

# THE SACRED MUSHROOM IN SCANDINAVIA

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All known examples of a remarkable Bronze Age Scandinavian religious motif are brought together for direct comparison, including those which have a dubious claim to membership in the set. These latter are dismissed on various grounds, leaving those which have a probability approaching certainty of being related. Attention is drawn to two recently discovered Swedish petroglyphs. These both link the motif, heretofore found exclusively on bronze razors, to the main body of the religious symbols of the period and provide additional evidence of the unsatisfactory nature of prior identifications. Occam's razor is utilised to propose that the motif is what it appears to be—a mushroom. An hypothesis, based on known activities of neighbouring cultures and recent ethnobotanical findings, is advanced to explain the appearance of a mushroom in a ritual context. A Swedish folk practice which may be an attenuated form of such a mushroom ritual is described.

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## I

In Sweden, Norway, and Denmark there are rock carvings that are the product of a rich religious tradition. They are found largely in agricultural areas and usually close to the sea. These petroglyphs are the product of the Bronze Age culture of the region although they have Neolithic antecedents (Stenberger 1962: 99). Contemporaneous with the formation of these engravings, many of the same motifs appear on bronze objects often found as grave goods, particularly flat, wide bladed razors. Analysis of the motifs suggests strongly that they were symbols of a religion which had as its main theme worship of the sun and that they were engraved as part of the ritual of this worship (Gelling & Davidson: 1969).

The motifs range from abstract symbols to representational figures, the latter somewhat schematised in rock but often highly embellished in the more plastic bronze medium. Amongst these motifs the ship-figure is particularly noteworthy. It seems to occupy a central position in the ritual as the vehicle by which the sun, after being drawn westward by horses across the sky by day, returns to the east. The ship often serves as a setting for other symbols, indicating the religious nature of the subject in much the same way that a cartouche indicates the royal nature of the Egyptian hieroglyphs within it. Thus we find snakes, fish, men brandishing axes, horses, birds, wheel crosses, and many other figures within the ship setting. Each of these has been placed more or less securely in the mythic framework that has survived the intervening millennia.

One of the least securely placed is a curious motif occurring on seven bronze razors found in Denmark (fig. 1), on two rock carvings in Åby, Bohuslän, Sweden (fig. 3) and on a hanging vessel found in Öland, Sweden, now in the Kalmar Museum (fig. 4). The razors have been dated to Periods IV and V of the Bronze Age (Althin 1945: 221; Sprockhoff 1954: 87), somewhere between 1100 B.C. and 700 B.C. The rock carvings (Fredsjö 1967) are in the 'rich' style of Marstrander (Marstrander 1963: 457) and are, therefore, probably contemporaneous with the razors.

The rock carvings at Åby are situated near one another on a sloping rock face.

