole in size, although it had no depth (fig.1). During excavation much effort was made to find a rune stone, or pieces of one, unfortunately with negative result.

However, two pieces of rune stones originating from two different stones have been found some 400 meters north of the excavated bridge in the old village of Broby (today's Broby Gård). At least one was used as a brick in an old cellar wall. (A third fragment was in fact found in Broby Gård in the early 19th century but unfortunately that piece is missing today) (Budtz 1992:161). We know, and we have come across several examples of this throughout the years, that rune stones have often been moved from their original places, especially in the early Middle Ages. Sometimes the rune stones were raised in a

new place by the church, but often they were used as building material, not only in churches but also in secular buildings. The shape of a rune stone is often oval or rectangular which makes it suitable for building material. Since they are only fragments of (two different) rune stones, the runic texts are also fragmentary. Neither do the fragments give any information whatsoever about the place where they once had been raised, nor are the words "bridge" or "road" to be read on any of them. Not even the almost classical rune stone phrase "NN raised the stone after NN" is to be found on either of them (for examples of rune stone inscriptions, see Åke Johansson's article). Nevertheless, I have suggested in other contexts that one or possibly both of these rune stone fragments found in Broby Gård may have been raised near the bridge that we excavated (Grön 2005: 16).



Fig. 1. Photo of the bridge. The contours of the boulders are marked with lines while the fundament for the rune stone is marked with a broken line. Photo. C. Grön.

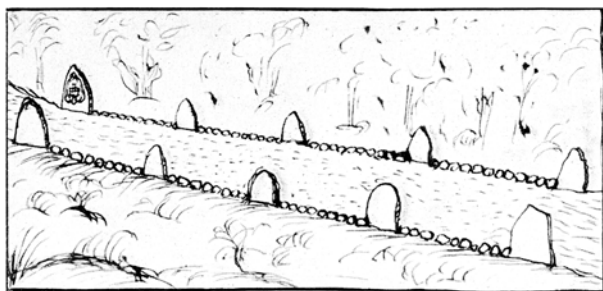


Fig. 2. A drawing of the Jarlabanke Bridge made by Peringsköld around 1700. Note the upright stones or boulders.

The burial ground

Now, where does the bridge lead? Well, to a burial ground which consists of 17 graves, most of them rectangular stone settings oriented in an east-west direction and containing skeleton burials. The grave gifts were few, if any; in most cases limited to a knife and/or a small piece of pottery. The burial ground was excavated simultaneously with the bridge lane. The graves were dated by their appearance, content, shape, form and C¹⁴-datings to the Viking Age and early Middle Age, that is to about 700-1100 AD. The same criteria have led us to identify some of the graves as, if not “pure” Christian graves, graves influenced by Christian ideas. The burial ground belongs to the transitional period between the pre-Christian and Christian era (Grön & Sundberg 2005).

Other bridge-lanes, bridges and pavings

There are several Iron age roads, bridges, bridge lanes and pavings in the area around Broby, especially around the Vallentuna lake. In figure 3 each number represents a bridge lane or bridge (no. 1 is Broby). Most of them haven't been excavated but we know they indicate a bridge or a road from the rune stones that were raised beside them. Most of the rune stones bear the inscription: “...made this bridge” (the author's translation), which is an unambiguous evidence of some kind of bridge or paving. The area is a kind of “land of rune stones” or “land of bridges”.

One of the bridges which have actually been excavated is Gullbro (no. 5 on the map, fig. 3). The excavation revealed two phases, of which the last one was dated to the Viking Age (Shierbeck 1995:14). Another, partly excavated bridge is the aforementioned Jarlabankebro (no. 6) where several minor excavations have been carried out throughout the years. This bridge has also been dated to the Viking Age, specifically to the 11th century (Andersson & Boje-Backe 1999:35). A third excavation that must be mentioned in this context took place in the immediate vicinity of Broby Bridge (no. 7 on

fig. 3). Next to the river Karby ån, along the road Frestavägen, there were three rune stones that mention both a bridge and a mound. The rune stones were moved in modern times to a safer place close by, due to concern over the effects of heavy traffic. The excavation revealed three skeleton graves dated to the Viking Age (about 1000 AD) and nine postholes. No clear traces of a former bridge were found, although some of the postholes *could* be remains of the bridge that the rune stones indicate (Andersson & Boje-Backe 1999: 1, 28).

