

# Prehistoric Pictures – Their Context and Function

PAPERS PRESENTED AT A SYMPOSIUM IN LUND, 9–10 MAY 2008

On two sunny spring days in May 2008, about two dozen researchers and doctoral students gathered for a two-day symposium at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at Lund University.

The idea to arrange the symposium emerged from the notion that within archaeology, various research traditions on the interpretation of pictures had developed, traditions which work quite independently of each other, resulting in specific research traditions for different periods. For example, the Bronze Age rock carvings are often discussed with respect to their placing in the landscape, and in connection with religion, cosmology and ritual (see e.g. Fredell 2003; Milstreu 2004). In contrast, the pictures from the Iron Age and especially the Viking Age have largely been studied with an iconographical approach. The question “Who and what is depicted?” has been of central importance. In other words: How can the figures be identified with the help of the written sources? With the exception of some individual scholars, there has been little reflection on theory and method in research on pictures.

Meanwhile, however, there are some younger researchers who work with new perspectives in the field of Iron Age pictures. Influenced by the broad movement of post-processual archaeology, which brought along a renewed interest in the thinking and the world-views of past people, and an opening towards theories from the social sciences and humanities, research on pictures has become popular again in recent years among doctoral

students in prehistoric archaeology, not least in Lund.

In Germany there has always been a strong interest in Vendel and Viking Age depictions. On the one hand, research was carried out by archaeologists whose works are still strongly influenced by the typological method and the reluctance to interpret the depictions. On the other hand, philologists and scholars of “Germanische Altertumskunde” in Bonn, Göttingen, Kiel and Munich took their point of departure in the Nordic medieval written sources, and tried to trace the mythological accounts and heroic sagas narrated in these texts back to earlier times, and thereby find proof of their antiquity in the prehistoric pictures. In this perspective, pictures have an auxiliary function only. As in the field of prehistoric archaeology, some younger researchers have now brought new perspectives and results.

Within other disciplines such as ancient history, Egyptology and art history there is a methodological and theoretical discussion about the interpretation of pictures, which seems highly relevant, but which has not really influenced prehistoric archaeology so far.

The aim of the symposium was therefore to bring younger researchers from Scandinavia and Germany together with established scholars who have been conducting research on prehistoric pictures for a long time. We chose to put a chronological emphasis on the Late Iron Age (Vendel Period and Viking Age). Speakers from other disciplines than prehistoric archaeology were invited to present their theoretical and methodological approaches.

In preparing the symposium, we had noticed that all the newer approaches no longer only looked at the pictures themselves, but focused on aspects of the social contexts of the pictures, too.

Eva Rystedt's paper took a closer analysis of Bronze Age and Iron Age chariot imagery traditions in Greece as a starting point to deal critically with the traditional assumption that similar pictures in different cultural areas must mean the same thing. Is there really a transfer of the original meaning of the depictions?

In her lecture "Communication and Distinction – The Use of Semiotics and Social Theory in Interpreting Figural Art of the Early La Tène Iron Age", Jennifer Bagley presented a model of how to use semiotics and social theory in interpreting figural art of the early La Tène Iron Age.<sup>1</sup> As there are no contemporary written sources from the region, she focused on the objects and their find contexts, mainly graves. Not only the pictures themselves, but also the objects and graves can be seen as signs and means of communication. Their patterns and structures are thought to mirror societal distinctions.

Other papers examined the relation between the picture and the object bearing the picture. Elisabeth Rudebeck's paper "Beautiful Co(i)n Men in a Long-term Perspective" dealt with the role of the male body in the justification of power, particularly exemplified by the symbolic function of coins with ruler portraits from different areas of Europe during more than a thousand years.<sup>2</sup> She argued that coins became models for other material images of ideal masculinity. They were used as amulets and carried as jewels, in containers, and sewn on to (or into) the dress. From the metaphorical language in Old Norse written sources it seems probable that coin portraits also inspired narratives about beautiful and magnificent rulers.

In her paper "Depictions of Humans in the Vendel and Viking Ages: Their Contexts

and Functions", Michaela Helmbrecht presented a semiotic approach to objects with pictures, combined with a biographical perspective. Perceiving pictures as means of communication, the contexts of pictures from the Vendel Period and Viking Age can give important clues for the understanding of their functions.<sup>3</sup>

One specific art style or stylistic variation in space can be seen as an expression of cultural identity (Ileana Stanculescu; Johan Callmer), while a long-term perspective on the animal style reveals insights into continuities and discontinuities in the association of meaning along quite different sources and media (Maria Domeij).

Some outstanding examples of Viking Age craftsmanship were the topic of two other papers. Michael Neiß's paper focuses on quality aspects on Viking Age silver brooches, which encompass not only craftsmanship and material, but also symbolic values. Jörn Staecker presented a new interpretation of the pictorial programme of the Bamberg and Cammin shrines: "The Bamberg and Cammin Shrines – Decoding Viking Art" (see Staecker 2007).

Dealing with the "guldgubber" of the Vendel Period, Sharon Ratke combined various iconographical and functional interpretations which do not necessarily exclude each other.

Several papers dealt with images that were ascribed some sort of magic, amuletic or religious power and even the ability to act. "The Egyptian Conception of Pictures" is a clear example of this (Nadja Braun), and glimpses of a similar perception of pictures are visible in Nordic material too (Michaela Helmbrecht).

The final discussion brought up some major issues that had been touched upon repeatedly during the symposium. One urgent question is how we can make assumptions about the contexts and the functions of the pictures if we do not know their iconographic meanings. It became obvious that the interpretation with the help of written sources is still

one central method, but the need for more methodological awareness in an interdisciplinary approach was clearly emphasized.

There was furthermore general agreement that “context” needs to be defined when it is to be analysed, as the term has been used with widely varying meanings within prehistoric archaeology. And, as with context, what is “meaning” when it comes to pictures? There seems to be a general consensus that the terminology must be refined here, too. Furthermore, what facets of “context” are visible to us today, what is lost, and how do we deal with source criticism?

Some approaches applied a long-term perspective and compared a selection of outstanding examples, while other approaches looked at specific historical situations, considering as much available material of a defined area as possible. The approaches are therefore so disparate that it is difficult to summarize the symposium as a whole. It has, however, become obvious that a renewed trend in the research on prehistoric pictures has developed. The social and societal dimensions of pictures, and not only their iconographical interpretation, are now at the centre of research, that hopefully can give inspiration and make contributions to other disciplines as well.

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## Notes

- 1 Jennifer Bagley’s paper will be published as a part of her forthcoming doctoral dissertation at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München.
- 2 Her lecture was a summary of ongoing research within The Swedish Research Council project “Engendering Central Places”, conducted by scholars at the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Lund University.
- 3 Michaela Helmbrecht’s paper will be published as part of her doctoral dissertation at Lund University.

## References

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