

SKIÐBLAÐNIRSOME IDEAS ON RITUAL CONNECTIONSBETWEEN SUN AND SHIP

Rudolf Simek

Ships are generally recognized as the main motif, apart from discs (and similar symbols for the sun), praying and vaulting figures, trees, axes etc., of Scandinavian Bronze Age rock-carvings. It is also widely accepted by modern scholars (cf. e.g. Nordan p. 364 and Almgren) that these images depict objects from the real world, although they are drawn for the purposes of a cult. Furthermore, the ship continued to have an important place in the cult and the rites of the Scandinavian peoples also after the Bronze Age, which is evident from the large number of ship-burials, boat-graves, stones set out in the shape of a ship (so-called ship-settings), pictorial representations and passages in literary traditions.

But the ritual importance of the ship was not, however, limited to burial customs. Similarly it is impossible to observe any unity of ideas in these cases; the concept of the voyage to the other world existed, but nevertheless many of the burial-ships are anchored or buried under a mound.

In my opinion it is therefore incorrect to attempt to relate all ritual representations to a single cult, as has often been done.

Perhaps we should distinguish between the following (though the list does not claim to be complete):

1. The ship in burial customs:
 - a) The journey of the dead individual to the other world (cf. esp. Müller-Wille).
 - b) The dead in the ship Naglfar (cf. Krohn; Müller-Wille; deVries pp. 202 & 580).
 - c) The ship as the house of the dead (cf. Behn p. 54f).
 - d) The ship as a container of grave-goods.
2. The ship in other mythological contexts:
 - a) The idea of the sun-god who crosses the sky in his ship (cf. Almgren; Brøndsted II).
 - b) The ship as a cult-object in the worship of a sun-god (see below).
 - c) Possibly the ship as a cult-object in fertility rites (cf. Marstrander pp. 256-265).

Further to 2.b) it may be assumed, that as ships in rock-carvings are of importance in the cult, the vessels depicted were, at least temporarily, withdrawn from secular use and used for ritual purposes. A cult of this kind may be assumed, not so much for the agricultural population praying for a fertile season, but for those in direct contact with seafaring, fishermen, merchant sailors etc.

Up to the introduction of steampower, it was of great importance to all seafarers through the

ages that the season for sailing - generally the time between the equinoctal storms, i.e. March to October - should be safe and profitable. Thus they tried to influence the transcendental powers whose aid they sought for this purpose. For a good season fair weather and sunshine were of course necessary. (Incidentally, having longer days and more sunshine was also important for navigation: for this see below). Thus it is hardly surprising that the combination of ship and sun symbol is a particularly common one in the Bronze Age rock-carvings (much more common, for instance, than the combination of ship and net motif: see Marstrander p. 263 & p. 454). Often they occur in the same group, with the sun symbol sometimes attached to the ship, carried either on a pole or by a human figure, or attached to the side or stem of the ship.

Jan deVries (pp. 108 ff.) and Turville-Petre explain this occurrence of both the symbols as being part of fertility rites (e.g. ship-carrying processions); rites for securing a good navigation season would no doubt be very similar to those appropriate for fertility rites (Mannhardt p.391). We must of course bear in mind that in fertility rites the sun may well be depicted crossing the sky in a ship. However, there is much evidence in favour of the view that we are here concerned with the veneration of the sun in ritual procession, as indeed sun symbols were for this purpose often attached to wagons (cf. the Trundholm wagon: deVries pp. 112ff., Derolez p.59). This interpretation is, however, disputed by Marstrander (p.455), who does not see any connection between sun and ship but only between the sun and the so-called net motif. This view seems very dubious as there is so little evidence to support it.

One reason for the large number of examples of ship and sun together, dating from the Bronze Age - a number which diminishes again towards the beginning of the Iron Age - could be the warmer climate enjoyed by Northern Europe at that time, which permitted seafaring to prosper but did not diminish its perils.