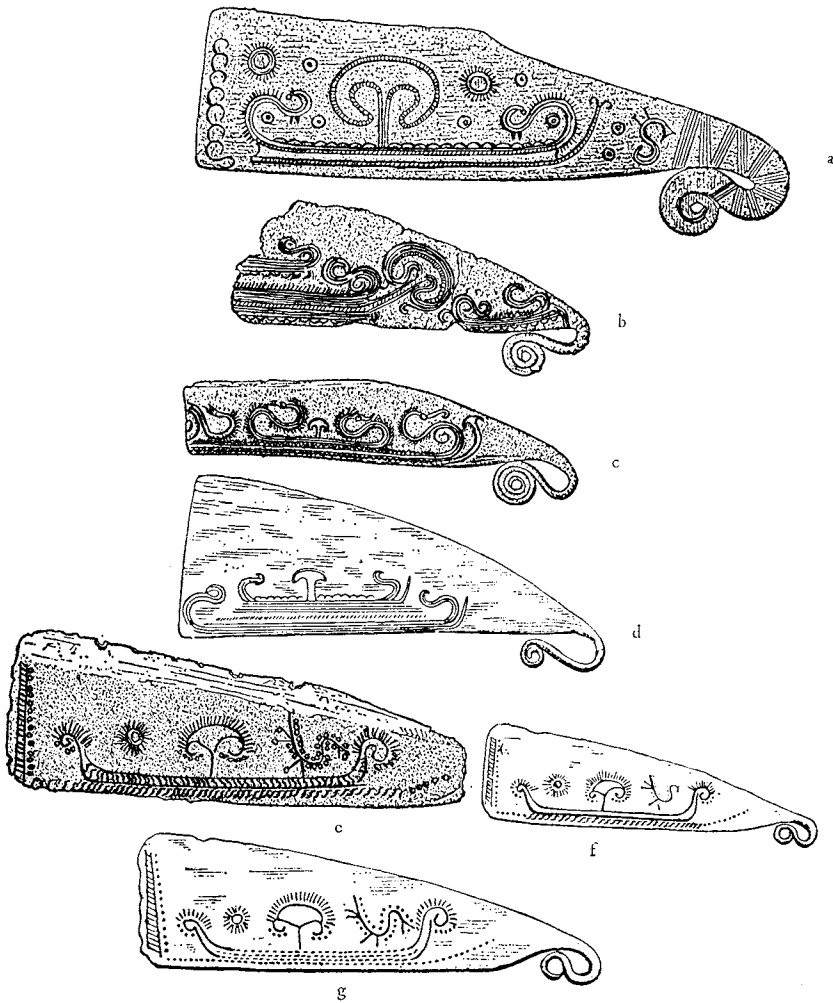


FIGURE 1. All known examples of the mushroom motif on bronze razors: *a*, Honum, Skanderborg; *b*, provenance unknown; *c*, Abkaer Mark, Hadersleben; *d*, provenance unknown; *e*, Vandling, Hadersleben; *f*, Hadersleben; *g*, Nustrupfeld, Nordschleswig.

They are accompanied by other ship figures, a wheel cross, a complex spiral, and several male figures. Both of the ships contain, in addition to 'crew strokes', a principal human shape with arms upraised in a worshipful manner, two objects on poles, and the object discussed in this article. The objects on poles are being held by members of the crew and have been identified as spears (Gelling & Davidson 1969: 135). It is to be noted, however, that the shafts continue through the top of the putative spear point, as well as appearing through its body, that there are two distinct shapes only one of which is pointed, and that both carvings show a size difference between the examples. They really appear like loops, perhaps of rope, suspended from the tops of shafts. The shape with which we are primarily concerned is being held in one case by a well delineated human figure. In the other,

it may be held by a crew stroke or may be free standing—it is difficult to tell which.

These carvings allow us to do two things. We can now firmly place this motif in the main body of cult images used by the Scandinavian rock carvers. Heretofore we were dependent solely on the rather dubious example of the 'standing double spiral' (fig. 2*d*) to forge the link to the image found on bronze razors. More importantly perhaps, we may use this additional evidence to aid in the identification of the object.

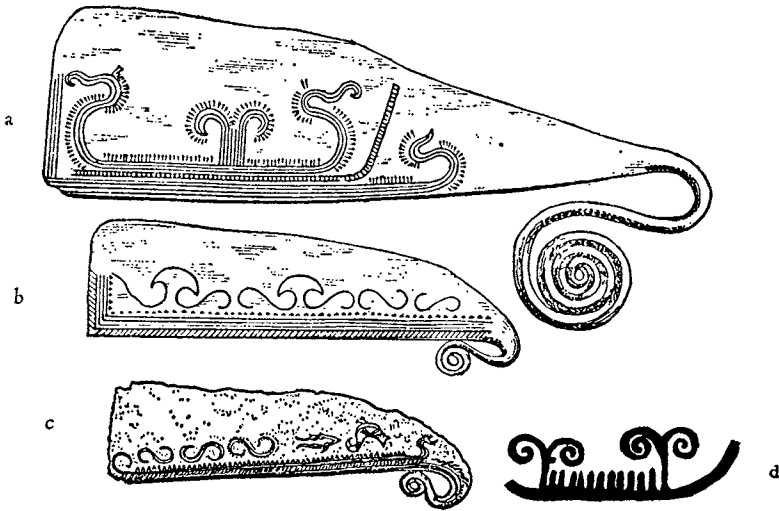


FIGURE 2. Similar Motifs: *a*, Denmark; *b*, Gröstorp, Skåne; *c*, Skåne; *d*, Bohuslän.

