

Rock art for the dead and un-dead

Reflections on the significance of hand stones in Late Bronze Age Scandinavia

Introduction

Only a few if any South Scandinavian Bronze Age rock art images are as enigmatic as the 27 hand stones found at various sites in Denmark, in northern Bohuslän in Sweden and in Østfold in Norway (Glob 1969; Kaul 1987, 1998; Goldhahn 2007). The reason is first and foremost that the iconography is quite homogeneous. They almost exclusively show a raised

hand with the thumb placed at an angle of approximately 90 degrees. Four dashes are placed above the fingers. The palm is often pecked somewhat deeper and may therefore be the image of a right hand (fig. 1, cf. Melheim 2008). All similar hand images are made on portable slabs. Hand stones found in archaeological contexts all seem to belong to

Figure 1. Hand stones from Sandagergård on Zealand, Denmark. Photo: Lennart Larsen, National Museum, Copenhagen (after Goldhahn 2007).





Figure 2. Henrik Thrane finds a hand stone at Jyderup Skov on Zealand, Denmark. In this case the hand motifs was engraved on the inside of the cover slab of a small stone cist from Later Bronze Age (Thrane 1975, 178). The photo belongs to Henrik Thrane, here published with his kind permission.

the sphere of death. Most of them appear as cover slabs used in relation with cremation burials (fig. 2). Exceptions are the hand stones from Sandagergård on Zealand found in an unmistakable relation with a cult house (fig. 1). As the cult houses also clearly relate to Bronze Age burial places and burial rituals (Kaul 1987; Victor 2002; Svanberg 2005), they also belong to the sphere of death (Kaul 2004; Goldhahn 2007).

Dating of graves with hand stones suggest that some of them may belong to a late

period III while others possibly belong to an early period V (Glob 1969). However, most of them belong to period IV, approximately 1100–900 cal BC (Kaul 1987; Goldhahn 2007: 44–56). The iconography is very explicit with limited extension in time and space indicating that these hand stones were made for specific purposes in specific contexts. The latter is rather obvious since the hand stones were newly made, most of them pecked, others carved, when they were incorporated into their archaeological contexts (Glob 1969;

85-90; Kaul 1987; Goldhahn 2007). Thus, the meaning and significance attributed to these hand motifs must have been limited, direct and articulated in a connection with death as a correlating centre. In fact, this must be considered a very good beginning for an interpretative archaeology.

Previous interpretations

The first hand stone was found in a burial mound at Rævebakken north of Copenhagen on Zealand in 1858 by none other than the Danish King Frederik VII (Glob 1969). Since then the hand stones have been interpreted as belonging to a rock art category associated with death and rebirth (e.g. Brøndsted 1941; Norling-Christensen 1941; Johansen 1971; Thrane 1975). The Norwegian archaeologist Sverre Marstrand argued that the hand motif was a universal symbol protecting against "the evil eye". According to Marstrand it had two functions: "partly actively bringing luck by radiating life enhancing, blessing energies; partly passively averting by protecting against evil forces" (Marstrand 1963; 223, translated here). The hand motif from the Later Bronze Age's spectacle fibulae was believed to belong to the first category while hand stones from grave contexts were more passive: "for protection against desecration of graves" (Marstrand 1963; 223, translated here).

Peter Vilhelm Glob questioned Marstrand's interpretation. He suggested a link between the hand motifs and the introduction of cremation burial practice and its rebirth metaphors (Glob 1969; 90). The reason was that the four dashes plus the depicted hand's five fingers makes nine, the equivalent of the number of moon phases a woman carries a baby. Glob (1969; 90): "The sign may be a symbol of rebirth since five fingers plus four dashes makes nine which may symbolize nine months, however, only if the moon was a measure of time at the beginning of the Later Bronze Age" (translated here).