This combination of symbols appears not only on the rock-carvings of the Bronze Age, but is also depicted on some bronze razors, amongst others on those from Hvirring, Jutland (Marstrander p.80) and from Vandling, South Jutland (Brøndsted II p. 273), and also on the mount of the Wismar horn (Marstrander p. 337). The shape of two other razors (Nyrup and Klitmose: Brøndsted l.c.) relates to the shape of the ships of the rock-carvings, having a sun circle on the prow. Another example from this period is the large ship-setting at Skousgard on Langeland (Brøndsted II p.200) which like so many others does not contain a grave; an unfinished circle is carved on the prowstone at the south-eastern end of the setting. The stone cist of a grave at Kivik in Scania which also shows carvings of ships and circles, is perhaps not to be regarded as an expression of the same cult, but rather as representing ideas inherent in burial customs. But the different concepts may have influenced one another and coalesced - in a case of this kind perhaps the journey of a dead worshipper of a sun-god to his god; this may also be indicated by the fact that many ship graves - though not as many as has sometimes been assumed (Brögger-Shetelig-Falk p.230) - direct their bows to the south (Müller-Wille p.24).

The golden boats from Nors in Jutland, about one hundred small votive boats, which, as their construction indicates, belong to the Roman Iron Age (c.200-400 A.D.), are also decorated with

Circles (Brøndsted III p.234 ((Germ.Ed.1960));
Derolez p. 192).

Later, perhaps regarded only as traditional decoration, we find the sun on ships in the form of circles and spirals at the prows of Viking Age ships, in cases where there is no animal figurehead. An interesting sidelight is thrown on this by the find in a ship burial on the Ile de Criox in Brittany, dating from the Viking Age, of a "metal circular band, 2 feet in diameter, with moveable leaflink ornaments round the outside" (Arbmann p.82), which had probably been fixed to the sternpost of the boat. The ON terms hringr, hringrskuta, and OE hringedstefna, as well as the name Hringhorni (the ship of Baldr: Falk p.38; Norden p.385) may also indicate that circular prow decorations were used as well as animal figureheads.

The round shields used on warships of the viking Age, for both decoration and show, have also been seen as a kind of sun symbol: cf. the kenning "goti sólborðs" (Gröndahl p.184) "horse of the sun-boards" for a ship.

All this may be explained by assuming that the sun disc, dedicated to the sun-god, represents the figurehead of the ship, which is placed by it under the protection of the sun-god.

This god could hardly have been any other than Freyr, the god in charge of sun and rain, under whose government peace and fertility prevails. Freyr, moreover, is the owner of the miraculous ship Skiðblaðnir, which could accommodate all the Aesir, which always had fair winds and could be folded up small enough to be put into a bag (SnE pp. 47-48). It may be supposed

that what has happened in the case of Freyr's ship is, that a cult ship has been transferred into an aetiological myth, a cult boat which was built only for the duration of a feast (Almgren p.320; deVries II p.178). One might expect feasts of this kind for a god, who is to such an important degree responsible for the welfare of the seafarers, to take place at the beginning and end of the shipping season. (He is, moreover, the son of Njördr, the god who lives in Noatun = an enclosure of ships, and may in earlier times have protected seafarers until his importance decreased as he became more and more closely identified with his "stronger" son). Something similar happened in Rome, where a feast was held in spring (the feast "Isis navigium" on 5th March: Almgren p.27ff.) for Isis, who was venerated both for her importance for fertility and for her protection of navigation, in which feast boats were carried in procession to ensure a good season.

We do in fact know of a feast in honour of Freyr at the beginning of October (Gislasaga 15: this saga was not written down before the 13th century, and even if we discount the influence of Christian Harvest Thanksgiving it is impossible to decide whether it was held to give thanks to Freyr for a good farming season or for good navigation - the context in Gislasaga makes it impossible to decide this with certainty). On the other hand there are folk-customs of processions with ship-carriages extending over Western Europe up to the 19th century. Also in these processions the ship appears in conjunction with the sun symbol, here in the guise of the wheel of fortune (Almgren p.20ff.; Derolez p.150; Mannhardt I p.559 & 593).

