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Animals and animal depictions in the early Holocene of Northern Europe

Based on an antler adze with deer depictions

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Published in:

Tiere und Tierdarstellungen in der Archäologie

2017

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Larsson, L. (2017). Animals and animal depictions in the early Holocene of Northern Europe: Based on an antler adze with deer depictions. In V. Brieske, A. Dickers, & M. Rind (Eds.), *Tiere und Tierdarstellungen in der Archäologie: Beiträge zum Kolloquium in Gedenken an Torsten Capelle, 30.–31. Oktober 2015 in Herne* (pp. 63–73). (Veröffentlichungen der Altertumskommission für Westfalen Landschaftsverband Westfalen-; No. 22)..

Total number of authors:

1

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Tiere und Tierdarstellungen in der Archäologie

 **Aschendorff**
Verlag

**VERÖFFENTLICHUNGEN DER ALTERTUMSKOMMISSION FÜR WESTFALEN
LANDSCHAFTSVERBAND WESTFALEN-LIPPE**

BAND 22

**herausgegeben von
Aurelia Dickers**

Vera Brieske, Aurelia Dickers und Michael M. Rind (Hrsg.)

Tiere und Tierdarstellungen in der Archäologie

Beiträge zum Kolloquium
in Gedenken an Torsten Capelle,
30.–31. Oktober 2015 in Herne

 **Aschendorff**
Verlag

2017

Dieses Werk wurde mit Mitteln des Landschaftsverbandes Westfalen-Lippe realisiert.

Schriftleitung:

Vera Brieske

Redaktion und Lektorat:

Birte Reepen, Vera Brieske, Beverly Hirschel (engl. Beiträge)

Satz und Layout:

Birte Reepen

Umschlaggestaltung:

Barbara Schulte-Linnemann

Grafische Arbeiten:

Stefan Hofer

Für die Richtigkeit der Bild- und Textnachweise sind die Autoren verantwortlich.

Bibliographische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind im Internet unter <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

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Gesamtherstellung: Druckhaus Tecklenborg, Steinfurt

Schriften: Cala und TheSans

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier

ISBN 978-3-402-15010-8

Titelbild: Lascaux, Saal der Stiere (Foto: ©LABORATOIRE DE RECHERCHE DES MONUMENTS HISTORIQUES/D. Bouchardon).

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Animals and animal depictions in the early Holocene of Northern Europe

Based on an antler adze with deer depictions

Lars Larsson

Introduction

Unlike the situation on the Continent during the Upper Palaeolithic, depictions of animals are rare during the Mesolithic. In contrast, there are several examples that demonstrate the survival of the often ignored geometric depictions that existed at the same time as the cave paintings on the Continent¹.

An object of special interest as far as animal images in the early Holocene are concerned is a find from southernmost Sweden now in the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm, acquired in 1865 (SHM 3437) (**Fig. 1**). It is an object made of antler that was found close to the town of Ystad, in the southern coastal area of Scania in southernmost Sweden. Unfortunately, the precise location is not known. Given the local geology, antler would not have been well-preserved in dry conditions; its state of preservation therefore indicates that it was found in a bog, most probably during peat cutting, which was intensively practiced in the mid-19th century.

There are a number of bogs in the area around Ystad. The most plausible location is the Öja-Herrestad bog to the east of Ystad. During the early Mesolithic it was a lake, drained by a river that flowed into the sea a couple of kilometres further out than today. When the sea level rose in the late Mesolithic it became a lagoon and was later transformed into a bog when the sea level fell again and the lagoon was cut off from the Baltic Sea². Settlements from the late Mesolithic have been found

close to the former shoreline and out on former islands, and one small site has been excavated³.

The other bogs in the Ystad area are too small to have been used for more permanent settlement of hunter-gatherers, but they cannot be completely ruled out as places where a tool such as the one we are considering could be found. Indeed, a number of antler and bone artefacts have been found in bogs in southern Scandinavia without any connection to settlement sites.

The object in question was made from a cast-off red-deer antler – the rose wreath is still visible. It is in excellent condition (**Fig. 1**). The colour is almost the same as that of a modern antler. There are patches of darker colouring that were most probably caused by its preservation in peat. The preservation conditions, or perhaps the handling of the object when it was found, may have caused some small round, shallow depressions on the surface.

The only major damage to the object is a crack running from the perforation some five centimetres towards the edge. This crack occurred sometime after the decoration was added.

The decorated adze

The length of the object is 19.8 cm; it has an oval cross-section with a maximum width of 5.9 cm, and a hole to hold a shaft with a maximum diameter of 3 cm. The hole was made by perforation from both sides and is partly diagonal to the long axis. The edge is transversal to the perforation. Its shape indicates that the object must have been used as an adze.

