

From life to death

Moving through liminal space

A reappraisal on a decorated bone piece from Ryemarksgård, Denmark

Abstract

The Mesolithic of north-western Europe (in particular southern Scandinavia) offers a small but significant assemblage that includes decorated bone and antler pieces. Many of these have been found in Denmark and southern Sweden and their functional and symbolic nature has been widely discussed.

Of the three-hundred and fifty¹ or so decorated pieces found in southern Scandinavia, approximately 7% possess anthropomorphic figures (in one form or another), including the single decorated piece of aurochs bone from a bog near Ryemarksgård, central Zealand discussed here. In the case of this particular piece, I wish to argue that it represents a transition between life and death or between states of consciousness and unconsciousness. One can safely assume that bone and antler pieces displaying this form of imagery was not mere idle graffiti. As part of this discussion, I will compare and contrast this axe with other Mesolithic portable art and suggest that the design form on the Ryemarksgård axe is both meaningful and intrinsically powerful.

Keywords: Mesolithic, Denmark, decorated aurochs bone, symbolic content

Abriss

Das Mesolithikum Nordwesteuropas (vor allem Südschwedens) bietet eine kleine, jedoch bedeutende Versammlung, die verzierte Knochen und Geweihstücke enthält. Viele von diesen Stücken wurden in Dänemark und im Süden von Schweden gefunden. Die funktionelle und symbolische Natur dieser Stücke ist ausgiebig besprochen worden.

Von den ungefähr 350 verzierten Stücken, die im Süden Schwedens gefunden wurden, besitzen um 7% anthropomorphe Figuren (in dieser oder jener Form). Dies ist auch zutreffend für das Einzelstück von einem Auerochsknochen aus einem Moor in der Nähe von Ryemarksgård, Mittelseeland, das hier besprochen wird. In Bezug auf dieses Stück möchte ich die Behauptung aufstellen, dass es den Übergang zwischen Leben und Tod oder zwischen Stadien des Bewussten und des Unbewussten darstellt. Es kann mit Sicherheit angenommen werden, dass Knochen und Geweihstücke mit solcher Art von Darstellungen nicht nur eitel Graffiti sind.

In dieser Abhandlung vergleiche und kontrastiere ich diese Axt mit anderer transportierbarer mesolithischer Kunst und lege nahe, dass die Form des Designs der Ryemarksgård Axt sowohl bedeutungsreich als auch wesentlich einflussreich ist.

Keywords: Mesolithisch, Dänemark, verzierter Auerochsknochen, symbolischer Inhalt.

Introduction

The Mesolithic of north western Europe has been considered a rather functional period within prehistory; its assemblages based on lithic industries, subsistence living and environmental considerations (Fischer 1995; Price 1985; Price & Brown 1985; Rowley-Conwy 1981; Rowley-Conwy et al. 1987; Zvelebil 1986a, 1986b and Zvelebil & Rowley-Conwy 1986). However, this period offers a small but significant assemblage that includes decorated bone and antler pieces (see Andersen 1971, 1980; Clark 1936, 1975; Liversage 1966; Müller 1898, 1918; Nash 1998, 2000, 2001; Stjerna 1911 and Vebæk 1939)²

It is almost impossible to make any valid interpretation from a limited assemblage such as this, anywhere in prehistory. Special artefacts such as objects of personal adornment are usually found in isolation and any direct association with more common and mundane items can further corrupt the authenticity of anything considered unique. Further complications occur when the distribution of such items appears to be more-or-less random; the researcher is thus left with more questions than answers.

Similar to much of the art from this period, decorated and polished bone and antler has been assigned to archaeological miscellanea. The majority of bone and antler has mainly elaborate geometric decoration. Also present are a limited number of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic designs (Appendix 1). Many of the human figures though are sexually ambiguous (Tilley 1996:45)³. Nearly all these items have been found in Denmark and span the entire Mesolithic (Map 1)⁴. Decorated pieces such as the Ryemarksgaard axe have, according to Graham Clark similar design characteristics with (Upper Palaeolithic) Magdalenian art from France and (Post-Glacial) Russia (1936:178-9). Interestingly, their appears to be a chronological and geographical shift in bone and antler design (Nash 1998). During the Maglemose, the majority of decorated pieces possess zoomorphic and anthropomorphic designs and are found largely on Zealand. However, during the Kongemose and Ertebølle periods, de-

