

The Divine Sun-Horse and other Zoomorphic Motifs, from Bronze Age Denmark to Early Iron Age Italy and Greece – Stylization, Reading, Meaning*

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Abstract

The Chariot of the Sun, c. 1400 BC, found in 1902, Denmark, renders intelligible the idea of the non-personified sun pulled by a divine horse. It does not stand alone. In Nordic Bronze Age art, the sun-horse is seen in action, assisting the sun on its cyclical voyage, related to agents such as the fish, the snake, the waterbird, and the sun ship.

During the Nordic Late Bronze Age, 1100-600 BC, the sun-horse motif appeared on small bronze objects like razors with a remarkable frequency, including a large range of variants, from 'naturalistic' figures to virtually incomprehensible stylized figures, including stylized double horses. The stylization tradition does not just include the horse

figure, but also the other zoomorphic agents related to the journey of the sun.

When accepting that an animal figure has kept its religious or cosmological connotations during the stylization process, it is possible to trace the sun-horse and the other sun helpers through Europe, from Denmark via Italy to Greece. The stylized figures of horses, birds, and fish should not be considered as decorative art without deeper meaning. These considerations go for the Nordic sun-horse, Italian sun-horses, and fish motifs on Greek Late Geometric pottery.

From this background, the sun-horse and the sun bird phenomena are traced into North and Central Italy, 900-600 BC. A variant of the stylized Italian sun-horse

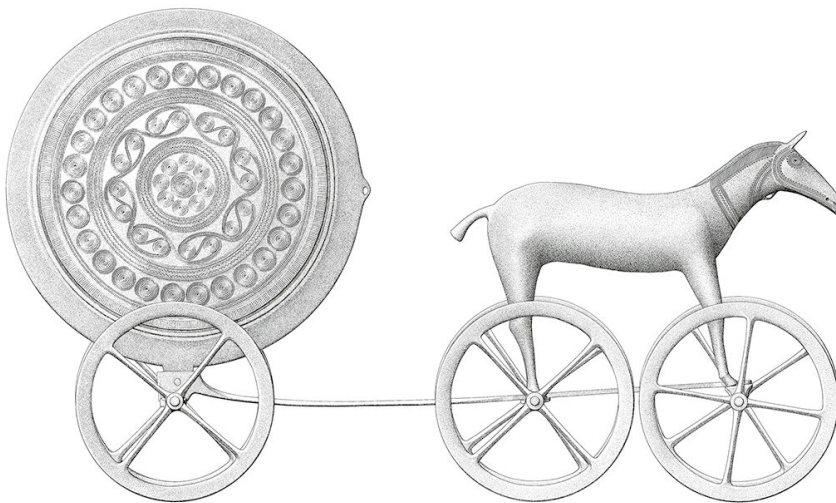


Fig. 1: *The Chariot of the Sun. Trundholm Bog, Zealand, Denmark, c. 1400 BC. (After Aner & Kersten 1976).*

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Fig. 2: Sun-horses, Late Bronze Age rock carvings; (a) Kalleby, photo, (b) Balken, rubbing. Both Tanum Parish, Bohuslän, Sweden. The Kalleby example shows the sun represented by a wheel-cross. (Photo and rubbing: Tanums Hällristningsmuseum, Underslös).

materializes in Villanova Culture swastika designs, the swastika formed by schematized horse-like figures.

On Greek Late Geometric pottery, 800-700 BC, we meet the horse, the fish, the waterbird, and the snake, together with wheel-crosses and swastikas, all components occurring on the contemporaneous European iconographic scene. In particular, the fish motif on Argive Late Geometric pottery is scrutinized, connecting the sun-horse and the fish. When accepting that even the most stylized variants of a zoomorphic motif still contained its deeper meaning, then the fish can also here be seen as an important sun helper.

Some ideas were seemingly shared over long distances, as expressed in the iconography, from Greece to Denmark and Sweden, though occurring on different media and expressed in different styles. These motifs were all in play and treated by the artists between 900 and 700 BC, in more or less stylized versions.

