The difficult heritage of Sandby borg – exploring memories, ideas and narratives of a 1500 year old massacre

Carolina Jonsson Malm, Gustav Wollentz & Bodil Petersson

To cite this article: Carolina Jonsson Malm, Gustav Wollentz & Bodil Petersson (2022): The difficult heritage of Sandby borg – exploring memories, ideas and narratives of a 1500 year old massacre, International Journal of Heritage Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13527258.2022.2146735

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2022.2146735

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 21 Nov 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 439

View related articles

View Crossmark data
The difficult heritage of Sandby borg – exploring memories, ideas and narratives of a 1500 year old massacre

Carolina Jonsson Malm, Gustav Wollentz and Bodil Petersson

The School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden; \( ^{b} \)The Nordic Centre of Heritage Learning and Creativity, Östersund, Sweden; \( ^{c} \)Department of Cultural Sciences, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 4 June 2022; Accepted 8 November 2022

KEYWORDS Sweden; archaeology; iron age; narratives; chronotopes

Since 2011, archaeologists have carried out excavations in Sandby borg (Figure 1), a ringfort located on the island of Öland just outside the Swedish mainland, where a gruesome massacre took place some time between AD 450 and 550. So far, the remains of approximately 30 unburied bodies have been encountered inside and outside the buildings of the ringfort and an estimated number of 200–300 dead are believed to still be hidden under ground, apparently the victims of brutal violence and possibly other forms of degrading treatment or punishment (Alfsdotter, Pamphel-Dufay, and Victor 2018; Alfsdotter 2019; Alfsdotter and Kjellström 2019). The history behind the massacre is still not known, nor who the perpetrators were or what motives they had. This has spurred numerous speculations, from well-founded scientific hypotheses to pure fantasies. Undeniably, the story about the discovery of the massacre site has reached beyond national borders (The New York Times, 25 April 2018; BBC, 25 April 2018; CNN, 1 May 2018; National Geographic, 7 October 2021) and Sandby borg is now being developed into a major attraction on Öland with on-site tours, public excavations, digital resources and an archaeological exhibition at Kalmar County Museum.

The increasing interest in Sandby borg as a place to visit, study and exploit, is largely due to the violent event that took place there, which raises questions about the site as a difficult heritage site (see also Wollentz 2017a; Wollentz 2020) and the discursive and practical implications of that framing. The overall research question and focus of this study is to investigate how different groups construct narratives surrounding Sandby borg, and examine the spatio-temporal relations within these narratives. In doing so, this study recognises that difficult heritage sites are places where various interpretation processes occur as a result of the interactions between different approaches and contexts.

Our approach and method

Before we venture into presenting our results, we need to discuss the decisions made when designing the study, including its theoretical underpinnings, data collection, analysis and limitations. Our methodology is essentially qualitative and ethnographic, which has proven to be an effective way when examining words and actions in the context of heritage (Sørensen and Carman 2009). Qualitative and interpretive approaches focus on achieving an understanding of what people think, say and do, rather than determining if it is ‘wrong’ or ‘right’, in this case, if Sandby borg is understood correctly, if it is used in a proper manner and if it really is a difficult heritage site or not. We aim to explore how different groups approach the same heritage site and the various factors that...
determine how the site is perceived, experienced and used. These factors can be both internal and external; internal factors relate to the characteristics of the group such as its knowledge, values, motives and activities, while external factors are elements outside of the group such as time, place and the sociocultural environment.

Our study relies on information gathered by three interdisciplinary and applied research projects – the first is *Frozen in time: Histories of life and moments of death at Sandby borg* (2016–2018),\(^1\) the second *The Wounded Landscape* (2014–2018),\(^2\) and the third *Experimental Heritage and Entrepreneurship* (2016–2018)\(^3\) – drawing on the fields of archaeology, history, critical heritage studies and literature. This information derives from ethnographic fieldwork, participatory observations and written, oral and visual material (such as media publications, interviews and artworks) from three focus groups: 1) archaeologists excavating the site, 2) artists based on or working with the island of Öland, and 3) local residents living close to the ringfort. The use of ethnography facilitates comparison between different dimensions of heritage, such as official discourses, people’s perceptions and daily practices.

This article is further expanding upon some of the concepts and results highlighted in previous research. By interviewing the local population living around Sandby borg, Wollentz examined the spatio-temporal relations produced surrounding the gruesome massacre (Wollentz 2017a; Wollentz 2020). However, the research did not relate the result to other narratives, such
as those of archaeologists or artists which are included in this paper. Jonsson Malm used narrative analysis to examine how archaeologists excavating Sandby borg construct popular narratives to reconstruct the past, but did not engage with the theoretical concepts employed in this paper (Jonsson Malm 2022). Neither did Gill, Petersson, and Weheliye (2021) or Petersson et al. (2020), when they studied how artists interpret Sandby borg within the framework of present-day perceptions of the site after the excavation. The underlying motivation behind this paper is thus to combine and compare narratives from different groups, which we believe will broaden the understanding of how, when and why Sandby borg is experienced as difficult heritage and the social implications of such framing.

