

# Bronze Age Imagery Through Water and Fire

Åsa Fredell

*“For my shield this day I call:  
Heaven’s might,  
Sun’s brightness,  
Moons whiteness,  
Fire’s glory  
Lightning’s swiftness,  
Wind’s wildness,  
Ocean’s depth,  
Earth’s solidity,  
Rock’s immobility.”*

(Teilhard de Chardin, verse 4 of a  
Celtic hymn in Wessels 1994:85)

The article focuses on representations or indications of water and fire in the late Bronze Age imagery, primarily on one figurative theme that occurs in rock art and that composes the single and dominant motif on hanging-vessels. It is argued that this theme represents the act of creation. The cosmological functions of water and fire are seen as complementary actants that play different roles in space and cosmology as they are related to other archaeological materials and elements.

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This article is based on a presentation of selected and adjusted syntheses that have emerged through picture-semiotic (Sonesson 1992, 1995) and relation analyses of figurative materials. The figurative material discussed here is mainly dated to the late south Scandinavian Bronze Age, but extends from the end of the Montelius period II to the end of period V, that is 1350 - 750 BC. The material is composed of rock art, images on objects, and different types of figurines (solitary or in different types of composition with other figurines or objects).

The syntheses are part of a forthcoming thesis which discusses how figurative materials could have been employed to communicate ideology/cosmology in a society based on oral tradition<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> For references concerning oral tradition in societies, see Goody (1968, 1977, 1987) and Ong (1967, 1977, 1990).

To state that elements or phenomena like fire, air, materialities and liquids/fluids were central concepts in prehistory, as they are today, is not really revolutionary. Yet few researchers have discussed these elements in direct relation to the cosmology or ideologies that were most likely communicated through figurative imagery during the Bronze Age.

It is my opinion that archaeologists of today consciously avoid the discussion of the contents of the image and the relation between images, and instead focus on phenomena, materials or landscape in a more general relation to the image. I therefore strongly emphasise the need to turn the discussion around and explore the landscape within and between the images at the micro-level of the panel/object and not just study the image as a phenomenon in the landscape.

I believe that the unwillingness to interpret the iconographical contents of the images is due to a lack of theoretical and methodological tools within archaeology that treat figurative expressions semiotically. It can happen (and it has happened) that the image, because of the lack of theoretical and methodological tools, becomes a mirror for the present and is used for more or less conscious political purposes. When refraining from the content of the image the risk for present misuse is avoided, but by doing so one also avoids the great potential within the images as well as their role as active communicators of the most direct and meaningful expressions of the contemporaneous society.

In this article my intention is to apply and show the results and potential of a newly employed theory and methodology concerning the interpretation of pre-historic figurative materials. Here it is presented in the examples of water and fire as active elements in a prehistoric cosmology.

That people in different times and societies have viewed the elements of nature and the phenomena of the sky as limitless reserves of power and values, is reflected in rituals and mythological conceptions of worlds as well as in poetry (see the quotation by Teilhard de Chardin, above) and economical exploitation. The elements are ascribed with characteristics and other qualities that are partly based on their physical appearance, but are also dependent on the relation that people have to them generally in the contemporaneous society or in more specific situations. The elements also play a significant role in many stories of creation where they, alone or combined in pairs, represent the origin and procreation of life.

#### THE REPRESENTATION OF FIRE IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

The fire has had a central role in many of the activities at settlement sites, such as the casting of bronze, cooking, the hardening of ceramics, drying, as well as the production of heat, charcoal and light. Several societies and religions have ascribed the fire with transformative qualities, and its role in transformative processes like cremation, metallurgy, the hardening of ceramics, and cooking has been emphasised (Parker-Pearson & Richards 1994; Kaliff 1997). Primarily we see the importance of fire during the Bronze Age in the newly introduced cremation

ritual. We can also sense its importance in the large systems of hearth or cooking pits that are located in special places in the landscape (Thrane 1974; Heidelk - Schacht 1989; Thörn 1996; Björk 1998). Fire-damage to rock art panels and hearths next to rock art are other important indications of fire. The fire might also have had an important role in the visual performance of rock art (Bengtsson 2001:129, 2002:273f).

Fire was probably also crucial when making offerings; archaeologists have found indications of its use in different contexts at the settlement site and in or next to hoards and graves – places where offerings might have been conducted. One should, however, consider that it is impossible for us today to distinguish between a ritual food-sacrifice and the occasional cooking of a meal, since these can leave the same traces in the archaeological record. Melheim (2001:62) suggests that fire must have preceded the deposition of hoards since the objects are usually not damaged by fire. It is also possible that the fire was used as an initiation ritual to prepare and mark a specially selected place (Bengtsson 2001:129; Victor 2002:173). The abundance of fire-cracked stone in organised layers and heaps, which compose the walls of or are found outside cultic buildings (Victor 2002:173) or occasionally in or near relation to graves and rock art panels, suggests that the combination of fire and stone might have had a more ritual meaning in these contexts.

Kaliff (1997) has emphasised the role of fire in the communication between the earthly and the divine spheres in the sacrifice by fire in Bronze Age Scandinavia. In central Europe and Greece there are rich finds of ashes and bones from animals, which have been interpreted as places for fire-offerings (Burkert 1983). The role of fire in Bronze Age cremations has been connected (by Kaliff 1997) with an analogy in Greek mythology where fire was a means to attain immortality as it removed, through consumption, the mortal body and set the immortal spirit free<sup>2</sup>.