The Chariot of the Sun: an emblem of Bronze Age religion – the sun-horse in action

“The Chariot of the Sun”, found in 1902 by ploughing in Trundholm Bog, Odsherred, Northwest Zealand, Denmark, stands as an emblem of prehistoric religious art (Fig. 1). The director of the National Museum, Sophus Müller (1846-1934), promptly published the sensational

find, which can be dated to the Bronze Age, c. 1400 BC (Nordic Bronze Age Period II). He concludes that “it throws new light on spiritual life and religion in the distant and obscure past” and “it renders intelligible the idea that the non-personified sun was pulled over the heavens by a divine horse”.¹ On the rim of the sun disc, the remains of a fragile eyelet are seen, and a corresponding eyelet is found under the horse’s neck. A string must have passed through the loops to link the disc with the horse. In other words, the horse is pulling the sun by a string; the horse is the *sun-horse*.²

As Müller noted, it is important to distinguish between the horse and the sun disc on the one hand and the chassis with the wheels on the other. The solar disc and the horse illustrate the belief that the sun was pulled on its journey by a divine horse. The carriage was not part of this notion. The sun image and the horse were placed on wheels in order to demonstrate the very movement of the sun in the rituals of the Bronze Age.³ The term “the Chariot of the Sun” is actually a misleading one that happened to be accepted later both in Danish and in other languages. Müller did not employ the term “*Solvognen*” (“the Chariot of the Sun”) but referred to it as “the Sun Image from Trundholm”.⁴ Recently, it has been termed “the sun-horse wagon from Trundholm”.⁵ The term “the

1 Müller 1903, 103, own translation.

2 Müller 1903; Kaul 1998; 2010.

3 Müller 1903.

4 Müller 1903, 114.

5 Kveiborg *et al.* 2020, 83.

Chariot of the Sun” (*Sonnenwagen*) was introduced in the 1930s by German scholars.⁶ The divine sun-horse, as such, thus without any connection to a wagon or chariot, is seen in Nordic Late Bronze Age renderings, on bronzes, and on the rock carvings (Fig. 2, a and b).

“The Chariot of the Sun” yields further information as to the worldview of this epoch. The two sides of the sun disc are not identical. Most important is that one side is covered with gold foil, and on the same side a row of short radial grooves marks a halo. The other side is not covered with gold, and there are no radial grooves, no marked halo. When looking at the golden and radiant side of the sun disc we notice that the horse is facing to the right, pulling the sun towards the right. When we turn the sun image round so that we can see the darker, non-golden side of the sun disc without the halo, then the horse is facing left. In our physical world, however, the sun never moves to the left on its daily journey. But if in the worldview of the Bronze Age the earth was considered to be flat, then these directions make sense. The observable ‘travel’ direction of the sun in the daytime is from left to right. This direction changes when the sun meets the horizon at sunset. After sunset, the sun has to return to its starting point at sunrise by moving from right to left, under the surface of the flat earth, through the darkness of the underworld, and here in an extinguished state, not radiant. At sunrise, then, the sun changed its direction to the daytime direction, towards the right.⁷ Thus, the sun-horse had a most important role in Bronze Age solar mythology as a helper or conveyor of the sun both in the day and at night, right and left.

The eternal journey of the sun: the sun-horse, the fish, the snake, the waterbird and the sun ship – seen from the North

If “the Chariot of the Sun” was the only object where this ‘left-right-logic’ appeared, we could speak of a coincidental observation. However, some centuries later, during the Late Nordic Bronze Age (c. 1100-500 BC), the blades of bronze razors became the canvas for more complex mythological/cosmological renderings related to the eternal voyage of the sun. In the rich Late Bronze Age imagery,



Fig. 3: Sunrise. A divine fish is pulling the sun up from the stem of the night ship to the morning ship. Bronze razor, without find provenance, probably Jutland, Denmark, c. 800 BC. (Photo: F. Kaul).

the fish, the snake, an aquatic bird, and the dominant solar barque, together with the omnipresent sun-horse (in many versions), contribute to a larger narrative. Here, in my studies in Bronze Age iconography, it has been essential to employ and understand the ‘left-right-logic’.⁸ When it comes to the rich and varied iconography on the razors and other bronzes, we are so happy that the sailing direction of the mythological solar barque involved is clearly marked – the prow having a marked raised keel extension. Consequently, it is possible to distinguish between night ships and day ships.

An illustrative example of the relationship between right and left, day and night, up and down, is seen on a razor without find provenance, probably from Jutland, c. 800 BC (Fig. 3). Here two ships are depicted. The lower ship is sailing towards the left – being the night ship – while the upper one is sailing towards the right – being the day ship. From the stem of the left-sailing night ship, a fish is pulling the sun upwards to the right, the direction of the morning sun: an ideal sunrise situation, where the fish plays a most important role, at dawn, in the cyclical voyage of the sun. Other examples show the fish in or accompanying the sun ship, the solar barque, during day and night, including sunrise situations.⁹

⁶ Sprockhoff 1936; Kaul 2004; 2010.

