

Biking to the Viking

A windy bike trip across Sweden's southern coast to find remnants of ancient cultures
Or 'Runestones and churches and mounds – *Oh, my!*'

By Martha Helgerson

Journey begins in Simrishamn

June 2018: A Swedish company, Sakura Tours, set us up with touring bikes, helmets, and panniers; they gave us a mapped route, highlighting numerous stops, and arranged our accommodations in Skåne (Scania).





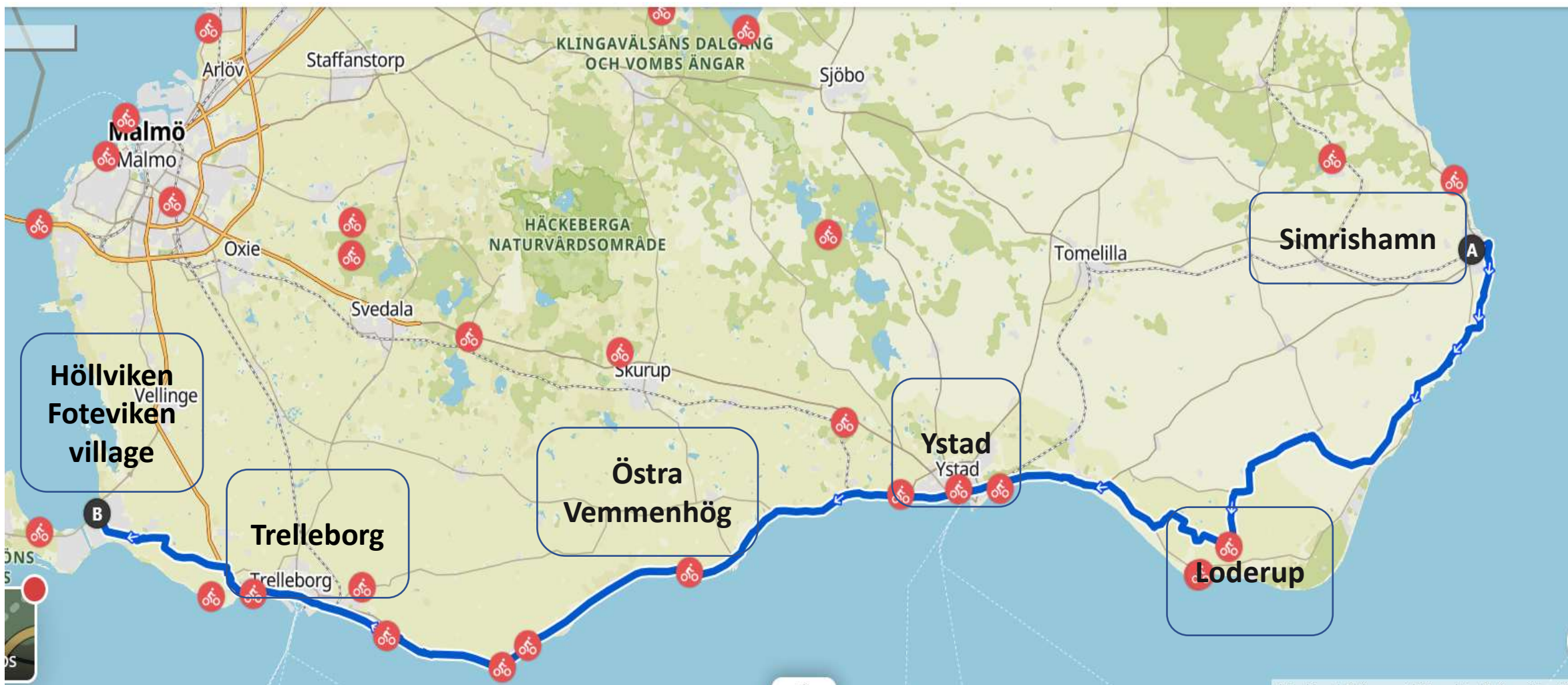
Four of us would embark on a Viking-themed itinerary that took us east-to-west over five days, cycling a total of a leisurely 120 kms.

But sometimes, it felt much longer?

Why?

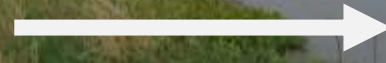
Strong headwinds over a mostly flat terrain.

Note to self: Next time, bike west-to-east in southern Sweden.



