

Gods and Animals in Disguise

An analysis of Rock Art and iconography in Southwestern Norway

Abstract

From Rock Art to figurines, the Nordic Bronze Age (NBA) is rich in iconography and symbolism. It produced some of the most magnificent works of prehistoric art, such as the Trundholm Sun Chariot, the bronze lurs and the Fårdal figurines. Along with many others, these artworks provide important insight into Bronze Age cosmology, ritual and religion. Focusing specifically on the petroglyphs of Southwestern Norway, we argue that Rock Art and iconography played an important constitutive role in creating, maintaining, and transforming beliefs that would have been abstract and disembodied otherwise. Furthermore, we stress the importance of Rock Art in exploring hybrid identities. By combining elements from the worlds of animals, spirits and humans, Rock Art allowed for the perception of realities normally hidden from view.

Keywords: Nordic Bronze Age, mythic animals, hybrids, shamanism.

Introduction: The Rock Art of Southern Scandinavia

With their solid texture and enduring presence, rocks lend themselves well to the depiction of otherworldly beings and realms. The durability and solidity of rocks convey a sense of strength and stability, making them ideal for portraying mythical beings and experiences that lie beyond the limits of the physical world (Nordby & Sørgaard 2020: 144). Whether it is a giant statue of a god or the depiction of a mythical beast, rocks can be sculpted or carved to depict these awe-inspiring beings in all their splendor.

Rock Art sites in Southwestern Norway (Figure 1) and Scandinavia in general are mostly located on the coast, usually in sheltered places near inlets, bays, and natural harbors (Malmer 1981; Mandt 1991; Kaul 1998; Myhre 2004; Ling & Cornell 2010; Kjeldsen 2019). While thematic and stylistic similarities can be observed, local preferences for certain motifs have been noted: For example, animal and human figures

are commonly depicted in the Rock Art of Bohuslän (Sweden) and Østfold (Norway). Human figures are frequently showed armed with axes or swords, engaging in ritual or war related activities. In Denmark, there is a dominance of circular motifs, in particular the wheel cross (Kaul 2013; Kaul 2021), while human and animal figures are rare (Randsborg 1993: 82; Glob 1969: 96). In Southwestern Norway, only a few depictions of humans and animals are known. Ritual- and ceremonial scenes are rarely encountered, and warrior- and battle scenes are entirely absent (Kjeldsen 2017: 96). Cupmarks, wheel-crosses, circles, spirals, geometric figures and foot-soles are common in all parts of Scandinavia (Glob 1969; Malmer 1981; Kjeldsen 2017; Nimura 2015).

Ships are by far the most common motif. In Bohuslän alone some 10,000 boat images are known to exist (Bengtsson & Bengtsson 2011: 37). In Southwestern Norway,



Fig. 1. Map of study area.

ships account for approximately 72% of all the images (Kjeldsen 2019: 113). The importance of ships as symbols probably stems from their role as intermediaries between worlds. Ships may have represented a means of venturing into the unknown, whether it was unexplored lands or mysterious realms. Similarly, the open sea, with its depths and endless horizons, may have been a metaphor for the vastness and mysteries of the otherworld (Kveiborg et al. 2020: 83-88).

Embarking on a journey to the spiritual realm was probably looked upon as a fearful undertaking, requiring the assistance of a variety of helping spirits. These could take various forms and were probably believed to possess special abilities that enabled them to navigate between different worlds. Some of the spirits may have been linked

to celestial events, such as the sun's journey across the sky, due to their boundary crossing abilities. The ability to shapeshift, or transform one's physical appearance, is a recurring theme in the mythologies of many ancient cultures.

Shamans – mediators between worlds

In the context of Scandinavian Rock Art, numerous images have been interpreted as representations of trickster figures, or shamans, engaging in transformative rituals (Lahelma 2005). They may be seen wearing distinctive headdresses, holding ceremonial objects, or engaging in rituals. Some are equipped with wings, beaks or horns. Ethnographic literature has provided valuable insights into the significance of costumes



Fig. 2. Anthropomorph with bird mask, wings, sword and a pouch hanging from its waist. Austre Åmøy, Stavanger. Photo: ©Åge Pedersen, Museum of archaeology, University of Stavanger.

and paraphernalia in enabling a shaman's spiritual transformation and facilitating communication with their spirit animals (Hirschfelder & Molin 2019: 257). The costume serves as a powerful tool for bridging the boundaries between human and nonhuman beings and plays a crucial role in the shaman's ability to become one with their helping spirits. According to Pedersen, for example, the Mongolian shamanic costume "affords the shaman with a multiple, extra-human body, which, by inducing a momentary transformation of his or her corporeal gestalt, enables the shaman to attain other-

wise unattainable points of view" (Pedersen 2007: 142).