⁷ Kaul 1998; 2004; 2018a and 2018b.

⁸ Kaul 1998; 2004; 2018b and 2021.

⁹ Kaul 1998, 216-21.

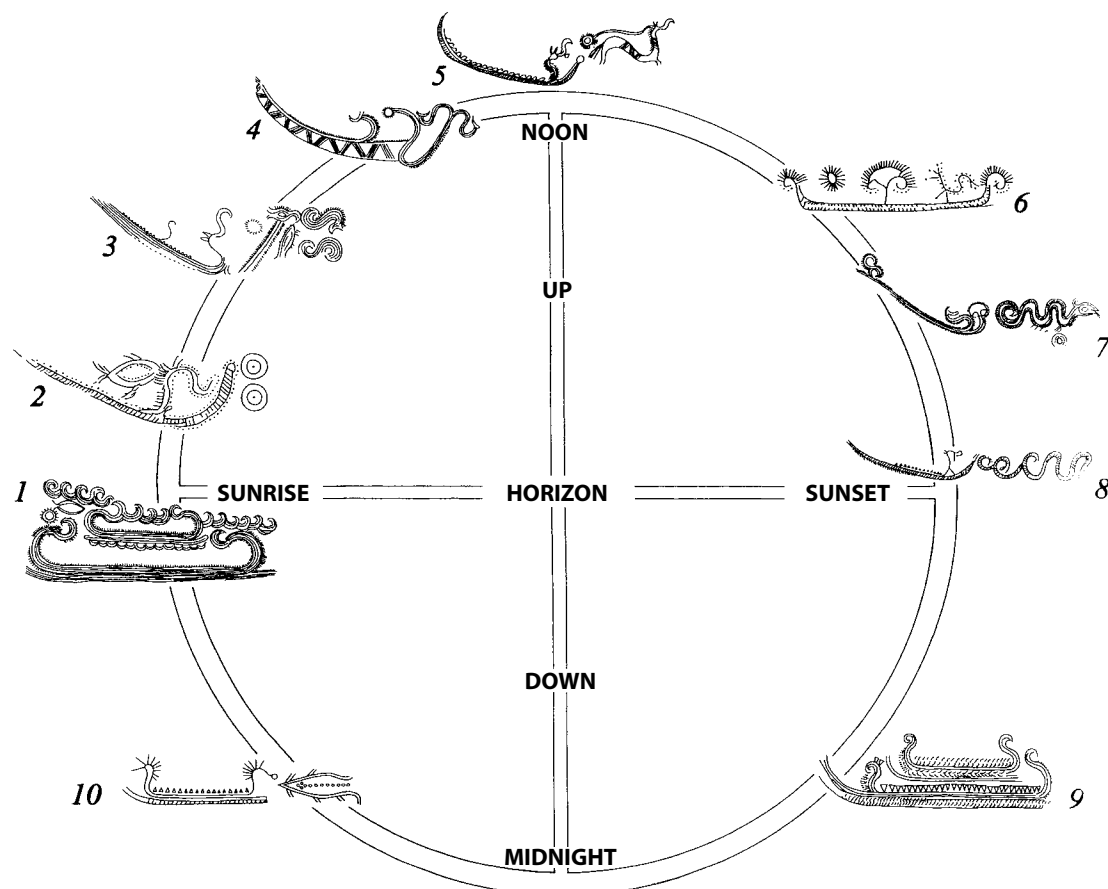


Fig. 4: Motifs from Danish razors, Late Bronze Age, 1100-500 BC, showing different points of the cyclical movement of the sun. (After Kaul 2004.).

1. Sunrise. The fish pulls the rising sun up from the night ship to the morning ship.
2. For a while, the fish was allowed to sail on with the ship.
3. The fish is to be devoured by a bird of prey. Stylized sun-horses (S-figures) are ready to fetch the sun.
4. Two sun-horses are about to pull the sun from the ship.
5. At noon the sun-horse has collected the sun from the ship.
6. In the afternoon the sun-horse lands with the sun on the sun ship.
7. Sometime after the sun-horse has landed, the sun is taken over by the snake from the afternoon ship.
8. The snake is concealing the sun in its spiral curls. It will soon lead the sun down beneath the horizon.
9. Two night ships sailing to the left. The sun is not visible, extinguished and dark on its voyage through the underworld.
10. A night ship followed by a fish swimming to the left. The fish is ready to fulfil its task at sunrise.