We can conclude that the fire is richly represented in the archaeological record from the Bronze Age (as is true for other archaeological periods). The idea that fire might have had an important role in the conception of the creation/origin is supported both by figurative materials and the act of cremation (see discussion below).

It is not unusual that archaeologists find double, concentric/oval circles of stone (perhaps representing the sun) at the bottom of heaps of fire-cracked stones, together with traces of fire (e.g., see Kaliff 1995:appendix 5 id 1507). Double, concentric circles, with or without rays or dots, are often part of the depictions on objects. These might very well represent the sun(s) or its movement across the sky (Figs. 1 and 4).

In 'Allvissången', in the older poetic *Edda*, one can read about the trans-

<sup>2</sup> Whether or not the conception of some kind of soul existed during the Bronze Age has been discussed more thoroughly by Gräslund, B. (1994).

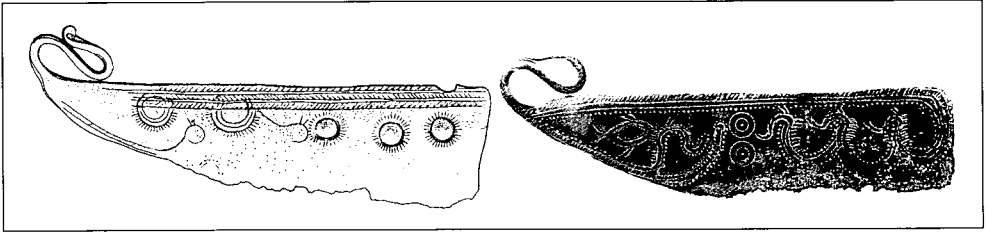


Fig. 1. Depictions of the sun(s) on two razors. Revised after Kaul (1998 cat. nos. 353 and 387). Both razors are most likely from period IV.

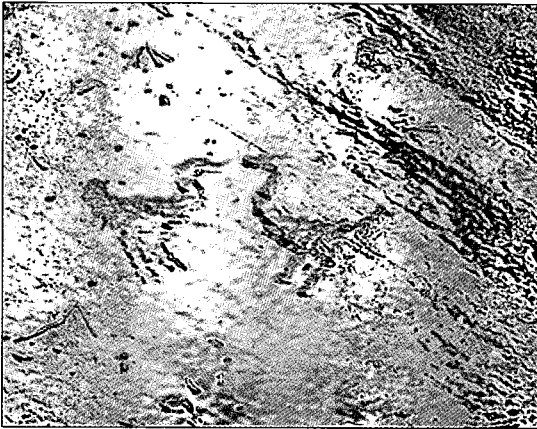
formative qualities of the sun and the fire. The sun is considered to be the fire of the heavens and the air, while the hearth is described as the sun of the houses. Fire is also considered to be a medium of warmth and light. Even the more destructive character of fire is commented upon, for example when the fire is described as the brother of the wind and the destroyer of trees and houses.

**THE REPRESENTATION OF WATER IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD**  
 Like fire, the role of water (a sub-element of liquids/fluids) has been ascribed with life-giving qualities and has also been equated with the source or beginnings of life. In the story of creation, as we know it from the late Iron Age, it is fire (Muspelheim) and water (ice – Nifelheim) that together comprise the components of the first mythical creatures. The physical power of water to dissolve and shatter shapes as well as to cleanse has contributed to the fact that water in many societies has been equated with the power to renew (Douglas 1997). Water can in many ways be considered as an alternative to fire and in some cases their life-giving abilities coincide.

The central significance of water in the Bronze Age is characterised, among other things, by the ship as a symbol<sup>3</sup> as well as by the sacrifices and hoards in the wetlands, rivers and lakes. The rivers must also have been important during this time, since long-distance communication and trade were thriving with the import of bronze (copper and tin). Communities located along the rivers and coasts have always been characterised by their ability to “move around” and quickly absorb news, since they use the water as a means of transport for goods, people and ideas (Ambjörnsson, R. 1997). The earliest epics (e. g., the Iliad and the Odyssey) in the West set their stories in relation to the sea. Water seems to have been a centre in the conception of the world as it has both the ability to bring people together and to separate them. The ability of water to change shape from running water to ice and steam/fog is probably also a phenomenon that people reflected upon.

The central meaning of water has also been noted in relation to rock art where

<sup>3</sup> See Crumlin–Pedersen (1995), Larsson, T. B. (1994) and Artelius (1996) for a discussion about the ship as a symbol.



*Fig. 2. A composition of birds and a cup-mark (Aspeberget, T19) deliberately placed in a minor stream of running water particularly visible after rains. Photo by Åsa Fredell.*

water often, especially in Bohuslän<sup>4</sup>, is directly connected to the images and in certain cases seems to have played an active part in the composition and construction of a higher level of meaning. The fact that water has been consci-

ously incorporated in the figurative expressions on the panels could point to both a practical function (to avoid rock-dust from the production process and shorten the production time) and a mythological function (since it makes images look more alive – see Fig. 2). Also, the water can become part of the miniature landscape on the panel as it can create an association to lakes (water-filled depressions in the rock<sup>5</sup>) and waterfalls or rivers (running water). The direct relation between rock art and water is not always present. In the rock art in Uppland we rarely see this connection (Kjellén & Heyenstrand 1977). This difference further emphasises the meaningful local variations which exist in the archaeological record and which we ought to recognise and explore.