As we have already seen, Flemming Kaul also explicitly links this specific iconography to the sphere of death. He develops Glob's thesis. He thinks that the presence of the hand stone outside the cult house at Sandagergård is a symbolic marker for "a deity or divine

power (not necessarily personified) over life and death" (Kaul 2004; 108, translated here). He links the four dashes above the open hand to the inner markings of the sun cross and Kaul interprets them as symbolizing the four seasons or the four turning points of a day and night: spring, summer, fall and winter and/or dawn, noon, dusk and midnight:

"If we suggest that the sun wheel with its four spokes is not only an image of the sun but in some cases also an emblem of the sun's eternal cyclical journey day and night and through all seasons [. . .] where the four spokes may mark the four turns of day and night and the four seasons, then the four dashes, one above another, may also mark that we are confronted here with a power that might break down the cyclical time, split the elements of time, remove the circular

Figure 3. Hand stone from Almsted Gammelgård on Als, Denmark (after Glob 1969; 89).





Figure 4. One disc from one of the most beautiful spectacle fibulae, found 1892 at Åketorp in Råpplinge parish on Öland, Sweden (KLM 4559). The iconography on the open disc's depicts two confronting "sun horses" while a tree motif adorns the back (Oldeberg 1933). The other half of the fibula is kept at Statens Historiska Museum (SHM 9287). Total length approximately 18.5 centimetres, width 8.61 centimetres. Photo: Pierre Rosberg, Kalmar Län's Museum.

Figure 5. Spectacle fibula from Hågahögen in Bondkyrka parish in Uppland, Sweden (after Almgren 1905).



order of time and release timeless chaos or nothingness – here the cyclical time has been broken down" (Kaul 2004; 108-110, translated here).

Kaul was probably inspired to this interpretation by the atypical hand stone from Almsted Gammalgård on Als where the usual four dashes are replaced by an engraved circular motif (Glob 1969; 89), in other words the correlating unit holding the four dashes in place in a normal sun cross (fig. 3).

Kaul's interpretation is interesting and suggestive. Problematic, though, when it is considered that the hand motif never appears together with actual sun crosses on hand stones from Later Bronze Age. The closest example is also atypical and comes from Skivum from the county of Ålborg in Jutland. It is an approximately 7 centimetres large stone decorated with a circle with eight spokes. At the top of this sun wheel appears a very small engraved hand (Glob 1969; 78, 236).

The hand motif on spectacle fibulae

The matter becomes both complicated and more interesting by the fact that the hand motif also appears in other contexts in Later Bronze Age Scandinavia (Kaul 1987, 1998, 2004; Fredell 2003; Goldhahn 2007), mainly on the back of spectacle fibulae from period V and VI. Andreas Oldeberg has described the latter fibulae in detail in his thesis "The History of the Nordic Bronze Age Fibula" from

1933 (Swe. *Det nordiska bronsåldersspännets historia*). The iconography on these fibulae is interesting and ambiguous, not least because quite a few have both an open and a hidden iconography. In general, the open iconography on the front side of the discs of the fibulae is abstract, but figurative motifs do appear (fig. 4). Particularly common are stylized axe motifs sometimes ending in lines that might be depictions of stylized ships' prows. The hidden iconography on the back of the discs have a majority of abstract and figurative symbols well known from other bronze objects and from the rock art repertoire: hand motif, sun cross, axes, spiral motif, triskele motif, forked symbols, tree motifs, etc. (Oldeberg 1933).

The open iconography on many of the most lavish spectacle fibulae renders an antithetical symbolism concerning the concepts of day and night and/or sun and moon just like the more famous Trundholm sun disc and the iconography on razors from Later Bronze Age (Kaul 1998, 2004, cf. Melheim 2008). A fine example is the fibula from Harritslev from Skovby on Funen (Jensen 2002: 392) and the gold-adorned fibula from Hågahögen in Bondkyrka parish in Uppland (Almgren 1905). The discs of the latter fibula are adorned with

similar concentric circles. The differences appear mainly in the central ornamentation of the discs. The left disc is organized round a concentric circle surrounded in turn by nine similar figures. The centre motif is provided with an aureole or rays indicating sun and day. A similar aureole is lacking in the right side disc's central motif, here surrounded by seven like figures which gives the impression that the ornamentation of the fibula expresses an antithetical day and night and/or sun and moon symbolism (fig. 5).