Other Danish Late Bronze Age razors continue the narrative of the voyage of the sun. For a time, the fish is allowed to be on the morning ship, but at a certain time it is devoured by a bird of prey or a waterbird. Then the sun-horse can take over the transport of the sun from the morning ship. After midday, the sun-horse lands on the afternoon ship, giving over the responsibility of the transport of the sun to the afternoon ship. Finally, at sunset, a snake takes over the sun from the afternoon ship.

This snake probably helped the extinguished sun into its nightly underworld leftward voyage. It should be regarded as representing positive forces of cosmological order, working as a mediator between the underworld and the world above. During the night we once again meet the fish – here in connection with a left-sailing ship. The fish could help the darkened sun in its voyage through the dangers of the underworld. It was also ready to perform its important task of helping the sun from the night ship

to the morning ship at dawn.¹⁰ Thus, a central cosmological myth, a full day-and-night-journey of the sun, can be ‘read’ in the pictorial language of the North (Fig. 4). It is the horizon and the surface of the earth, which is linear, while the line of the voyage of the sun seems expressed through two semicircles meeting at the horizon.

Different versions of this Late Nordic Bronze Age cyclical cosmological understanding should be considered. For instance, the snake could have had a role in the morning, here also helping the sun. The horse could also have had a role during the night, perhaps at the deepest point of the underworld.

Recent studies have shown that matters related to this solar-focused iconography are more complex and varied than what appears from the ‘standardized’ presentation of ‘the eternal voyage of the sun’ (see Fig. 4). Some razors seem to suggest that more than one story can be condensed into the full razor design (with animal-headed handle). Hybrid creatures are included. Horses may be shown with bull’s horns, a beak, a triangular beard, and oversized round eyes. This composite being is almost always placed on the prow of a ship; but it also appears as a full sun-horse. Many examples of the snake-horse hybrid have been identified, also on rock art. In some rare cases, the sun(god) seems to appear in anthropomorphized shape on board the sun ship.¹¹

The Nordic sun-horse – stylization, decoration, meaning

The history of research and the elaboration of interpretations do not follow a straight course. In some periods, non-religious interpretations were favoured. During the last two centuries, an interplay between interpretations in the religious sphere and in more secular fields has taken place.¹²

The leading Danish archaeologist Jens Jacob Asmussen Worsaae (1821-1885) regarded the images of ships on the bronze objects and on the rock carvings, as well as circular designs, fish, snakes, and horses connected with the ships,

as religious images related to a solar cult.¹³ Worsaae’s successor at the National Museum of Denmark, Sophus Müller, was much more restrained in interpreting the imagery of the Bronze Age. He did not consider such pictures as symbolic representations with religious content.¹⁴

When it comes to the miniature art on the bronze objects, Müller presented some arguments founded in certain artistic concepts. The art on the bronzes is called decorative or ornamental art (Danish: *prydkunst*). Decorative art as such has no deeper meaning apart from being decorative, ornamental. (Of course, decorative art can have meaning in an aesthetic sense, since it establishes harmony and balance).

When a ship is seen on a razor, then it is because the ship’s shape is simply a nice ornament.¹⁵ Furthermore, Müller argues that when a pictorial motif, such as the ship, becomes increasingly stylized then it totally loses any meaning, ending up merely ornamental. The same goes for horse and zoomorphic motifs: when a horse figure has lost its naturalistic appearance as a result of repeated artistic treatment, it has no meaning. According to Müller: “It is thoughtless art that has brought about these figurative constructions. If the representation of the horse had had a greater significance as being dedicated to, or otherwise associated with, the divinity, it would have been better able to assert its position.”¹⁶

By claiming that when a motif, such as the horse, by stylization became solely decorative, Müller has consequently dissociated himself from religious interpretations. In my opinion, there was no loss of meaning, even by the most pronounced stylization.¹⁷ It is more a matter of being able to ‘read’ the almost abstract patterns in their context. As to the aesthetic evaluation – that we are contemplating works of no greater value – we are naturally dealing with a sort of ‘classical art’ conception. In our age, where cartoon strips are regarded as being art, other words of a more positive tone should be preferred, such as “varied”, “dynamic”, “innovative”, and even “charming”. This discussion goes in particular for the motifs on a razor from Sennels,

¹⁰ Kaul 1998; 2004 and 2021.

¹¹ Kaul 2009; Kaul & Freudenberg 2013; Stig Sørensen & Appleby 2018; Ahlqvist & Vandkilde 2018; Ahlqvist 2020; Kveiborg *et al.* 2020.