To answer the overall research question, we explored a set of analytical questions centred on how the focus groups interacted with the massacre site: What meanings do the informants attribute to Sandby borg? What emotions and reactions do Sandby borg evoke for them? What narratives about Sandby borg do they construct and circulate? How do contextual factors such as temporality, spatiality and sociality affect their various interpretations, descriptions and uses of Sandby borg? These questions guided the analysis of information by identifying recurring themes and conceptualising them through our theoretical framework, combining a critical engagement with heritage, and difficult heritage in particular, with a spatio-temporal analysis, namely the idea of the chronotope. This resulted in a multi-layered and multi-faceted analysis illustrating a variety of possible approaches to difficult heritage.

Figure 3. Saga Björling and Bodil Magnusson performing together at Sandby borg summer 2018: music, song/recitation and poetry. Photo by Magnus Ekenstierna 2018.
Difficult heritage and the complexity of space and time

Heritage sites can be more than simply local places in the cultural environment; they are products of spatial histories, cultural memories and contested narratives. Difficult heritage sites are perhaps the most controversial since they are sites with complex and painful histories that are sometimes acknowledged and sometimes disputed or even ignored (Macdonald 2009). This study engages with the concept of difficult heritage as both a theoretical framework and an analytical tool. In order to examine Sandby borg as a potentially difficult heritage site, we propose a qualitative methodology designed to facilitate an open and responsive understanding of the ways in which people perceive, experience and use the site.

We approach heritage as a contemporary phenomenon, produced and reproduced through social processes and practices shaped by present values, meanings and needs. This contrasts to a more traditional attitude which argues that ‘heritage’ carries intrinsic historic value for society (Smith 2006; 34; Harvey 2008, 19). This framework allows for the interpretation of diverse meanings and experiences of heritage in general and of difficult heritage in particular. Furthermore, we prefer using ‘difficult’ heritage rather than, for example, ‘dissonant’ (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), ‘negative’ (Meskell 2002), ‘dark’ (Seitsonen 2018) or ‘toxic’ (Wollentz et al. 2020) heritage, since they all hold different connotations and implications, and the term ‘difficult’, in our view, is more neutral.

For whom then is Sandby borg a difficult heritage? Important factors when determining the degree of ‘difficulty’ are space and time. It has been argued that heritage becomes especially

Figure 4. Visitor with full digital gear taking part of SOUNDmound sound installation within the walls of Sandby borg. Photo by Bodil Petersson 2018.
difficult to reconcile when one’s own people or country are the perpetrators (Macdonald 2016, 270). This could be relevant in the case of Sandby borg, since it raises questions concerning who carried out the massacre. However, the common approach towards ‘difficult heritage’ and the atrocities pertaining to prehistory has been to see time as a ‘force’ in itself which gradually lessens the difficulty of heritage (Meskell 2002), most likely influenced by the popular saying that ‘time heals all wounds’ (see also Wollentz 2017a).

We can note that a linear and chronological approach to the relationship between time and difficult heritage has been prevailing (with some exceptions, see Macdonald 2009), which in fact stands in contrast to our dynamic approach to heritage. In the same context, it is revealing to note that massacres pertaining to contemporary times often are studied as difficult heritage (for instance concerning exhumations from the Spanish Civil War: González-Ruibal 2017) in the sense that a focus is placed upon how they are being negotiated (or not) in contemporary society. However, such a focus has not been undertaken in regards to prehistoric massacres, despite the fact that more and more traces of prehistoric massacres/battles are continuously discovered (e.g. Horn and Kristiansen 2018).

Indeed, our approach emphasises how heritage is continuously created in the present, through a palimpsest of temporalities, some consciously highlighted through discursive narratives forming chronotopes, while others linger below the surface affecting the present in unexpected and non-chronological ways. In fact, heritage can also serve to collapse temporal distances through charting a non-linear temporality because ‘as they remember people “shuttle” between past and present: so they tread a terrain in which the past is not totally past and by implication, the present not totally present’ (Filippucci 2010, 80). Thus, past trauma can be given a sense of presentness again. This, in turn, calls for a re-examination of the relationship between difficult heritage and the prehistoric past, which we will carry out through studying the difficult, or not so difficult, narratives surrounding Sandby borg.