The importance of water in the archaeological record mainly indicates natural places in the landscape that have been given significance through sacrificial depositions and hoards. Water has most likely been a prerequisite for settlement, communication and trade with more distant places. The ship as a symbolic design in graves and probably a multi-symbolic shape in the imagery is also an indicator of the importance of water. Creatures connected to water like fish and the aquatic bird also have prominent roles in the figurative material during the Bronze Age. Another decorative and perhaps figurative expression that implicates water is the wave-like patterns that often appear on objects such as weapons, knives, jewellery and hanging-vessels during the late Bronze Age (Fig. 3).

## WATER AND FIRE IN THE COSMOLOGY AND THE IDEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

No matter how many dichotomies or typological groups we create in the present to analyse the past, the fact remains that it is the combinations and relations between our dichotomies and groups that appear most fundamental to the imagery and archaeological record during the Bronze Age. In different types of crafts, for

<sup>4</sup> See e.g., Hygen & Bengtsson 1999: 44-45.

<sup>5</sup> See Hauptman-Wahlgren 1998 for a discussion about water-filled depressions at Flyhov.

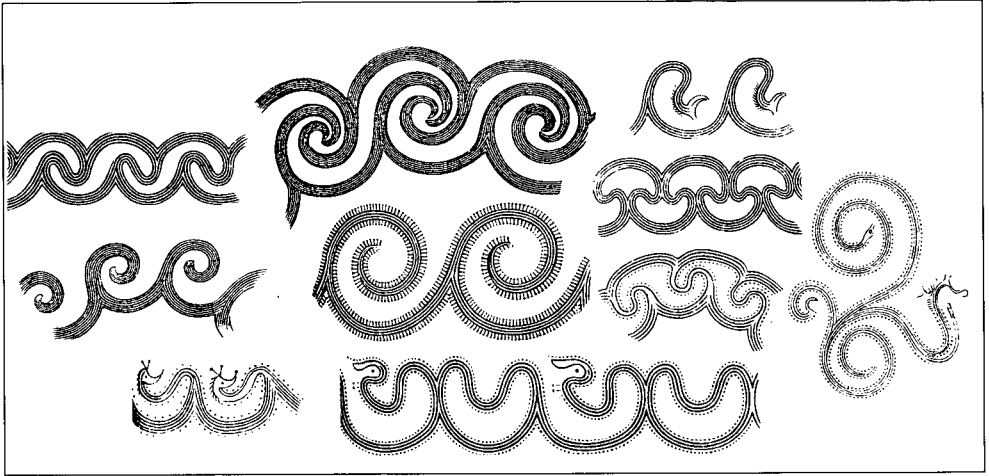


Fig. 3. Wave-like patterns typical for the late Bronze Age. Is it a representation of water? Revised after Montelius (1917). Note the wave-like pattern furthest to the right where the body of a serpent-like horse is divided into another horse and a snake. It is impossible to say whether the snake and the horse come together to form the serpent-like horse, or if the serpent-like horse is divided into a horse and a snake or should be considered as a three-headed creature. The serpent-like horse also has a line below the head that can be compared to the lower stern on contemporaneous ships found in the figurative material.

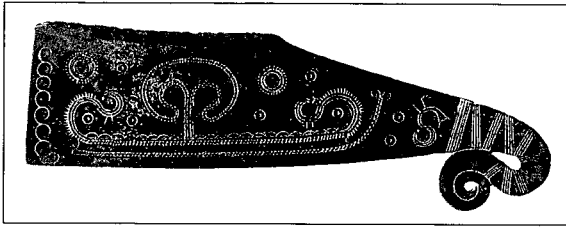
example metallurgy and ceramics, we are faced with the combination and coherence of the different elements. The power of fire to transform and the power of water to cleanse are general observations that have been given local meanings in relation to ideology/cosmology and context/function.

A division is also designated by the function of earth and the heavens as dividers of vertical space, where the elements of water and fire can be seen as complementary or independent procreators of life. At the same time they are actants<sup>6</sup> within the vertical space and its different spherical levels – the heavenly sphere, the atmosphere and the earthly sphere. Fire is represented in the different spheres by the sun, the lightning and the fires on earth, while water is represented by the heavenly sea (the blue sky), the rain/fog (moving in opposite directions) and the different types of water on earth. Another interesting observation is that the Vanes, according to the ‘Allvissång’ in the *Edda*, used the same word for sea as for fire, namely *våg* (“wave”).

I believe that there is a great potential in studying water and fire as communicating and mediating phenomena, respectively, in a vertical cosmology between heaven and earth.

A place where the different elements meet can be considered as a special kind of borderland that might have had a particular meaning related to the communication between spheres/worlds, since graves, sacrificial hoards, rock art and

<sup>6</sup> See Fahlander (2001: 67-70) for a discussion of the different theoretical use of actors, actants (material actors) and agents as the social individual and the other(s).



*Fig. 4. Ship, sun(s), animal and wave-like patterns on a razor. From Kaul (1998 cat. no. 275). Hvirring parish, Honum, Jutland. Early period V. The symbol depicted on the ship has been interpreted as an axe or a tree (see Kaul 1998). In contemporaneous Greek material the same symbol is interpreted as a flower (the lily of Hera) or a tree. When seen on the back of horses, the same symbol is interpreted as wings (Ahlberg-Cornell 1996). Perhaps this is a depiction of a ship moving in the heavenly sea?*

systems of hearth-pits often are located at this type of place in the landscape. My hypothesis is that places where elements like fire, water, earth and air meet have been considered as particularly favourable for communication between spheres, that is between humans and heavenly phenomena like mythical creatures, celestial bodies and/or gods.