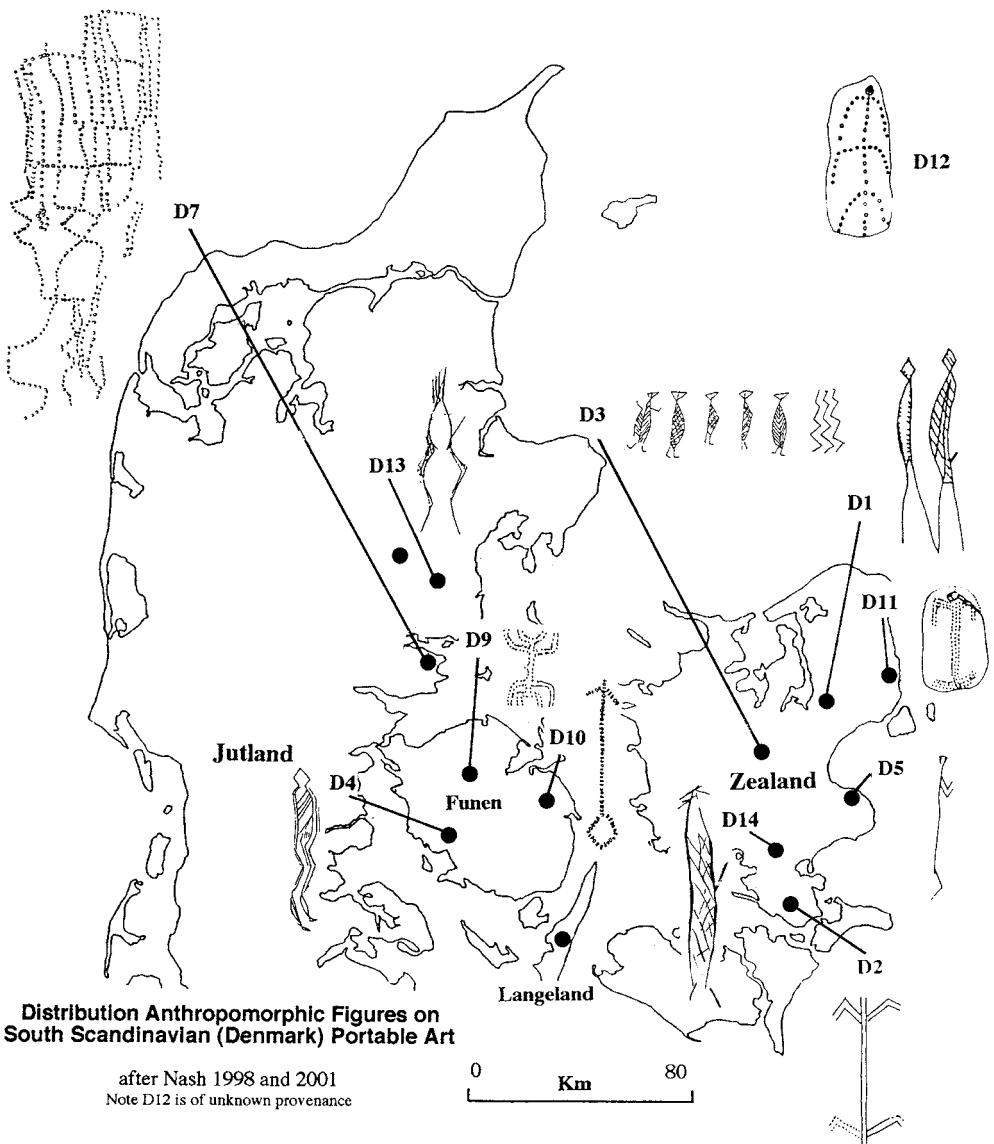
signs become more geometric and, especially from the late Ertebølle decoration disappears altogether and is replaced with scrapping and polishing only (Andersen 1980). These pieces are found mainly in Jutland (Andersen 1980; Nash 1998). Within this assemblage, the vast majority of bone and antler pieces are drilled; either to be used as probable pendants or axe tools (Nash 2000:24)⁵.

