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THE SHIP AND ITS SYMBOLISM
IN THE EUROPEAN BRONZE AGE

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Abstract: For thousands of years, boats and ships have been depicted on objects and structures and continue to be powerful and instantly recognisable images in the contemporary world. While several European Bronze Age cultures adopted the image of the ship as a recurring leitmotiv, different meanings became to be associated with these images. It is often possible to recognise the arrival of foreign ideas and their inclusion in existing cultures. A possible common origin for the European artistic repertoire will be investigated.

Keywords: ship; boat; symbolism; Europe; Bronze Age.

INTRODUCTION

The image of the ship recurs in all inhabited regions from ancient times. There is scientific evidence that boats were used at least 40,000 years ago, and possibly much earlier (McGrail, 2003: 3–4). Having been such a feature in the lives of men and women for so long, boats and ships have become an integral part of human activity, and it is hardly surprising that they have been depicted over the course of history.

The interpretation of the material evidence relating to the depictions of ships has followed separate lines of enquiry, mainly following a distinction based on the medium, and, to a lesser extent, geographical distribution. For instance, studies of Scandinavian rock art have largely ignored depictions on bronzes or boat-shaped graves. The geographical distribution of the types of archaeological evidence overlaps only to a minimal extent (Kaul, 1998: 113). However, all Scandinavian representations are stylistically connected; this is demonstrated by the chronology of rock art imagery based on the scientific dating of bronzes on which similar depictions have been found (Kaul, 1998: 87–90). Bradley (2006) argues that the cosmology recognised by Kaul (1998) as underpinning the representations on bronzes may also be recognised on rock art depictions, and he proposes further research to test the compatibility of the cosmology with rock art images.

Another school of thought (Kristiansen, 2004; Kristiansen and Larsson, 2005: 189–212) recognises ships as symbols, and as such they are compared with similar symbols across the European continent and the Mediterranean, ignoring any boundaries.

Interpreting the material evidence attached to the iconography of the ship requires a balance between contextual analyses of images as part of broader landscapes, but it is also necessary to consider foreign cultural influences. The latter cannot properly be understood if the meanings of the images within their contexts are unknown. The comparison between similar symbols in different cultures cannot be limited to stylistic analyses of the graphical representations. Bredholt Christensen and Warburton (2004) argue that, in archaeology, ‘a symbol must be an expression of something (Saussure) and it must be recognizable (Peirce)’ by at least two people. Frequent meanings should be inferable from the archaeological evidence: similarity in contexts and consumption patterns may be a valid indication of similarity among a given set of symbols, even before any deciphering of meaning1 is attempted, bearing in mind that it is not necessarily possible to decode what a symbol meant in antiquity (Bredholt Christensen and Warburton, 2004).

GOBUSTAN AND THE BIRTH OF A REPERTOIRE

The earliest depictions of ships in the European and Mediterranean regions can be found near Gobustan, Azerbaijan (Figure 4.1b). The chronology of these rock carvings is still debated, ranging, for the depictions of boats, between the 6th millennium BC and the 16th millennium (Farajova, pers. comm.). Representations of boats appear amongst a multitude of wild animals and human figures; no relationship between scenes can be recognised. Interestingly, the sun occasionally appears associated with the boats and a solar myth has been proposed by Formozov (1980: 38–39). Around Gobustan rock art is spread over a wide area, but significantly boats appear only on panels found in the two areas closest to the

1 McCauley and Lawson (2002, 9–10) suggest that knowledge of meaning may not be indispensable in a ritual, even for the participants.
COGNITIVE ARCHAEOLOGY AS SYMBOLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

Fig. 4.1. Gobustan, (a) self-igniting fire at Lokbatan mud volcano, © Bundesanstalt für Geowissenschaften und Rohstoffe (BGR); (b) carved ships, © Malahat Farajova; (c) stone tambourine.

Caspian Sea, on the Boyukdash and Kichikdash mountains (Farajova, 2004). Some of the boats depicted can be large: one is 150 cm long (Anati, 2001). However, many other rock carvings are also large – such as a fish (cetacean) about five metres long. Large depictions appear characteristic of the most ancient periods and may date to the Palaeolithic. This would suggest that Gobustan might be the region where old beliefs involving boats formed, possibly over a period spanning from the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age (if the large boat rock carvings are earlier). The location, a region of mud volcanoes, appears to have been used for ritual purposes probably because features of sky, sea, land, and fire could all be seen together. The presence of both sea fish and boats among the rock carvings, and their location close to the ancient shoreline, demonstrate that these depictions were probably representations of real boats. The Caspian Sea was connected to the Black Sea through a narrow passage, and from there, at the time of the first rock carvings, it was possible to reach the Mediterranean. Therefore the area must then have been more important for maritime traffic than in later periods.