1 MITHEN 1996; LEWIS-WILLIAMS 2002.

2 LARSSON 1991.

3 LARSSON 1986.



Fig. 1 The perforated adze found near the town of Ystad, in southernmost Sweden (Photo: A. Sjöström).

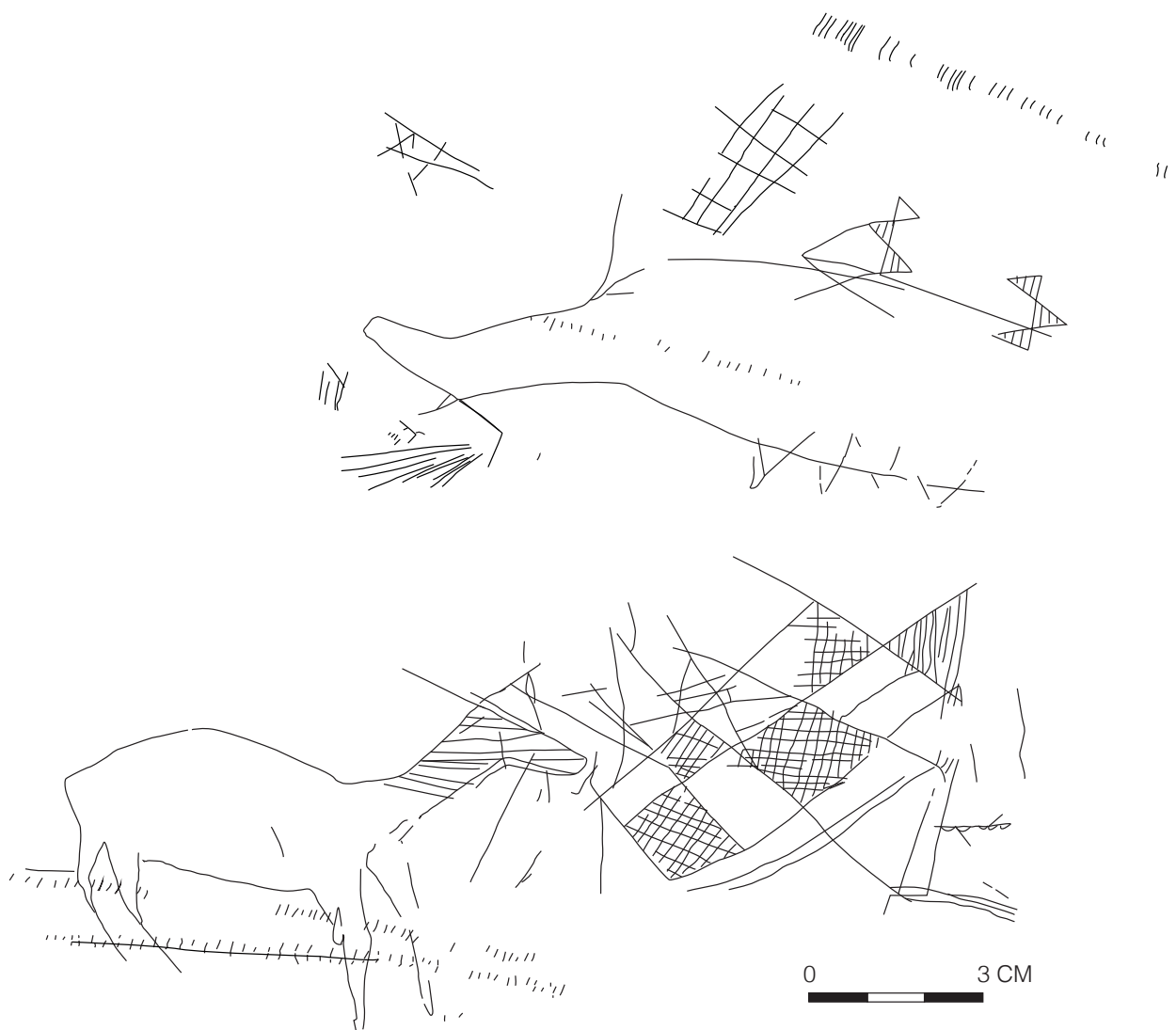


Fig. 2 The decoration on the antler adze (after CLARK 1975 with additions).

The edge is rounded and very smooth, without visible striations or splinters, suggesting that the adze was heavily used on soft material, such as for removing bark from trees or hoeing soft soil. The wear around the shaft-hole is further proof of its intensive use.

Most of the surface is nicely polished and it is decorated, which has made the object very well known. For example, Professor Grahame Clark, used it as the cover picture for his book “The Mesolithic Settlement of Northern Europe”⁴. The most obvious reason why this object has attracted so much attention is the portrayal of two animals. These should be interpreted as deer, most probably red deer. The entire body and legs of one animal are clearly drawn (Fig. 2), while the other animal is just sketched in to show the head, the line of the back and parts of the abdomen.