There are, of course, other elements or materialities/liquids besides fire and water that might have been considered as

more earthly in relation to the more cosmological ones earlier mentioned. These include among others; metal, wood, stone, bone and bodily fluids such as blood. All of these (and probably several more) were materialities that most likely were related to different subtypes within a category as well as to cosmology and myths. These are not, however, discussed in detail in this article.

## THE IDEA OF ORIGINS AND COSMOLOGIES

The notion of origins is an intellectual idea, a cultural construction that often serves as an important component in the constitution of group identity. This construction is not supposed to be explicitly recognised but is instead dependent on the idea that it should be conceived of as natural.

I believe that the myth of the origin/cataclysm serves an important role in society since it gives larger groups of people a common “birth” and “death”, often connected to kinship (or other constructions with a similar purpose) and the appointment of a specific place to consider as their own. The idea of origin is rather like a collective substitute for the parents and birthplace of the individual. The origin is further connected with the legitimisation of phenomena like kinship, power and land-ownership. The idea of origin can be compared to a collective contract envisaged in cosmology. The time for the origin should suitably be placed so far back that the burden of proof is impossible and thereby unnecessary, especially for the group concerned.

It is common that stories of creation begin with a solid material (or two solid materials) that later is divided into smaller parts, which is not so different from the biological fraction of cells or the reproductive system of mankind. However, it is important to be aware of a fundamental difference when making this illustration. Cultural constructions are always initiated by more or less conscious choices in political situations, and they generally become considerably more complex

with time/history/transformation than the biological illustration. Stories of creation can generally be divided into three categories:

- change/creation is initiated from within – a division/branching of one element into beings,
- change/creation is initiated from outside – a merging of elements that results in beings,
- change/creation follows a break-down and is initiated by a god or an ancestor/person.

The last category includes people who immigrate and travel from one place to a new place/beginning.

The purpose of creation is usually to structure chaos/nothingness into cosmos/something. Elements either come together or split up into mythical, into godly, and into human beings (usually in that order). While this is happening the landscape/earth is formed by gods with the help of the mythical beings' bodies or their movement across the landscape.

Cosmology is in a sense a narrative and fictive explanation of the ordering of the world. It is found in different variants throughout the world and is usually transformed in time by manipulation. This is especially true when considering oral-based societies that without notice can change and transform their stories in a way that is impossible for literary based societies (Goody 1987:118, 189; Peabody 1975:13). The stories of creation have in general a quite conservative nature, and changes or transformation in the design of the story are rarely made. If they are made, it is often in connection with power-related changes within the society. Details in the content of the stories were probably easier to modernise/transform than the design since this could be done in relation to oral transition of narratives and the gradual development of the spoken language. It is also possible that several different or varied stories of creation co-existed (as is most likely in an oral-based society). The shift or transformation in the archaeological material need not necessarily be the result of something new but might instead be a shift in the popularity of different stories.

Miniatures of cosmos are usually generated in society, for example in systems of value like law and spaces such as towns or houses (Parker-Pearson & Richards 1994; Ambjörnsson 1997).

Due to the incomplete source-material, an archaeologist can not obtain a clear picture of prehistoric cosmologies. The material remains can only support a scattered, muddled and/or distorted picture. It is important to be aware of this since a total image or reconstruction is impossible, and if it is done it should be considered as a modern construction.

## THE CREATION

Kaliff (1997) suggests that the sun should be considered as the origin and end in Bronze Age cosmology. On the basis of my studies of Bronze Age figurative



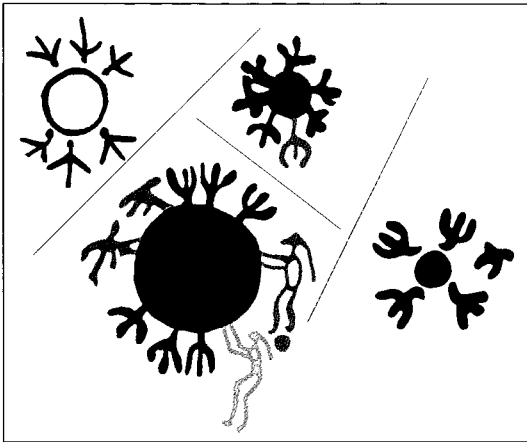


Fig. 5. Above left: scene on the lure from Wismar. Revised after Goldhahn (1999). Middle: similar (inverted?) scenes from Aspeberget in Tanum (T12). Right: Similar scene where the three-forked figures are in movement and cut loose from the sun-disc (T25). The figures in grey are here believed to be somewhat later additions. Original documentation (from the archives of Vitlycke museum) by Ithrestam & Bröstöm and Högberg 1989, here revised.

materials, I am prepared to agree that the sun/fire might very well have been the element of origin in Bronze Age cosmology. The interpretation by Kaliff (1997) that the cremation of the body brought the dead back to the origin/ancestors, is also considered to be likely.

During my studies of figurative materials I have found one figurative structure/theme that might well illustrate the act of creation (Fredell 2002:254 and Fig. 5). The image is transformed over time in details and contents. To my knowledge, the earliest appearance of this theme is on the famous lure from Wismar, dated to period III. Similar images can also be seen in rock art, especially in Tanum. I also strongly believe that a later illustration of the same figurative theme can be found on the hanging-vessels from period IV-VI (Figs. 6-8). Even though details in the image/scene change according to the time and the material (and probably according to the different oral traditions), the schematic structure is maintained during the whole period, that is, 750 years.