Bone and antler, together with amber, clay, flint and wood forms part of limited assemblage that is present in Mesolithic Denmark and southern Sweden (Andersen 1985, 1986; Fischer 1974; Jensen 1982; Nash 1998; Tilley 1996). There is also a small but significant mobile art assemblage consisting of animal teeth, cowie shells, bone and antler from Britain which, although considered personal adornment, probably dates to the Upper Palaeolithic (Smith 1992)⁶.

Placing mobile art into a socio-economic context

Concerning early settlement, the literature tends to place early Mesolithic inland activity as a seasonal phenomenon whereby people move between temporary coastal and inland settlement (Bronsted 1957; Clark 1975; Jensen 1982). However, the rich environmental flora and fauna and extensive lithic floors suggest settlement was possibly more than just temporary (Broholm 1931; Mathiassen 1937; c.f. Fischer 1995). During the later Kongemose (c.5500 BC), the area around large inland sites such as Åmosen and Sværdborg in central Zealand had become densely populated and marks a hiatus for inland habitation (Mathiassen 1943). Nonetheless, large open sites are rare and the general assumption is that settlement was semi-sedentary with small hunter/ gatherer/fisher groups moving around the landscape.

The earliest bone and antler pieces have been found in inland bogs which are usually close to Maglemose occupation sites (see Mathiassen 1937; 1943). A similar deposition is recognised in Jutland during the Ertebølle for shaped amber animal pieces (Nash 2000: 25). More abstract and unclear designs from



Map 1 Distribution of bone and antler pieces possessing anthropomorphic figures (after Nash 1998).

the Maglemose appear to contrast with representational designs on amber from the same period.

Ornamentation techniques include scratching, drilling and pricking; usually in the form of fine or bold lines (carved using flint). Later techniques involving drilling and pricking, referred to as 'cuneiform dots' or ornamentation

pointillée was probably the result of using a bow-drill (Clark 1936). Scratching (or carving) would have been made by flint (Clark 1975:152; Müller 1918). These techniques were also used on other mobile artefacts. The majority of the decorated Maglemose bone and antler uses the scratching technique. Concerning anthropomorphic and zoomorphic designs, heavy scratched

Appendix 1. Anthropomorphic designs on Mesolithic

Artifact Number ¹	Location	Provenance	Tool type
Bone and Antler			
D1-Zealand	Veksø Mose	bog	A
D2-Zealand	Stensby	unknown	BK
D3-Zealand	Ryemarksgård	stray find	BO
D4-Zealand	Jordlose møse	bog	AM
D5-Zealand	Koge Sonakke	unknown	BK
D6-Jutland	Silkeborg Sø	lake/bog	PA
D7-Jutland	Hjarno	settlement	AS
D8-Langeland	Langeland	unknown	BP
D9-Funen	Funen	unknown	SK
D10-Funen	Refsvindinge	unknown	BH
Amber			
D11-(Zealand)	Zealand	unknown	pendant
D12-(Denmark)	unknown	unknown	pendant
D13-(Jutland)	Ringkloster	unknown	pendant
Flint			
D14-(Zealand)	Holmgård V	bog	flint

Tool Types: A = axe, AA = antler axe, AM = antler mattock, PA = pendant axe, SK = spatula knife

Sources: Andersen 1980; Clark 1936, 1975; Fischer 1974; Nash 1998,

¹ These numbers do not correspond to previous numbering by Nash (1998).

lines was usually the preferred technique and the Ryemarksgaard axe is no exception to this rule (Nash 1998:147).

Previous thoughts

One of the most spectacular of all the decorated artefacts and housed in the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen. This early Maglemosen artefact is a stray find from

a bog near Ryemarksgaard, central Zealand. The ornamentation, located on a metapodial belonging to an aurochs⁷, possesses five scratched human figures which run horizontally along the shaft (Fig. 1).

To the right of the fifth figure is a series of three vertical zig-zag lines. The two outside figures are standing 'face-on' and appear to 'escort' the three central figure. These

bone, antler, amber and flint

Human Figure(s)	Drilled/ undrilled	Period
anthropomorphs (2)	1	Maglemose/Kongemose
anthropomorph	0	Maglemose
anthropomorphs (5)	0	Maglemose
anthropomorph	1	Maglemose
anthropomorph	0	Maglemose
anthropomorph	0	Maglemose
anthropomorph	0	Ertebølle
anthr./therio.	0	Maglemose
anthropomorphs (6)	1	Maglemose
anthropomorph	0	Maglemose
anthropomorph	1	Maglemose
anthropomorph	1	Maglemose?
anthro./frog?	2	Ertebølle
anthropomorph	0	Maglemose

BK = bone knife, BH = bone harpoon, BP = bone point,

2001 and Vebaek 1939

central figures are seen walking towards the zig-zag lines.