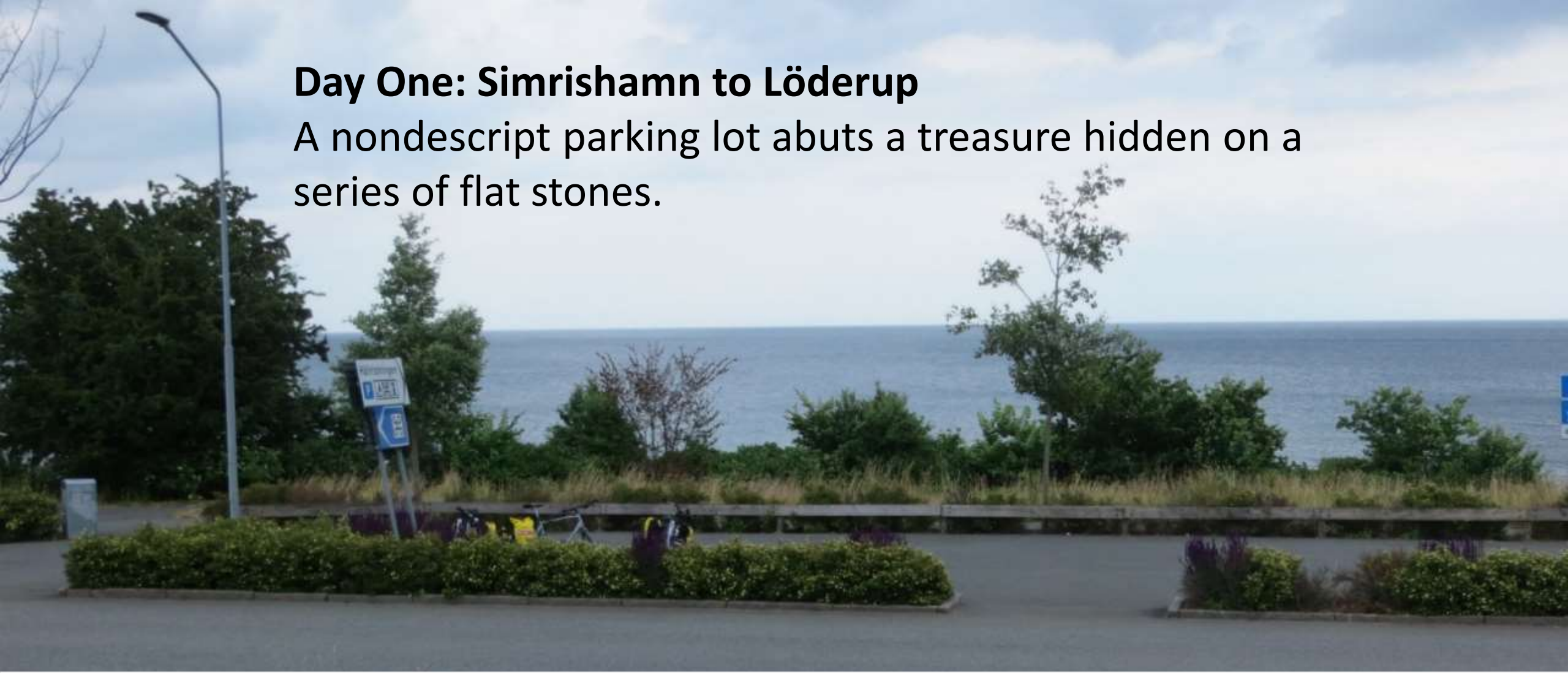
We started at **A = Simrishamn**, spent four nights on the road, and ended at **B = Foteviken Viking Village**

Sweden has a network of bike paths – mostly on paved trails or small roads, but occasionally on dirt or sand paths in nature preserves.



Day One: Simrishamn to Löderup

A nondescript parking lot abuts a treasure hidden on a series of flat stones.




First stop: Horsahallen's rock carvings in Simrislund





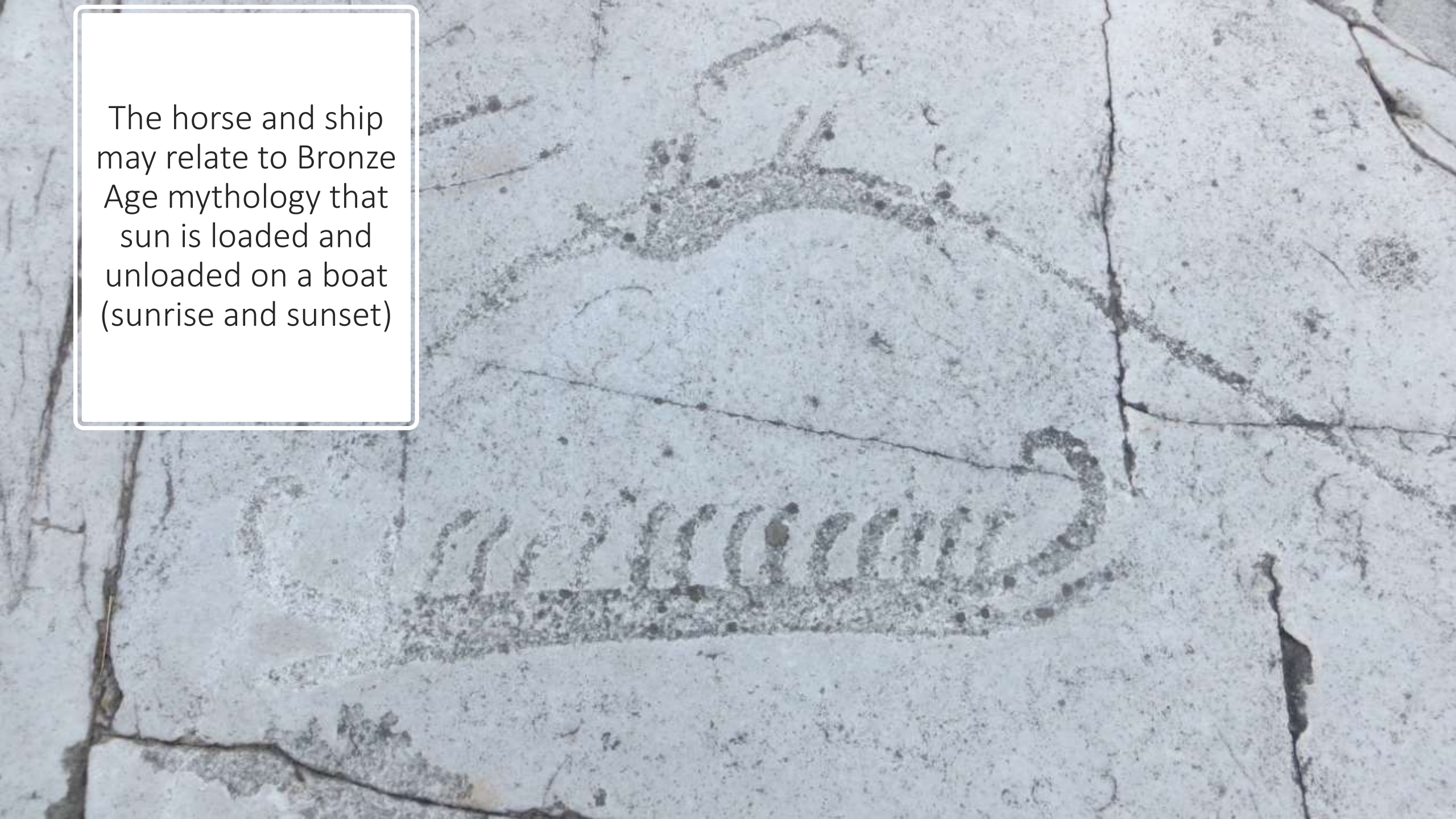
Images were carved into flat rocks during Bronze Age, 3,500 years ago.