When unravelling the different narratives, we will focus upon the spatial and temporal relations within them, building upon the concept of chronotopes as theorised by Bakhtin (1981). Bakhtin uses chronotopes to reflect on the inseparability of space and time in literary narratives. Furthermore, Bakhtin argues that it is the very fusion of spatial and temporal indicators that makes time ‘take on flesh’ and provides space with a responsiveness (Bakhtin 1981, 84). Even though Bakhtin focused specifically on literature, the concept has been applied for narratives retrieved through material culture (Goldhahn 2015), archaeological history (Guttormsen 2013), social anthropology (Jansen, Brković, and Čelebičić 2017) and history (Aronsson 2009). Following the concept of chronotope, we will pinpoint the way time and space is linked within the identified narratives. Disentangling the spatial and temporal relations within the narratives will also make it easier to reveal the differences between narratives and how they relate to each other. Interestingly, the analytical lens of chronotopes was previously applied upon the local perspective surrounding Sandby borg in one of the research projects mentioned above (Wollentz 2017a; Wollentz 2020), in which two main ones were discovered: the biographical one (temporally close and personal) and the chronotope of the massacre (temporally distant and non-personal). These two form a solid starting point for our examination, but by providing more perspectives than in previous research, they will be nuanced and expanded.

Explaining the past through popular science communication

The first study centres on the team of archaeologists excavating the massacre site and how they talk about the site, the findings, and their interpretations of the past. The narrative analysis is based on media interviews with some of them, published from 2011, when the excavations started, until the present day. The interviews were carried out by local and national newspapers, radio and television stations, and can be viewed as a kind of ‘master narrative’ on Sandby borg that the other narratives somehow must relate to. Archaeologists are often perceived as producers and preservers of what
Laurajane Smith (2006) calls the ‘authorised heritage discourse’, which means that archaeological interpretations are given priority over non-scientific statements, and that archaeologists and other heritage professionals have the power to shape how people understand historic sites and events. How the archaeologists manage and communicate the heritage of Sandby borg is therefore essential for our analysis.

Local media began reporting on Sandby borg after the observation of suspected looting pits at the site, which led to the discovery of exquisite jewellery hidden inside some of the ringfort’s houses (Barometern, 14 September 2010). Further excavations unearthed more valuable and prestigious artefacts, such as glass beakers, silver brooches, bronze statuettes and Roman gold coins, but perhaps most astonishingly was the large amount of human remains – of both children and adults – scattered inside and outside the houses. The analysis of the skeletons revealed evidence of deadly violence and the type of fractures indicated an unexpected attack rather than a battle. Contextual analysis suggested that the fort was abandoned immediately following the attack and that it was never inhabited again (Östran, 2 November 2011).

After the uncovering of the violent event, the archaeologists, using archaeological, bioarchaeological and forensic methods, have tried to understand what happened (Figure 2). In doing so, they are piecing together archaeological information to reconstruct and interpret the historical event in a way that makes sense and conveys meaning for people today. It is interesting to note that it wasn’t until summer 2012 that the archaeologists began telling reporters that what happened in the ringfort probably was a massacre, before that, the incident was mainly described as ‘an attack’, ‘an invasion’ or ‘a violent scenario’. In an article with the headline ‘Findings in Sandby borg indicates a massacre’, the archaeologists confirmed that the unburied bodies and their unnatural deaths suggest that a massacre took place (Barometern, 24 August 2012). Framed as a massacre, the discovery was afforded more gravitas and received a greater interest from media. From being a matter primarily of local concern, it began drawing national attention, and later on even international attention.

After establishing that what had happened in the ringfort was a massacre, this becomes the heart of the narrative. The massacre is what transforms Sandby borg to a heritage site with a unique and intriguing story (Pluciennik, 1999). The massacre is firmly situated in both place and time, and determines the story’s chronology. Since the massacre is believed to have taken place 1 500 years ago, that moment in time is also the primary point of the story, from which all earlier and subsequent events unfold. In this story, there is a clear before and after, where the massacre represents ‘the threshold event’ that disrupts the status quo and, somewhat paradoxically, ends things and at the same time sets everything in motion. Bakhtin (1981, 248) describes the chronotope of the threshold as being ‘connected with the breaking point in life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life’. The concept of threshold or liminality refers to a ‘transitory, in-between state or space, which is characterised by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change’.