There are V-shaped marks on both animals’ heads, but these are not big enough to suggest that they are anything but an indication of their ears. Next to the head of the sketched animal is a group of diverging lines that could signify some form of antler crown. But these are very thin lines, unlike the carved lines of the animal’s body. This could mean that neither of the deer have antlers and might therefore imply that both are females, which do not have antlers. There is an old and widespread tradition in northern Scandinavia of hunter-gatherer rock art depicting elk without antlers. However, in some cases the “beard” of the male elk is shown but not the antlers. No typical body markings indicating the sex of the deer are visible on the adze. Red deer are relatively rarely depicted on rock carvings and most of the red deer are portrayed without antlers⁵. In accordance with accepted norms or rules, the big forest animals are mainly depicted without antlers. Red deer shed their antlers in late winter and new ones are fully grown by the following autumn.

In addition to the depictions of animals there are rows of short transverse lines and something resembling a chequerboard pattern with alternating hatched and empty rectangles. There are also similar patterns with triangles. Angles, which may have constituted continuous bands, also occur. And then there are other lines that do not seem to belong together (Fig. 2). The decoration on the adze was executed with variations in the depth and width of the incised lines. For example, the chequerboard and angular motifs consist of deeply incised lines while the ani-



Fig. 3 The edge of the adze with heavy wear from use and the depiction of a deer (Photo: A. Sjöström).

mals were drawn with thin and shallow lines. On the other hand, both the chequerboard motifs and the animal carvings appear to be of the same age since the head of one of the animals has a filling of parallel lines executed in a way that resembles the filled rectangles.

Decoration in at least two stages

Traces of wear on the edge show that the adze was used intensively (Fig. 3). The wear on the surface of the rose wreath on the neck of the adze indicates that it was probably used for a considerable length of time (Fig. 1). However, deliberate polishing of some of the decoration cannot be excluded.

The carving seems to have been done carelessly, with no need for accuracy. Not all the carving was done at the same time, as is clear from the way the different elements overlap each other in some cases. Careful scrutiny of the carving allows at least two different carving stages to be distinguished (Fig. 4). In the first stage, transverse lines and a presumed angle band (Fig. 5) were executed, while the deer and the chequerboard and triangular patterns were added at a later stage (Fig. 6). Some time passed, perhaps quite a long time, between the two stages, as indicated by the fact that the parts carved during the first stage are badly worn whereas the later additions are intact. The adze thus appears to have ended up in a wetland context shortly after it was decorated a second time.

As regards the publication of the carving, there are a number of differences in the various versions. The oldest illustration, in Montelius’ publication, is the most detailed but lacks most of the older, heavily weathered