The 150 images
include 50 axes,
45 ships &
animals

The horse and ship
may relate to Bronze
Age mythology that
sun is loaded and
unloaded on a boat
(sunrise and sunset)



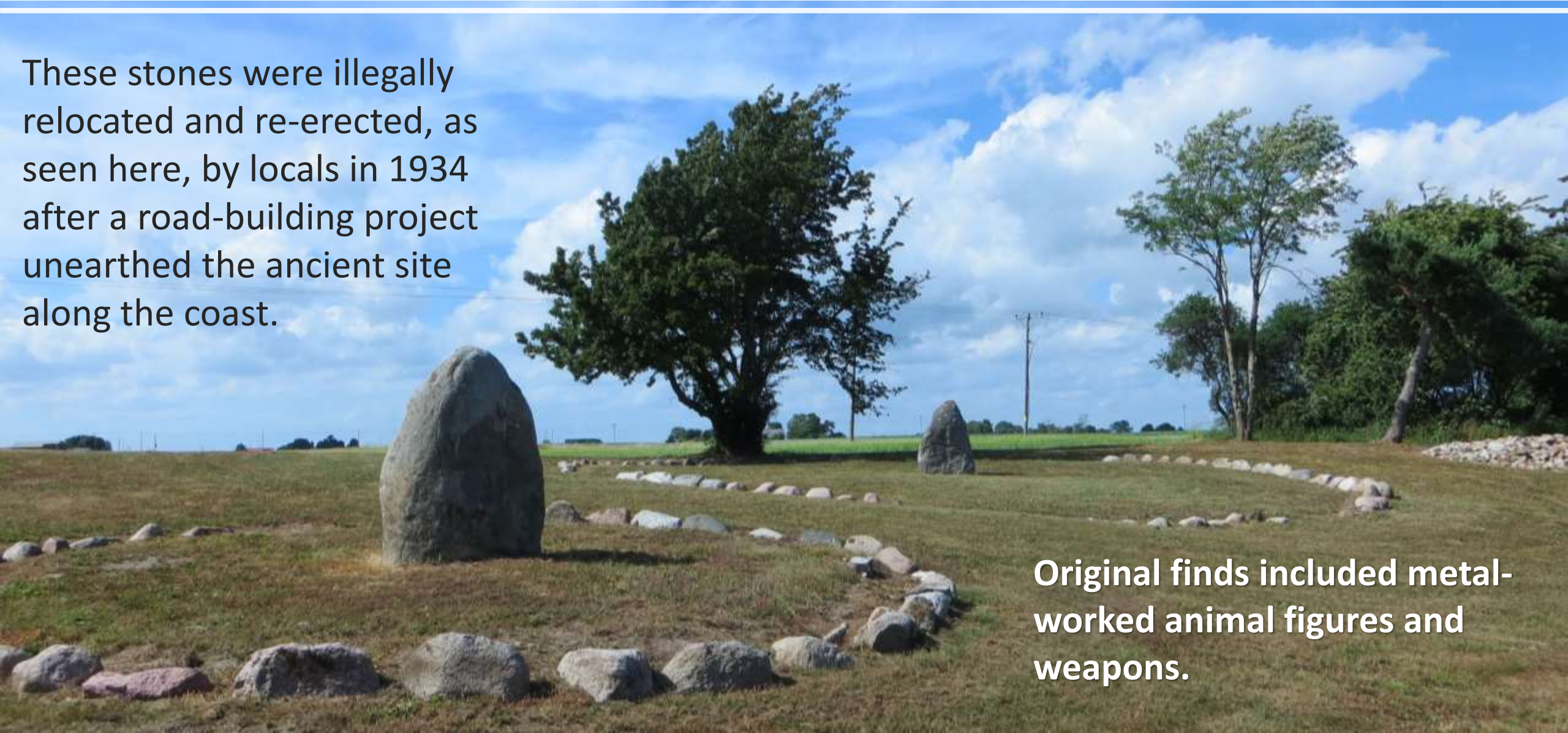
Next stop: A 4000-year-old mound near Skillinge that we would never have noticed on our own.

In the 1940s, archeologists found skeletal remains and artifacts in the grave site notable for its encircling wall and a cistern.

This Stone Age grave mound (2000 BC) was also used by the Vikings (1000 AD)