Closely related to the liminal is the notion of Sandby borg as ‘a moment frozen in time’. The archaeologists’ fascination with the site is not only due to the violence, it is also the realisation that they are dealing with an undisturbed archaeological site that is also capturing the everyday life in the ringfort. One of the archaeologists, when interviewed by Swedish public television, says the following:

It is a closed context, just like one would expect after a volcanic eruption or a shipwreck. No one has touched or changed anything here afterwards, and that gives us the opportunity to see exactly what life looked like. (SVT Småland, 4 September 2013)

On several occasions comparisons are made between the closed context of Sandby borg and the famous ruins of the ancient city of Pompeii that was buried under volcanic ash and has been inscribed onto the world heritage list. In an article from 2012 with the headline ‘This is Öland’s Pompeii’, the archaeologists talk about the sensational nature of the frozen moment in Sandby borg
These kinds of closed contexts can be understood as liminal spaces, where the temporal and spatial dimensions are intertwined and inseparable, and the undisturbed past exists in the present. In that sense, the story about the Sandby borg massacre is taking place 1,500 years ago, but at the same time, also today.

The discovery of the massacre, in 2011, is another important component in this narrative, which bridges the gap between the past and the present. In this narrative, the liminal is linked to the chronotope of mystery. The archaeologists engage with the mystery chronotope when trying to establish the chronology of the events surrounding the massacre to find the causality of the events and understand their consequences. The chronotope of mystery functions both as the principle of their narrative construction and as the mechanism of the storytelling. When piecing together the narrative of Sandby borg and presenting it to audiences, the archaeologists ask questions like: How and why did the massacre happen? Who were the victims? Who were the attackers? Why were the bodies never buried? Why was the ringfort abandoned and never inhabited again (Ölandsbladet, 19 October 2013)? Every excavation and post-excavation analysis raises new questions that require new approaches. Examining the media interviews, it is possible to follow how both the research and the archaeological story unfolds and shifts in focus and argumentation. It could be compared to watching a team of crime scene investigators searching for clues to solve a case, and in fact, Sandby borg is often referred to as a crime scene. As one of the archaeologists explains:

Severals of them [the bodies] have suffered fatal stab wounds to the head and other stab wounds. And they remain where they have fallen. So yeah, this is a crime scene. We are talking about CSI Sandby borg here. (Kvällsposten, 30 June 2016)

Another example is when one of the archaeologists appeared in a popular Swedish television program about true crimes and particularly unsolved ones. She was invited to talk about how archaeological forensics can contribute to criminal investigations, but she also talked about Sandby borg and the ongoing excavation (Brottpsjournalen, 13 November 2018).

In the interviews, the archaeologists seem enthusiastic when talking about Sandby borg and the findings, some even calling the discovery ‘every archaeologist’s dream’ (Ölandsbladet, 25 August 2012; Barometern, 30 August 2013). This highlights the complexity of conducting trauma research. On the one hand, the archaeologists portray the massacre as a gruesome act, and claim to be deeply affected by the tragic fate of the victims, but on the other hand, they also express excitement and wonder over the sensational discovery and the unsolved mystery. It is probably only natural that the strange circumstances surrounding Sandby borg triggers curiosity and encourages a deeper engagement with the site and its history. Using the rhetoric of mystery can be an effective way of connecting with audiences and helping them make sense of the strange event. However, our understanding of the mystery and the crime story is so deeply embedded in popular discourse that it may not always be a deliberate and conscious framing. It is thus important to remember that archaeological storytelling is a powerful tool and the way archaeological stories are shaped matter. If scientists present a historical event as a mysterious crime story, people will probably start thinking and talking about it as just that, reproducing a discourse that may leave out other possible interpretations and approaches, and also runs the risk of leading to a banalisation and trivialisation of a complex and difficult historical event (Joyce, 2002).

In stark contrast to the chronotope of mystery stands the chronotope of tragedy. Engaging with this chronotope shifts the focus from the strange and thrilling to the dark and painful side of the Sandby borg story. It took a few years before the archaeologists started using the term difficult heritage when talking about the site in the media. An interview in one of Sweden’s largest evening papers highlights their conflicted feelings towards the site:

It’s disturbing. People usually talk about difficult heritage, the concentration camps are viewed as such. And this is also a difficult heritage. A very exciting story that can tell a lot, at the same time a difficult story. It’s a massacre and a tragedy. (Kvällsposten, 30 June 2016)
The archaeologists repeatedly refer to the Holocaust and other violent tragedies when talking about Sandby borg, mostly events in the present or recent history rather than in a distant past. This may be seen as a narrative technique used to overcome the historical distance through affective connection and identification. When engaging with the tragedy chronotope, focus is not on excitement and wonder, but on compassion, empathy, and the promotion of human value. This narrative appeals to the audience’s emotions and uses the massacre as a starting point to teach moral values. This becomes evident when the archaeologists tell the media about their collaboration with local schools, which includes educational programs where the children learn about conflicts and conflict management (Östran, 17 July 2018).