In Southwestern Norway, there are four panels depicting possible shamans and/or anthropomorphic beings engaging in shamanic rituals. At Site IV at Austre Åmøy in Stavanger, an anthropomorphic being is depicted face-on with raised arms (possibly wings) and a bird-like mask with a beak. (Figure 2). It appears to be in a state of transformation. The figure carries a small sword or a knife and has a pouch hanging from its waist. Similar pouches have been recovered from the Hvidegaard and Magle-



Fig. 3. A pair of human figures, one of which wears a possible headdress. Austre Åmøy, Stavanger. Photo: ©Åge Pedersen, Museum of archaeology, University of Stavanger.

høy burials in Zealand, Denmark, which date to the Early NBA, per. III (1300-1100 BC). In the Hvidegaard I burial, the cremated remains of three individuals were wrapped in a cloak and placed on a cowhide lining

the floor of a stone cist (Sørensen & Rebay-Salisbury 2023: 156). Among the most spectacular finds was a pouch with various tools and gadgets, including a perforated cone shell from the Mediterranean Sea, multiple

Fig. 4. Headless being (shaman?) overseeing a sexual ritual, perhaps a sacred marriage. Kråkhaug, Sola. Photo: ©Åge Pedersen, Museum of archaeology, University of Stavanger.



roots of various kinds, and a talon of a bird of prey (Goldhahn 2019: 75-76). The pouch also contained a small bag made of intestines or bladder, in which additional objects were found: the mandible of a young squirrel, some small pebbles, and a piece of intestines or bladder that contained additional pebbles (Goldhahn 2019: 75-76). Possibly used in magical rituals (Goldhahn 2019: 89-94), the pouch is thought to represent the paraphernalia of a shaman or a ritual specialist.

At Austre Åmøy (Site I) a pair of human figures is displayed, one of which wears a possible headdress. (Figure 3). A somewhat similar headdress is depicted at Amtmannsnes, Alta, Norway (Helskog 2012: 152, fig. 158). The headdress also has some similarities with the one displayed on the Vestrup Mark razor (Late NBA, period IV) and the horned head-dress of bronze with gold foil found in a bog at Hagendrup in Zealand (Early NBA, per. II). The head-dress from Vestrup Mark has recently been interpreted as part of a shamanic costume (Ahlqvist 2021).

At Vigdel in Sola, at least four human figures are depicted in a procession. Leading the procession is a larger figure holding a raised axe. Perhaps it is escorting souls to the afterlife, protecting them from dangers along the way? Above is a figure (possibly a shaman or a ceremonial leader) in a boat with its arms raised as in adoration (Fett & Fett 1941: pl. 39C; Kjeldsen 2017: fig. 5).

At other sites, shamans are depicted without their typical attributes. At Kråkhaug in Sola, for example, two figures, a man and a woman, are displayed, engaging in sexual intercourse. Next to the pair is a shorter figure as well as an oversized, headless being with accentuated calves holding a large axe. The oversized figure is situated higher up, observing the three individuals (Kjeldsen 2017: 99). (Figure 4). The missing head may be taken to indicate shamanistic ASC (altered states of consciousness). In certain altered states of consciousness, the nervous system can create an illusion of dissociation, resulting in a sense of disconnection from one's physical self (Lewis-Williams 2012).

The Sun and its helpers

In Kaul's (1998; 2004) interpretation of Bronze Age cosmology, the ship has a central role, transporting the sun across the sky from sunrise in the east to sunset in the west. At night, the sun travels through the underworld with the help of a serpent, until dawn when it rises in the east and a fish carries it from the night ship to the morning ship. A sun-horse accompanies the sun as it travels across the sky. At noon, the horse lands with the sun on the sun ship. After a while, the serpent takes charge, enshrouding the sun with its body before escorting it to the night ship, as illustrated, for example, on the bronze razor from Lolland (Denmark) (Kaul 1998: 262, fig. 150, 170). The fish once again follows the night ship to resume its duties the next day.

The ship, serpent, waterbird, fish, and horse all play significant roles in this narrative, symbolizing different aspects of the cosmos and the sun's journey. While ships are among the most widely depicted images in the Rock Art of Southern Scandinavia, horses and fish are shown far less frequently. Occasionally, snakes are depicted, such as at Varlös, Tanum, Bohuslän, where two serpents appear to be drinking from a large vessel (Kaul 2004: 328-29). At Järrestad, Österlen, Skåne, a serpent winds its way over the rock surface, heading towards the imprints of human foot soles. (Figure 5).