All human figures have been subject to a number of interpretations. Concerning the Ryemarksgaard axe, Clark (1975:152) has suggested that all five human figures are depicting moods of "happiness and sadness". The external figure on the left has its arms and legs extended outwards, possibly indicating

happiness? Whilst the three central figures have no arms and are 'walking' towards the zig-zag lines. These, Clark argues, represent sadness. The fifth figure, also without arms, but oriented to a face-on position is also regarded as depicting sadness. All head-shapes are inverted triangles; the faces are flat, without form and 'lifeless'. Concerning the multiple zig-zag lines, no interpretation has been made. More recently,



Fig. 1. The Ryemarsgaard axe, Central Zealand (Sources: Clark 1975; Nash 1998)

Rying's popular account suggests the five figures represent a family scene (1981:23). The two outside figures are considered to be male whilst the three central figures may be pregnant women (hence large protruding abdomens). Rying also suggests the two outside figures are both dressed in sleeveless cloaks (seams are open at the front along the line which dissects a series of inverted chevrons). Again, nothing is said about what the zig-zag lines may represent.

There appear to be a number of problems with both Clark's and Rying's arguments. Firstly, Clark's interpretation of the figures possessing happy and sad faces seems rather dubious in that all the heads are identical. Furthermore, there is no difference in shape or form between the 'happy' external figure and the other four 'sombre' figures. More importantly, the facial features show no emotion. Both Clark and Rying ignore the important zig-zag design and, therefore, only half the narrative has been attempted.

More recently, Anders Fischer from the National Forest and Nature Agency in Denmark has used the figures from the Ryemarsgaard axe as symbols for the 'Man and Sea International Symposium held at Kalundborg, Denmark in 1993. In the proceedings of the symposium, Fischer refers to the figures as 'humans and waves on water' (1995:11). Here, the waves are represented by the three vertically carved zig-zag lines. However, the Ryemarsgaard axe was found within an inland bog. Furthermore, during the Early

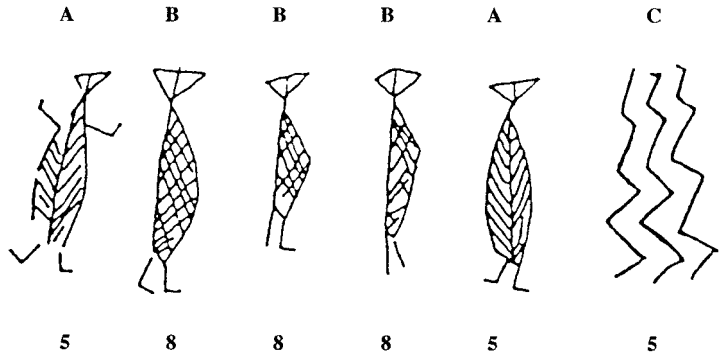
Mesolithic Maglemose the approximate land/sea boundary extended many kilometres to the east, north and west of the present Zealand boundary suggesting the Ryemarsgaard find is more an inland than coastal phenomenon (Nash 1998). Contrary to this could be that selected Maglemose mobile art, in particular anthropomorphic and zoomorphic pieces may have formed part of a complex exchange system and that decorated bone, antler and amber may have moved around a wider landscape that included coastal and inland group contact. Therefore, the Ryemarsgaard axe may have been originally carved on the coast especially if the zig-zag lines do represent waves.

Reappraisal and deconstruction

In order to make any valid attempt to interpret this or any other Mesolithic piece, one needs to deconstruct in detail the art. The French social anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss has postulated that within society are a set of universal underlying structures (1962, 1963). Although the basic theories of Levi-Strauss have been superseded by post-structuralist ideology, the methods by which art can be interpreted remains valid.