The ancient landscape of Gobustan must have been truly extraordinary: there were mountains reaching into the sky towards the sun; volcanoes spewing fire (Figure 4.1a); mud, smoke and steam; cold rain, and rivers running. In such a scenario, populated by a variety of figures, all the human senses would have been stimulated² and it would, perhaps, have been possible to actually see boats reaching towards the horizon, without any need of the imagination; in other words, these were not ‘symbolic’ ships.

The artistic repertoire developed over thousands of years in the Gobustan region, and at least some of the associated beliefs must have spread into the European continent. Gobustan was on an important ancient route connecting the Near East to Asia.

EGYPT

In Egypt, model ships often featured in the funerary assemblages of elite burials ever since Old Kingdom times (Grajetzki, 2003: 40–41). By the First Dynasty, actual ships appeared in the boat-grave cemetery at Abydos, dated to 3300–3100 BC (Ward, 2006). In the second half of the fourth millennium, boats become a frequent subject on painted Naqada II pottery (Wilkinson, 1999), rock carvings at Wadi Abbad (Ward, 2006: 120), and in Tomb 100 at Nekhen (Hierakonpolis; Cialowicz, musical tones, when struck. The stones demonstrate that sensory stimulations were a key component of ancient rituals in the area. McCauley and Lawson (2002, 77–79) suggest that prolonged emotional stimulation may produce subconscious effects that help enhance perception of the experience and memorize it. Rock art, perhaps, would have been used here as a means to help memorize events. In some cases, an excess of emotional stimulation could affect mnemonic capabilities and produce a state of altered consciousness (McCauley and Lawson 2002, 80–81), but such a state is not evident in the naturalistic depictions of boats.

² There are at least two stones in the area, the so-called ‘stone tambourines’ (Figure 1c). They produce metallic notes, of variable
1995), but these artistic manifestations are associated with the arrival of people from Lower Egypt by boat.

Ships have been interpreted as symbols of royal power (Williams; 1988: 38). The first occurrence of ships in a symbolic context is to be found in the Pyramid Texts – inscribed in the pyramid of Unas (Kaul, 2005), the last Fifth-Dynasty pharaoh. Utterance 267 reads, ‘he flies as a goose; he alights as a scarab upon the empty throne which is in thy boat, O Re’ (…) [Unas] pushes off from the earth in thy boat, O Re; so when thou goest forth from the horizon, he [Unas] has his sceptre in his hand, as navigator of thy boat, O Re’ (Mercer, 1952: 89). The idea that the pharaoh would ascend to the sun in the sky is repeated throughout the texts, but his means of so doing vary from text to text, and not all the ‘spells’ were part of Egyptian mainstream belief. Further elements of this belief can be gathered from Unas’ pyramid (Figure 4.2a), which is part of a larger mortuary temple, where two structures in the form of boats (Figure 4.2b), and possibly also containing wooden boats, could either have symbolized the diurnal and nocturnal vessels of the sun god (Verner, 2002: 337–338), or the boats that carried the construction materials for the monument and which were depicted in the causeway3 (Verner, 2002: 334). The texts were inscribed to be read from the burial chamber to the antechamber, understood as the ‘horizon’, and would have accompanied the deceased pharaoh from the tomb to the sun, a journey also symbolized by the architecture (Verner, 2002: 43).

Verner (2002, 41) warns that Pyramid Texts ‘compile various conceptions of the beyond, drawn from different origins and periods’. In utterances 273 and 274, there is a reference to cannibalism, ‘[Unas] is he who eats men and lives on gods, lords of messengers, who distributes orders’ (Mercer, 1952: 93), a practice which was not followed in Egypt. The Pyramid Texts were a collection of accounts circulating at the time, assembled to ensure that the pharaoh was sure of reaching his final destination, the sun, one way or another. The possibility that the symbolic boats of the Pyramid Texts might have been a foreign influence is suggested by the fact that there is no reference to water: the journey of the boat is set in the sky, and stars are depicted in the burial chamber, antechamber (Figure 4.2a), and corridor4 (Verner, 2002: 334). However, a boat travelling to the horizon, where it meets the sun, is actually used, and this appears in contradiction to the astronomical references on the ceiling of the same burial chamber and antechamber where the Pyramid Texts are written. That view recalls the landscape of Gobustan, where it seems that the horizon met all earthly things, and boats were present in that landscape. The Egyptians may have favoured the use of a boat as the most suitable means of transportation for a pharaoh, and therefore adapted to their needs the circulating belief that