4 CLARK 1936.

5 LØDDØEN/MANDT 2012.

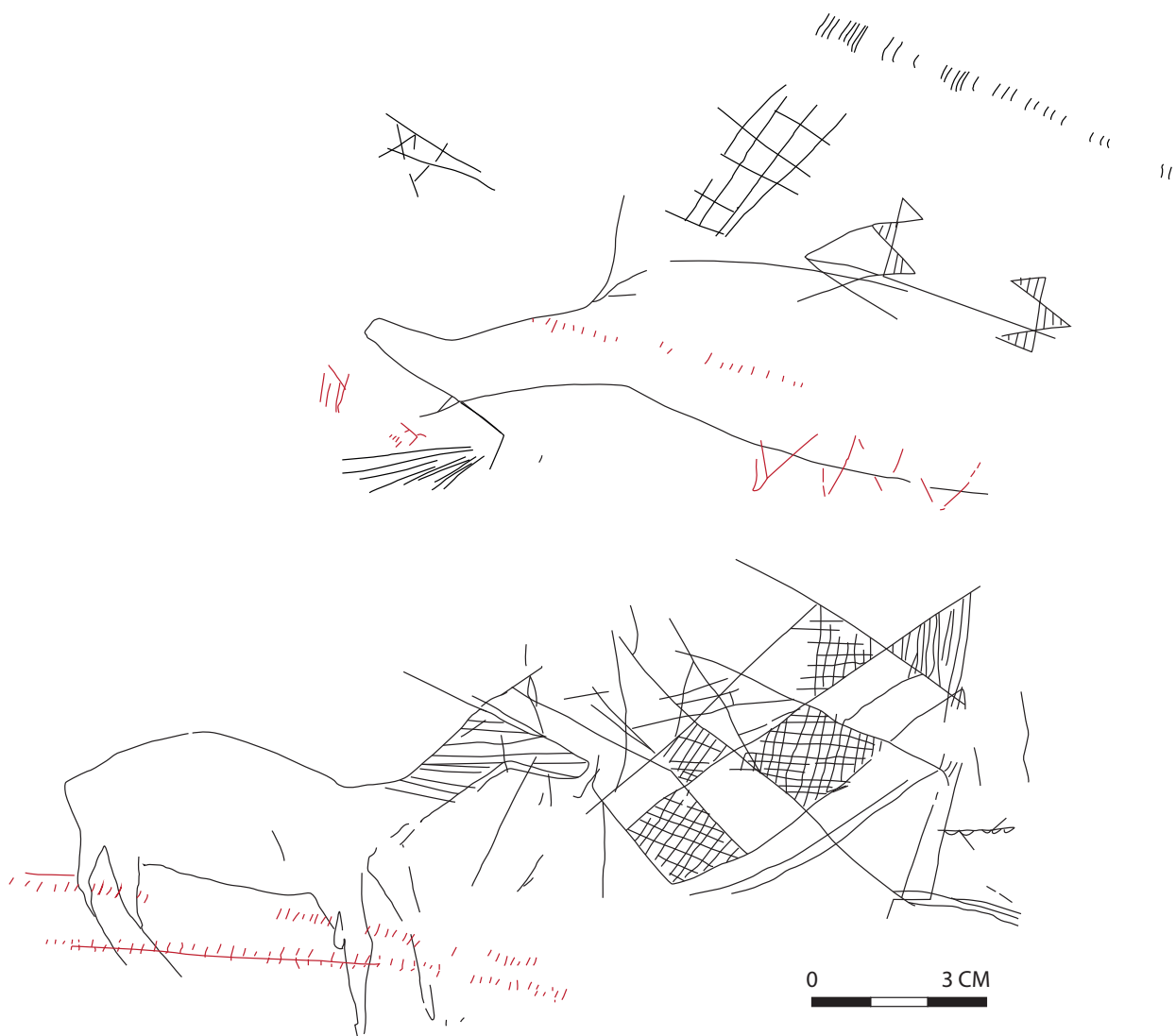


Fig. 4 At least two stages of decoration have been identified. Early decoration (red lines) and late decoration (black lines) (after CLARK 1975 with additions).

lines⁶. The illustration used by Clark lacks some of the motifs, such as a figure shaped like a broom between the animal heads and a cross motif under the abdomen of the sketched animal⁷. Nash indicates that there may have been a third deer in the carving, but nothing of the kind can be discerned⁸.

Another aspect that has not received attention previously is the distribution of polish. An area – broadest (3 cm) just below the shaft-hole and gradually narrowing almost down to the edge – remained unpolished and the rough surface of the antler is still visible (**Fig. 7**). The contrast between polished and unpolished

areas should also be seen as a kind of ornamentation, probably with a symbolic meaning. In order to mark the unpolished area, small lines perpendicular to the length axis were incised on one of the edges of the unpolished area.

Most of the decoration would only have been visible at close range. The intention might have been that no one but the owner or user of the object could observe the decoration. There are examples of decoration on Mesolithic antler artefacts having been rubbed with resin or coloured black with a charcoal mixture to emphasise the decoration more clearly⁹. However, there is no trace of any such marking on the object under consideration here.

6 MONTELIUS 1917, 42.

7 CLARK 1975, 153.

8 NASH 1998, 26.

9 MALMER/MAGNUSSON 1955.



Fig. 5 Earlier carving with weathered line and transverse lines (Photo: A. Sjöström).



Fig. 6 Carving with chequerboard pattern (Photo: A. Sjöström).



Fig. 7 Area without removal of the original surface, with an edge marked by short lines (Photo: A. Sjöström).

Geometric motifs have been found on several other objects made of bone and antler during the Mesolithic¹⁰. In certain cases, their execution is highly regular, but just as often we find the same seemingly careless depiction as on the adze from Ystad. The extent of the decoration can vary from all over the surface to just limited areas. There can also be variation in the size of the polished surface bearing the decoration. A small number of objects were decorated in two or more stages¹¹.

¹⁰ NASH 1998; PŁONKA 2003.

¹¹ PŁONKA 2003, Fig. 147.

Animal depictions on objects made of antler, bone and amber

A considerable number of hafted antler objects with decoration have been found in southern Scandinavia and northern continental Europe¹². However, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic representations are few.

Animals are rarely depicted on objects made of antler. Only one object depicts a quadruped. This is a tool with a shaft-hole from Åmosen in Zealand¹³. Unfortunately, the part of the object with the depiction is fragmented. Here, a four-legged animal is drawn with almost zigzag hatching (**Fig. 8**). Immediately below the animal are parts of what must be a human being, seemingly in the adorant posture. If the depictions of the animal and the human were intended to be on the same scale, the animal could be a roe deer. The surface of the object is decorated with zigzag motifs. On a perforated antler shaft from Szczecin-Grabowo, in north-west Poland, there is a depiction that is more like a deer than anything else (**Fig. 9**).