Among the decorative patterns on the lure from Wismar there are several figurative expressions that have strong parallels in rock art (i. e., ships with lures and stems of a horse's head, sun/wheel-crosses, and warriors with round shields in front of their bodies and spears on their shoulders). Here I wish to emphasise one image composed of a circular disc surrounded by three-forked figures with a dot (head?) in the end closest to the disc (Fig. 5 above/left). This type of image can be seen on several rock art panels in the Tanum area (e.g., on panels T12, T25, T105:3, T255, T304, T323<sup>7</sup>). The number and appearance of the three-forked figures varies. Sometimes they are directly connected to the circular disc and sometimes disconnected as if composing a circular movement around the disc (Fig. 5).

I would like to suggest that the figurative composition on the lure from Wismar also can be seen much later (and somewhat differently expressed) as a dominant

<sup>7</sup> The registration is according to the archives in Vitlycke Museum.

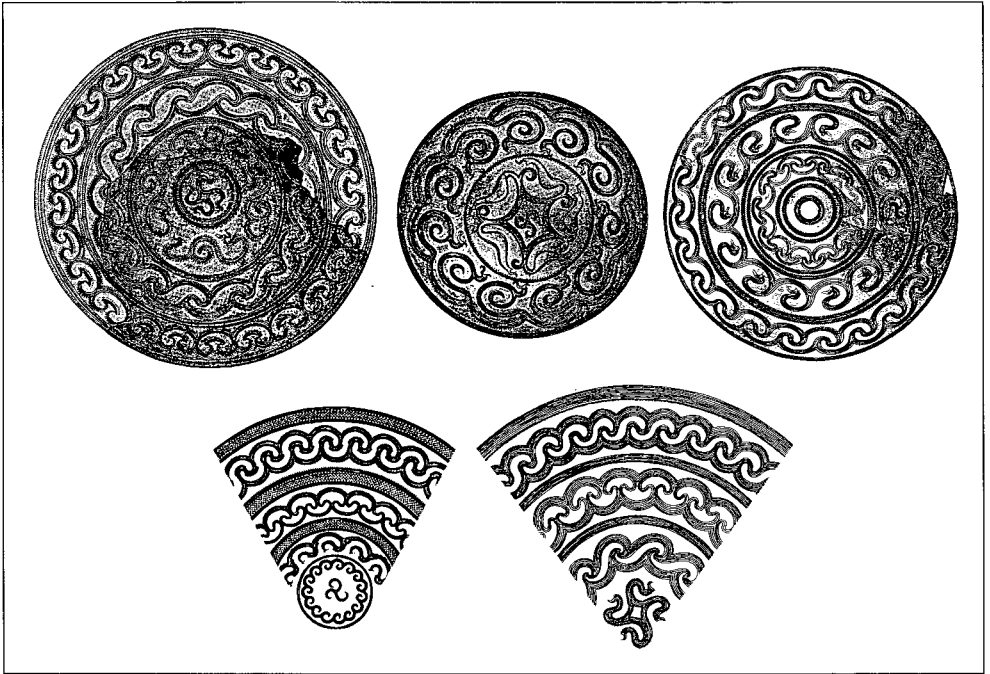


Fig. 6. Examples of the central pictorial theme on the bottom of hanging-vessels. After Sprockhoff & Höckmann (1979: figs. 18, 24, 10, 214 and 274).

theme on the hanging-vessels<sup>8</sup>. On the outer bottom of the vessel there is almost always some kind of sun-image depicted (Figs. 6-8). During the later Bronze Age there is a rich variation in symbols depicting the sun, such as sun/wheel-crosses, a circular disc (sometimes with rays) or a swastika (this symbol can also be seen with three or multiple arms).

On several occasions the central sun-image is connected to parts of animals (serpent-like horses) that seem to be coming out from the sun like the three-forked figures on the lure from Wismar and on the panels. As on the lure and the panels, these creatures can also be seen disconnected from the sun in a circular movement around it. There are variants where the creatures are divided into double/twin actors as well as other cases where they are seen as single and/or more horse-like figures (Figs. 6-8). There are often three circles that constitute figurative/decorative fields around the sun-disc or symbol on the hanging-vessels. These can possibly be connected to the vertical division of the three spheres mentioned above.

<sup>8</sup> In general 20% of the hanging-vessels show figurative expressions. The other 80% show purely decorative and perhaps symbolic patterns. The percentage varies between different geographical zones and is highest in Scania and the middle and east of Sweden (37.5 %) and lowest in Jutland (7.8 %). The figures are from my own analysis, based on the catalogue by Sprockhoff & Höckmann 1979, and will be further presented in my thesis.



*Fig. 7. Hanging-vessels from Billeberga that show the birth and transformation of the horse. Revised after Sprockhoff & Höckmann (1979: figs. 14 and 12). Left: Around the central sun a wave-like band of connected serpent-like horses is formed. In the outer field/sphere the serpent-like horses have become separated and their bodies are becoming more horse-like as legs form. Right: Around the central sun (here symbolised by a swastika) a wave-like band of serpent-like horses is formed. In the outer field/sphere the serpent-like horses are separated but becoming double-headed as they probably replicate themselves. In the replicating process the snake is formed from the splitting of the body.*

The spatial representation of figures and more decorative patterns varies in relation to the fields. The serpent-like or bird-like horses are often found closest to or in direct connection to the sun. They seem to be created from the branching of spirals or wave-like bands (perhaps flames?) from and around the sun. In some examples a vessel will show more than one variant of the serpent-like horse's division into horse and serpent. There is one example of a hanging-vessel where it is possible to observe the transformation of a serpent-like horse to a horse in relation to the sun and the three spheres (Sprockhoff & Höckmann 1979:fig. 14 see Fig. 7 left).

