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).
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 where incorporated into their archaeological contexts (Glob 1969;
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 Marstrander argued that the hand motif was a universal symbol protecting against “the evil eye”. According to Marstrander it had two functions: “partly actively bringing luck by radiating life enhancing, blessing energies; partly passively averting by protecting against evil forces” (Marstrander 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” (Marstrander 1963; 223, translated here).

Peter Vilhelm Glob questioned Marstrander’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).
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 Gammelgård 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

Figure 4. One disc from one of the most beautiful spectacle fibulae, found 1892 at Åketorp in Räpplinge 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).
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).

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Museum No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Simris, town and parish, Skåne</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 118</td>
<td>Private collection</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sjörup parish, Skåne</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 120</td>
<td>SHM 9822:79</td>
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<td>Valleberga parish, Skåne</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 121</td>
<td>SHM 6150</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Komsta, Stiby parish, Skåne</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 147</td>
<td>SHM 8722:844</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skåne, casual find</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 131</td>
<td>SHM 3312</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skåne, casual find</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 133</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Svarthorpe, Asele parish, Västergötland</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 140</td>
<td>SHM 7034</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slättång, Värdumia parish, Västergötland</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 115</td>
<td>SHM 5316</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kamfjord, Sandhehered parish, Norge</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 122</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Äpplerum, Räpplinge parish, Oland</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 192</td>
<td>SHM 10872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Oldeberg 1933: 193</td>
<td>SHM 12191</td>
</tr>
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<td>Alvede, Högåns parish, Gotland</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 194</td>
<td>Visby Fornsal 5031</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Oldeberg 1933: 195</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Stenbro, Slite parish, Gotland</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 200</td>
<td>SHM 8297</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Långmyr, Vamlingbo parish, Gotland</td>
<td>Oldeberg 1933: 203</td>
<td>SHM 16669</td>
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</table>
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 Vård-kumla 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).
Two other spectacle fibulae of interest in this context are from Äpplerum in Räpplingen 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. Oldeberg 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 Räpplinge 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 Räpplinge 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.

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