The massacre is at the heart of the story and the liminal threshold event where different interpretations and stories may be articulated. In the media interviews, the two main narrative constructions appear to be the mystery and the tragedy, using the same narrative components, but with different means and logics, the first story being driven by excitement and curiosity, and the latter by a moral pedagogical stance. They also illustrate how spatiality and temporality are intertwined, sometimes collapsing historical distance through the freezing of time and space or through evoking emotional reactions and historical empathy. These results reinforce the importance of deconstructing archaeological narratives in order to deepen our understanding of the role of time, place and sense-making in the process of reconstructing past events. Next, we would like to further explore other perceptions of Sandby borg and how these relate – or don’t – to the archaeologists’ stories.

Artistic interpretation of Sandby borg in the present

The second study focuses on artists engaging with the concept of difficult heritage through Sandby borg. Two artists within the Experimental Heritage and Entrepreneurship research project conducted during the years 2016–18, Bodil Magnusson and Frances Gill, took their explicit point of departure in the archaeological site and the excavations relating to the massacre. Their primary concern was how the knowledge about the massacre affects present-day visitors to the site, and how the events that once took place in the past also have parallels in the present. A main concern for the artists was how this event from a distant past also can tell us something about ourselves in the present. Both artists developed a sequence of artistic interpretations and events.

Artist Bodil Magnusson is born and lives on the south-eastern coast of Öland, in a small village only 27 km south of Sandby borg. Since her youth, Magnusson has conceived of Sandby borg and its vicinity as a peaceful and beautiful place to go with friends and stroll by the sea. The site is in this sense connected with the chronotope of biography, the story of how a specific site is closely connected with personal and family life.

As the explorations and excavations started around 2011, the feelings for the site became mixed. Magnusson has described how the former idyllic place now transformed into a more ambivalent experience. Even though nothing was visible from the surface to begin with, the excavations changed the perception of the site. It is also a fact that the place that formerly was quite unknown to both locals and tourists, now started to attract tourists and other interested visitors. The former calm and peaceful, personal place was now turned into more of a visitors’ site, especially during summer, with guided tours and presentations during the excavation season.

The first artistic interpretation suggested by Magnusson was a bench made of local Öland limestone with a plexiglass wind shelter around it with etchings of poems into the surface of the plexiglass. But since the site is a monument protected by law, it was argued from the regional authorities that it was not possible to interfere with the place by erecting a bench and a wind shelter nearby. Magnusson therefore changed approach and decided to place her work in an application for iPhone and Android, Shuttle. Photos by photographer Sebastian Jakobsson were on display in the app together with poems written and read by Bodil Magnusson that recall the event of the massacre and also describe the feelings evoked by the site in the present.
Magnusson’s artwork was named ‘Messages in the wind’ (“Budskap i vinden’ in Swedish) and was made accessible both via the smartphone app Shuttle on-site and as part of a museum exhibition on the topic of Sandby borg at Kalmar County Museum. The motivation to display the poems and photos in the exhibition was to create a room for reflection and reconciliation after the museum visitor had had the opportunity to experience the exhibition representing the awful happenings that had occurred at the fort. The poems and adjacent photos were intended to console people in distress after the museum experience.

A few years later, in 2018, Magnusson took part in a communication project related to the Experimental Heritage project. Magnusson produced a film, also with the title ‘Messages in the Wind’, where she appeared together with the music artist Saga Björling (Figure 3). 'It happened then, it happens now – man tramples the paths of violence’ are key sentences relating the massacre in the past to the present in an explicit way.

Artist-musician Frances Gill has a background in archaeology, conducting PhD work on music archaeology at the university of Tübingen. She lives in the vicinity of Växjö in Småland and was one of the artists involved in the Experimental Heritage project on Öland. Her choice was also to work with the site of the massacre and to relate the past with the present.

Gill made an art installation named SOUNDmound (Gill, Petersson, and Weheliye 2021). She constructed a series of related so-called sound sculptures that change character as the visitor moves around inside the fortress (Figure 4). The installation can be accessed via the smartphone app Shuttle on-site. Gill’s installation takes its starting-point in the present-day situation of refugees coming from regions of war in other parts of the world to Europe but being denied a full human life and assigned to be refugees. The purpose was explicitly to use this specific archaeological site to discuss the present-day situation with similar difficulties such as assault, warfare and persecution.

As an initial step before the construction of the SOUNDmound, Gill initiated an artistic event performed at Sandby borg by herself together with artist Helle Kvamme and archaeologist Ludvig Papmehl-Dufay, called ‘A Door at Sandby Borg’. Gill, Kvamme and Papmehl-Dufay put up a door as an entrance from one of the streets of the fort leading into one of the houses with many slain victims in it and a performance took place there, relating to the door. This event is referring to the liminal and to the threshold character of what once happened in the fort.