In some cases, objects with shaft holes were shaped to look like an animal's head, usually an elk, with the shaft-hole corresponding to an eye¹⁴ (**Fig. 10**). Another item that seems to depict an animal is a flat object that was found on the head of a man buried in a sitting position in Grave 14 in the late Mesolithic cemetery of Skateholm II in southernmost Sweden¹⁵. The top of this object, which was probably a form of hairpin, is shaped rather like the head of an animal with the hole marking an eye (**Fig. 11**).

A small number of objects bear depictions of fish. A fragmented object made of antler, with a shaft-hole, was found in Sjöholmen in central Scania: it is decorated with a number of parallel bands amongst other motifs. In the preserved part between the antler stem and a tine, a hatched motif might be classified as a fish, perhaps a pike¹⁶ (**Fig. 12**). There is a similar depiction of a fish on a small sandstone plate from a small bog site, Ageröd I:D, dating to the late Maglemose culture¹⁷. A similar shape can be distinguished among the ornaments on the cortex of a flint core from Holmegård V, Zealand¹⁸.

¹² NASH 1998; PŁONKA 2003.

¹³ BRINCH PETERSEN 1982.

¹⁴ KABACINSKI et al. 2011.

¹⁵ LARSSON 1984.

¹⁶ LARSSON 1978b.

¹⁷ LARSSON 1978a.

¹⁸ FISCHER 1975.

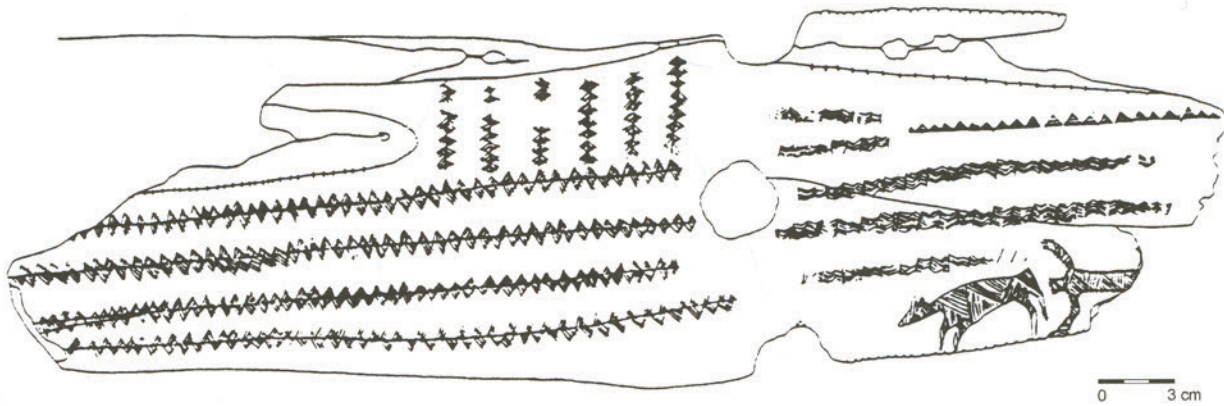


Fig. 8 Object with a shaft-hole, from Åmosen in Zealand, with a four-legged animal and fragments of a human-like figure (after PŁONKA 2003, Fig. 18).

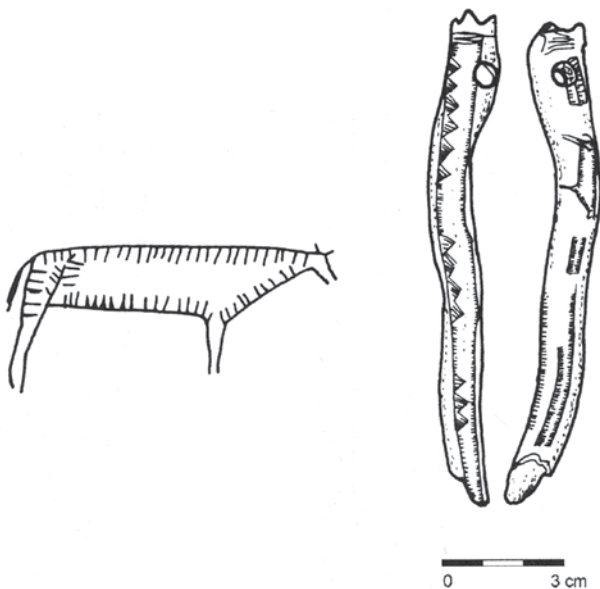


Fig. 9 An animal depicted on an object with a shaft-hole, from Szczecin-Grabowo in north-western Poland (after PŁONKA 2003, Fig. 15:3–4).



Fig. 10 An antler object with a shaft-hole; the upper part shaped like the head of an animal (after KABACINSKI et al. 2011, Fig. 6).

