

Joakim Goldhahn

*Birds in the Bronze Age:  
A North European Perspective*

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Review by Richard Bradley

It seems as though the visual culture of the Nordic Bronze Age featured a cast of thousands. There were human beings, animals (both wild and domesticated), weapons, tools, ornaments, and musical instruments. There were also drawings of the sun, vehicles, and boats with their crews. They were represented in several media, principally rock art and metalwork, but only a few of these elements have played much part in wider interpretations of the past. The ships, sun, carts, horses and snakes offer clues to an ancient cosmology, while the images depicting watercraft, armed men and weapons emphasise the importance of warfare and maritime trade. If these are the dominant strands in current thinking, it is difficult to say how they were related to one another.

Both approaches share a common feature, for they employ only part of the available evidence. Despite the emphasis on animals, they make little use of faunal remains. The dominant images in the petroglyphs of Northern Europe are located by the sea, yet little attention is paid to the non-figurative elements distributed across inland areas where cup marks, footprints and wheel crosses occur in considerable numbers. They are seldom discussed. On the other hand, the species depicted along the coast feature in ambitious interpretations. That applies to horses, deer, snakes and bulls, but other creatures are largely overlooked. That is why Goldhahn's account of Bronze Age birds breaks new ground.

It does so in several ways. Because the author is an experienced ornithologist he is able to identify more depictions of birds among the petroglyphs and metalwork of Scandinavia than previous writers on the subject. He can also pick out individual species among these images. That is important as they have their distinctive patterns of behaviour which feature in later folklore. At the same time, many of these pictures show birds in the course of transformation into (or even from) humans, animals and objects: an observation that is absolutely central to Goldhahn's interpretation. Observations of this kind can play a vital role in studies of Bronze Age cosmology, but they are hardly relevant to accounts of warfare, travel and trade. He makes equally effective use of the small quantity of bones recovered from archaeological contexts, although they have seldom been documented in much detail, meaning that his interpretation has to rest on a small body of observations. There is also a problem in distinguishing between intentional deposits and those which accumulated by chance: a point that Goldhahn acknowledges in his interpretation of the famous site of Skedemosse. Even so his discussion of the bird bones associated with burials raises many points of interest. This is especially true of the unusual collections he identifies as 'medicine bundles'. They could have been associated with ritual specialists and might have been employed in divination.

That idea depends on comparison with other regions. So does his suggestion that birds travelled between this world, the heavens and an underworld. That is certainly consistent with the cosmology illustrated by Danish razors. It also recalls accounts of Arctic ethnography in which beings can change their shapes and pass between different levels of the universe. At one time there was a fashion for 'shamanic' interpretations of rock art, but it was based on the presence of distinctive 'entoptic' images. In this case there is more to learn from analogy with a neighbouring region. That is especially true since it is obvious that there was a direct relationship between North Scandinavian rock art and the Bronze Age pictures in the south. Goldhahn provides a useful account of 'the animacy of rocks'; this is another feature which is shared between both regions. This comparison could be taken even further. A foretaste of what can be achieved is an account of Norwegian cave paintings which I found particularly compelling.

The subtitle of the book makes it clear that this is a 'North European perspective'. In many ways it is helpful as there has been too much emphasis on relations between Bronze Age Scandinavia and Central and Southern Europe. On the other hand, it means that some important issues make little contribution to the analysis. Whilst rock art extended no further than the north of Germany, that is not true of other depictions of birds and boats. By limiting this account to the visual culture of the Nordic Bronze Age Goldhahn is considering only one part of a wider phenomenon. This is a

pity as his discussion of literary sources extends across a larger area than his review of the archaeological evidence.

This is a book that sets a new agenda, and its emphasis on a neglected body of information is entirely welcome. So is the focus on bodily transformation. For the author this is consistent with the ontological turn in contemporary research. His approach is explained in the opening section of the book which employs a specialised vocabulary. Thus Goldhahn writes about ancient ‘wordlings’, ‘agential realist ontology’, and even the ‘birdness’ of birds, but in spite of occasional obscurities, the case is effectively argued. Given his command of so many natural historical, literary and archaeological sources, I wonder whether his findings would have been much different without this theoretical framework.

That is for the reader to decide. What matters is that this study opens new vistas in Bronze Age archaeology. It opens fresh possibilities for research, and that is why it needs to be read.