Previous empiricist approaches has tended to formalise and control the understanding of art; i.e. a human figure is a human figure, a zig-zag line is a zig-zag line. Prehistoric art had literally become 'art for art's sake', placing the image, the symbol as nothing short of a dying impression hanging on a

Fig. 2 Design variants that construct the figures on the Ryemarksgaard axe.



literary wall. Art, as well as being aesthetically pleasing, is in many ways structured and deliberate. Art portrays meaningful messages and throughout prehistory is similar to the structural constraints enforced onto contemporary ritual and mythological symbolism, by which 'art' may be manipulated and controlled and thus may be read (Levi-Strauss 1963).

In 1993, whilst researching south Scandinavian mobile art, I encountered in one of the numerous display cabinets at the National Museum of Denmark the Ryemarksgaard axe. This piece formed part of an analysis which involved the structural deconstruction of one hundred bone and antler pieces using the approaches by Hodder (1982, 1986), Frankel (1978), Mezec 1989 and Tilley (1996) (to name but a few).

In particular, Frankel (1978:148-60) discussing the design sequencing on Bronze Age Cypriot ceramics used an individual design sequencing in order to construct a link involving decoration with social bonding between individuals and neighbouring communities. Bonding establishes communal identity and arguably social and political stability. One might therefore assume that the south Scandinavia Mesolithic society was based on strong economic and social interaction between communities. One of the mechanisms of social interaction, be it semiotic if form would have been art. It would appear that the more complex the art, the more that is visually expressed which may indi-

cate stronger social-political and symbolic use (Nash 1998:37). It is therefore clear that the Ryemarksgaard axe conveys an important message which would have been transmitted between individuals. More importantly, it conveys messages that are meaningful at the time the art was commissioned and later used.

Initially using Clark's motif classification (1975: 158)⁸ and a more comprehensive scheme by Nash (1998:45), the figures on the Ryemarksgaard axe contains at least three different design variants (DV) including multiple vertical zig-zag lines (DV40), multiple chevrons arranged vertically (DV46) and encased meshing (DV61 - Fig 2)⁹. These design variants, organised construct each of the six figures (Fig 3) (Nash 1998:45)¹⁰. Reading along the bone shaft from left to right, and using Frankel's ceramic design sequencing, the human figures and zig-zag lines can symmetrically read. Thus the Ryemarksgaard axe reads:

A :: B :: B :: B :: A :: C

In transforming this group of letters from a basic system (what I refer to as Level 1) into a more complex motif classification (Level 2), an identical symmetrical arrangement is still present (see fig. 3 and footnote 9):

5 :: 8 :: 8 :: 8 :: 5 :: 5

From this analysis¹¹, the Ryemarksgaard axe, along with 36 other Mesolithic decorated bone and antler pieces (displaying 45 design

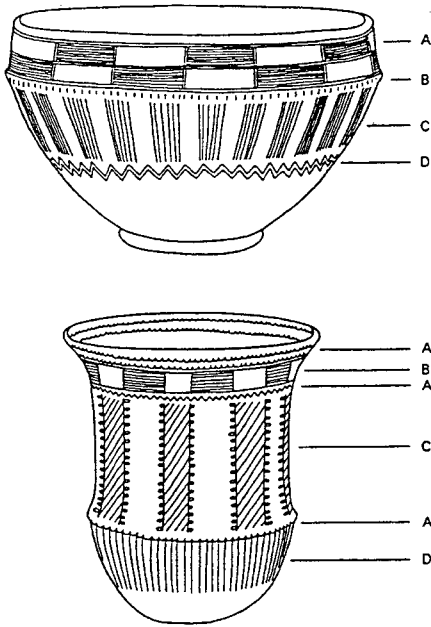


Fig. 3 Design structure on Neolithic pots and the Ryemarsgaard axe (sources: Hodder 1982 and Nash 1998)

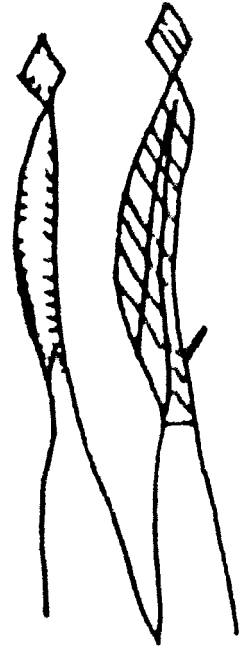


Fig. 4 The Veksø mose antler axe possessing two human figures with internal mesh designs (source: Vebæk 1939)

fields) comply to a strict set of rules (Nash 1998:95). Firstly, each piece is unique. The figures on the Ryemarsgaard axe are not repeated elsewhere. Although, there is one figure that does have similar internal diagonal meshing as figures on the Ryemarsgaard axe. This piece, an antler axe, possesses two human figures one with a clear erect phallus and was found at the nearby Veksø mose [bog] (fig. 4).

