

The Fossum panel – a Calendar?

Interpretation background

A review of how different authors have presented religious interpretations of Rock Art (RA) was partly presented in Kristian Kristiansens article (Adoranten 2012). To this group of more culture-historical oriented authors were Oscar Almgren who during the late 1920:s presented, to some extent, a revolutionary interpretation where he saw direct links between Babylonian and Egyptian traditions with Nordic RA, which he explained as a result of the expansion of agriculture and its cultural impact that was connected to this activity. Almgren claimed that people used different myths, which involved certain gods, in their daily life and the rituals, many of which were connected to fertility, were depicted on the rock panels. Another aspect of interpretation that has been focused during more modern times is that the panels are connected to some sort of belief that was based upon travels to the world of death. Based upon the actual rock carvings that have been found inside graves as in Sagaholm, investigated by Joakim Goldhahn, it is not farfetched to connect these panels, where ships are presented, with the imagined travels of the soul from the dead person to an imagined place for dead. Linked to this theory of soul travels is also Fleming Kauls revolutionary scheme of the suns motion over the sky, based upon interpretations of motives made on Bronze Age razors, that links ships directions with pictures of animals to the position of the sun (Kaul 2004). These ideas were supported by the find of the Trundholm horse and wagon set, which symbolically, indicated some sort of sun worship in the Nordic countries during BA. So the rock art can to some extent be linked to fertility, to death and to sun worship as indicated above, but probably also to other aspects of religious, not ordinary life.

Myths

The definition of a myth is usually defined as “a socially powerful traditional story” and is by its nature something similar to a very loosely story that has been retold through the generations. This means that the myth can be varied and details added so if there once was a kernel of truth, this part is now difficult to extract. Also the myth can be completely false from the beginning, as is often the case with the myths of origin, which usually is created by political or economical reasons. A more stringent variant might the myths that belong to a group of Aetiological Myths be, which once were told in order to explain natural phenomena in the world, especially the weather or seasonal changes. Here, in this category, the myth in itself is completely fictional, so we do not need to bother about any true kernel. But the interesting concepts of these myths, for this study, are the myths themselves and how people tried to explain what happened in the world. The focus in this article is to investigate whether an Aetiological / Explanation myth can be used to interpret a certain panel, the Fossum panel, situated 5 km east of Tanum, Sweden. The myth that will be used is a combination of myths, similar but not equal to myths that were told in the Mediterranean region.

In ancient Greece, an Aetiological myth explained the seasonal variations with the help of a vegetation goddess, Demeter who went into the Temple to mourn her daughter Persefone's forced life in the underworld during 4 months of the year. Persefone had been kidnapped and forced into marriage by the underworld god Hades. During this time of the year the vegetation died through draught and nothing was growing. After the 4 months, Persefone was allowed to leave the underworld and the vegetation could start to grow. A similar myth was told



The Fossum Panel. Photo G. Milstreu/Tanums HällerstningsMuseum.

in ancient Egypt, where the vegetation god Osiris was killed by his brother Seth, making the vegetation stop to grow. Osiris was later helped by his sister Isis to life, but he was not able to leave the underworld totally, he was forced to come back, why the vegetation cycle continued.

A more specific myth that will be used here to explain part of the panel in Fossum is the myth of Baal from Canaan, found in Ugarit, today part of Syria, in the 1920:s and written down on clay tablets from the Late Mediterranean Bronze Age, about 1600 – 1200 BC (Wikander 2003). The myth can of course be much older and is probably based upon similar thoughts from the Mesopotamian culture. The myth goes roughly like this: Baal, the vegetation god was in full power during the vegetation period. The water god Yamm complained to the highest god El that Baal was too powerful, why El gave the power to reign to Yamm. Baal did not give up easily so he fought back, but he was finally threatened by Mot, the god of Death. Baal was forced to enter the underworld making the vegetation to stop growing and nature died (The summer draught).