Next, near Borrby: Two sets of stones from a Middle Bronze Age burial site

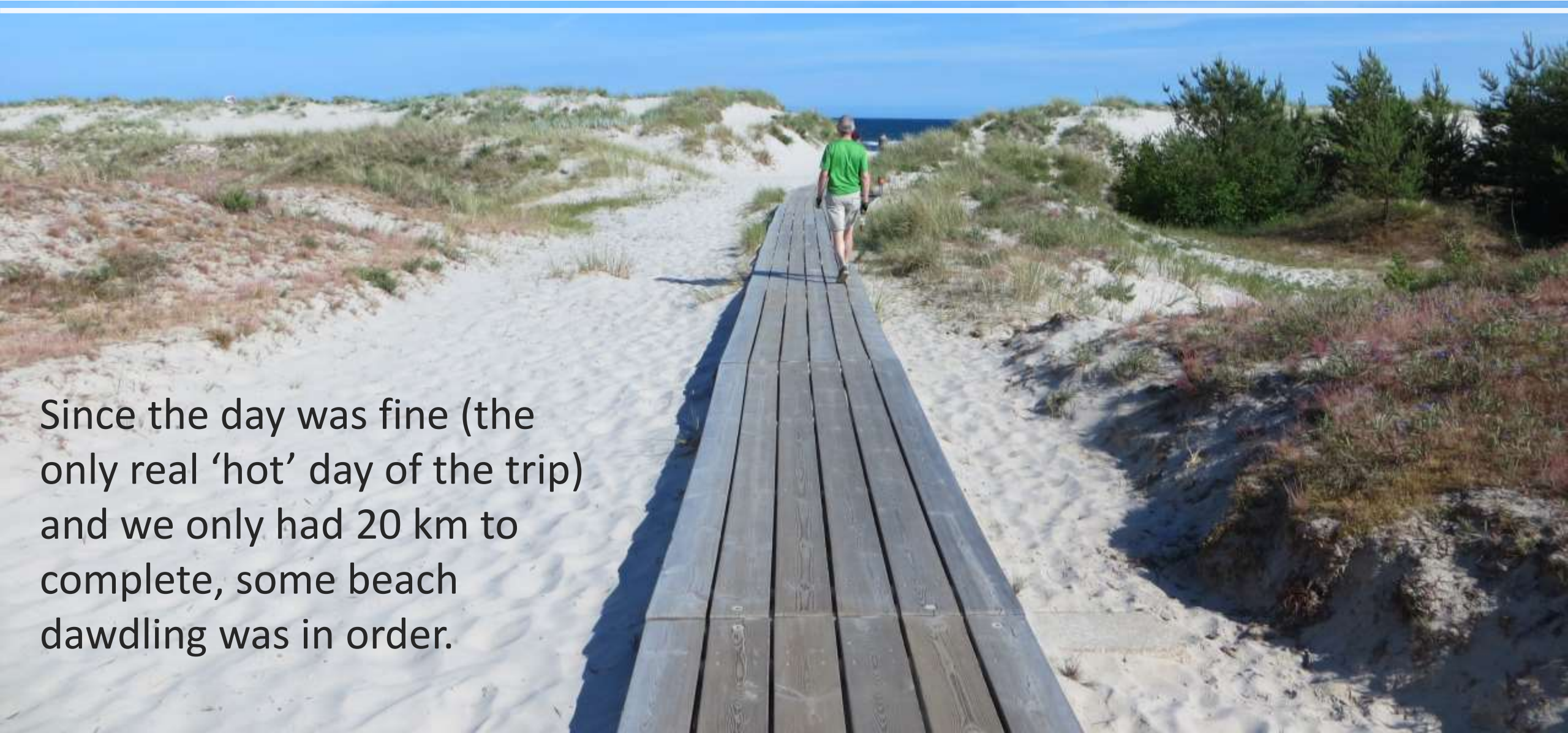
These stones were illegally relocated and re-erected, as seen here, by locals in 1934 after a road-building project unearthed the ancient site along the coast.



Original finds included metal-worked animal figures and weapons.

During our 1st day, the beautiful Baltic Sea was never far away from us.

Since the day was fine (the only real 'hot' day of the trip) and we only had 20 km to complete, some beach dawdling was in order.





We easily reached our 1st night accommodations: An old-fashioned resort on the sea.

Day Two: Löderup to Ystad



Stiff winds greet us as we prepare bike west to see a Viking Age 'stone ship' near Kåseberga.

Ales stenar



Perched atop a tall coastal cliff, Viking Era *Ales stenar* date from 500-1000 AD although they stand on a burial site circa 3,500 BC.

Sixty-nine stones, in roughly a ship's contour, comprise a 'calendar' that marks the two solstices (bow and stern).



Don stands at
the 'bow' that
aligns with the
midsummer's
northwest
setting sun.



A photograph of a stone circle in a grassy field. In the foreground, a large, grey, moss-covered stone stands prominently. Behind it, a line of other stones, some reddish-pink and some grey, recedes into the distance. The ground is covered in dry, yellowish-brown grass. In the far background, a blue body of water is visible under a clear sky.

Few artifacts were
found in a 1995
excavation, but
archeologists
identified boulders
with 'cup marks'
hewn in them from
Stone Age graves...

...and concluded the Vikings likely simply re-purposed many of these 'cupped' rocks to form the ship's perimeter.



*After Ales Stenar,
our journey
continued +/- 15 km
along the coast to
historic Ystad, our
stop for the evening.*



To get to Ystad, we took small roads and signed paths through a nature reserve that skirts the coast.



*Greeting us were interesting sights,
such as these brightly coloured bath
houses*



And a series of stone and concrete bunkers from World War Two.





The bunkers were part of the 500-km long Skåne Line (or Per Albin Line) in southern Sweden to protect against German or Russian invasion.

Only a handful remain.



*Arriving in Ystad, we find a charming,
historic port town, home of the fictional
detective Kurt Wallander.*

Our B-and-B accommodation was in the medieval centre of town, walkable to all sights.





The main place tourists go to is St Mary's Lutheran church, circa 1200 AD.



It's known for its lavish altar and two large crucifixes, one of which uses real human hair.

However, owing to a scheduling 'error,' we took our tourist bones not to St Mary's but to the 13th C Franciscan Abbey - now a museum.





The Greyfriars lived there from 1267 until 1532 when the Protestant Reformation forced the brothers out.

The abbey's
modest
Gothic parish
Church of St
Peter, holds a
few items of
note.



The most compelling of which was this stone font with stylized carvings.



This grinning
‘lion’ was
particularly
memorable.





Ystad is a
super-scenic
town



Timbered buildings line the streets.



It's easy to wander aimlessly while soaking up the atmosphere.



Day Three: Ystad to Pillehill

*Leaving Ystad, we travel west, first along the coast
where we steel our confidence
against a grey sky and an unrelenting brisk headwind.*

Surprise!
Surprise!



Disas ting

Enligt en tradition skall en gång "Jungfru Disa" hållit ting på den här platsen, därav namnet på fornlämnningen. Fornlämningen är en rektangulär stenkrats, 36 meter lång och 16 meter bred.

Kulturskatten ovärdigt.
År 1920 gjordes en arkeologisk undersökning av en del av området. Det visade sig då, att det fanns ett kulturlager utmanat av stenkratsen och att här hade människor legat spända över kulturlagret. På två ställen, i mitten och nära väster om mitten, var kulturlagret skivbeänd och ridskivade. Lämningarna tolkades som resterna av en grav från äldre järnåldern, ca 500 f Kr - 400 e Kr.