In other cases one can see that the lower part of a human being is being formed from the rear of the horse (Fig. 8). It is intriguing to consider that the human-horse combination, in view of the many contemporaneous parallels in Greek imagery could represent an inverted kind of centaur (here with a horse's head and a human body instead of a human's head and a horse's body). The con-

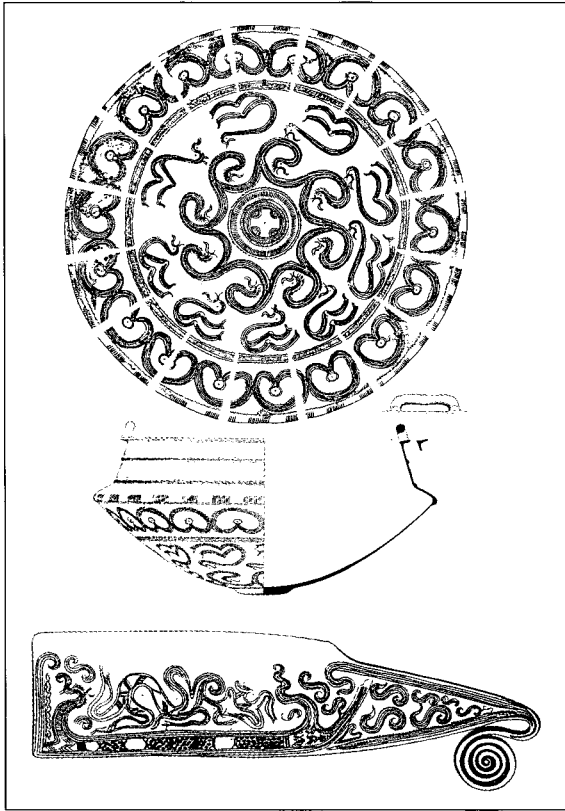


Fig. 8. Top: Hanging-vessel showing the transformation or birth of a human being (god?) from the rear of a horse. The combination human-horse also forms a shape which with the dot or eye under the horses' head, transforms into aquatic birds. (This information was given to me by Lotte Hædeger during a presentation at Isegran in Norway.) From Sprockhoff & Höckman (1979: fig. 317). Below: Razor showing two human beings (gods?) on a ship. Their bodies are turning into or being formed from wavy serpent-like bands. From Kaul (1998 cat. no. 105).

nection to the creation myth pictured on the life-giving vessel<sup>9</sup> and the fact that the human's legs are turned upside-down (not a very functional position if the creature should be considered as a functional unit) more likely implies that we are dealing with a birth and/or transformation. There is also another example of a scene (on a razor – see Fig. 8) where the upper bodies of

two human figures placed on a ship are transformed into wavy lines (serpents?) There are other examples of scenes, especially on the panels, that suggest that the human beings or gods were created directly from the sun like the mythical creatures and not from the serpent-like horse (Fig. 5).

It is obvious when studying the figurative material that the mythical serpent/bird-like horse had a prominent role in the act of creation that is seen in period III and onward. Since the important horse is created by/from the sun (according to the imagery on the hanging-vessels) it is reasonable to believe that the conception of the creation and the mythical serpent/bird-like horse already existed in a somewhat different version by the end of period II. We are already very familiar with the myth concerning the sun-horse's travel across the heavens as seen in the figurative composition of Trundholm and on several razors from period IV-V (Fig. 9).

The serpent-like horses that are connected body to body like Siamese twins on the hanging-vessels (Fig. 6/right/outer sphere) could also have been depicted

<sup>9</sup> The vessel/kettle/cauldron is much later, in the pre-Roman Iron Age, considered to have life-giving qualities. For example: Dagdae's cauldron of rebirth in the early Celtic/Irish myth (Olmsted 1979; Watkins 1985: 284).

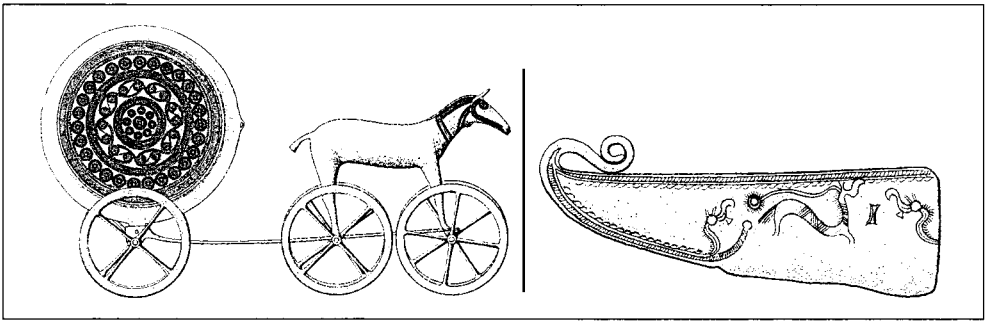


Fig. 9. Left: the Trundholm composition from the end of period II. Revised after Goldhahn (1999 fig. 8.8). Right: A razor showing a horse carrying the sun in a band/string. Revised after Kaul (1998 cat. no. 243).

much earlier in period II where they occur (but are quite rare) on belt-hooks. They are also depicted on razors from period IV-V (Fig. 10).