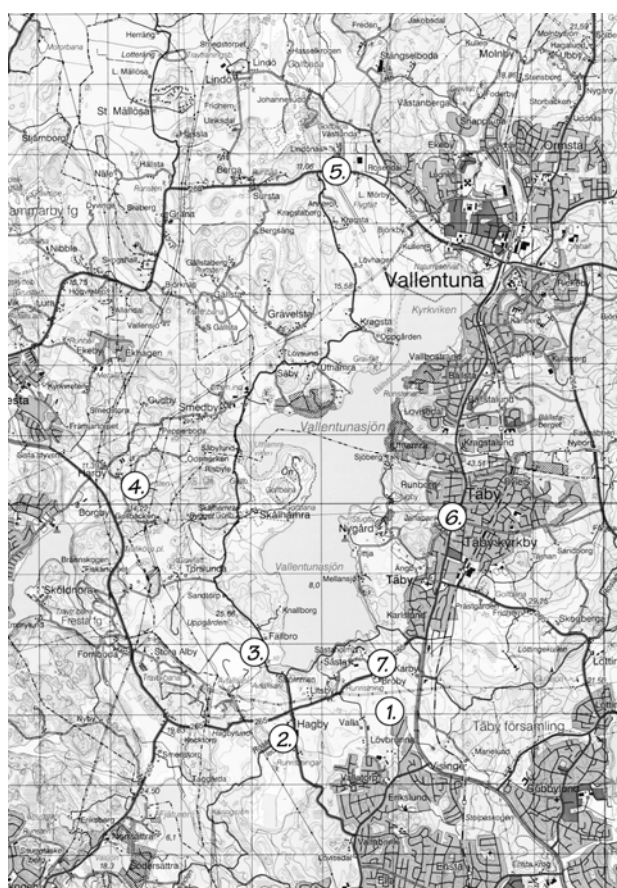


Fig. 3. Map with numbers of known bridges, bridge lanes or pavings around the Vallentuna lake. 1. Broby, excavated by the author. 2 Hagby. 3 Fällbro. 4 Harby. 5 Gullbron. 6 Jarlabankebro. 7 Broby.

Discussion

If we take a closer look at the bridges we will find that some of them are situated rather close to a burial ground or groups of graves. This is valid not only in the area around the Vallentuna Lake, there are examples from other parts of Uppland as well as other parts of Sweden. Graves and grave fields (from different times in our pre-history) are rather often situated close to roads, crossroads and bridges (see Rudebeck 2002). In several



Fig. 4. Clearing the bridge on an early autumn morning. Photo: C. Grön.

cases they seem to lead from the village or settlement to the burial ground – like the two bridges in Broby (nos. 1 and 7, fig. 3). Sometimes they lead from one burial ground to another, or from a burial ground to a group of graves – like Fällbro (no. 3, fig 3). A relationship seems to exist between the bridge and the grave or the burial ground. Even if the majority of the grave groups and fields have not been archaeologically excavated, we have solid reasons to believe that they have been in use during the same period as the bridge lane. The exteriors of the graves visible above ground and the ornaments on the rune stones indicate that they are contemporary.

The bridge lane was, of course, of great importance for transporting goods, cattle/livestock, people or anything else that had to go from one side of the bridge to the other. But what if it served a further, a more non-pragmatic purpose? The phenomena graves and roads/bridges have (naturally) been connected with travelling, from this life to afterlife, and the liminal phase in which the deceased is neither part of life nor afterlife (Rudebeck 2002:191). What if it was important that the deceased *literally* had to cross a bridge on their way from this life to afterlife as a part of the burial act?

Norse mythology tells us about *Bifrost* – a bridge made of fire that can be seen on the sky as the rainbow in daytime and as the Milky Way in night time. It leads from earth to Asgård, home of the gods and the actual place for the afterlife. Some sources refer to it as the bridge to *Hel* – the place reserved for the dead. Please note that *Hel* is not to be confounded with *hell*, the dwelling of the devil (Näsström 2001:32, 342; Thunmark-Nyhlén 1981:20).

The journey to the afterlife, as we know it from the Norse mythology and literature, is often described as dangerous and troublesome. It is possible, indeed plausible, that the journey was performed as a drama during the burial act in order to help the dead to the other side. The bridge used could be a real bridge or just a symbolic one, for example a thread over a stream (Nordberg 2003:82-84).

Most of the rune stones are considered to be Christian monuments, raised by early Christians (Gräslund 1996). A great number of the known rune stones bear the inscription “...NN raised the stone and made the bridge” (author’s translation, see also Åke Johansson, this volume). In my opinion it seems logical: if a rune stone is considered to be a Christian monument, the acts

described upon it – both raising a stone and making a bridge – must have some kind of Christian meaning, albeit with a pre-Christian origin.

Later on, even the early medieval church took interest in roads and bridges. The church encouraged the people to build, restore and repair bridges and roads, and considered this a holy act that pleased God. The purpose was to make it easier for the peasants and common people to get to church for their spiritual nourishment (Andersson & Boje-Backe 1999:34; Gräslund 1996:33).

By going to church, believing in God and paying taxes the good parishioner could make sure he was going to

paradise when his time came. Finally, it became a part of the indulgence.

Building a bridge was a costly project that required great resources of time and manpower. The time, effort and resources that were invested in building and maintaining a bridge bear witness of its importance, an importance that reached beyond life on earth. Norse mythology has it that the bridge literally led to afterlife.

Considering all these facts the bridge would consequently have an important function as a means for a safe journey and a proper arrival to afterlife. By crossing the bridge the surviving relatives made sure that the ancestor made it to the other side (fig. 4).

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