Idén och ett gyllene fört, som delar av bronsåldern. Här fanns det bevarade till i gravarna som dateras till ca 1 000 f Kr. Gravarna var brändgräset där de brända benen och gravskivorna ligger i en serie av keramik och sätter ner i jorden. Vi vet inte hur dessa gravar var markerade ovan jord eller om de var det alla.



We soon we arrive at our first designated stop: Disas ting

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The story goes that ancient maiden (AKA goddess of fate) Disa, held a legal proceeding ['thing'] amid this rectangular formation of 16 stones of unclear origin.

Archeologists in 1920 excavated the site & found cobblestone layer with charred human remains, from around the time of Christ.

*After the “thing,” we power on & espy
our first burial mound*



An old mileage post dated 1799 signs our way.



On this 'wind-kissed' day, we slowly cycle
up, up (& up), on a seemingly endless, slyly
sloping hill through jewel-green rye fields,
to our next B&B.





The B&B was in a farming area near Öst
Vemmenhög

Sydkustens Pillehill offered accommodation, an in-house pub, and curated dining with locally sourced food.



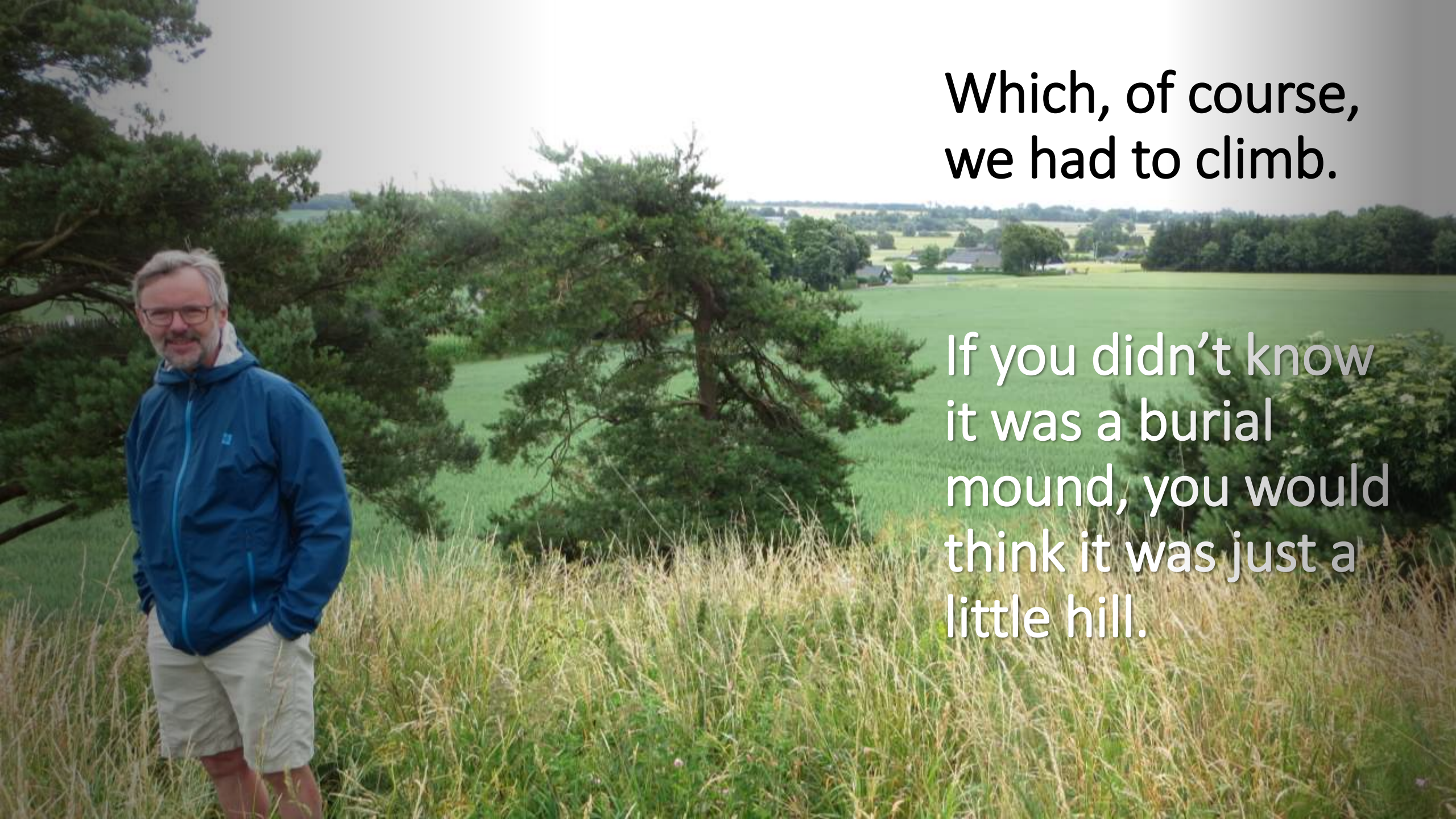
Pillehill is a charming spot with its
moss-covered thatched roof,

A wide-angle landscape photograph showing a rural scene. In the foreground, a green field slopes down towards a small farmstead. The farmstead includes several buildings, notably two large red barns and a smaller white house. A dirt road or path runs alongside the farm. Beyond the farm, the land rises into rolling green hills under a bright blue sky filled with fluffy white clouds. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and expansive.

...its verdant views of the expansive
countryside, but also ...


A landscape photograph showing a grassy mound with several pine trees. In the foreground, there is a bamboo fence. The background shows a body of water under a cloudy sky.

...its own burial mound!



Which, of course,
we had to climb.

If you didn't know
it was a burial
mound, you would
think it was just a
little hill.