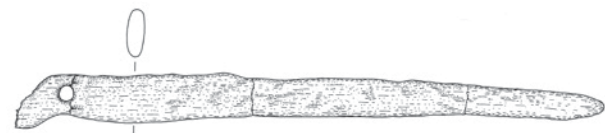


Fig. 11 An object made of bone, probably a hairpin; the upper part resembling an animal head. From Grave X, Skateholm II, southern Scania (Drawing: E. Koch).

The question is whether some of the motifs carved on decorated antler objects might be more or less abstract depictions of animals. The motif on the Sjöholmen object is partly hidden among the other decoration.

Mammals occur as figures carved out of amber. They have usually been interpreted as bears. Unfortunately, they are all stray finds, which makes their dating rather uncertain. On one of these, from Resen in Jutland, there is a decoration of the kind found on Mesolithic objects. A number of animals, classified as bears, elks and a bird, have been regarded as Mesolithic. An amber head, from Egemark in Zealand, displays considerable similarities to an elk, with the “beard” seen on male animals as mentioned above (Fig. 13). The whole object is decorated with zigzags. Similar decoration is evident on an amber elk from a settlement site at Weitsche in northern Germany, from a late phase of the Late Palaeolithic¹⁹. The amber animals resemble the many animal figures, both portable and depicted on cave walls, dating to the Upper Palaeolithic. The tradition arrived with early immigrants to Scandinavia, who settled in an area where amber ought to have been easy to obtain after the melting of the ice.

¹⁹ KABACINSKI et al. 2011; VIEL et al. 2012; VANG PETERSEN 2015.

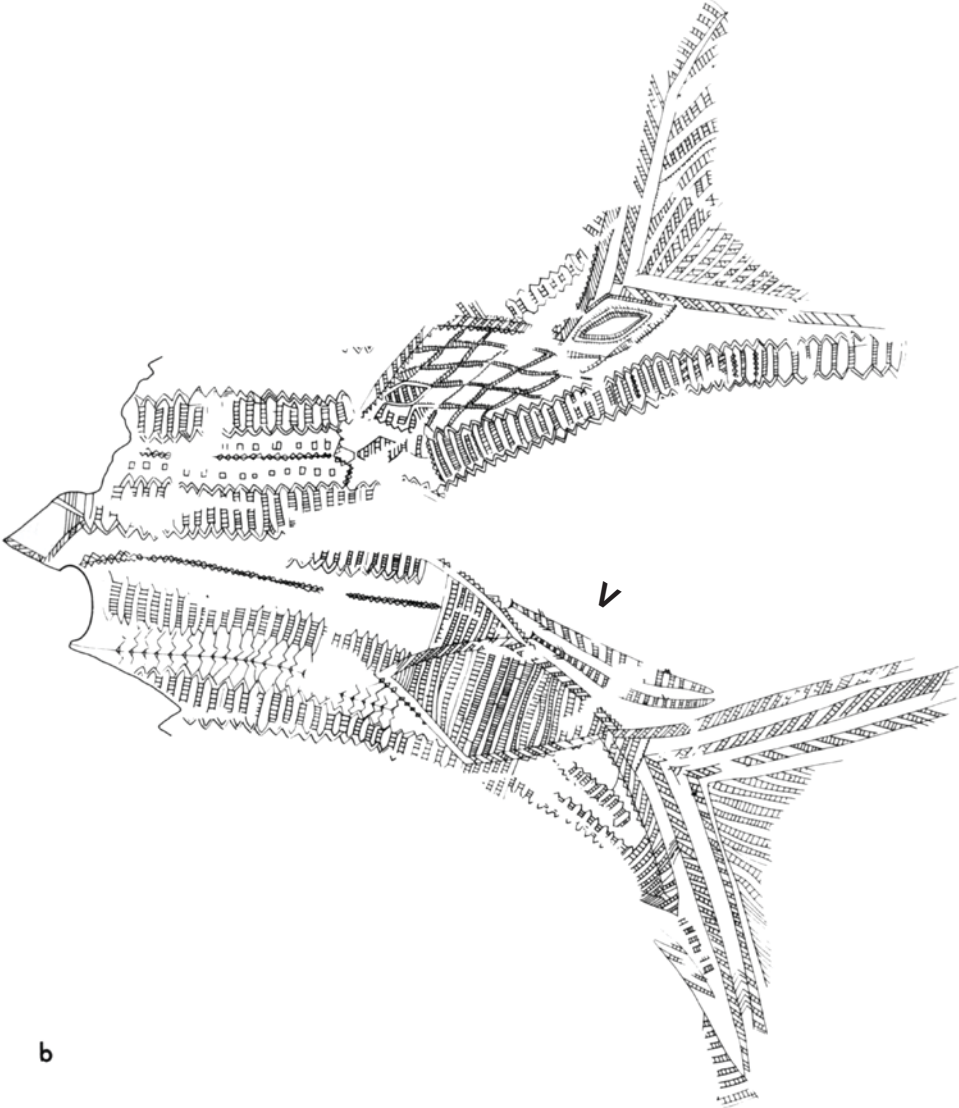
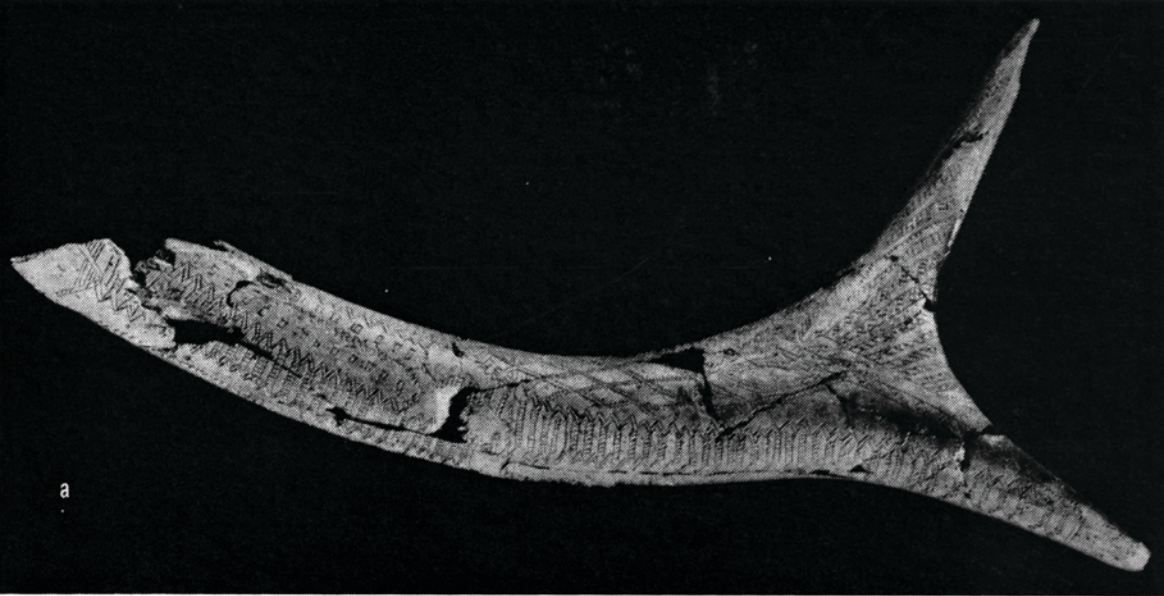