Baal's sister Anat looked for Baal in the underworld with the help of the sun god Shapash. Finally they found him, but Anat was forced to kill Mot in order to free Baal. As soon as Baal re-entered the upper world, nature started to grow again (Sowing period). Baal was again strong and reigned, and the seasonal cycle was complete. The Baal myth has been used in earlier investigations with the aim to interpret RA, especially the panel at Vitlycke (Jørgensen 1987). A full translation of the myth is made by Wikander (2003).

Another myth that will be used here is the myth about the heavenly Twins, Castor and Pollux that probably originates from Mesopotamia where the two twins Lahmu and Lahamu which had the not very nice task of cutting the dead person into pieces before he could enter the world of Dead (Forsell 2009:87). Beside this characteristic of being connected to the underworld, the Twins are said to be the saviour of the sun, when threatened by dark monsters (Kristiansen 2012:72). That a divine Twin couple eventually was worshipped in Scandinavia is indicated by the finds of the twin figures

from Stockhult and Grevensvaege. A more thorough overview of the beliefs during Bronze Age, see Melheim (2006).

As said above, the myths are not consistent to one variant, as written sources seldom exist (here however there exist clay tablets) and as the myths are kept orally during long periods and over long distances, the myths can be changed unintentionally. For this type of myths, the Aetiological ones, the myth can vary in details, but the basic message must be kept, as it is a description of the nature itself, seasons change in a certain way, nature dies in winter and lives fully during summer. In the Nordic countries there is no known Seasonal Myth, if not the Saga of the death of Balder is a special version of this or the fragmental story of the goddess Nerthus, who by her journey over the rural country made nature fertile is one part of a seasonal myth. Also it is worth noticing that the climate changes are not the same in the Nordic countries compared to the Mediterranean region, where winter rain and summer draught is dominant. So, when using a myth like the one about Baal, it is not equivalent to claim that this myth existed in the Scandinavia, neither that a variant of this myth was known by everybody, maybe only a small group of people. But according to logic, there should have been a need also in Scandinavia to describe why the weather changed and who made it to change.

The aim with this article is to give indications for; 1) that a similar myth **can** be used to explain the panel, 2) a small group of people **might** have known about this myth and wanted to record it and 3) the panel with its symbolic scenes **might** have been used to explain the seasonal changes of nature.

Contacts between the Mediterranean Region and Scandinavia

As mentioned above, Oscar Almgren proposed contacts between Scandinavia and the Mediterranean during Bronze Age as a result of trading metals and by the spread of agriculture. More recent Kristian-

sen has described many possible contacts between the regions as a result of aristocratic peoples travelling around in Europe (Kristiansen & Larsson, 2005:186). Trade which mainly was based upon Baltic amber, exchanged to metals and weapons from Central Europe, since at least the beginning of the Nordic Bronze Age, during the 18th century BC. It is quite clear that the local Nordic metal craftsmanship was to a great deal depending on import of raw material from Europe, made along different trade routes, one Atlantic and one along rivers of Central Europe. Also according to Kristiansen the habit of using panels for figurative RA started in Kivik, Bredarör during the 18th Century and was spread from there to other parts of Scandinavia (ibid:198). It is however quite clear that figurative paintings and carvings were made much earlier in the Northern part of Scandinavia, from at least the 3rd Millennia BC. So in a way the RA we see today can be regarded as a result from influence from both, a Northern and a Southern tradition. Much can be said about this, but the essential part for this study, is that it is possible that parts of a Myth from eastern Mediterranean, from Canaanites or from Phoenicians, via trading people from Greece or Metal traders of Central Europe might have been brought up to Scandinavia. It is enough that only a few people were told about this myth, people that lived in the region close to Tanum, who had a need for knowing the reasons why the weather changed as it did. Usually the panels can be dated when comparing the rise of actual sea level from Bronze Age, which in the Tanum area is about 15 to 7 m during the period. The Fossum panel is situated 44 m above Sea level, which makes it obvious that also during its use it was never close to the sea. So it is difficult to date the Fossum panel, officially it is dated to Late BA, period IV, from 1100 – 900 BC, (SHFA site).

