

Where have all the young girls gone?

Abstract

New studies of rock art show that women in the Swedish rock carvings, believed to have been curiously absent, might have been there all along. However, as they were standing next to chariots, or with hanging phallus, researchers thought the figures to be male warriors.

This article discusses Bronze Age social identities and their role in prehistoric religion and society according to social agencies, materiality and communication with anthropomorphic gods, based on pictorial scenes from Scandinavian rock art and Central European ceramics, bronze figures and finally ancient myths.

Keywords

Rock art, chariot, cult specialists, prehistoric religion, goddesses, hoards, figurines, gender and Bronze Age.

Three chariots and charioteers as rock art

The rock carvings from Bohuslän reveal an explosion of Bronze Age figures, giving us an insight into the cultic world of the Bronze Age people. Many of the pictured scenes probably show cultic ceremonies and mythic tales. Ships, footprints, horned giants and animals all interact on the cliff slopes in the landscape (Vandkilde 2011: 374).

On one of the famous rock carvings in Backa, Bohuslän, Sweden we can see two chariots each drawn by a pair of horses. The third chariot seems to be without horses in front, and all three chariots are in the centre of the scene. Seven people stands around the chariots, all are dressed in what seems to be tunics and with their arms raised in prayer. Thus, one can interpret the scene as adorants praying next to chariots. Only one of the figures show a clear sign of gender: an erect phallus, a typical male characteristic in rock carvings. This feature have been the main reason why researchers have perceived the figures as males:

“... as comprising war-chariots and male charioteers dressed in special clothing for battle, probably warriors standing next to chariots” (Kristiansen & Larsson 2015: 223).

The chariot is a strong symbol of the elites in the Nordic Bronze Age and the evidence of its use, can be underlined by the carving on stone slaps in the Kivik grave. Here, a chariot is shown with a person riding it through what seems to be a cultic scene or some sort of procession. The person buried in the Kivik grave were without doubt among the elite in the Bronze Age, around 1000 BC. Combined with the use of chariots on the battlefields of the Middle East and prestige warrior transport in the Mycenaean world, this has lead researchers almost automatically to interpret the chariot as a male symbol belonging to the sphere of warfare, ritual and prestige (Varberg 2014).



Fig. 1 Rock carving from Backa, Bohuslän, frottage by Gehard Milstreu, Tanum Rock Art Museum.



Fig. 3 Rock carving from the Kivik grave, Sweden. Photo: Gerhard Milstreu.

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Female figures are much rarer on the rock carvings than male figures, and a clear marking of the female sex is absent other than cup-marks between the legs on sporadic occasions, but this might be due to the fact that we don't know where to look for them, or how (Coles 2005: 35).

On the chariot carving, two figures seem to have a hanging phallus between their legs. That made me wonder if that mark, a symbolic opening between the legs, could be a mark for the female gender.

In 2009 Flemming Kaul and Gerhard Milstreu kindly made a new reconstruction (frottage) of the central chariot scene in Backa, Bohuslän.

Fig. 2 Rock carving from Backa, Bohuslän, Photo: Flemming Kaul.



The new frottage of the rock carvings shows an interesting detail. The carving between two of the adorants legs is a strait vertical carved line from the womb of the figure to halfway between their legs, which is a clear indication of the female sex. The adorants are perhaps not all male, but female with distinct female features shown in the lower body. This suggests a new interpretation involving female cult specialist performing in a cultic event with horse and chariot, and perhaps involving warriors.

In the rough carvings, it is difficult to see details in the adorants clothing. They seem to be wearing tunics or dresses that are alike, both male and female. The male tunic known from oak coffin graves resembles to some degree the clothing of the figures on the Backa carving, but the nature of the stiff rock carving and thousands of years of weather erasing information makes it hard to determine dress details convincingly. Only future studies of the rock carvings depicting males with a hanging phallus may reveal whether these male figures, in fact should be regarded as females. If that is the case, the number of female figures on rock carvings will increase considerably.

Women and chariots in European context

One can define religion as an abstract way of communicating with the otherworld.

That world is not perceivable for every one and the concept of religion implies that it is governed by authorities, and the will of transcendent forces is conducted through religious specialist's, which are often placed centrally in the society - as prophets, priests or even kings and queens.

The performative nature of the Bronze Age religion and cult is evident in figurines, clay models and rock art, and it can further be proposed that cult specialists enacted personified gods and goddesses in cultic performances (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005: 355, Varberg 2013). Thus, we may see the rock carvings from Bohuslän as a cultic scene with female cult specialists, warriors and chariots.