It is also interesting to note the variation between the numbers of ornamentation surrounding the central motif on the Håga fibula discs. As the discs supposedly were created at the very same occasion, it is very likely done by purpose and relates to a meaning unknown to us. This also applies to the main part of the iconography on the visible discs of the spectacle fibulae, often being abstract and merely "decorative" which possibly signals that it required some kind of esoteric insight and knowledge to obtain a rightful understanding of its meaning and significance (Goldhahn 2007, Chap. 4).

In this context it is noteworthy that the Håga fibula's left disc's sun and day symbol-

Table 1. Hand motif on spectacle fibulae from Scandinavia. Source: Oldeberg 1933.

Period	Site	Source	Museum No.
V	Simris, town and parish, Skåne	Oldeberg 1933: 118	Private collection
	Sjörup parish, Skåne	Oldeberg 1933: 120	SHM 9822:79
	Valleberga parish, Skåne	Oldeberg 1933: 121	SHM 6150
	Komsta, Stiby parish, Skåne	Oldeberg 1933: 147	SHM 8722:844
	Skåne, casual find	Oldeberg 1933: 131	SHM 3312
	Skåne, casual find	Oldeberg 1933: 133	-
	Svarttorp, Asele parish, Västergötland	Oldeberg 1933: 140	SHM 7034
	Slättäng, Vårdkumla parish, Västergötland	Oldeberg 1933: 115	SHM 5316
	Kamfjord, Sandehered parish, Norge	Oldeberg 1933: 122	-
VI	Applerum, Råpplinge parish, Öland	Oldeberg 1933: 192	SHM 10872
	Applerum, Råpplinge parish, Öland	Oldeberg 1933: 193	SHM 12191
	Alvede, Hogrån parish, Gotland	Oldeberg 1933: 194	Visby Fornsal 5031
	Långebro, Vårdinge parish, Södermanland	Oldeberg 1933: 195	SHM 2842
	Långebro, Vårdinge parish, Södermanland	Oldeberg 1933: 196	SHM 2674
	Stenbro, Slite parish, Gotland	Oldeberg 1933: 200	SHM 8297
	Stenbro, Slite parish, Gotland	Oldeberg 1933: 201	SHM 9346
	Ekebys, Ganthem parish, Gotland	Oldeberg 1933: 202	SHM 12118
	Långmyr, Vamlingbo parish, Gotland	Oldeberg 1933: 203	SHM 16669



Figure 6. Spectacle fibula from Äpplerum in Röpplinge parish on Öland, Sweden (SHM 10872, after Oldeberg 1933).



Figure 7. Spectacle fibula from Åketorp in Röpplinge parish on Öland, Sweden (KLM 1435). Photo: Pierre Rosberg, Kalmar Län's Museum.

ism would have been visible only when it had been taken off. When it was carried on the dress the central motif was covered by the disc adorning the needle of the fibula (fig. 5). The sun symbol was therefore hidden from others' eyes most of the time. As it will be explained below this is a repeated antithetic symbolism which can be studied also on other spectacle fibulae from Later Bronze Age.

All hand motifs on spectacle fibulae have been found on the hidden esoteric side of the discs. All except one piece from Norway are cast together with the discs (Oldeberg 1933: 221). Thus, the hand motif was designed before the fibulae were created by means of the *cire perdue*-technique, yet never meant to be visible. Oldeberg (1933; 221-222) thought that the motifs on these hidden discs were apotropaic symbols for protective and averting purposes (also Marstrander 1963: 223).

It is interesting to note the lack of hand motifs on fibulae from period IV when the hand stones were usual in burial contexts. Oldeberg reproduces 18 fibulae with hand motifs in his dissertation from 1933 and they are evenly distributed between period V and VI (tab.1). Some of the hand motifs are rudely stylized, others are more realistic.