The Panel in Fossum, RAÄ nr 255:1A

The Panel has been investigated and presented many times during the years and a detailed presentation is not needed here. However there are some features that

might be highlighted. The Panels are spread along a rock that is weakly bulging from south to north, making the normal to the more southern part, where the main figures are located, towards SE, 130 degrees. The normal is the same as the perpendicular direction of the panel. This direction is also the same direction as the sun rises at winter solstice in the area, when the sun is at its weakest condition (SMHI site). Another distinct feature of the panel is the natural cracks that divide the panel into different sections. The cracks must have been there already when the panel was carved, as no figures are carved over the cracks.

The figures carved on the panel seem to be shown in different situations, which can be described as different scenes. It looks like two or more persons are shown in various positions moving around on the panel as if the panel wants to tell a story, much like a modern comic magazine. If we follow the natural cracks of the rock, we can divide the

panel into 4 scenes, according to Figure 1. The basic assumption for this study is that the artist/creator of the panel used these cracks to separate the different parts of his story. In order to interpret the scenes the Baal myth will be used, even if there might be other myths or sagas that eventually can be used.

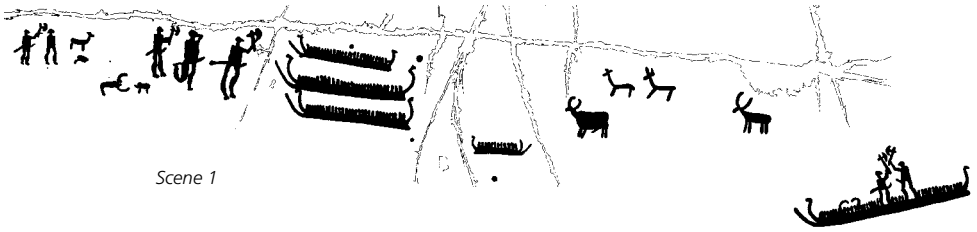
Each Scene is shown below separately, for clarification, making it easier to follow the discussion. The scenes are presented and discussed in a clockwise order.

Scene 1: Fossum panel, 255:1A.

To the far left, two persons are shown moving to the right towards a person lying crippled without one leg. One person is in charge indicated by an axe, the other person is passive with his arms to his side, as if he were a prisoner. The third person is lying dead and crippled. Somewhat more to the right three persons are together, the crippled man is now fixed, even if his leg seems to be loosely attached to the body, the other two seems to be in charge leading the crippled man away. To the far right a ship, with two persons, is approaching.

Figure 1. Fossum panel, 255:1A, the complete panel.





Scene 1

Baalmyth: The scene is showing the vegetation god, Baal doomed to the underworld, where he is killed, the crippled person, and later restored to life and helped out of the underworld. **Twinmyth:** The two twins have entered the underworld in a ship and are the ones who help the vegetation god to leave the underworld.

arrow. Somewhat higher are two persons engaged in killing a dog with a long lance. Far to the left are three persons standing, two blowing horns and one female watching. Somewhat to the right are two giants threatening each other, surrounded by three persons whereof one is slaying an animal.

Scene 2: Fossum panel, 255:1A.

The main scene. In the lower region two persons, one looking for something and one seems to be hunting with a bow and

Baalmyth: When the vegetation god, Baal had left the underworld, he went hunting (the person with the bow) and the Sun god Shapash (the person with a wheel as a chest) looked for him. The giant in the centre is Baal who has regained

his strength is challenged by the Water God Yamm. Summer is at its peak, indicated by the two suns carved above the group of people. The female watching the persons blowing horns is probably Baal's sister Anat who were active looking for Baal.

Twinmyth: The two persons killing the dog are the Divine Twins, explained by the disappearance of the Dog stars, see below. The Twins are also shown on a panel, see figure 2, more to the east together with dogs. The two persons blowing horns might be the Twins celebrating that summer is in its full bloom. The Twins have done their job of rescuing the vegetation god and will soon leave. The other persons surrounding the giant in the centre might be gods that wants to take



Scene 2

power, challenging Baal. In the myth Baal is threatened by the gods Athatar and Yamm, before he is killed by the god Mot.