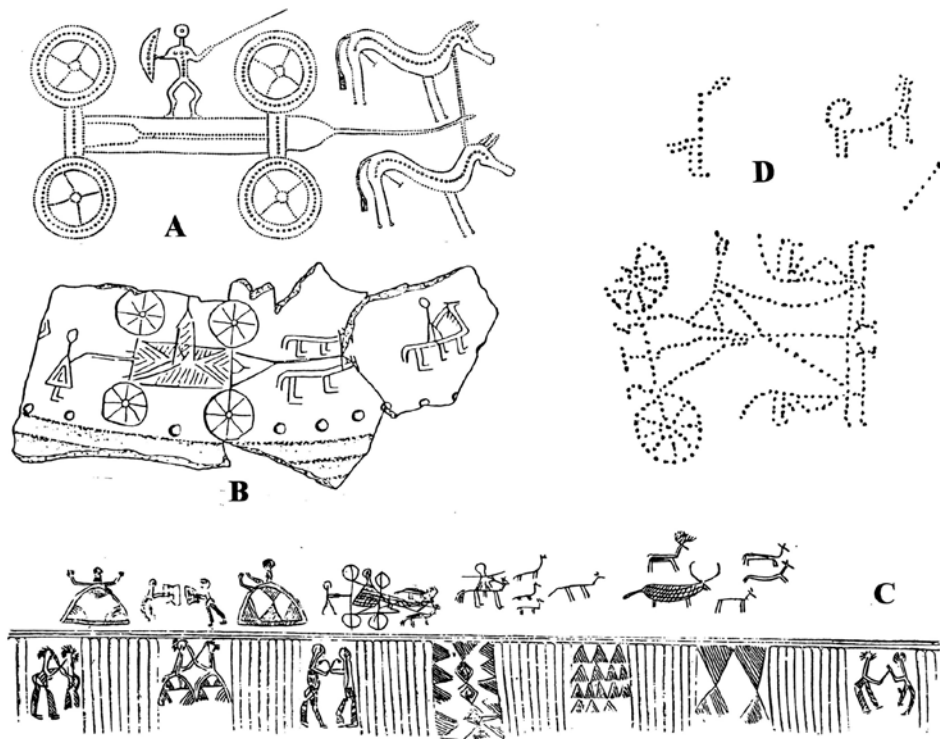
Scenes with women with their arms raised, as in the case in the Backa rock carvings, are also known from pictures on Late Bronze Age Central-European ceramic

vessels, the Sopron burial vessels from the Kalenderberg culture being the most elaborated (Metzner-Nebelsick & Nebelsick 1999; Teržan 2001; Varberg 2009a&b, 2013).

Some of the women on the Sopron vessels are standing behind warriors in single combat. Raising their arms to the sky as in prayer – is that also the case in the Backa carving?

In another scene, a woman is standing on a wagon drawn by horses, and a man with a spear follows her. In other scenes, they engage in some kind of dance accompanied by lyre-playing musicians. Maybe they are part of a sacred feast or even a burial ceremony (Teržan 2001:76). Again, the performative nature of the Bronze Age cultures is evident across time and space. The alternate interpretation of the Backa carvings is that it portrays female cult specialists performing a ritual including chariot,

Fig. 4 Pictorial scenes with wagons, horses and femal adorants on a ceramic vessel from Sopron, Hungary: A tumulus 86. B tumulus 28. Dobiat 1982, Gallus 1934.



horse and warriors as part of a Pan-European symbolic universe.

Small goddesses

A new type of artefact appears in the archaeological record in the Late Nordic Bronze Age. For the first time, the small bronze figure with clear female features makes its entrance onto the Nordic prehistoric stage, with only a few exceptions of four figures from the Early Bronze Age – three of them with distinct male features. Suddenly, from Period IV they are present in the material from bronze hoards, graves and single finds. They may be among the first representations of anthropomorphic gods in the Nordic Bronze Age, as suggested by Glob in 1969. He named the small figurines the *Goddess with Neck-ring* (Glob 1969).

In the very first appearance of anthropomorphic gods in Mesopotamia, they had clear characteristics, and most importantly a name and a shape in terms of reliefs, statues or pictures. The definition of gods is; they are supreme forces that rules over humans. They are immortal, rulers, social beings and they have *shape* (Bredholt Christensen 2010:82).

In 1900 one small figurine was found in the mud on the Kolindsund lakeshore in

eastern Jutland, Denmark. Since, the archaeologists classified it as scrap bronze and then forgotten. The figurine is a pendant of uncertain use and function and it portrays a small woman with her arms raised; the arms are not human arms, but end in what appears to be bird-heads. Based on its stylistic traits the piece probably dates from the Late Bronze Age Urnfield tradition, and can be dated to 1000 - 600 BC.