The creation of the on-site artwork SOUNDmound was preceded by several encounters and sound sessions with groups and communities of both native Swedes and people coming to Sweden from other areas in the world, some of which had come as refugees during the more recent event of migration in 2015 and 2016. There was also a group of Swedish and international students invited by Gill to explore sounds created during an on-site workshop in Sandby borg. Each group/community was encouraged to create sounds that in turn were sampled and rearranged by Gill into a sculpture of sounds that was arranged so that it could be experienced through the Shuttle app on-site.

The general impression from the artistic interpretations described above is that the aim is to abandon the idea of chronological time to reduce the possible distance and difference between then and now and consciously combine different times into one and the same, using place as the point of departure for the narrative. The dominant chronotope of the narrative is tragedy. In the first case, Magnusson’s ‘Messages in the Wind’, there are elements of reconciliation, the artistic comment is intended to function as a way to come to terms with what has occurred, while in the second case the aim is towards taking action to prevent things from repeating themselves in the future. Overall, it is the chronotope of tragedy that is evoked by the artworks presented by Magnusson and Gill. There are no elements of discovery, mystery or excitement within these interpretations. It is instead a clear focus on compassion and empathy. Parallel to tragedy, the idea of the site is also related to the chronotope of biography, with a clear focus on belonging to the site, perhaps most visible in the film by Magnusson.

Magnusson’s approach is explicitly audiovisual, while Gill’s approach is relying mainly on the sound experience. Both interpretations are making use of place as a way to access another time and
also to create a collapse of time to make the tragedy in the past immediately accessible and understandable in the present, with the aim of breaking down the barrier of time.

**How Sandby borg is made meaningful on a local level**

In the summer of 2016, interviews were carried out with a selection of the local population, with a focus on people who grew up near the fort. Among the interviewees it is possible to trace three main chronotopes that hold different spatio-temporal relations, closely related to the ones described above. The first one is the biographical chronotope. This is a story of visiting the landscape throughout the years, one of peaceful tranquillity and beautiful nature. It is a chronotope which is highly connected to the feeling of belonging in a specific place and time (Jansen 2009; Wollentz 2017b). This chronotope exists in a continuous and slow-moving temporality. Sandby borg is often referred to as a place that has always existed and its presence is taken for granted. It thus exists in the past, the present and the future simultaneously. Here, Sandby borg is associated with positive childhood memories, ranging from taking a swim in the sea outside the fort and playing with friends, to going on walks with parents or grandparents. This is similar to the associations that artist Bodil Magnusson expressed. This chronotope is close and personal – anchored in specific memories and associated emotions. Furthermore, it is highly rooted in the place of Sandby borg and its surrounding landscape.

One woman in her 40s who grew up close to Gårdby, less than five kilometres from Sandby borg, said that the discovery of the massacre challenges her personal relationship to the fort:

Q: Would you say you go there [to Sandby borg] more often since the excavations started?
A: Yes, a little bit more often. I have been reminded, kind of, and now it is more important for me to show it [to my friends] than it was before. Before [the discovery] it was mine.

Q: Does it also feel like you preferred it when it was yours? Was it nicer before?
A: I’m not really happy with this … yes … because it gets a bit dirty … or a little worn out, kind of … for me it loses a bit of its magic, I think, now.

Here we can note how the discovery of the massacre has made Sandby borg and its landscape more personally distant to her. It reveals how the recent archaeological discoveries of Sandby borg had an impact upon the biographical chronotope. Indeed, new narratives have been born through the excavation of the site and they relate to the incident of the massacre. For some people it is in fact difficult to reconcile these nostalgic memories from the past with the discovery of a massacre. A woman who got married standing on the wall of the ring fort a few years before the discovery of the massacre, negotiated the difficulty in the following way: ‘(…) in hindsight, I am super happy that we stood on top of the wall, towards the water. So we haven’t been standing on any dead person’.

Adding to these conflicting associations, there are stories circulating which claim that the fort has been avoided ever since the massacre. These stories of a long-term avoidance have been spread through media (see Barometern, 17 October 2013; Småländsposten, 19 July 2019; Östra Småland, 27 September 2014). While they were initially told to archaeologists by people who grew up near the fort, many people interviewed could not relate to such notions and some even actively contested them since they do not connect to their own personal memories and associations. This highlights how archaeological fieldwork is a creative practice which holds the potential to generate new narratives and relationships to landscapes, as well as challenge previous ones (Lucas 2001).