The footprints are not used in this interpretation as they seem to be added at a later (or earlier time) as one of the footprints are carved above another figure. Also the ships in the upper part, one small and one bigger is not used, as they seem to be added by another artist, due to their different style.

Scene 3 and 4. Fossum panel, 255:1A.

Three elderly people are sitting having a discussion. Below, a person with a bow is

threatened by a person with an axe. At the bottom a man without arms.

Baal myth: The elderly council, led by the mightiest god El decides that Baal's power is at an end. Baal with the bow is captured and forced to enter the underworld. Autumn has arrived. The lowest part, the man without arms, shows Baal just arrived from the underworld, weak without any power, indicating season of spring.

(Scene 3 is thus a transition period both for autumn and for spring, based upon the assumption that the direction of the ships indicate the order how to read the panel, the upper part, autumn, ships to the right. The lower part, a ship to the left, indicates springtime).

Scene 4: Fossum panel, 255:1A, shown combined with Scene 3, representing the World of death, the domain of the god Mot. No persons beside the god are shown.

Comment: So even if there is not a direct representation of a specific myth, it might indicate that a similar allegorical myth was known by the persons carving the panel. This is also the nature of a myth, it is never exactly the same, and never exactly retold. But the basic idea with a myth like this is to explain the nature's behaviour in a way that people could understand and remember.

The Stars

The Fossum panel has been analyzed by Niels Christensen (1988) with respect to how the Twin stars were positioned during Bronze Age at different times of the year. The Twin stars, Gemini, changes from evening star to morning star during the year and is also invisible for some parts of the year. Close to Gemini is the stars Canis Minor and Canis



Major, the two Dog stars that has often been used as an indicator for when the harvest is to be ready. The Romans used the rise of Sirius, one star in Canis Major, in August as indicator of when the harvest had to be ready.

From a standard star map, showing the stars at present, the following can be shown of the stars regarding visibility from Tanum. Gemini is visible during most part of the night, but from April only seen during evening and it disappears totally at midsummer. As the Gemini, during the late spring is only visible during the evenings, it might indicate that people thought that they spent the rest of the night in the underworld. Canis Major (Sirius) is visible during all night in January, in April only in the evenings and it disappears totally in May, returning first in October. The two dog stars can thus, due to peoples imagine, have spent part of their time in the underworld during late spring.

Scene 1: Winter. Here the Twins are shown in a boat, sailing towards the dead person to the left. The Twins are the ones that help the crippled person (the Vegetation god), leading him back to life. Two dogs (Canis Major and Minor) are also shown, indicating that the dog stars are not visible during part of the night, being in the underworld.

Scene 2: Summer: A dog (Canis Minor) is killed by the two Twins with a lance. Also Canis Major is killed shown above. This can be interpreted as the disappearance of the Stars Canis Major and Canis Minor from the sky, which happens in May. The Twins are only shown in scene 1 and 2, as they also will soon disappear, but somewhat later in June, at midsummer. Maybe the two Twins blow their horns to celebrate their departure?

Scene 3: Autumn: Mating season for the animals is in August and September, indicated by two pair of animals turned against each other. During this period neither the Gemini or the Canis Major or Minor is visible, the Twins and the dogs are not shown.

Scene 4: Winter: The god of Death is shown threatening all others. The stars Gemini and both dog stars (Canis Major and Minor) are visible on the sky, but shown

separate from the central panel, see figure 2.

The Panel 255:1B.

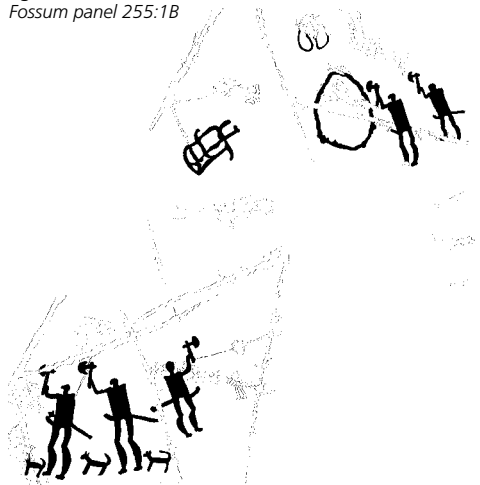
East of the main panel is two separate scenes shown as indicated by figure 2. The upper scene might show the Twins with the sun, when the sun rises close to the Twin stars, which happens in late summer, in August when the sun rises in the NE close to the Twin stars.