The only Nordic parallel to this figurine is the rock carving from Kasen, Bohuslän, Sweden. The carving shows a figure standing on a ship. The figure has raised arms in birdlike shapes. The figure and the rock carving may be part of the same tradition. Both human figures have pronounced animal features. They are probably shape-shifters who can enter the world of animals as easily as the world of men, an ability many Gods possess or perhaps cult specialists entering the world of Gods (Kaul 2004:342).

It is possible to find the same motive on pendants with female figures with either horseheads or what looks like bird-arms in the Central European Alp region and on the Balkans. Marcus Egg finds a resemblance with relief portraits of the Greek goddesses Artemis and Athena, the first being the mistress of wild animals and the second, the goddess of heroes, war, wisdom, and horses



Fig. 5 (Left) The Kolindsund figure. Photo: Rogvi Johansen, Moesgaard Museum

Fig. 6 (Below) Rock carving from Kasen, Sweden.

Tanums Hällristningsmuseum, Photo: Flemming Kaul



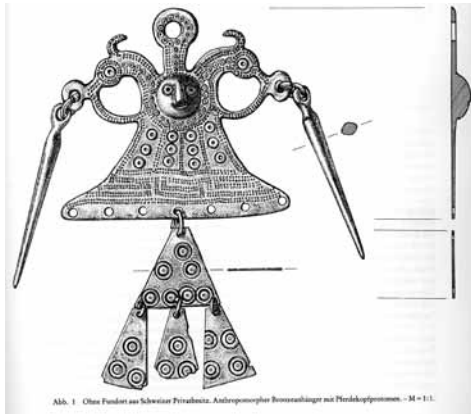


Abb. 1. Ohne Fundort aus Schweizer Privatsamml. Anthropomorpher Bronzearhänger mit Pferdeköpftypus. - M = 1:1.

Fig. 7 Anthropomorphic bronze pendant with horsehead arms. Without find location and in a Swiss private collection. After Egg 1986.

and the Central European pendants (Egg 1986).

If that is the case, the idea of a female goddess could have spread through human contact and interaction across a continent and the religious symbols of the Mediter-

anean states thereby transmitted, transformed and adapted into the Nordic Bronze Age in the first millennium BC.

Appearance of horse gear in a North European context

During the last 150 years, the combination of horse gear together with female ornaments in hoards dated to the Late Nordic Bronze Age appears in the archaeological record. The hoards were found in the areas surrounding the Baltic Sea (von Brunn 1980:113).

Bronze hoards constitute a large part of the archaeological material from this period. Huge quantities were deposited in the ground, and the archaeological material witnesses a wide-ranging custom of sacrifice. The hoards are therefore central to the understanding of the societies, which once left their items in the ground (Varberg 2013).

Between Scandinavia in the north and Romania in the south there is evidence of a

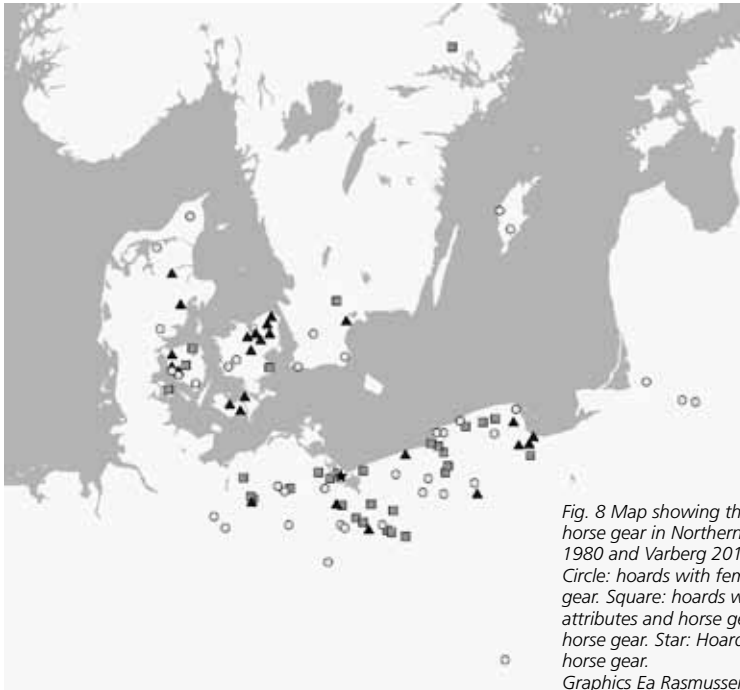


Fig. 8 Map showing the distribution of hoards with horse gear in Northern Europe based on von Brunn 1980 and Varberg 2013.

Circle: hoards with female ornaments and horse gear. Square: hoards with female ornaments, male attributes and horse gear. Triangle: hoards with horse gear. Star: Hoard with male attributes and horse gear.