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3 The accompanying inscription reads, ‘[I brought granite pillars from?] Elephantine for his majesty Unas within seven days (…) His majesty praised me for this.’

4 The stars in the burial chamber and the antechamber point to the zenith; those in the corridor point to the north, evidencing a complex astronomical alignment of the monument with the sky.
overemphasized the role of the ship as the only means of transportation capable of such a journey.

THE MEDITERRANEAN

Boats in the Mediterranean also appear in later periods. Rock art boats at Folia (Figure 4.3c), Greece (Dimitriadis, pers. comm.), may date to the Early Helladic period; boats with fishes were depicted on Early Cycladic II ‘frying pans’. These boats may have represented the process of fishing, and, by association, also life and death; the repertoire of the sun and boat is also featured and may have represented the cycle of day and night. These possible meanings and the shape of the vessels point to the cycle of fertility. The ‘wheel cross’ also appears on these vessels (Davis, 1992: 717, figure 9), and from the site of Chalandriani (Figure 4.3a) there are examples depicting oared ships, with fish emblems on their high prows (Hekman, 2003).

As the Mycenaean exchange network spreads across the Mediterranean (Vianello, 2005), a few representations appear on Mycenaean pottery, especially the Middle Helladic examples found at Kolonna on Aegina (Siedentopf, 1991); these representations echo the depictions found on the Cycladic ‘frying pans’ (Rutter, 1993: 779). Ships with bird protomes (Figure 4.3b) have been found in the same Aeginetan contexts since the Middle Helladic (Hiller, 1972; Wachsmann, 2000). The only possible depiction on Urnfield Vogelbarke in Mycenaean pottery dates even later – Late Helladic III C (Matthäus, 1980); an Urnfield-style bird has also been recognised on a gold diadem from the citadel at Pylos (Blegen et al. 1973: 16, figure 108d; Schauer, 1986: 74).

There are also rock art representations of boats in the Aegean region, particularly those found on Cyprus at Tel Acco and at Kition-Kathari (Artzy, 2003: 232).

The Tel Acco rock carvings were found on a portable altar (and probably used on board a ship) dated to the very end of the Late Bronze Age. Similar ships are depicted at Kition, on the walls of temples I and IV, and have been interpreted as ex-voto offerings. Three other sites have produced boat rock carvings similar to those of Aegean type; these are located in Israel on the western side of the Carmel Ridge, in the Nahal ha-Me’arot and Nahal Oren areas (Artzy, 2003: 237), and have been dated to the Late Bronze Age IIb (Artzy, 2003: 244). The area was frequented by Canaanite, Syrian, Cypriot, Anatolian, and Aegean merchants. Several boats are depicted on the ‘pyramid’ rock (a natural formation resembling a pyramid) at Nahal ha-Me’arot, and all have prows facing west, towards the sea.
Dated to the very end of Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age⁶ are bronze (and copper) ship models from Sardinia, confirming that ship iconography spread vigorously and widely from the end of the Late Bronze Age and during the Early Iron Age. Migrating people may have contributed significantly in spreading and amalgamating similar ideas and developing common traits. These people, and their ideas, were undoubtedly spread over a wide area, and rapidly, thanks to the established exchange networks that developed during the Late Bronze Age.

