



Ales stenar is the largest and best-preserved ship setting in Sweden. The 59 stone boulders stand high on the Kåseberga ridge, with a magnificent view of the sea, forming one of the most frequented ancient monuments in Sweden. The ship tumulus is around 70 metres long, 19 metres wide, and each boulder weighs around 5 tonnes. It was erected sometime between 500–1000 AD.

Most of these large ship settings were built during the Viking age, around 800–1050 AD. The boulders on the sides of the ship consist of granite and gneiss, while the four boulders in the middle are sandstone. On several of the boulders, above ground as well as under, there are so-called cup marks, small chiselled, round depressions. These indicate that the stones probably were gathered from older types of megalithic tombs, so-called dolmen and passage tombs.

The name Ales stenar (Ale's stones) is found for the first time in 1624, recorded as "Als Stene" by the parish vicar in Valleberga. Before then the ancient monument was called "Heds stenar" or "Hé stenar" (the stones on the moor), a name that have been used by the people living in the vicinity to this day.

Excavations and restorations

For a long time, the majestic stones have been an appreciated element in the landscape. On a coastal map from 1684, they are depicted as an unmistakable landmark for navigation. The first known "tourist photo" of the stones was taken in 1914. During the second world war, they had to function as a shelter in a coastal guard outpost.

Due to the site getting covered by sand and some boulders falling over, Ales stenar has been restored twice, in 1916 and 1956. We know very little about the work in 1916.

The work in 1956 lacks archaeological documentation, but later investigations show that the surrounding structures were destroyed and that one or several stones were removed and put back in the wrong way.

It was not until the end of the 1980s when archaeologists and geologists began to take a serious interest in the site, under the guidance of Professor Märta Strömberg at Lund University. Seven different samples for Carbon-14 dating were collected at the site, all showed that the present ship setting was erected sometime during 500–1000 AD. A clay pot with incinerated human bones was found, as well as charcoal residue, dated to 400–500 AD, indicating that the site previously was used for burials.

In recent years, by means of Ground-Penetrating Radar, archaeologists have established traces of several remains, hidden under the surface. Among other things, they saw the contours of a ship setting, 39 metres long and 11 metres wide, probably one of the two smaller ship settings, mentioned in accounts of the site from the 18th and 19th century. In addition, two round structures were discovered, with a diameter of around 6 metres. They may be interpreted as stone tumuli, a kind of ancient tombs.

Archaeologists have studied a large, circular structure, with traces of a rectangular stone setting in the middle, which turned out to be the traces after a removed stone-age dolmen. No more stones were found on the premises, implying that several of the current stones in the ship setting was gathered from the dolmen and used again.

An ancient monument with many stories

Ales stenar is one of Sweden's most popular sites to visit, several hundred thousand people visit the site each year. But why Ale stenar were raised, and by whom, we do not know for sure.

The magnificent landscape, the view of the sea, and the placement of the stones pave the way for many interpretations. Maybe it is a burial site, but a grave is yet to be found. A symbol of power and a gathering site? Or a cenotaph, a monument to an important person. One interpretation does not necessarily exclude another. Maybe it is something as simple as a gigantic sundial, a solar calendar? The ship's central line points at the spot on the horizon where the sun rises on the winter and summer solstices.

Ales stenar is one of several cultural history sites which we all own together. In common, these sites narrate our history, where we come from, who we are. It is fascinating that a site can provoke so many thoughts, feelings, and ideas. As well as something which makes it well worth a visit, and worth preserving for the future.

Since 2015, the Ales stenar site is managed by the National Property Board of Sweden.