Graphics Ea Rasmussen, Moesgaard Museum.

tradition of hoarding women's ornaments (such as belt plates, hanging bowls, neck- and ankle-rings) together with horse gear (e.g. bridlery and phalerae) during the Late Urnfield- and Early Hallstatt periods (1100 -500 BC) (von Brunn 1980: 126).

Research conducted by von Brunn (1980) shows a clear tendency towards a social practice including women, horse and wagon in the Late Bronze Age between the rivers Elbe and Weichsel in Northern Europe. His study included 206 bronze hoards with female ornaments, and 58 of them included horse gear as well. Only 29 hoards also included items belonging to the male sphere – such as sword, spear or axe – and only one single hoard consisted of only male items and horse gear (von Brunn 1980: 131).

I have conducted a similar study for the Scandinavian Late Bronze Age material, which reveals a similar pattern. 36 hoards with horse gear is identified. 21 of these hoards included women's ornaments and horse gear, and only six included both male and female items. Not a single find consisted of only male items and horse gear. In total, 28 hoards were from the Danish area and eight from the Swedish area (Varberg 2013:149).

The map showing the depositions of horse gear and female ornaments only strengthens the idea of the forming of a new strong female identity by the beginning of the 1st millennium BC in most of Northern and Central Europe. The depositions may reflect cult specialists who enacted as personified gods and goddesses in cultic performances – as depicted in rock carvings too.

Myths and Gods in the written sources

The written sources that could enlighten the search of what religion and cult the hoards, pictorial scenes and figures may reflect are widely spread across time and space. None of them written by the societies north of the Alps in the first millennium BC, but by classical writers from Classical Greece and Rome. These text may thus very

well have earlier origins in the oral tradition dating back to Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005: 22).

Between Greece and Scandinavia in the first millennium, BC there could very well have been a cosmology that was not that different from the Greek pantheon. The communication between the two areas was well established and reflected in the material culture (Hänsel 2000; Kristiansen & Larsson 2005, Varberg et al. 2015). Therefore, it is probable that fragments of the Greek and Near East cult inspired the Late Bronze Age cosmology. Consequently, there seems to be some likenesses between descriptions of the gods by written sources, the iconographic scenes in Central Europe and Sweden and the small figurines.

In the eighth century BC the Greek poet Hesoid in *Theogony* established a genealogy of the gods, and thereby the Greek Pantheon of Olympia. Nevertheless, the gods can almost certainly be dated much further back in time (Goldhill 2006:126). The most important goddess throughout the Mycenaean world is Potnia (mistress). She appears to be a prominent female figure in both Minoan and Mycenaean art. Mistress is so generic a designation that it is impossible to identify her with any definite goddess in the Greek religion. However, in Knossian expressions, she is named Athanai Potniai – Mistress Athena - and in the Pylian she is named Potnaiai Hippueiai – Mistress of Horses. She is probably the predecessor of Athena, known in classical times (Pe-ruzzi 1980: 119). Thereby we must regard the goddess Athena as an old deity, dating back in the second millennium BC and clearly associated with the horse. In archaic Corinth Athena was named Athena Hippias, the inventor of the chariot and bridle, and she had both a temple and an altar placing her as one of the central goddesses in the cult (Yalouris 1950:19). In classical times, Athena was an armed warrior goddess, and she appeared in Greek Mythology as the helper of heroes and kings and her animal-characteristics were the small owl, the snake and horse (Yalouris 1950:30).

Female cult specialists in the Late Nordic Bronze Age

Rock carvings, small bronze figures and myths all play a part in reconstructing the Late Bronze Age religion north of the Alps, and together clearly suggest that female cult specialists became more prevalent and had an increasingly important role during the Bronze Age. In other words, the role of a female deity became more significant in the religion at this time (1000-500 BC).

The emergence of women and their association with horses in the Late Bronze Age cosmology implies that a cult of personified gods with some fragmented and distorted resemblance to the Mediterranean gods is very likely. The goddess Athena has some resonance in the iconography of Central Europe and in the small figurine from Kolind-sund with bird-arms. Athena's attributes being owl (bird), snake, horse, spear, shield and chariot may be reflected in Scandinavian belief systems as well (Varberg 2013).

Regarding the two rock carvings from Backa and Kasen it becomes clear, that depictions of female cult specialists are a motive that may be more common in rock art than previously believed. The hanging phallus may in fact be a sign of female gender and thereby increasing the numbers of females on rock carvings considerably. This could dramatically change our perception of gender, social identities and their role in the Bronze Age societies.

*Jeanette Varberg, Curator
Moesgaard Museum, Aarhus, Denmark,
email: jv@moesgaardmuseum.dk*

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