NORTHERN EUROPE

Three main regions can be recognised in northern Europe: Scandinavia⁷, Denmark, and Germany. Thousands of rock carvings, many representing ships, have been found in Scandinavia and date from Period I onwards⁸: bronzes, however, are rare. In Denmark 419 ships are represented on 419 bronze objects; a few are also found on rock. In Germany about 100 ships are depicted on 419 bronze objects, but none on rock (Kaul, 1998: 113–117). Boat-shaped graves are found in all areas and date from Period III (Kaul, 1998: 48), although the monumental burial at Kivik (Randsborg, 1993), with several slabs depicting ships and other scenes, suggests that by Period II there was an established ship iconography connected with funerary rituals. The earliest representation has been dated to the middle of Period I (Early Bronze Age)⁹, and is found on the Rørby sword (Kaul, 1998: 73–86). This peculiar type of sword (of probable indigenous manufacture) imitates the shape of a ship ¹⁰, and a representation of a ship, in the style of the earliest examples of Scandinavian rock art, is incised upon it. Kaul (1998: 75) suggests that ‘the ship on the Rørby sword and the demonstration that it has close counterparts in the rock carvings show (…) that the ship was an important religious symbol in Scandinavia’ long before foreign influences from the south made themselves felt. In his opinion, ships to be ‘regarded as a symbol started with the beginning of the Bronze Age and the onset of the importation of larger quantities of bronze’ (Kaul, 1998: 84). In other words, the ship originally symbolized wealth and therefore social power, and in the early representations of ships human figures are seldom present because the focus was on the ship itself.

In contemporary central Europe, the iconography of the ship was also gaining importance – as part of a sophisticated astronomical and cosmological system. This is evident from the Nebra Disc (Figure 4.4), found¹¹ in Germany with an assemblage of Period I swords (Meller 2004).

Kaul (1998) observes a surge in the iconography from Period IV (Late Bronze Age¹²), after a decrease in ship representations in Period III. By then the ship motif appears to have become associated with the theme of death¹³ in Scandinavian rock art. Kaul (1998; 2005) has recognised in Danish bronzes a complex cosmology centred on the sun, borne by a ship and in the company of creatures such as the horse, snake, and fish. Some elements of this cosmology may have reached northern Europe from the central zone, and appear to have been adopted in each region and period. The arrival of the cosmology and belief system in northern Europe at the end of the Late Bronze Age would have affected the expression of pre-existing beliefs and reinvigorated the practice of representing ships in ritual contexts. It is at this point (Period IV) that performances aboard ships begin appearing on bronze representations, and, especially, on rock art. While a Hungarian influence can be recognised on bronze depictions, the rock art remains largely unaffected (Kniep, 1999). However, as we have seen, the spatial distribution of the two forms of ritual art only marginally overlapped. In the Mediterranean region, the evidence for rites taking place on board is also limited to the very end of the Late Bronze Age – correspondence to the end of Period III in northern Europe – for example the portable altar found at Tel Acco, Cyprus: the ship becomes a sacred space.

⁶ No secure archaeological dating has been possible for any of the surviving models (Tiboni 2006, 141).
⁷ Norway and Sweden.
⁸ As no direct dates can be determined, rock art is dated by comparisons to styles of dated depictions on bronze artefacts.
⁹ Middle Period I is dated around 1600–1500 BC.
¹⁰ Razors imitating shapes of ships appear in Denmark from Period II (Kaul 1998, 134).
¹¹ Since the Disc was recovered after looting, criticism has been expressed about its authenticity – for example by Schauer (2005).
¹² 1100–900 BC, and corresponding to the Early Iron Age in the Mediterranean.
¹³ The Bronze Age seascape has been interpreted by many scholars as a liminal space between land and sky, life and death (Bradley 1997; Goldhahn 1999; Van de Noort 2003; Chapman and Gearey 2004; Clark 2004; Westerdahl 2005). However this hypothesis puts the emphasis on the crew, who were often indistinct in early depictions. See also Lindenlauf (2003) for a similar interpretation of Homeric and later Greece.
Kaul (1998: 113) recognises that representations on bronzes often form ‘cohesive scenes’, where a number of symbols is aggregated, and he demonstrates that the scenes can be read by interpreting the ship as the focal point. He (ibid., 265) also suggests that Scandinavian rock art representations may be read in a similar way. He notices, in particular, the significance of the direction of the ships in the cosmology, derived from depictions on bronzes, and the relevance of such an observation in the interpretation of Scandinavian rock art ships. For example, all the ships in a field at Slänge are sailing towards the left; the same can be noticed in more complex scenes depicted at Fossum and Bôhuslan (Kaul, 1998: 265–267). As noted above, at Nţhal ha-Me’arot, Israel, all the ships represented in the ‘pyramid’ were also oriented in the same direction. This opens the possibility of being able to ‘read’ rock art representations as coherent symbols of a language. Bouissac (1993) suggests considering the individual representations as symbols in some form of hieroglyphic writing. This hypothesis deserves some attention in the light of Kaul’s successful decoding of an entire and plausible cosmology from a (largely repetitive) series of depictions on bronzes.