There is also a gold figurine of a serpent from Hesby in Stavanger, which offers an interesting parallel to the snake-horse figurine from Fårdal. (Figure 6). The serpent is a stray find lacking contextual information; however, it is generally believed to date from the NBA/Early Iron Age. Hesby is located on the island Finnøy, where several NBA hoards have been uncovered, including one of the largest hoards in Southwestern Norway. This hoard, which was unearthed at the neighbouring site Øvre Landa, comprises 1169 flakes, all stemming from dagger production. Interestingly, a beautifully crafted dagger, Lomborg type VI, was found in a bog at Hesby, opening the possibility that the serpent may have had a similar origin.



Fig. 5. The head of the snake juxtaposing, or superimposing, one of the many foot carvings at the Järrestad site. Österlen, Scania. Late Bronze Age. Photo: ©Flemming Kaul.



Fig. 6. Gold serpent from Hesby, Stavanger. Photo: ©Annette Øvrelid, Museum of archaeology, University of Stavanger.

Ships

The popularity of the ship as a symbol can be explained by its many practical uses. Ships played a significant role in Bronze Age Scandinavia. They facilitated raids and warfare as well as trade and transportation of goods. However, ships were more than just practical vessels: Building a ship and assembling a crew of skilled sailors required substantial resources, which led to it becoming a symbol of status and wealth (Ling et al. 2018). In addition, ships have long been recognized as a symbolic means of transport to the otherworld. In Egyptian mythology, for example, ships were used to carry the souls of the pharaohs to the afterlife.

Some of the ship images in Southwestern Norway may be symbols for the journey to the afterlife. At the aforementioned site Vigdel, for example, a shaman or a ritual leader seems to assist in the transport of souls to the otherworld. Above is a figure in a boat in an adoring pose, perhaps praying for the souls' safe journey to the afterlife? Interestingly, ships are present at all the panels where images of shamans appear, suggesting that shamans may have been responsible for ferrying the souls of the deceased to the otherworld.

In Southwestern Norway, Rock Art sites are often situated in close proximity to burial cairns. At the sites Nag (Strand), Bru, Austre Åmøy and Hodnefjell (Stavanger) burial cairns are located at high ridges and hilltops above or close to the rock panels (Kjeldsen 2017, 2019). At Utbjøa I in Vindafjord, a circle or sun image with four radial lines is placed in front a contour pecked ship with possible animal prows, dated to the Late NBA per V-VI. The ship appears to be guided by the sun. Perhaps it is transporting the souls of dead ancestors from the burial cairn 25-30 meters east and above, to the otherworld (represented by the water's edge) (Kjeldsen 2019: 118). The association of ships and the sea with death and the afterlife was probably established in the Early NBA (Kveiborg et al. 2020: 83-88).

Horses

In some ancient mythologies, ships were a means by which the gods themselves traversed the heavens and the underworld. In Indo-European mythologies, the sun (either in the form a personified deity or a celestial body) travels in a chariot drawn by horses. According to a variant of this myth, the sun is drawn across the heavens by a divine horse. This belief is well illustrated in the Trundholm sun chariot. Discovered in a peat bog in Denmark in 1902, the sculpture is considered one of the most iconic pieces of the NBA. It consists of a bronze horse and a gold-coated bronze disc, both of which are mounted on wheels. Notably, when Müller published this remarkable find in 1903, he did not employ the term "Solvognen", but referred to it as "The Sun Image from Trundholm" (Müller 1903: 114), emphasizing that the chassis is a separate element, that was mounted on the sculpture to illustrate the movement of the sun. The term "Chariot of the Sun" (Sonnenwagen) was introduced in the 1930s by German scholars

(Sprockhoff 1936; Kaul 2004; Kaul 2018; Kaul 2021).

The sun horse is also depicted on bronze razors and in Rock Art, for example at Ølbør III in Sola, where a horse is seen pulling the sun, represented by a large wheel cross. Six additional horses are depicted above and below. (Figure 7). The sun horses from from Balken and Lilla Arendal, Tanum, Bohuslän are other, better-known examples (Kaul 2018: 61-62, fig. 8 and 9). Occasionally, the sun horse is depicted without the sun as its typical attribute, as illustrated, for example, by two of the horses at Ølbør III, and the possible bronze horse from Re in Time (Figure 8), which is dated to the Late NBA. The figurine, which is a stray find, has a well-shaped, muscular neck supporting a long horse-like head. Unfortunately, the tale is broken, and the ears are missing.