Adding to the complexity, a more personal continuity with the distant past is made relevant in specific contexts, in which the discovery of the massacre, and those gruesome events of the distant past, connects to the biographical chronotope outlined above. The people interviewed often expressed pride over the discovery of the massacre, being such a spectacular find in a small and
sparsely populated community. Here, Sandby borg contributes to the regional identity. The interviewees are intrigued whether those who were killed were from Öland or from far-away places. Furthermore, some of the people interviewed are also interested to know whether their own DNA can be tested to determine their own (ancient) connection to the massacre. It thus becomes a regional identity tied to ethnicity. Such ideas of ancient linkages risk perpetuating a static, exclusive and essentialist approach to ethnicity (Brubaker 2004, 11). Nevertheless, it is significant to acknowledge that attempts of tracing connections between identities in the present with identities in the distant past, are part of what makes Sandby borg meaningful in the local community. Sometimes these connections feed into the biographical chronotope, when people are interested to know whether they may be personally related to those who were killed.

We mentioned above the chronotope of mystery. In line with such a chronotope, when first confronted with the massacre, the interviewees often take on the role of archaeological detectives themselves, coming up with feasible as well as less feasible theories in trying to explain the gruesome incident. The chronotope of mystery is present among the local population, who are influenced by how Sandby borg is framed by archaeologists. When asked how they reacted when they got to know about the discovery, the most common response was ‘fantastic’, ‘exciting’ and ‘very fun’. Later in the interview, when asked whether they found the discovery of the massacre somehow uncomfortable, difficult or unpleasant, the most common response was of surprise. Many people said that they had never thought about the site as difficult at all. For example, an elderly man currently living in Färjestaden, has never reflected upon the idea:

Q: Did the discovery of the massacre ever feel unpleasant?
A: No, I have never reflected on that . . . No, I have not.
Q: Because it was a long time ago, maybe?
A: Well, it is normal that you discover dead bodies. Not that many in the same place, perhaps, but I was on the excavation and I was looking at the skeletons there, and I took a good photo . . . but I have never made any kind of special reflection upon it. No. Partly because it was a long time ago, and also [. . .] we didn’t know them.

Contrary to feelings of difficulty, there was a great deal of excitement, especially when trying to interpret the event in line with the mystery chronotope. Nevertheless, this chronotope adds both temporal and spatial distance to the site, which is further accentuated by the fact that the interviewees occasionally compared the massacre in Sandby borg with the current war in Syria which is undeniably spatially distant to the island of Öland. Here, both space and time is employed in order to produce a sense of distance and, in extension, of difference, in the sense that distance is uncritically equalled to difference (i.e. difference as distance) through the common-sense assumption that the further away in time and/or space something is, the more different it must be. The argument to be made is that the chronotope of mystery is effective in stirring interest and engagement, but it can simultaneously serve to produce a sense of emotional detachment to the massacre and its victims.

However, archaeologists are not only using the trope of mystery to trigger engagement in the heritage of Sandby borg, but also Virtual Reality (VR) which serves to overcome temporal and spatial distance in order to make the massacre near and close at hand (Gunnarsson 2018, 67–109). Indeed, similar to how a sense of closeness can be produced through the use of VR, emotional attachment to the victims of the discovered massacre which transcends the mystery trope can be triggered. When emphasis is put on individuals instead of collectives, especially children, a sense of horror may strike people. It is also clear that it is easier to get emotionally touched when physically visiting the ring fort, especially when excavations are taking place and skeletons can be visible. This relates to an insight shared by Alfredo Gonzáles-Ruibal in the context of exhumations of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939): ‘people grant bones an extraordinary agency: bones
can derail history, at least history of the pacified kind’ (González-Ruibal 2017, 284). Indeed, the chronotope of tragedy was also present, even though it often needed to be triggered through for example individual stories or visual clues. One man in his mid-sixties, clearly affected by the massacre, referred to Sandby borg as an open site after stating that he would prefer the site not to be excavated at all since it disturbed those who were killed:

Q: But at the same time this is no grave, they have been murdered.
A: Yes, it’s open. But I think about the beginning, right? I think about when it happened and the years that passed. The winter is coming and the snow is covering [the fort]. Spring comes and the birds come and chop out the eyes [of the bodies] and whatever they may find. There were foxes and badgers back then as well. Hedgehogs. They take what remains. But the bones . . . it’s possible that there were some foxes. I know, dogs were running loose. They ran around. You may find an arm somewhere further out into nature. Yes . . .

Here we can note how the lack of proper burials is leading to the site being seen as open, as in ongoing and relevant, in contrast to being closed or finished. This, in turn, is triggering a set of reflections for the interviewee, where he is imagining how the site must have looked like after the massacre with animals eating the corpses. He is describing the landscape as if he is drawing from his own personal memories of visiting the site, creating interesting and somewhat unexpected linkages between the chronotope of tragedy and the chronotope of biography, in which temporal distances seem to collapse into a continuous present. Despite the fact that more than 1500 years have passed since the massacre occurred, the social significance of burials (Alfsdotter, Papmehl-Dufay, and Victor 2018) remains and affects how Sandby borg is dealt with and experienced as a form of difficult heritage.