Part of the problem of identification is that the sample is small and there has been a tendency to include within the class anything that appears remotely similar in shape. Theories must then be stretched to include erroneous evidence. As new evidence accumulates, we begin to enjoy the luxury of discarding data that do not fit or, at least, placing them in another category. The first to be excluded is the razor from Gröstorp, Skåne (fig. 2*b*), originally included by Althin but ignored by Sprockhoff and others. First, it does not appear within a ship setting unless the ship is schematised beyond recognition. Second, there are repetitions of the figure. In all other cases, only one shape is shown. Third, none of the motifs in fig. 1 has complex curves; all are supported on distinctly straight stems. Fourth, not all the s-shapes are joined; the two on the right are isolated. Lastly, it is similar to the twin horse motif (Sprockhoff 1954: 77 sqq.) shown in fig. 2*c* with the addition of an arc connecting the two s-shapes. Only a religious and artistic pun, conjoining multiple symbols, could be advanced as reason for its inclusion.

Excluded also must be the form which Sprockhoff (1954: 87) calls a 'standing double spiral.' This appears on the rock carving first collected by Baltzer (1881) (fig. 2*d*) as well as a bronze razor first published by Madsen (1872), and clearly lacks the concave-downward, surmounting arc of all the others. Obviously it would have been simple to add to the easily worked bronze, had it been thought

necessary. The new rock-carvings (fig. 3) show, even in the difficult medium of rock, that it was necessary. Whether this other symbol depicts a 'twin-tree' or a schematic 'twin-horse' motif (Sprockhoff 1954: 84; Gelling & Davidson 1969: 135) is moot. It clearly does not belong to the class under consideration.

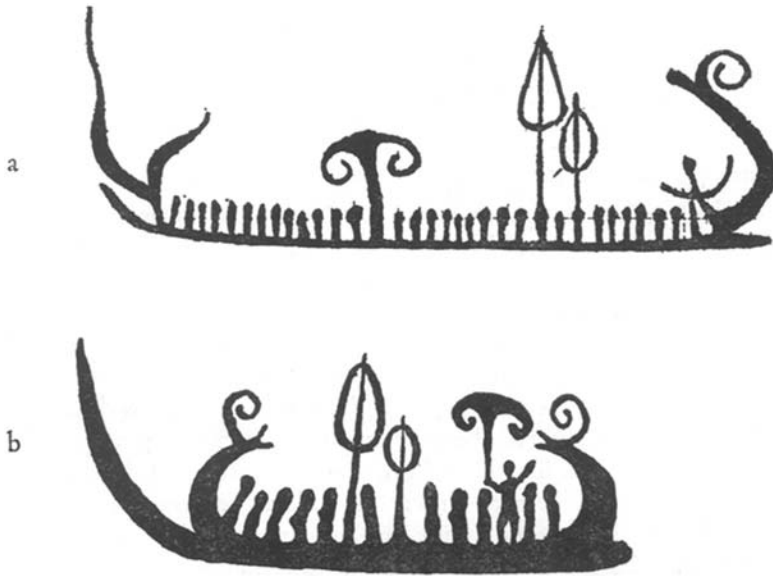


FIGURE 3. The mushroom motif in rock-carvings: a, b, Åby, Bohuslän.

Having made this exclusion, it still remains to discuss the other identifications of this shape, none of which has been convincingly made.

It was first described as a sail, or rather a bush used as a sail (Schuchhardt 1918), although there is no evidence that the Bronze Age Scandinavian sea-farers used anything more elaborate than paddles to propel their boats. Recently a boat has been built of the design appearing in the petroglyphs and found to be relatively seaworthy (Johnstone 1972). Part of the experiment showed that a bush *could* function as a sail, although, obviously, that is no proof that it, in fact, did. The Åby carving, showing a man holding the object (fig. 3b), removes this explanation for good and all from contention. As Althin notes (1945: 217), this interpretation never gained much acceptance. No sail could possibly function without proper support and there is no way to explain a reverential attitude towards a sail. In general, those attempts to understand motifs such as this solely from a utilitarian view miss the essential point of the obvious symbolic character of the depictions.