Fig. 12 A decorated object with a shaft-hole, from Sjöholmen in central Scania. In the part between the antler stem and a tine, a hatched motif that could perhaps be classified as a fish (marked with a V) (after LARSSON 1978b, Fig. 30).

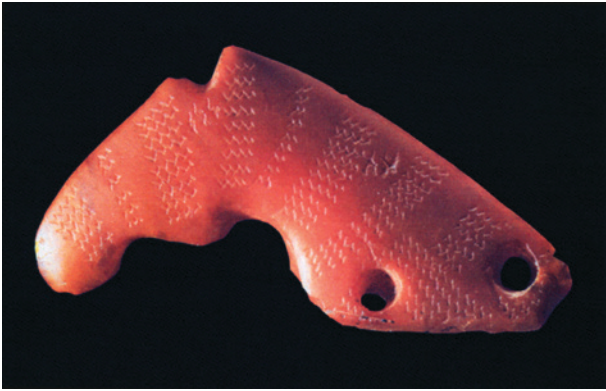


Fig. 13 An animal head, most probably a male elk, made of amber, from Egemark in Zealand (after KABACINSKI et al. 2011, Fig. 11).

At the beginning of the Mesolithic this form of animal depiction seems to have disappeared completely.

Anthropomorphic depictions are not frequent but they do occur more often than zoomorphic images. An example is the one from Åmosen that also has the depiction of an animal. Better known is the “Mesolithic family” drawn on an aurochs bone from Ryemarksgård in Denmark. The anthropomorphic images vary considerably in form and decoration technique²⁰.

Animal-human relationships

The deer figures on the Ystad adze show certain similarities to the numerous carvings of deer, elk and reindeer found in northern Scandinavia²¹. Some of these may also be of the same age as the Ystad adze. Just as with art as it is still practised today, images had symbolic features. The schematic rendering of the deer may have been entirely deliberate. In the world of ideas where they were formed, there were strong elements of shamanism, with beliefs involving close contacts between humans and their surroundings. Via trance, certain persons were supposed to take on animal form both factually and mentally²². The dividing lines between human and animal become blurred, as in the carvings. In several places in northern Europe skull roofs have been found, with antlers that may have been part of a shaman’s equipment²³. The place of deer antlers in rituals and ceremonies is also evident from the

²⁰ NASH 1998, 158.