CONCLUSIONS

The discovery of rock art rock carvings near Gobustan has yielded the earliest and most comprehensive repertoire of ship depictions and associated symbols. It appears that the site was a ritual centre from its beginning, and, most importantly, it was connected to the Mediterranean and continental Europe. It probably took millennia for that repertoire and set of beliefs to develop, and the example from third-millennium Egypt demonstrates that, even though powerful, those cultural influences were also slow to spread.

The rock carvings near Gobustan depict a real landscape that could be easily recognised and adapted by any culture, and this was essential to their success. In Egypt ships were singled out because they symbolized royal power. It is probable that larger ships and their contents were controlled by the pharaoh, and therefore ships were singled out because they symbolized royal culture, and this was essential to their success. In Egypt those are late and follow the early influences from eastern – Gobustan. From there the repertoire may have spread to Greece via the Near East and into northern Europe (via central Europe). Accepting that a single repertoire was developed across millennia explains many stylistic similarities, while local adaptations would maintain the artistic and cultural independence of the adoptive regions.

During the latest phases of the Bronze Age, the transmission of both artistic style, and associated beliefs, in relation to representations of ships, changes dramatically. By then, an extensive exchange network formed, based on enterprising seafaring, and its breadth can be easily recognised from the distribution of Mycenaean pottery in the Mediterranean (Wijngaarden, 2002). At the same time many polities disintegrated, forcing many people to migrate. The existing exchange network was apparently independent from any polity, and therefore could have survived any political change unscathed. Indeed, in such regions as Cyprus (Schreiber, 2003; Steel, 2004) or Italy (Vianello, 2005: 97–99), there are no signs of interruption in long-distance trade. The mixture of people and beliefs on board ships could have easily polarized towards communal and pre-existing beliefs, such as the cult of the sun. The ship itself would have been a powerful presence for those people – an important part of their landscape.

The horizon, depicted twice on the Nebra Disc (Figure 4.4), would also suddenly have become as important as it can be to those on a sailing ship. In short, the sun, the horizon, the sky, and the ship, all visualize the mariner’s landscape. Ship symbolism was brought to the Italian peninsula, perhaps unsurprisingly, by Aegean ships. In Valcamonica ships are quite rare (Fossati, 1999), and this would have not been the case if the symbolism had travelled north or south, via the Amber Route, into the Adriatic and Aegean regions.

The cultural impulse that started in the Mediterranean also affected northern Europe, and ideas were probably spread north by merchants and the elite from Hungary to Germany, and then into Denmark and Scandinavia. The symbolism of the aquatic bird seems to be a development of that region15, and it had barely arrived into Mycenaean Greece or the Italian peninsula by the end of the Bronze Age, by which time ship symbolism was already established in those regions (Figure 4.5). The symbolism of the horse and ‘wheel cross’ seem, instead, to have developed in the Near East16 and reached the Aegean and northern Europe by different routes.

The ship also became a ritual space, with ritual performances taking place on board, both in the Mediterranean (portable altars) and northern Europe (rock art depictions). During the Mediterranean Iron Age and Nordic Late Bronze Age, Period V, there is evidence of direct influences from the Mediterranean finding their way into northern Europe (Kaul, 2004: 132–133), but these are late and follow the early influences from eastern Europe. The artistic repertoire and belief system that originated in Gobustan by then had had a bearing on northern Europe by different routes.

14 Jackson (2005) focuses on glass making in ancient Egypt and demonstrates how several centres of production, spread across the kingdom, were used in the production of a single commodity under the tight control of the Egyptian elite.

15 Gergova (1989, 232) reports of clay double axes, boats, thrones, anthropomorphic female figurines, clay models of chariots driven by swans from tombs in the Late Bronze Age cemetery of Orsoya, Bulgaria (Thrace), and sun symbols in the earthenware of that culture.

16 Crouwel (2005) discusses the arrival at Mycenae, during Late Helladic I, of the ‘wheel cross’ and the chariot from the Levant, via Crete. Randsborg (1993) recognizes influences from the Near East, and especially the Aegean, in the monument at Kivik.

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several cultural traditions, after circulating through the Bronze Age exchange networks, and a new cycle of cultural influences began during the Iron Age.

References