Many have thought the motif to be symbolic of a tree, perhaps the world-tree of northern myth which held up the heavens (Hoernes 1917: 35; Wilke 1919: 158-162; Almgren 1934: 12; Gelling & Davidson 1969: 132). This was rejected by Althin (1945: 218) on the grounds that trees were portrayed in an entirely different manner. The new carvings make clear that we are not dealing with extreme stylisations of boughs, which interpretation was possible as long as the 'standing

double spiral' was included in our evidence. Also, it is hard to understand why the world-tree, with all its associations of stability and massiveness, would be held in the air in one hand, even in effigy.

The blade of a cult-hatchet has been offered as an identification of the shape (Schwantes 1939: 20). One can see that the blade would have an unusual orientation, totally unexpected from what is known of the rock carvings. Where a known axe is depicted, it is always shown with a handle. Never is a blade shown by itself, let alone pointing skywards. In addition, the new carvings show the blade-like area to be much too thin, even for a non-useable cult object.

## II

If it is none of these things and if we have excluded examples which point towards a stylised horse, then what is it? On the simple principle that something is what it looks like, it must be identified as the effigy of a mushroom. Both Sprockhoff and Gelling have called it 'mushroom-shaped,' but have sought elsewhere for an explanation (Sprockhoff 1954: 83, 86; Gelling & Davidson 1969: 135). This situation brings to mind the mushroom stones of Mesoamerica. Carl Sapper was the first, in 1898, to call them 'mushroom-shaped' figurines. From his day, as the Wassons told the story in 1957, 'all archaeologists knew these artifacts as "mushroom stones," but not one has ever come to grips with the possibility that they represent what they look like. Indeed it is customary to set off the designation in inverted commas and the learned writers often add a safety clause expressly saying that of course the designation is only one of convenience' (Wasson & Wasson 1957). This may be because, until recently, little notice has been taken in the archaeological literature of the role played by hallucinogenic mushrooms in the religion of cultures the world over. Many Indian tribes of Mexico (Wasson 1961; Schultes 1969) and various groups of central and northern Eurasia (Wasson 1971; Eliade 1972: 220 sqq.) are shown to have used hallucinogenic mushrooms in religious ritual. In addition, the same mushroom used by the Paleosiberians has been, convincingly for many, identified as the Soma of the Rg-Veda (Wasson 1971). Since there are these precedents for the important ritual position of mushrooms, may we not postulate a use of the divine mushroom in Scandinavia as well?

In the case of two of the mushrooms (figs. 1a and 1b) engraved on razors and the examples on the hanging vessel (Fig. 4), there are details which indicate structures on the surface of the cap. They are qualitatively different from those rays emanating from the mushrooms of figs. 1e, f, and g, which seem to indicate brightness. In all cases they are placed on the cap and appear to depict cells or spots. They are not general ornamentation—they stop at the top of the stalk or stipe of fig. 1a and are only on the top surface of fig. 1b and fig. 4. Could they represent the white patches that appear on the brilliant red surface of the cap of *Amanita muscaria*? All the examples suggest a rounded, almost spherical, cross-section with an incurved pileus. One of the rock carvings suggests a prominent umbo. These characteristics are consistent with *A. muscaria* in all but its latest mature stage. Three of the depictions (figs. 1a, 1b and 4) clearly show a hollow stem. Two of these (figs 1b and 4) have markings which suggest that the hollows contain something. It is the case that the stipes of *A. muscaria* are indeed hollow and



FIGURE 4. The mushroom motif with zoomorphs. Bronze hanging vessel, Öland, Sweden.