The fact that both in mediaeval and modern times these processions took place at Carnival time* and not in March is easily explained by the date of the Christian Shrovetide. Folk-customs also seem to indicate that a feast in veneration of the sun, connected also with navigation, was held at the Summer Solstice; in inland Europe burning wheels were rolled down hillsides and in Scandinavian areas boats were burnt on midsummer's night (Almgren p.93f & p.56ff).

We also have to remember that the sun was of great practical importance for sailors when navigating. Although attempts have recently been made to show that Scandinavian seamen of the Viking Age navigated also by the stars, this form of navigation may not have been so important during the short summer nights of the north as solar navigation - not least because of the practice of sailing along latitudes prevailing at this time.

In view of all these facts it seems possible to conclude that there existed in Scandinavia, from the Bronze Age up to the conversion to Christianity, in addition to other cults one for the worship of the sun-god, widespread among the seafaring population and not directly linked with either burial customs or fertility rites.

*Editor's note: the period between Boxing Day and the beginning of Lent.

References

- Almgren, Oskar: Nordische Felszeichnungen als religiöse Urkunden. Frankfurt/Main 1934.
- Arbmann, Holger: The Vikings. Translated and edited with an introduction by Alan L. Binns. London 1961
- Behn, Friedrich: Die Bronzezeit in Nordeuropa. Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln-Mainz 1967.
- Brøgger, Anton Wilhelm; Falk, Hjalmar; Shetelig, Haakon: (Hrsg.): Osebergfundet. Bind I. Kristiania 1917.
- Brøndsted, Johannes: Nordische Vorzeit.
Band II. Bronzezeit in Dänemark. Neumünster 1962.
Band III. Eisenzeit in Dänemark. Neumünster 1963.
- Derolez, R.L.M.: Götter und Mythen der Germanen. Wiesbaden 1974.
- Falk, Hjalmar: Altnordisches Seewesen. In: Wörter und Sachen, Bd. IV, Heidelberg 1912, pp 1-122.
- Gröndal, Benedikt: Clavis poetica antiquae linguae Septentrionalis ... Hafniae 1864.
- Krohn, Kaarle: Das schiff Naglfar. pp 154f; and: Zum schiffe Naglfar. pp 317-320. In: Finnougrische Forschungen XII, 1912.
- Nordén, Arthur: Die Schiffbaukunst der nordischen Bronzezeit. In: Mannus, 31. Jhrg., Heft 3, pp 347-398.
- Mannhardt, Wilhelm: Wald-und Feldkulte. 2 Vols.
²Berlin 1904-05.
- Marstrander, Sverre: Oestfolds jordbruksristninger: Skjeberg. 2 Vols. Oslo 1963.

- Müller-Wille, Michael: Bestattung im Boot.
Studien zu einer nordeuropäischen Grabsitte.
In: Offa 25-26, Neumünster 1970 pp 7-203.
- Turville-Petre, E.O. Gabriel: Myth and Religion
of the North. London 1964.
- deVries, Jan: Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte.
2 Vols. 2 Berlin 1956-57.

- - - - -

RECENT NORWEGIAN ACQUISITIONS
IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND

Alexander M. Cain

Because of the traditional connections between Scotland and Norway, the National Library of Scotland has long thought it appropriate to maintain strong Norwegian collections.

Contemporary Norwegian literature is in a very flourishing state, and the difficulty for any library not possessed of unlimited funds is to select. As Mr Holland pointed out in an article in the previous number of Northern Studies, the Library is cautious about acquiring the works of new authors until they have proved themselves.

However, a number of new authors have made their appearance in our collections. The feminist Liv Kjøltzow has a volume of short stories, "Øyet i treet"; Leif Bryde Lillegaard has a novel "Draugen: en hverdagstragedie", set on the west coast of Norway; other new novelists include