Finally, to conclude this discussion: the idea of origin/creation during the Bronze Age is interpreted as belonging to the first category presented above, where change is initiated from within and where one element (sun/fire) branches off into mythical creatures (serpent-/bird-like horses) and beings (gods?). This is a figurative and narrative theme of the creation that is displayed on panels and objects such as the lure from Wismar and on hanging-vessels. The vessel as an object seems to have a special relation to this figurative theme since it is the only figurative theme displayed on it<sup>10</sup>.

There are major differences between the idea/story of creation during the Bronze Age (according to the figurative materials) and the story of creation during the late Iron Age which was later written down in the *Edda*. There are, of course, also similarities, especially concerning design and structure. The differences are most evident in the contents.

The important differences in the contents of the story of creation that might reflect changes and values in the society are:

1. Creation is initiated through the branching of one element – fire in the form of the sun. In the *Edda*, creation is initiated through the merging of two elements – fire and water (ice) (Bæksted 1986:45ff).
2. The sun is transported across the sky in a performance where especially the horse seems to be important. In the *Edda* we can read that the movement of the sun and the moon across the sky is related to their escape from wolves that want to eat them (Bæksted 1986:45ff).

<sup>10</sup> As in most cases, there is an exception to the rule. On a hanging-vessel from Vannsjø, Norway there is an additional theme on the outer rim of the vessel where two birds can be seen facing a centrally placed vessel. This theme also occurs on a panel in Tanum (T269) and on a razor (Kaul 1998: cat. no. 357), but in these cases snakes (in the latter case with legs) replace the birds.

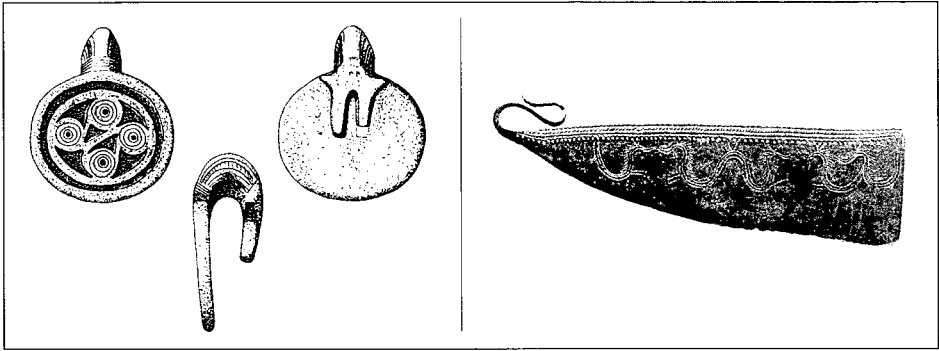


Fig. 10. Examples of double horses connected head to head or body to body like Siamese twins. Left: belt-hook from period II. Right: razor from period IV-V. Revised after Kersten & Aner (1976 band II fig. 1312 B) and Kaul (1998 cat. no. 237), respectively.

3. In the Bronze Age the figurative scenes show that gods were created directly from the body of the sun or the serpent/bird-like horse. In the *Edda* the gods are created by a giant's sweat (ancestors to the Vanes) and from a cow's licks on a salty stone (ancestors to the Ásir) (Bæksted 1986:45ff).

The role of the serpent/bird-like horse on the hanging-vessels is most likely succeeded by the figurative expressions of the cow/bull/ox on the much larger kettles/cauldrons that were introduced in the pre-Roman Iron Age (Fig. 11). I consider the idea of the vessel or kettle/cauldron as an object related to creation and its adhering rituals to be constant over time during the late Bronze Age and the pre-Roman Iron Age.

As we have seen, animals have great mythical importance both in the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. It is obvious that the status of the mythical creatures changes and is transformed over time. We have already concluded that the horse's role in creation is partly taken over by the cow/bull/ox.

With the shift to the Iron Age we can also see how animals more often are related to gods and are seen as being useful to them or serving as attributes. This shift in status might be related to the increasing personification of gods and the fact that animals like the horse became more common in society for more practical purposes (transportation, work and perhaps food).

#### THE TRANSFORMER, THE CARRIER AND THE REMEMBRANCER

We now leave the story of creation and move back to the discussion involving the elements' mediating role in a vertical cosmology. Together with other important elements or significant materials like stone, wood, metal and bone, I have created a hypothesis that groups these phenomena into three different "actants" according to their purpose and role in the cosmic drama – the Transformer, the Carrier and the Remembrancer. It is not my intention to argue that the conceptualisation of these three roles was present and/or had similar names in the Bronze Age. The



Fig. 11. The Rynkeby kettle from Denmark (dated to 100 BC) where cows are portrayed together with a creation symbol, a goddess and some animals. On the plate above, the creation symbol can be seen below and between a wolf and a wild boar. Revised after Kaul (1991).

names I use are merely an attempt to establish alternative groupings from the fictitious roles and purposes which they might have had in cosmology, instead of using the groupings and terms that are normally created today from the physical composition of materials.

The *fire* holds a special position as a solitary element representing the Transformer. Fire creates and destroys, but most of all it transforms. The role that fire plays in different types of crafting skills has analogies in the Re-creator or Magician. The use of fire transforms the materials and creates something new. The role that fire plays in cremation is multiple since it creates (ancestors) and delivers something (the soul) at the same time as it destroys the body. The fire turns or transforms one state to another, for example life to death or death to life. The transformation from one thing to another is a *movement in time*.