Fish

There are a few depictions of fish in the Rock Art of Southwestern Norway. At Åmøy (Site I) four halibuts are depicted,

Fig. 7. Photo and topographical map from TVT of the sun horses from Ølbør III, Sola. ©Annette Øvrelid, Museum of archaeology, University of Stavanger.

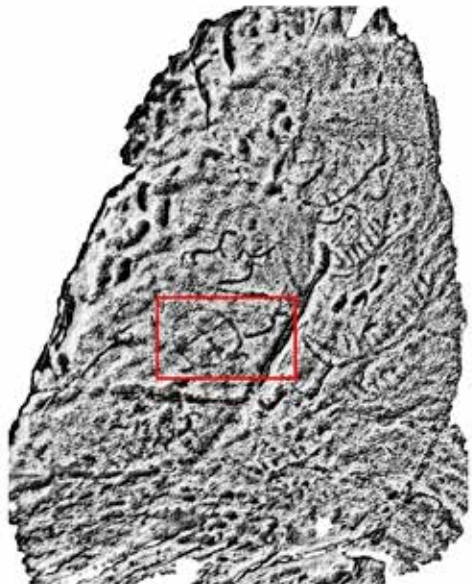




Fig. 8. Bronze figurine of a possible sun horse without the sun as its typical attribute. *Re, Time.* Photo: © Annette Øvrelid, Museum of archaeology, University of Stavanger.

surrounded by ships. (Figure 9). Although initially dated to the Mesolithic or Neolithic period, data suggest that the site was submerged for most of this time (Høgestøl et al. 2006: 15), making a Bronze Age dating much more likely. Evidence suggests that around 3000 PB, the shoreline was approx. 4,9 meters higher than today, dropping to around 3,5 meters above current levels by 2500 BP (Høgestøl et al. 2006: 15, Kjeldsen 2017). Situated at elevations ranging from 5,49 to 6,33 meters above present-day sea-levels, the halibuts would have been shore-bound in the Bronze Age. Notably,

the carvings show no signs of water erosion, challenging the assumption that they have been submerged in water for long periods of time. Also, a Mesolithic or Neolithic dating of the halibuts would make these carvings unique, as there are no other documented petroglyphs from the Mesolithic or Neolithic period in this region. It should be mentioned however, that halibut fishing scenes are present both at Forselv (Gjerde 2010: 147, fig. 75) and in Alta (Helskog 1988; 2012), Northern Norway, where they are dated to the Late Stone Age (5000-1700 BC).



Fig. 9. Large halibut at Austre Åmøy, Stavanger. Photo: ©Annette Øvrelid, Museum of archaeology, University of Stavanger.



Fig. 10. Possible catfish at Utbjoa, Vindafjord. Photo: ©Egil Bakka, Universitetsmuseet i Bergen

In a NBA context, halibuts may have held symbolic significance as helpers of the sun. Considering their snow-white meat, diamond shaped bodies and considerable size, this is hardly surprising. Although the maximum size this species can reach is uncertain, individuals up to 350 kilograms and 3.60 meters have been captured (Institute of Marine Research). At the site Utbjoa, another fish is depicted - probably a catfish this time. (Figure 10). The initial interpretation of the image as an arm was revisited after conducting 3D-scans. With their primordial and fearsome appearance, catfish may have held a special significance in NBA cosmogenic myths, perhaps representing transformation or the balance between chaos and order. The Utbjoa site is dated to the Late NBA (Mandt 1972; Kjeldsen 2019).

Although rarely depicted in Rock Art, fish do appear on Late NBA razors and ornaments. Fish are also depicted on Early NBA bronzes, including weapons. On the classical spearhead from the Valsømagle II hoard in Denmark, eight fish are depicted, moving towards the point of the blade. Fish also appear on the spearhead from Haga, Gotland, and on the shaft hole axe from Uhe in Jutland (Kaul 2004; Kveiborg et al. 2020: 85, fig. 4), and on slab 7 in the Kivik grave (Bertilsson et al. 2017: 299-300).

Birds

Throughout history, birds have played an important role, symbolizing things such as divinity, elevation, freedom, wisdom, power and strength. Because of their abilities to soar through the skies, birds have often been regarded as messengers or intermediaries between worlds. In many traditional cultures, birds have also been seen as omens of good or bad fortune (Goldhahn 2019: 300-301). Birds and part of birds, such as head, feathers and talons, were also used for magical and medical purposes (Goldhahn 2019: 91-94, 300).