Secondly, human figures on bone and antler appear to be dominant in the Maglemose and in Zealand, accounting for 54% of a total assemblage containing anthropomorphic figures (ibid. 94-5). During the Kongemose and Ertebølle and in Jutland, human figures account for only 22% of a sample assemblage. The dominant narrative appears to consist of geometric forms (solid lines, broken lines, barbed lines and banding (ibid. 44-54). Although the Ryemarsgaard axe has never been scientifically dated the figures and design sequencing display an early Mesolithic date.

Interpretation and narrative

Contrary to previous dissuasions, I would suggest that the five figures and the zig-zag lines represent something 'special', ritualistic and magical. The zig-zag lines possibly symbolise either death (and the afterlife) or a human (or humans, possibly the three that are being escorted) in a transition between a state of conscious and unconscious (state of trance). The three zig-zag lines may in fact represent the three central figures whilst the two escorting figures may possess rank or control over the three central figures. It is clear that all the figures except for, may be, the far left one are walking towards the zig-zag lines.

Similar to other forms of early prehistoric art, the design field on this axe may be arranged into a multiple-phased narrative that is spatially organised. Assuming that one would read the designs from left to right then a two-phase narrative is in operation. Firstly, the three central figures along with

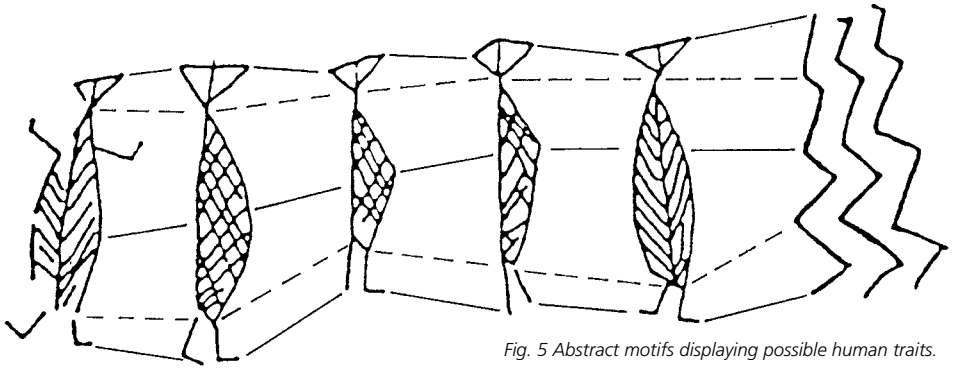
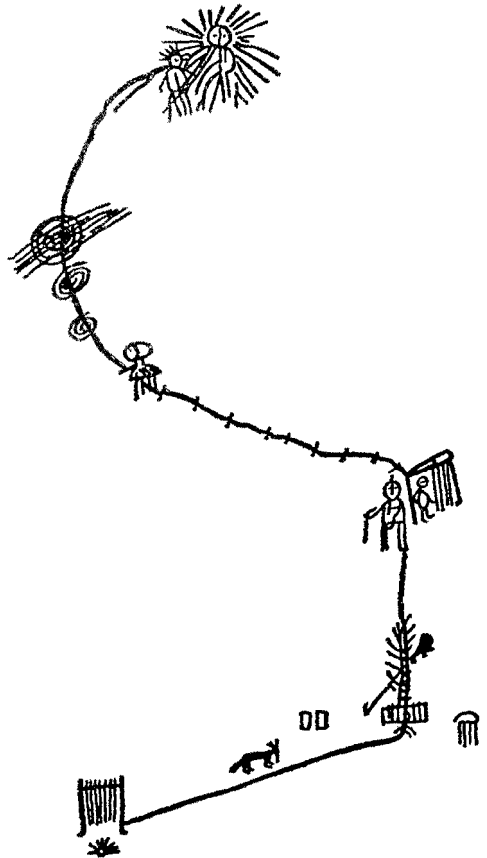


Fig. 5 Abstract motifs displaying possible human traits.

their escorts are being either physically or metaphorically moved towards the zig-zag lines. The zig-zag lines are carved in such away as to represent feet, legs, torso and head (Fig 5). Therefore what one is possibly witnessing is either a scene involving life (displayed on the left) and death (zig-zag lines) or a journey from a state of consciousness to unconsciousness.