Oldeberg's dissertation is well over 75 years old at the time of writing. As far as I know there have been made no attempt whatsoever to update his catalogue (cf. Baudou 1960; Larsson 1986; Johansen 1993; Jensen 1997, 2002) or to incorporate this iconography in an interpretation of Bronze Age religion (cf. Kaul 1998, 2004; Fredell 2003; Bradley 2006; Melheim 2008).

What might support Kaul's previously mentioned interpretation of the hand stones is the bronze fibula from Slättäng from Vårdkumla parish in Västergötland (SHM 5316). The front of the disc is adorned with two so called "coiled" motifs (Oldeberg 1933, translated here), which suggests a moon- and night symbolism. The back of the discs have a rudely stylized hand motif together with a sun cross with lines branching out in three towards the rim of the disc; this is mentioned by Oldeberg (1933; 221) but not visible on the photo of the fibula in his book (cf. Oldeberg 1933; 115, Fig: 106). This sun cross design is interesting because it implicitly supports Kaul's interpretation cited above inasmuch as it is likely that the year was divided into twelve moon phases in prehistoric time in Scandinavia (Nordberg 2006).



Figure 8. Spectacle fibula from Löten, Sandby in Åby parish on Öland, Sweden (KLM 21175). Photo: Pierre Rosberg, Kalmar Län's Museum.

Two other spectacle fibulae of interest in this context are from Äpplerum in Råpplingen parish on Öland (SHM 10872, 12191). They date back to period VI and are almost identical. The open sides of the discs are adorned with a stylized axe motif ending in something that might be interpreted as stylized ships' prows. These motifs are in turn surrounded by two coil-shaped figures reminiscent of crescents. Both discs have a stylized hand motif on the hidden side. The characteristic four dashes above the hands are lacking, but in both cases four dashes are marked in the edging surrounding the ornamented back of the discs (fig. 6). Furthermore, on exhibit SHM 10872 the edging on the back of the disc seems to end in an s-shaped line very similar to a ship's prow (cf. Kaul 2004). That appears to be more than a mere coincidence.

The iconography of these two fibulae is thus alike and seems to have been made at the very same occasion (a third fibula from the same site has an axe motif on the hidden side of the disc, see Oldeberg 1933). This iconography can also be interpreted in antithetical terms where the open discs with its stylized axes relates to night and moon and the hand

motif and the four dashes on the back of the disc relates to day and sun.

Some time ago, I came by accident upon some spectacle fibulae in Kalmar Län's Museum's collection when I visited in order to lecture on the Bronze Age object world. Oldenberg knew some of them, but not all. Many of them relate to the issues discussed in this article.

The first is a 13.2 centimetres long and 5.32 centimetres wide fibula from period IV found at Åketorp in Råpplinge parish on Öland (KLM 14353, Oldeberg 1933: 95). The open side of the disc is adorned with a number of concentric circles. On the back are three dashes that are difficult to interpret and a sun cross (fig. 7). With the mentioned antithetical spectacle fibulae in mind this may be interpreted as an open night side (moon/stars) and a hidden day side (sun cross and three forked motif).

The other fibula is more distinct. It was found in 1943 in a beet field at a place named Löten at Sandby in Åby parish on Öland (KLM 21175). The fibula which dates back to period V is 11.8 centimetres long and 5.13 centimetres at its widest. The iconography of this fibula is also antithetical. The open sides of the discs are adorned with a moon-shaped motif. Consequently, each hidden side is decorated with a sun cross and a distinct hand motif with fingers, palm and thumb appearing with desirable visibility (fig. 8). Here is yet another fibula with an iconography relating the hand motif to a sun cross, a combination which clearly supports Glob's and Kaul's interpretations that the four dashes relate to the significance of the sun cross and rebirth metaphors.