In the Hvidegaard burial, a pouch containing, among other things, a talon of a bird of prey was found, perhaps representing health and magic. Bird iconography is present on many Late NBA razors (Goldhahn 2019: 113-17). The handles or "prows" of these razors are sometimes sculpted to look like birds, some of them metamorphosing into horse-like creatures (Goldhahn 2019: 116-17). In the Rock Art of South-western Norway, birds are rarely depicted, the exception being a ship-figure from site V at Austre Åmøy, featuring two ships, one of which has a bird/serpent prow. The other ship features an in-turned horse head prow (possibly period V). (Figure 11). Horse-head prows are common on ships from the Late



Fig 11: Two carved ships, one with a possible horsehead and one with bird/or snake decoration at the stern. Austre Åmøy, Stavanger. Photo: ©Annette Øvrelid, Museum of archaeology, University of Stavanger.

Fig 12: Ship with horse-head prow. Löväsen, Tanum 325:1. Photo taken with artificial light. ©Gerhard Milstreu, Underslös Museum.



NBA, as exemplified by the ship from Tanum, Sweden. (Figure 12).

Concluding remarks

It is generally acknowledged that the sun played an important role in NBA rituals and beliefs. Kaul's (1998, 2004) interpretation of the sun myth is widely accepted as a tool for interpreting NBA imagery and iconography. Ships, horses, birds, snakes, and fish all played an important role in this narrative, each with a special set of abilities to assist the sun on its journey across the sky and through the netherworld. Moreover, the preoccupation with hybrids and boundary crossing suggests that some elements of animism were incorporated in NBA ritual practices and beliefs (Ahlqvist & Vandkilde 2018). Depictions of shamans in a transformative state, wearing beaks or wings, suggest that shamans could travel between worlds with the assistance of one or more helping spirits.

In the past decades, three-dimensional digital documentation, particularly laser scanning technology, has advanced, enabling more detailed interpretations of Rock Art images. According to recent 3D-scans of ship images in Southwestern Norway, a large percentage of ships – perhaps even a majority – have animal head prows (possible horseheads) (see for example Brun & Øvreliid 2022: 74-75, fig. 11, C-D), suggesting that some of them date to the Early NBA. If this is the case, animal/object hybrids were probably integrated into NBA myths and beliefs earlier than previously thought. In Southwestern Norway, ships with animal prows are commonly dated to the Late NBA.

Compared to regions with particularly rich concentrations of Rock Art, such as Østfold in Eastern Norway and Bohuslän in Sweden, the Rock Art of Southwestern Norway is simpler and less detailed. Ceremonial scenes are rare, battle scenes are completely absent. The reasons for this are unclear, but it may be related to local artistic traditions. Twin symbolism, in the form of twin axe bearers, is also absent, despite

numerous twin depositions in hoards (Nordby & Sørsgaard 2019).

The Early NBA is generally characterized by stylistic images (ships, cup marks, circles, and geometric figures). Scenes depicting shamans, ritual objects, hybrids, and animals are more common in the Late NBA. As authoritative forms of leaderships became more established, ritual leaders may have taken on new and increased importance. Specific individuals may have been designated to perform and oversee rituals (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005: 352-53), carving rocks and breathing life into epic tales. Through the skilful manipulation of rocks, ritual specialists were able to bring myth to life, allowing audiences to glimpse into a world that existed beyond their own. In this sense, the images were also conduits for preserving and passing on mythical stories, serving as reminders of ancestral traditions and origins.

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Ausgewählte Säugetierdarstellungen in der Eiszeitkunst und der Versuch ihrer zoologisch-ethnologischen Interpretation

This publication is the doctoral thesis written by Ingmar Michael Braun at the University of Tübingen.

The European Upper Palaeolithic Ice Age art (cave art and portable art) is primarily known for its often realistic depictions of mammals.

In an interdisciplinary approach, representatives of the families Equidae, Bovidae with the genera *Capra*, *Rupicapra*, *Ovibos*, *Saiga* and *Bos*, Cervidae, Elephantidae, Rhinocerotidae, Ursidae and Felidae are examined according to the following zoological-ethnological criteria:

Determination of species and subspecies, sex determination, seasonal characteristics, age determination and behavioural features.

These zoological-ethnological findings are supplemented by numerous photos and drawings, including recent representatives of these mammals, and contrasted with the figures from Ice Age art. This publication is available for € 61.- (+ postage) from Habelt-Verlag: <https://www.habelt.de>