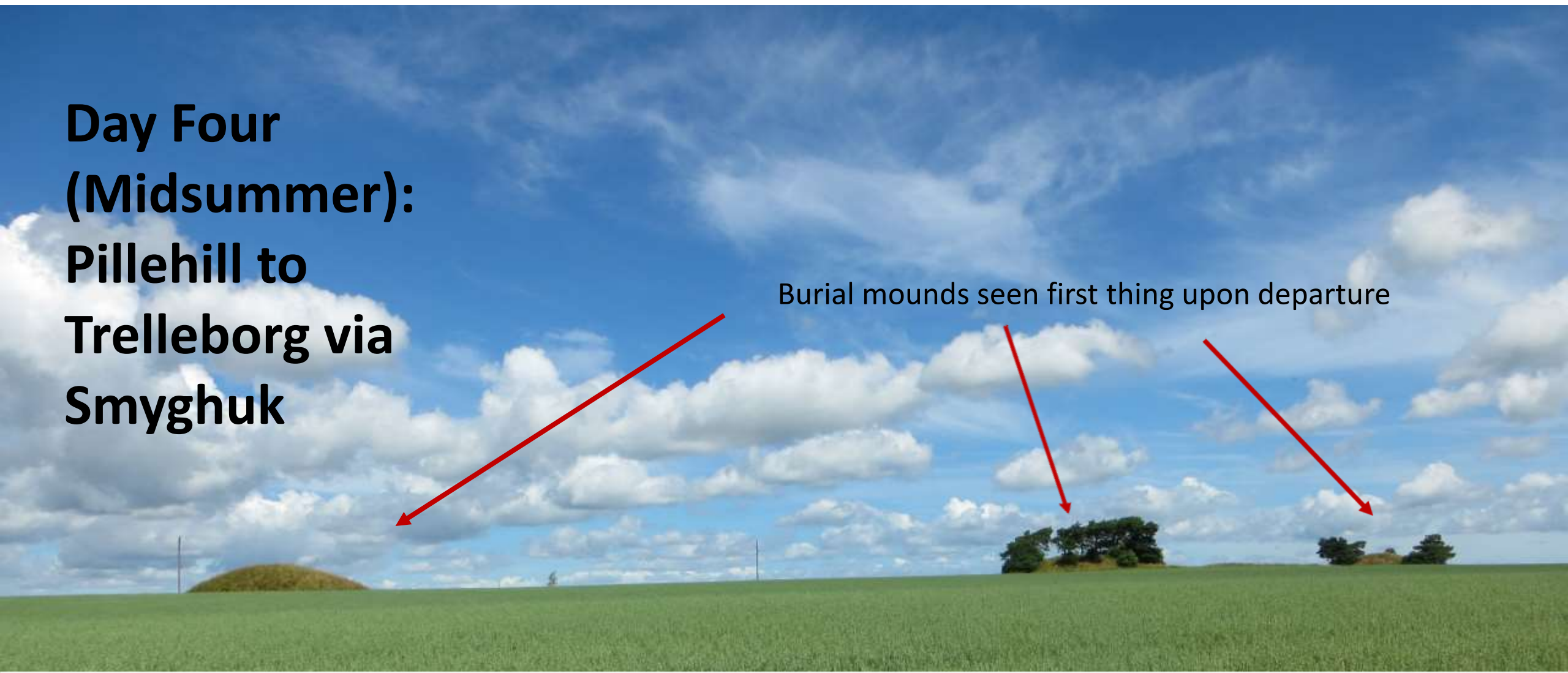


But turn around, there is yet another
'little hill' in an adjacent field.

**Most mounds date
from the Late Iron
Age 500 AD to the
Viking Age 800-1050
AD.**

Day Four (Midsummer): Pillehill to Trelleborg via Smyghuk

Burial mounds seen first thing upon departure



Runestones and churches also punctuate the landscape for the next 8 hours or so


We approach the Tullstorp Church on a poppy-lined road.

To celebrate midsummer, we pick some of these cheerful flowers and decorate our bikes!



A photograph of Tullstorp Church, a red brick building with a prominent square tower topped by a white conical roof. The church is surrounded by a well-maintained cemetery with numerous gravestones, some of which are decorated with red and pink flowers. The scene is set against a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

Tullstorp Church, built in 1868 on the site of a 1000-year-old wooden church, is the epitome of tidy. In its cemetery we find ...



The Tullstorp runic picture stone, circa 980 AD, erected during the reign of King Harald Bluetooth who ruled Denmark and part of Scania (Skåne).



It reads: “Kilbur and
Åsa raised this
monument in memory
of Ulf.”

Who are these
people? No one
knows. But it’s felt
they had strong
dynastic connections
to Bluetooth.