Discussion and interpretation

The hand motif of the hand stones and the spectacle fibulae present a range of similarities and differences. The first are found in burial contexts and have with good reason been associated with anything but day, life and sun (fig. 1-3). Paradoxically, the latter motifs appear only on the hidden side of the bronze discs, which from the perspective of the antithetical iconography of the fibulae may relate to a day- and sun symbolism. The latter is emphasized by the fact that the hand motif often appears in connection with sun

crosses or, as in a case like the Äpplerum i Råpplinge on Öland, together with four dashes placed on the rim of the sun-shaped disc of the fibula.

What we see here is similar motifs expressing different connotations. Thus, the differences between these hand motifs are obvious. Moreover, the hand stones were exclusively associated with the sphere of death in the Bronze Age while the spectacle fibulae rarely or never were buried with the dead; they have mainly been found in different kinds of bronze depositions (Oldeberg 1933).

From this we can learn that the hand symbolism was varied and associated with different phenomena in Later Bronze Age. This is emphasized by the fact that the hand motif also appears in other contexts than those mentioned in this article, together with bronze figurines and rock images from open panels in the landscape. How to interpret the hand motif from these contexts is open for discussion elsewhere.

With regard to the interpretation of the hand stone iconography and significance, I find Kaul's interpretation plausible, not least because it is based upon the meaning of the four dashes:

"... the four spokes may mark the four turns of day and night and the four seasons, then the four dashes, one above another, may also mark that we are confronted here with a power which might break down the cyclical time, split the elements of time, remove the circular order of time and release timeless chaos or nothingness – here the cyclical time has been broken down" (Kaul 2004: 108-110, translated here, my italic).

If we follow Kaul in this, then the hand stones seem to represent a principle quite opposite Glob's interpretation which maintained that the hand stones symbolized the cremation ceremony's rebirth metaphors. What we are faced with is simply a disintegrated timeless chaos where cyclical time is broken down – *the hand motif was created to keep the dead in place* (fig. 2). Thus, the hand stones seem to have been made to keep the dead, or rather un-dead, from coming back or being born

anew. These rock art images can therefore be regarded as a medium to keep un-dead people, or some of their spiritual aspects, in their graves or in the other contexts where hand stones have been found (e.g. Goldhahn 2007, ch. 9). One example is that one of the hand stones at Sandagergård on Zealand was placed in an averting position against the cult house where three cremation urns were buried in the floor (Kaul 1987).

The contrast to these hand motifs appears where the sun cross was found in burial contexts from the same period (see Althin 1945; Glob 1969; Kaul 2004; Myhre 2004), which consequently seems to incite the deceased to be born anew.

In this perspective the rock art images found in burial contexts become a medium usable for two quite different antithetical purposes: partly to keep un-dead restless souls in the grave (or during the actual burial ceremony in the death house), partly to help the deceased to a safe journey.

Acknowledgement

I am very grateful to dr. phil. Flemming Kaul, The National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen, and emeritus professor Henrik Thrane, Aarhus University who kindly provided photos and ideas. My sincerest thanks to antiquary Birgit Körge at the Kalmar County Museum for her help at the archives and during studies of spectacle fibulae.

*Joakim Goldhahn,
Linnaeus University, School of Cultural
Sciences, S-391 82 Kalmar.
Email: joakim.goldhahn@inu.se*

Translated by Eva Arnesen

References

- Almgren, Oscar** (1905). *"Kung Björns hög" och andra fornlämningar vid Håga*. Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets-, Historie- och Antikvitets Akademien.
- Althin, Carl-Axel** (1945). *Studien zu den bronzezeitlichen Felszeichnungen von Skåne*. Lund: Gleerup.