The chronotope of tragedy triggers a different kind of reflection through heritage than the chronotope of mystery, for instance regarding memories, violence and the values of human lives. One person interviewed ventured from a discussion of Sandby borg to a general reflection concerning the horrors of war and what it can do to people. This is not a moral claim. Rather, both engaging detective work and deeper reflections are important in making Sandby borg meaningful. Furthermore, it is also clear that the different chronotopes identified can overlap, feed into as well as challenge each other. Indeed, these three chronotopes (biography, mystery and tragedy) are essential components for making Sandby borg meaningful and relevant. But these chronotopes can also contest each other creating a sense of dissonance in how Sandby borg is experienced. It follows that Sandby borg holds a palimpsest of different temporalities simultaneously present, where the distant past and the close and personal past co-exist and draw upon each other.

Conclusion

In the light of the Sandby borg excavation, this paper has sought to understand the various interpretations of the site as contextual and narrative chronotopes. This approach emphasises the contextual relevance, and nuances and expands the amount of chronotopes highlighted in previous research. By applying the analytical lens of the chronotope, when examining how archaeologists, artists and the local population shape, direct and provide layers to narratives, we have been able to add depth and complexity to how space and time interconnect in making Sandby borg meaningful.

From our studies, three main types of chronotopes emerge as significant for understanding how the narratives surrounding the site are constructed: the mystery, the tragedy, and the biography. In the mystery chronotope, the massacre is the heart of the narrative and can be viewed as a threshold event characterised by liminality and uncertainty, which evokes feelings of exploration, curiosity and excitement in the present. The chronotope of mystery is found in the narratives of both the archaeologists and the local population. The similarities also lie in the way archaeology is compared to detective work and the ringfort to a crime scene. Although one could argue that the mystery
chronotope, by focusing on the wonder of the findings, creates a sense of distance to the atrocity of the massacre and the many deaths, it also bridges the past and the present through the comparisons with modern-day phenomena and criminological terminology.

In the chronotope of tragedy, the link between present and past appears as the main intention, with the purpose to create a sense of similarity between humans now and then. The tragedy creates a bridge that enhances the possibility for comparison across times. The human condition as a general and shared experience is held forth in this narrative. It is used primarily in the context of artistic expression where the aspect of time is reduced in favour of identification independent of time. Tragedy also appears as a reference point among archaeologists working with the site, relating to the need to handle the emotions awakened through the experience of excavating such a dramatic and tragic event. A link is established between violent events in the past and contemporary events of violence and oppression, and thereby the difficult aspect of Sandby borg becomes evident and explicit.

The chronotope of biography is particularly strong among the local population who grew up near the fort, and it could also be noted in relation to one of the artists who had personal memories of the fort from when she was young. Some of the people interviewed experience difficulty in reconciling such a gruesome discovery with a place associated with positive memories connected to close family, beautiful nature and feelings of belonging and security. The chronotope of biography is emphasising Sandby borg as a place that has always been there, and which therefore will continue to be there in the future – a place and time of ‘forever’. However, this chronotope is challenged by the chronotope of tragedy that became prominent with the start of excavating the site, and associated stories of long-term avoidance of a scarred landscape intricately connected to horrendous and brutal acts in the past and in the present. As a consequence, some people interviewed seem to feel a need to ‘defend’ the experience of the biographical chronotope, illustrating how these chronotopes exist in a symbiotic relationship.

The accounts above reveal a number of tensions around the perception, experience and narrativization of Sandby borg and the violent event that took place there. Our examination of these different perspectives illuminates how various actors draw upon multiple, context-based, and fluid understandings of archaeological findings, space and time. These results may have implications for the future study of difficult heritage, including the ways in which to approach and communicate traumas when dealing with the distant past, the ways in which spatiality and temporality are understood to affect the conceptualisation of historical traumas, and the methodology through which historical events are accessed via the concept of chronotopes.

Notes

2. The Wounded Landscape was carried out at the Graduate School Human Development in Landscapes, Kiel University (Wollentz 2020).
8. 21 individuals were interviewed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
Funding

This work was supported by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond [P15-0138:1]; Familjen Kamprads stiftelse [20160056]; and by the German Research Foundation (DFG) through the Graduate School ‘Human Development in Landscapes’, Kiel University [GSC 208/2].

ORCID

Carolina Jonsson Malm http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3803-070X
Gustav Wollenetz http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9680-9127
Bodil Petersson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9733-612X

References