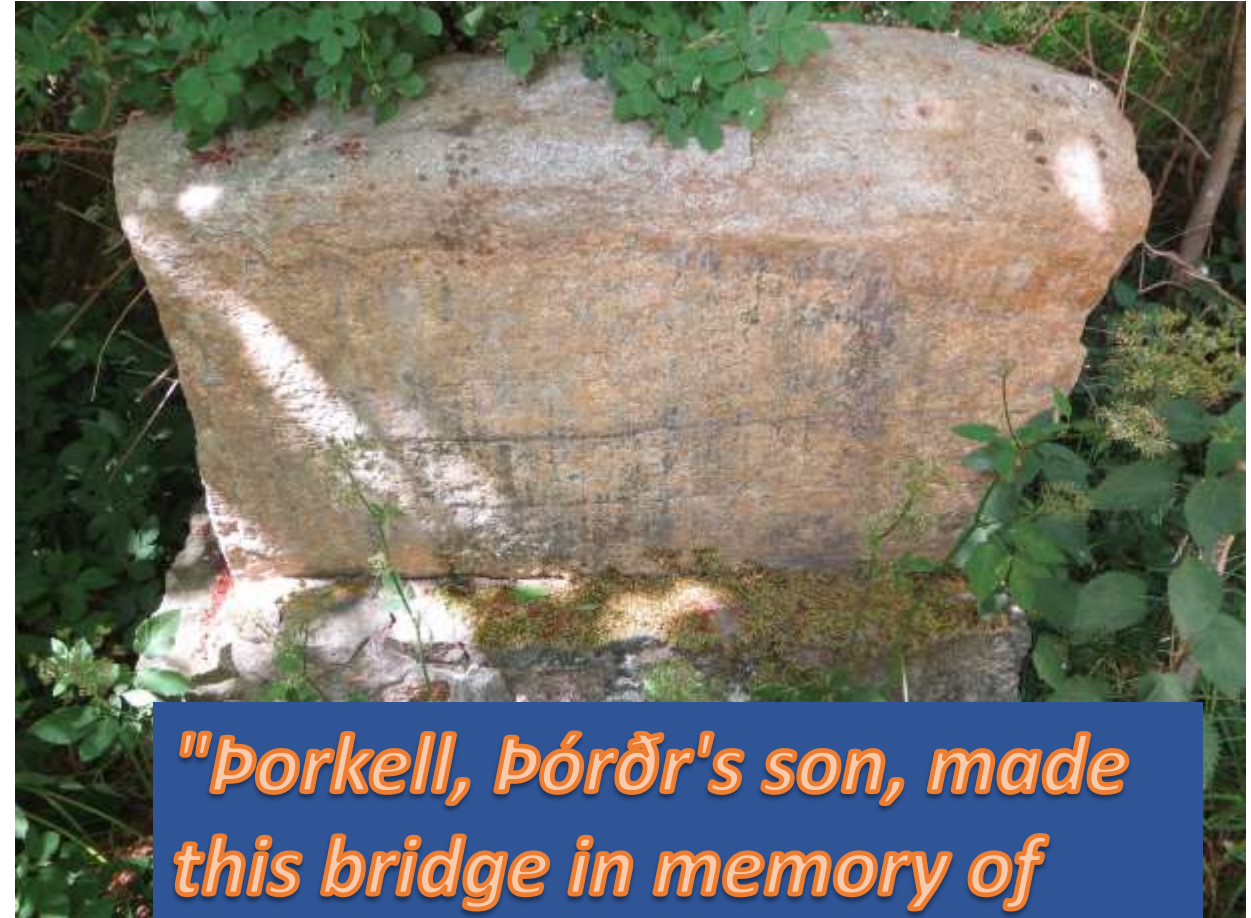
The stone shows connections to the East Roman Empire (Istanbul):

During Bluetooth's time, Northerners served as emperor guards.

The East Roman emperor used symbolic lions to show strength. Bluetooth adopted the lion as his symbol as well.

The ship is modelled after an East Roman Empire (Istanbul) warship, 'dromon.'

After Tullstorp, we head to Jordberga Castle & Park to find *its* runestone hidden in some weeds



"Þorkell, Þórðr's son, made this bridge in memory of Vragi/Rangi, his brother."



Minutes more down the road, we encounter the Källstorp church, a Gothic-revival style built in 1860.



A few minutes later, heading back to the coast, we encounter Lilla Beddinge church, built in 1880.

Finally,
churchyard-
saturated, we
arrive at
Sweden's
southernmost
'land's end' or
Smygehuk



Low-key local midsummer celebrations were underway. Stores closed early as people gathered 'round the maypole.





Smyghuk's scenic harbour is overseen by a 'joyful' statue modelled after the grandmother of actress Uma Thurman



We enjoy a leisurely midsummer picnic before finishing our day's ride to Trelleborg, another windy 15 km away.

Trelleborg is an important port, second only in size to Goteborg, with a busy ferry crossing.