- Baudou, Evert** (1960). *Die regionale und chronologische Einteilung der jüngeren Bronzezeit im Nordischen Kreis*. Stockholm: Studies in North-European Archaeology 1.
- Bradley, Richard** (2006). Danish razors and Swedish rocks: cosmology and the Bronze Age landscape. *Antiquity* 77: 567–571.
- Brøndsted, Johannes** (1941). Danish arm and hand carvings. *Acta Archaeologica* XII, 119–125.
- Fredell, Åsa** (2003). *Bildbroar. Figurativ bildkommunikation av ideologi och kosmologi under sydiskandinavisk bronsålder och förromersk järnålder*. Göteborg: Gotarc Serie B. Gothenburg Archaeological Thesis 25.
- Glob, Peter Vilhelm** (1969). *Helleristninger i Danmark*. København: Gyldendal.
- Goldhahn, Joakim** (2007). *Dödens hand en essä om brons- och hållsmed*. Göteborg: Gotarc Serie C. Arkeologiska Skrifter 65.
- Jensen, Jørgen** (1997). *Fra bronze- til jernalder: en kronologisk undersøgelse*. København: Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskriftselskab.
- Jensen, Jørgen** (2002). *Danmarks oldtid. Bronzealder 2000-500 f. Kr.* København: Gyldendal.
- Johansen, Erling** (1971). Med hevet hand. *Kuml* 1970, 171–188.
- Johansen, Øystein K.** (1993). *Norske depotfunn fra bronsealderen*. Oslo: Universitetets Oldsaksamlings Skrifter 15.
- Kaul, Flemming** (1987). Sandagergård. A Late Bronze Age cultic building with rock engravings and menhirs from Northern Zealand, Denmark. *Acta Archaeologica* 56 (1985), 31–54.
- Kaul, Flemming** (1998). *Ship on bronzes. A study in Bronze Age religion and iconography*. København: PNM Studies in Archaeology and History 3:1/2.
- Kaul, Flemming** (2004). *Bronzealderens religion*. København: Nordiske Fortidsminder Serie B 22.
- Larsson, Thomas B.** (1986). *The Bronze Age metalwork in Southern Sweden. Aspects of social and spatial organization 1800-500 B.C.* Umeå: Archaeology and Environment 6.
- Marstrander, Sverre** (1963). *Østfolds jordbruksristninger: Skjeberg*. Oslo: Intitutet for Sammenliknende Kulturforskning Serie B 53.
- Melheim, Lene** (2008). Right and left. Directions in Bronze Age cosmology seen through a pair of spectacle-fibulas. In: Konstantinos, Chilidis, Lund, Julie & Prescott, Christopher (eds.). *Facets of Archaeology. Essays in honour of Lotte Hedeager on her 60th birthday*. Oslo: Oslo Archaeological Series 10, 539–554.
- Myhre, Lise N.** (2004). *Trialectic archaeology: monuments and space in southwest Norway 1700-500 BC*. Stavanger: Arkeologisk museum i Stavanger, Skrifter 18.
- Nordberg, Andreas** (2006). *Jul, disting och förkyrklig tideräkning: kalendrar och kalendrariska riter i det förkristna Norden*. Uppsala: Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för Svensk Folkkultur.
- Norling-Christensen, Hans** (1941). Et Bronze-laders helligtegn. *Nationalmuseets Arbejds-mark* 1941, 49–59.
- Oldeberg, Andreas** (1933). *Det nordiska bronsåldersspännets historia: med särskild hänsyn till dess gjuttekniska utformning i Sverige*. Stockholm: KVHAA Handlingar 38:3.
- Svanberg, Fredrik** (2005). House symbolism in aristocratic death rituals of the Bronze Age. In: Artelius, Tore & Svanberg, Fredrik (eds.). *Dealing with the dead: archaeological perspectives on prehistoric Scandinavian burial ritual*. Stockholm: Swedish National Heritage Board, 73–98.
- Thrane, Henrik** (1975). Stenhøje fra bronzealderen. Grave fra en bronzealderbygd i Jyderup Skov, Odsherred. *Nationalmuseets Arbejds-mark* 1975: 172–182.
- Victor, Helena** (2002). *Med graven som granne: om bronsålderns kulthus*. Uppsala: AUN 30.