The lower scene might show the Twins with dogs, both are visible early mornings from October, during winter time and in early spring as Evening stars. The third person is unknown, maybe Orion the hunter, a star close to the Twins. The panel shows the stars when they are up on the sky and not in the underworld.

The Ships

It is worth noticing that the ships of the Fossum panel are heading left (west) on the lower part of the panel and opposite right (east) in the upper part. The 7 ships going west are 4 in scene 1, 2 ships in scene 2 and 1 in scene 3. There are many indications that the ship was believed to be the vehicle for the sun, when making its journey over the sky. As the ship moves the sun, it

Figure 2:
Fossum panel 255:1B



might have been thought of as something that moved Time, a way of indicating that Time travels! With an additional assumption that each crewmember of each ship is a symbol of one day, as in a calendar, the 7 ships going west/left have a total number of crewmembers/days of 186 days. The number is close, but not exact, to the period between winter and summer solstice of 183 days. The ships going east is more difficult to count as there are ships looking as if they were added at a later period, by other artists. So, even if there are more and smaller ships that eventually can be combined in a special way to better represent a solar year, it is difficult to find a clear combination that makes an accurate representation of a full solar year. But, it might have been an attempt from the artist side! Maybe, the artist who made the panel, tried to show the number of days for each season as good as possible. He tried to describe the yearly changes in order to let the gods and especially the weak winter sun, remember how to behave, in order to keep the nature intact. But the artist did not get it right, so eventually other artist have added other ships later, which might be indicated by somewhat changed design of the other ships.

Even the ancient Greeks did have problem calculating a solar year, they used a lunar calendar based upon 29 days, adding up to 348 days of a year, forcing them to add an extra month certain years in order to match the year of the sun

Discussion and Conclusions

As seen above it can be shown that a combination of some basic Aetiological myths regarding the seasonal weather changes can be applied to the figures on the Fossumpanel, even if the myths themselves are not known in details, and especially no Nordic variant. It can be questioned why the Vegetation God is not represented on the sky as a star, as both the Divine Twins and the Canis stars. Actually, there are no other gods represented as stars, only mythical heroes and alike, so the major gods, represented here, were probably believed

to exist elsewhere, maybe bound to the earth. Eventually they were believed to belong to, so called, chthonic gods bound to the underworld. It might even be so that the people of the Bronze Age regarded the sun itself as bound to the underworld, as it disappeared to the underworld daily. The weather god, Baal responsible for rain and fertility, is also bound to the underworld, during periods of draught or freezing winters, why he might have been regarded as bounded to earth.

If this proposal for interpretation is according to the Fossum artist intention, he/she wanted to show how the climate changed during the year. The artist wanted to show the gods how to act, in order to keep the good order, and avoid chaos. By carving the message in rock, it will be saved for ever, for the gods to see, especially the weak winter sun, which is close to die. The panel is directed towards the dawn of the sun at winter solstice, so the sun god could see for himself how to act. This is also a theory that was already mentioned by Oscar Almgren during the 1920s where he claimed that people during Bronze Age believed that the RA forced the gods to do as the pictures showed (Almgren 1927:251).

The knowledge about stars, which stars was interpreted as Twins and as Dogs, can of course also be something that was brought to Scandinavia from the Mediterranean region by special persons, maybe by the artist himself. The panel might have been a special job, ordered by the local king, in order to avoid any drastic change by the gods, a *seasonal Calendar*, aimed to keep nature in good order, in balance, avoiding chaos.

Torbjörn Skånberg
torbjorn.skanberg@telia.com

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