²¹ HELSKOG 1988.

²² FUGLESTVEDT 2010; HARVEY/WALLIS 2016.

²³ CLARK 1954; Street 1989.



Fig. 14 Grave XI, Skateholm II, southern Scania. A number of antler stems are placed on the legs of a young male (Photo: L. Larsson).

way they were deposited in a roughly 7,000-year-old grave in Skateholm²⁴ (**Fig. 14**). The red deer can be regarded as the chief of the animals in the late Mesolithic forest, with which mental links were established to gain access to other resources of the forest. Red deer antlers can also be perceived as a symbol of rebirth since they grow again each year, and as a fertility symbol since they are the clearest gender marker of the male.

The other motifs are even more difficult to interpret. The fact that they occur on several carved objects indicates that their meaning was well known during the Mesolithic. It has been suggested that they may depict nets which were used not only to catch fish and birds but also big game. Nash writes that the chequerboard pattern and its similarity to the filling

²⁴ LARSSON 1984.

of one of the animal heads suggests a deliberate attempt to conceal the earlier animal images. It is clear that the patterns are carved to different depths, but no difference in wear between the animals and the chequerboard pattern can be discerned, so they must have been made with little difference in time²⁵.

In recent years, the discussion of hunting magic in hunter societies has been toned down. If we make comparisons with the beliefs found among hunter societies that still exist, or existed until recently, we see that magic is combined with hunting, but it is an integral part of a much more complex system of ideas. Could it be that hunting red deer was primarily significant for the ranking of men – that the procurement of food was less important²⁶? Perhaps one can see a parallel in today's elk hunting in northern Sweden with its noticeable impact on social life? Representatives of different institutions – church, municipality, business and school – take part in elk hunts.

It is particularly interesting that there are traces of wear on the decoration of the Ystad adze. They can hardly have been caused by use, because use wear occurs on the working edge. Perhaps it passed through many hands in an exchange system? The choice of motifs and the shape suggest that, like other objects, it belongs to a decorative idiom that was accepted by one or more tribes in, for example, Scania and Zealand. There was a social structure in which certain rules and norms were shared. Carved objects may have functioned as a link in the exchange of objects that were significant for ceremonies²⁷. The role of the object as a functioning implement may have been subordinate to its function as a cult object that was passed from one society to another in order to maintain and deepen the cohesion among the bands of settlers along the coasts of Scania and Zealand. Its intact state suggests that the adze was finally deposited in a wetland context as a ritual deposition.

The date of the antler adze

Like a significant number of other decorated objects made of antler and bone, the adze from Ystad is a find that cannot be associated with any occupation layer. But there are objects found in secure settlement contexts that provide a chronological foundation. Unfortunately, these provide uncertain guidance for the dating of this particular object. It has been

dated by scholars to an early phase of the Late Mesolithic²⁸, but it also has patterns that were carved on objects from later in the Mesolithic. A sample was therefore taken for radiometric dating and the result was 6555 ± 45 BP (LuS 11469), 5545–5475 cal. BC (1 sigma) and 5620 BC–5465 cal. BC (2 sigma). This means that the object can be dated to the later part of the Mesolithic, to the transition between the Kongemose culture and the Ertebølle culture. This must be considered a rather late date for an object of this kind.

Conclusions

The adze made of antler from the vicinity of Ystad, in southernmost Sweden, has proved to be interesting for several reasons. The depiction of two deer makes the adze unique as there are so few animal carvings on objects made of bone and antler from the Mesolithic in northern Europe. The fact that there is further decoration with geometric motifs that can be determined as having been carved on two separate occasions means that the object was probably used for a considerable length of time, and was perhaps handled by several people from different groups in southernmost Scandinavia. It is extremely unusual to be able to distinguish such clear differences in the time of carving. The fact that there is an unworked area between the polished and the carved areas of the surface also makes the object special. This Late Mesolithic object thereby displays several distinctive features, which illuminate in different ways the relation between object, subject and society.

Professor Torsten Capelle was an old friend of mine who had close connections with the Department of Archaeology in Lund. He often visited us during his stays at the cottage outside Landskrona in southern Sweden. In some cases, it was just for a chat but often it was in order to present ideas about the research that was of current interest to him. He especially enjoyed discussions with Ph.D. students who regarded him not as an international authority but as a scholar testing new ideas.

My theme is not in line with what Professor Capelle used to study. However, he was a scholar with many interests, and during our meetings we used to discuss aspects of prehistory that could be far from his ordinary view of research. It would not have surprised me one bit if he had provided some new ideas about the topic I have presented.

25 NASH 1998, 26.

26 MITHEN 1990.

27 NASH 1998.

28 PŁONKA 2003.

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