The probable anthropological and ethnographic examples to describe the movement between life and death and various states of unconsciousness through entoptic trance has widely discussed. One particular example which (conveniently) displays similar qualities to what may be present on the Ryemarksgaard axe is presented by Andreas Lommel (1967:84). He has commented on the role of shamanism among the Salish Indians of the north-west coast of America. Here, the shaman travels across an imaginary sea (or the 'River of the Dead') to retrieve the lost or stolen soul of a sick man. The voyage divides the living from the dead and involves a crew of ten other shamans. The steersman (or helm) is regarded as the spirit of the officiating shaman. The ten shaman are presented both as mortals and as spiritual oarsman. Standing in two rows, each shaman has a paddle and imitates the movements of a boat's crew. This 'act' is visible to the audience but the spiritual knowledge (the shamans voyage) is hidden within the minds of the participants. Nevertheless, the theatre of movement and the use of props enlighten

Fig. 6 Moving between worlds and physical transformation, the shaman or kam depiction from the Altai region, China (source: Lommel 1967:97).



the audience. Similar voyages or journeys are evident throughout the anthropological literature. In many cases, supernatural voyages are expressed on rock art and usually involve human figures being physically transformed. From the Altai region (China) the shaman's ascent to heaven is not straightforward. The shaman or kam has to undergo a series of journeys across the physical world in order to enter heaven (Lommel 1967:97-8) (Fig. 6). Similarly, the Ryemarksgaard axe portrays a similar movement involving people and the movement from a physical world to a supernatural world. These people could well be initiates that not only moving through altered states of consciousness but moving through their own life cycle; juvenile to manhood or womanhood.

Concluding remarks

There have been a number of valid interpretations made on this very special bone piece. However all previous discussions have overlooked various elements of what is portrayed and what the art is carved on. Of the limited number of bone and antler pieces possessing anthropomorphic figures, including the Ryemarksgaard axe, five appear to originate from bogs and these, according to Tilley (1996:44) may be deliberate depositions (termed votive deposits). However, the majority originate from settlement floors or unknown provenance. Whilst I accept there is a symbolic importance of such items, the overwhelming evidence is that elaborately decorated bone, antler and amber pieces form part of a special exchange package. This is clearly seen with the drilling and re-drilling of hafted- and tread-holes from all three groups of mobile art. It is therefore probable that the Ryemarksgaard axe was a unique exchange item which possessed special powers; may be as a symbolic item used to transport people from a mortal world to a supernatural world.

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Notes

1. Brinch Petersen estimates at least 400 pieces including amber (1973:100).
2. Also referred to as mobile or mobiliary art.
3. With the exception of a male figure on a antler axe from Veksø mose and four stylised female figures on a spatular knife from Funen - both pieces are Maglemose in date.
4. The southern Scandinavian Mesolithic is divided into three sub-periods: the Maglemose (10,000-5500 BC); The Kongemose (5,500-4,500 BC) and the Ertebølle (4,500-3,200 BC).
5. It should be noted that these axe tools may represent something other than functional items. Any severe use of these hafted axes would result in immediate destruction. I have previously stated that their use has a more symbolic function and may form a 'signature' for an elaborate contact/exchange system (Nash 1998).
6. See Sieveking (1987) who has collated a limited inventory of Upper Palaeolithic British and French mobile clay, bone and antler art. Some of items listed may suggest Maglemose influences and therefore date to the early Mesolithic. See also discussion by Sieveking (1991).
7. The percentage of mobile art carved onto aurochs bone throughout the south Scandinavian Mesolithic accounts for roughly 5%. This figure is taken from a sample involving 66 pieces (Nash 1998:139).
8. Clark's 1975 design classification was originally adapted from Clark's less complex table made in 1936.
9. Clark's classification for this axe includes meshing (c); multiple zig-zag lines (r) and chevrons (s).
10. Level 1 draws together the basic shapes. For example, DV40 and DV46 are generically

classified as zig-zag lines (v) and DV61 are classified as mesh (viii) (Nash 1998:44-46).

11. Of 100 south Scandinavian Mesolithic bone and antler pieces.

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