The Carrier's mission is to move objects or people between worlds. Representatives are *earth, water and air*, since they all make a *movement in space* possible. This movement can be done both in the world of humans and in the world of

gods, and not least in between these worlds. In the world of humans, the earth (land) and water (lakes, sea and rivers) are the elements to cross if one wishes to make a transportation and relocation in space. This movement can be made by horse, foot, horse and wagon and by ship on more or less known routes. The ability to move in the air was not possible for the humans living in this period, but it did not stop them from observing for example birds and imagining that mythical animals and gods as well as celestial bodies made this type of transport across the sky. Like the humans on earth, the gods used animals, wagons and ships to move across the sky. It is also possible that humans believed that the soul and/or the sacrifice by fire could move vertically from earth to sky with the ascending smoke through the air. A fascination for the vertical movement might explain the important meaning of figurative expressions like the fish, which can move vertically through the water, and the bird, which can move vertically through the air (and sometimes water). People were limited to a horizontal movement through space – acrobats excluded. A fascination for acrobats and “falling” people, perhaps between spheres, can also be observed on the panels.

The deposition of sacrifice – i. e., hoards and people in water and/or earth (or the combination - wetlands) – can possibly reflect a desire and wish for the elements to carry the people or objects away to another (or the other) world. The combination of borderland (where elements meet) and Carrier might have been acknowledged as particularly favourable for communication and transport between the different worlds.

Finally there is the Remembrancer. Represented by materials like *stone, metals, bone, clay/ceramic and wood*, we encounter carved figurines and figurative expressions on objects that invoke and preserve important stories, oral knowledge and myths of the society through representation in physical materials. The Remembrancer plays an important part in the society when he/she/it transmits knowledge, traditions and heritage through generations (people), pictures and other media. The materials not only represent the humanly created and remem-

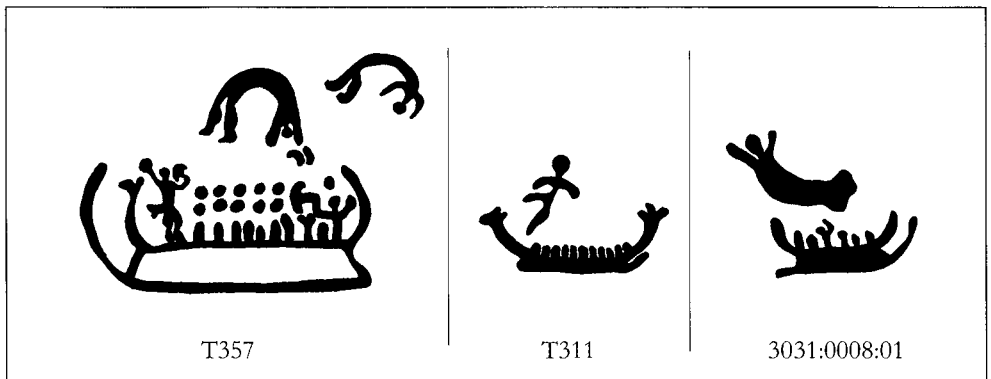


Fig. 12. Examples of acrobats (T357) and “falling” (T311, 3031:0008:01) humans in rock art. Revised after Högberg (2000) left and middle and the author’s own documentation to the right.



bered design, but they also carry pictures that relate to stories and knowledge which, when told, make cultural transmission possible. The pictures might be pecked into stone, cast or carved in metals, as well as modelled or cut in wood, clay/ceramic or bone.

The *connection to persona and place* should be considered as most important since objects or representations of this type often are given a biography by people contemporaneous with them. The Remembrancer in an oral tradition is always dependent on a person and a place. The communication mainly emphasises the dialogues within the human society. The images talk about myths and other types of knowledge *from* and through people as well as *to* people through time (generations) and space (distant places).

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that elements or phenomena like fire, air, materialities and liquids/fluids were central concepts/actants in the south Scandinavian Bronze Age, and that fire and water had prominent and communicative roles in the archaeological material and landscape as they transformed or transported goods, people and/or words between different spheres/worlds in a vertical cosmology. I also emphasised that fire and water were visualised as central components in the creation act that is rendered as a figurative theme on rock art panels and hanging-vessels. The depicted theme on the hanging-vessels shows how mythical creatures (the serpent/bird-like horse) are created from a division/branching of the fire/sun. On the panels three-forked creatures (perhaps humans, birds or animals) take the place of the serpent/bird-like horse that was seen in a similar position on the hanging-vessels. Multiple variants within the theme are to be expected in an oral society. The act of creation is visible in the figurative material from period III, but there are indications that it was valid already by the end of period II. The peak of the visualised act of creation is reached during period IV-V. Later an alternative act of creation, which focuses on the cow instead of the horse, is depicted on the larger kettles together with other mythical animals and sun symbols.

I also stressed several important differences in the creation act and related myths between the Bronze Age and the later Iron Age (as described in the *Edda*). Transformation and change are to be expected also in an oral society. Finally I discussed the elements from an alternative perspective where the Transformer, the Carrier and the Remembrancer all play their roles in the cosmological life-world of humans.

I believe that it is far too easy for us to transform and reduce these cosmological roles into time, space and place, that is, elements that today are essential to our modern and traditional conception of the landscape. By doing this we lose an important dimension connected to memory – imagination and the creation of fictive stories as an explanatory model of society.

*English revised by Laura Wrang.*

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