¹² Kaul 2004; Kristiansen 2010.

¹³ Worsaae 1882, 93-6.

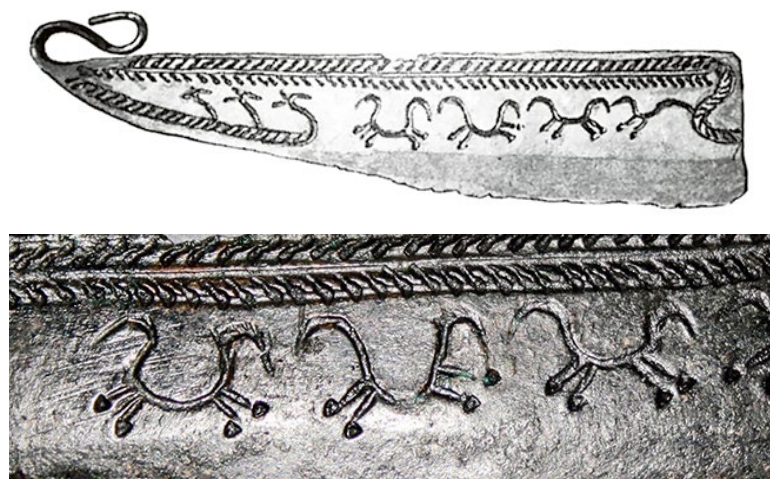
¹⁴ Müller 1897, 419-20.

¹⁵ Müller 1897, 352-4; Kaul 1998, 69.

¹⁶ Müller 1920, 139-40, own translation.

¹⁷ Kaul 2018c.

Fig. 5: A bronze razor from Sennels, Northwest Jutland, Denmark, with charming double horses related to a ship. Upper shows the whole razor; lower showing the double horses, 1100-900 BC. (After Müller 1921; photo: F. Kaul).



Northwest Jutland, Denmark, which Müller used as an example of restless art without value. Here, three double horses appear in front of a ship with a triple horse-headed stern (Fig. 5). The horses seem to be running, though each pair of legs is running in different directions. When considering the importance of the ‘left-right-logic’ in Nordic Bronze Age cosmology, then a horse figure moving left and right ‘at the same time’ may indicate that the (sun-) horse could work both day and night.¹⁸

The find of “the Chariot of the Sun” in 1902 prompted Müller to conclude that it shed new light on spiritual life and religion in the distant past.¹⁹ It may seem strange that while “the Chariot of the Sun” was understood as embodying religious thoughts, the miniature art on the razors, including horse figures, was not considered as having any relation to religion. Seemingly, the concepts of art applied by Müller impeded him from including the pieces of miniature art on the bronzes into the sphere of religious or cosmological understanding. It is important to note that, for Müller, the horse figure of “the Chariot of the Sun” was considered as ‘real art’ or ‘high art’, a true plastic piece of sculpture in a classical sense. Even after the find of “the Chariot of the Sun”, Müller maintained the ideas of the meaninglessness of what he considered ‘decorative art’.²⁰

In the 1930s, interest in religious interpretations was increasing. For instance, Johannes Brøndsted of the National Museum of Denmark reached the conclusion that beliefs about the journey of the sun and its various means of transportation were significant features in Bronze Age iconography as expressed on the Late Bronze Age razors.²¹ Here, the idea of the sun being drawn by a divine horse across the heavens proliferated, and words like “sun-horse” and “sun ship” were employed. It is important to note that Brøndsted realized in 1938 that the horse and sun combination still maintained its meaning, even when the horse figure was heavily ornamentally transformed or stylized (Danish: “*Ret stærkt ornamentalt omdannet*”).²²

A corresponding interest was simultaneously shown in Germany in understanding the pictures on the bronzes as being of a religious nature. The interplay between ship and horse as the sun’s means of transport was in focus.²³ Jacob-Friessen’s work is an iconographical analysis of the motifs on some richly decorated razors from Niedersachsen, and the religious and mythological background for the pictures was then considered as obvious. He suggests that a comprehensive treatment of all the Danish decorated Late Bronze Age razors should give further insight into the mythology of the voyage of the sun.²⁴ In the works by

¹⁸ Kaul 2004.

¹⁹ Müller 1903, 303.

²⁰ Müller 1920; 1921.

²¹ Brøndsted 1938.

²² Brøndsted 1938, 95.

²³ Jacob-Friessen 1934; Sprockhoff 1936.

²⁴ Jacob-Friessen 1934, 375.