that they are often, especially towards the base, loosely packed with fibres. One representation (fig. 1b) shows curving, dependent structures coming off the pileus at its lower edges. This is precisely where the remnants of the universal veil of *A. muscaria* are often seen. *A. muscaria* abound in Scandinavia and we possess reliable testimony that the Inari reindeer Lapps once made use of these hallucinogens in their shamanic performances. It is certain that *A. muscaria* was at least as common in Stone and Bronze Age Scandinavia as it is today. It grows in mycorrhizal relationship with *all* species of the genus *Betula* and most species of *Pinus*. It has been found in association with *Abies*, *Larix* and *Picea* (Ramsbottom 1953: 204). Exceptionally, it has been found with oak and chestnut. The two primary hosts, *Betula* and *Pinus* have wide distribution in Europe and Asia (Wasson 1971: 154 sqq.) and *A. muscaria* has been found everywhere they grow. It is, therefore, axiomatic that a favourable habitat for the hosts is favourable for the mushroom as well. Pollen analyses in northwestern Europe, and particularly Sweden, show that from the end of the last glaciation *Betula* and *Pinus* have been remarkably abundant. From the time the ice sheet retreated until Periods IV and V of the Bronze Age, *Betula* constituted between 90 per cent. and 13 per cent. of the forest population. *Pinus* shows the same range. About 1000 B.C. *Betula* averages 33 per cent. over all of Sweden and *Pinus* 41 per cent. Furthermore, *Betula* and *Pinus* populations have a fascinating inverse relationship. When climatic conditions are such that birches decrease in number, pines increase and vice-versa. This means that the total of the two, in any one region of Sweden, has remained at a constant and high level through the entire postglacial period, regardless of climate. In most areas they have amounted to 70–90 per cent. of all trees in the forest for nine millennia (Von Post 1946: 196, 197, 200, 201, 211). Neither the world wide thermal maximum which culminated c. 3000 B.C., nor the climatic ‘deterioration’ which followed, had any real effect on the combined numbers of birch and pine. *A.*

*muscaria* has thus been assured an amazingly constant and plentiful supply of hosts of which it inevitably would have taken advantage.

Finally, one must not be put off by the relative size of man and mushroom in fig. 3*b*. There are numerous examples of petroglyphs of easily recognised objects which have been exaggerated for emphasis or have been portrayed much larger than life size.

Although it is difficult to trace many of the motifs down to historic times, there is one intriguing, if oblique, reference in northern folk-custom to mushrooms. It is a Swedish custom, practised until fairly recently, which is part of the festival of the Midsummer Fires. On St John's Eve, after the kindling of what was known as Baldr's Balefire, the 'spectators cast into the flames a kind of toad-stool (Bäran)<sup>1</sup> in order to counteract the powers of the trolls and other evil spirits.' (Frazer 1966: 172).

Thus, the evidence in bronze and rock suggests that a component of the sun-centred religion of the Bronze Age north was a mushroom cult, utilising the psychotropic properties of the fungus for ritual purposes. These practices, still maintained by other northern groups into this century, died out, as did so much in Scandinavia, by the early Iron Age.

#### NOTES

The author is indebted to Mrs Gillian Bottomley for graciously allowing him to present her drawings of the Åby carvings, to Mr R. Gordon Wasson and Professor Michael Coe for advice and encouragement, and to Mr Peter Gelling for appreciated help.

<sup>1</sup> Frazer was accurate but not complete in his transcription of this account. He neglected to include a subordinate clause after the word *Bäran*: 'so named after certain emissaries of Satan' (Lloyd 1870: 265). Without this clause, Frazer's entry makes it appear as if *Bäran* might be the specific, if local, name of the mushroom used. Obviously the word refers to the mushroom as the representation of a spirit, for which it is a surrogate, stand-in or embodiment.

There are two words, related to the verb *bära* (English *bear*; O.N. *baera*; O.S., O.G. and O.E. *beran*; Dutch *beren*) which are used in this sense. *Bäraren* (the bearer) was a ball of yarn into which a man would drop some blood from a finger on which he had made a slight cut. This signified that he had given his soul to the devil, in return for which, the 'bearer' would bring prosperity to his house. Another related word, *bjära*, is the term for a kind of troll, formed of various material and brought to life through certain manipulations by its owner. The troll worked for its owner by bringing to him milk and butter from other people's cows (Wassén 1974).

It seems that we are dealing with a related usage in this instance, destroying the evil spirit by destroying the mushroom in the flames. It is still interesting to contemplate how a mushroom could become in the peasant mind a personification of an evil spirit.

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