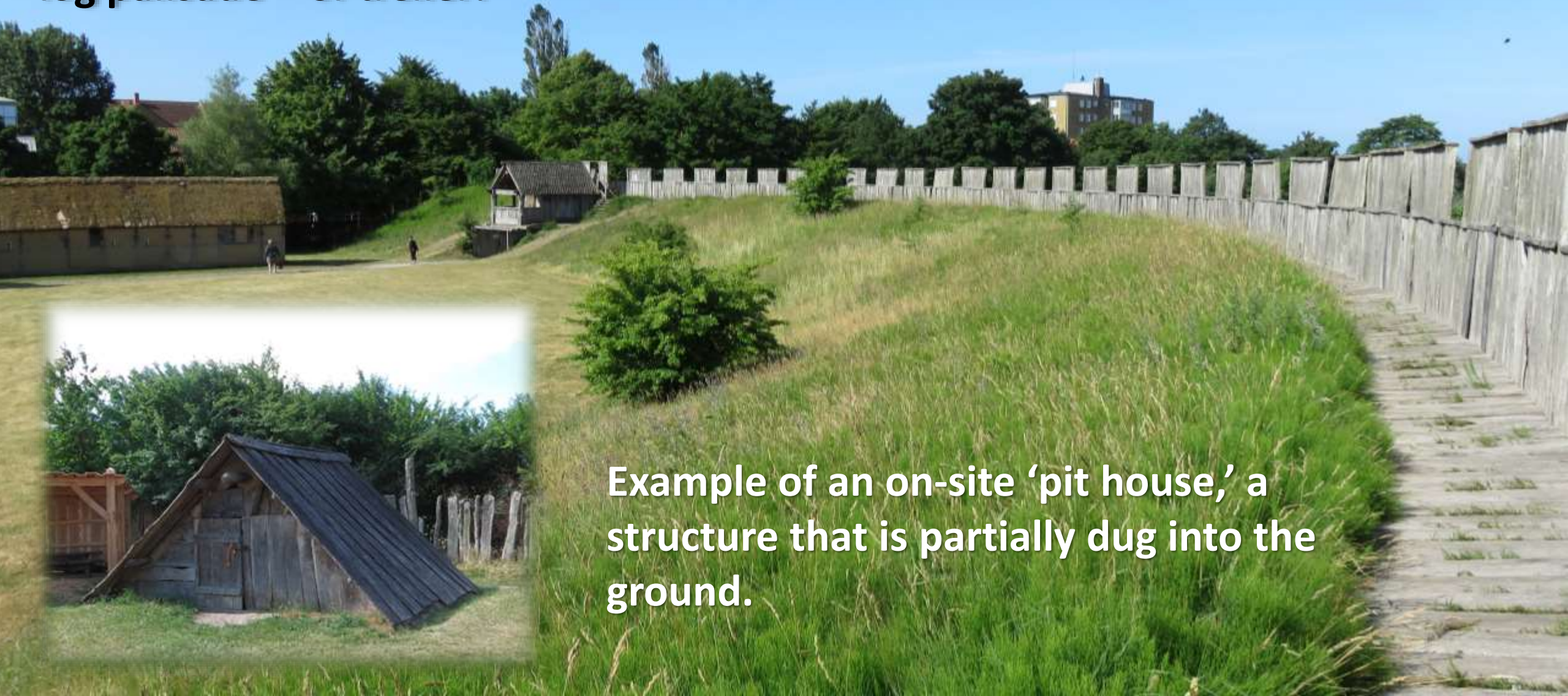


Final day of biking [Day 5]: Trelleborg to Foteviken Village.

A photograph of a reconstructed Danish ring castle, Trelleborgen, at sunset. The structure is a wooden platform with a central tower and a ramp leading up to it. The sky is filled with dramatic, colorful clouds in shades of orange, yellow, and grey. The foreground is a grassy field.

We'd come to Trelleborg to visit a reconstructed Danish ring castle [stronghold]— or *Trelleborgen* (circa 900AD), discovered in 1988, during a housing development.

The city excavated and preserved one-fourth of the original fort (now set amid modern housing) that features an earthen embankment with a split log palisade – or *treller*.



Example of an on-site 'pit house,' a structure that is partially dug into the ground.



The large compound emphasizes a time of domestic consolidation rather than Viking raids, and includes a long house, a farm area, and museum.

Unfortunately, we could only spend an hour here:

We had more churches to see!

Why so many churches in this part of Sweden?? By the 17th C, successful farms meant more people, which meant more villages, each with its own church (or two); many remain today (or were rebuilt in the 19th C).

This medieval church in Bodarp shows Danish influences. Skåne was ceded by the Danes to Sweden in 1658 (Peace of Roskilde).



And, yes, Bodarp also has its own burial mound





Moving on, we take a slight dog-leg detour north and stop at Fuglie's 1905 Gothic-revival rebuild, set atop a demolished medieval church.



The 20th C brick
edifice has a few
runestones nearby:
The obvious one is in
the church yard.

However, we are also directed to another nearby stone, hidden in what looks like someone's yard





The inscription is faint. Since a dog is barking at us, we don't linger to ponder the rune's ancient secrets

FUN FACT: Depending on who's counting what, Sweden has the most runestones -- between 1,700 and 2,500 -- of all the Nordic countries; most were erected circa 900 AD.



Back on the road,
we only have time
for a quick photo op
at the 19th C neo-
Gothic church in
Håslöv (built atop a
12th C site).

Ditto for the
Danish-
influenced
medieval church
in Rang.

We're checking
our watches to
get to our next
stop in time.



Plus, the changeable weather conspires to rain on our parade as we trundle towards our trip's final destination.

Note burial mound



The clouds part, but time was short
as we approached Höllviken, our
gateway to ...





... a giant-step back in time at
the coastal Foteviken Village

The open-air museum was built in 1995 on the site of a 12th C battle.

It strives to create an environment reflecting late Viking and early Medieval ages.





‘Real’ inhabitants carry on with everyday tasks while modern visitors snoop around to discover ...

A weaving 'studio'





A family's living quarters

The image shows a rustic interior space, likely a living quarters. The walls are made of light-colored, textured material, possibly plaster or mud. A wooden frame structure is visible, with a dark red, curved object hanging from it. On the floor, there are several large, dark, round objects, possibly pots or baskets, and a stack of wooden bowls. A patterned cloth with various designs is hanging on the wall. The floor is made of wooden planks.

The image shows the interior of a traditional long house, likely from a Southeast Asian culture. A central hearth, constructed from stones and bricks, is the focal point, with a fire burning inside. A metal pot hangs from a chain above the hearth. The room is dimly lit, with light coming from small windows or openings. The walls and ceiling are made of dark wood. On the left and right sides, there are long wooden tables or benches. Several people are visible in the background, and a person is in the foreground, partially obscured by the text. The overall atmosphere is rustic and traditional.

The inside of a long house

A photograph of a communal kitchen. In the foreground, a long wooden table holds several large, light-colored wooden pots with lids, some containing food. There are also wooden bowls and a wooden spoon. The background shows a doorway leading to another room, and a cobblestone path outside. The text "A communal kitchen" is overlaid in the center.

A communal kitchen

A wooden look-out tower with vertical slats. Two horizontal wooden bars are mounted across the tower, each holding several dark, rounded medieval helmets. At the bottom of the tower, several shields are visible, including a red one with a yellow lion and a yellow one with a red border. Bright light streams through the vertical slats, creating strong vertical highlights and shadows.

A look-out tower filled with helmets
and shields.



A fibre expert

A priest who
handled coins
and wrote in
runes.






Carvers, iron workers, jewelry makers
& tanners

And ... a
clash of
cultures?



Foteviken was a fitting finale to our jam-packed, five-day Biking to the Viking.

Öresund Bridge in background

A wide-angle landscape photograph showing a body of water (the Öresund) under a dramatic, cloudy sky. In the distance, the Öresund Bridge is visible as a long, thin structure across the water. The foreground on the right is a grassy dune with a dirt path leading towards the water. The text "Öresund Bridge in background" is overlaid on the image, with a white arrow pointing from the text to the bridge.

Head winds notwithstanding,
'slow travel' by bike yielded a memorable,
handle-bar glimpse into a history still
visible to anyone visiting Sweden's most
southern tip . . .





...if you know where to look.