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Professor Kristian Kristiansen

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# BRONZE AGE VOYAGING AND COSMOLOGIES IN THE MAKING: THE HELMETS FROM VIKSØ REVISITED

*Helle Vandkilde*

*Abstract: The twin helmets from Viksø open a window into a Bronze Age world of cosmological and corporeal journeying while also shedding light on shape-changing, human-animal hybrids, and the cult and making of heroes in southern Scandinavia.*

*Keywords: helmets, masks, hybrids, heroes, cults, death, cosmology, mythical and epic cycles, re-enactment and transformation, journeys, sea, water, beliefs, netherworld*

*And Meriones gave to Odysseus a bow and a quiver and a sword, and about his head he set a helm wrought of hide, and with many a tight-stretched thong was it made stiff within, while on the outside the white teeth of a boar of gleaming tusks were set thick, to and fro, well and cunningly, and on the inside was fixed with a lining of felt. This helmet Autolykos on a time stole out of Eleon when he had broken into the stout-built house of Amyntor, son of Ormenus; and he gave it to Amphidamas of Cythera to take to Scandeia, and Amphidamas gave it to Molos as a guest-gift, but he gave it to his own son Meriones to wear; and now, being set thereon, it covered the head of Odysseus.*

*(Murray 1946: Iliad X: 260-71)*

The boar tusk helmet that was put on Odysseus' head prior to a nightly spying expedition into the Trojan camp was by then an outstanding piece of war gear because of the epic genealogy inseparable from the helmet itself. Despite the rich array of weaponry metal finds from the Nordic Bronze Age, there are remarkably few helmets. The paired helmets from Viksø – dating to Period IV, c. 1200/1100-1000 BC and thus broadly contemporaneous with the Homeric situation – are fairly unique. They are indeed special objects in their own right (Fig. 1), as testified by the keen interest they have attracted since their recovery from a bog at Viksø, north-west of Copenhagen, Zealand in 1942. Like the Mycenaean boar tusk helmet, they must have formed a part of rich narratives and taken pride of place among the accoutrements of warriors fighting and proving their valour, but they were so much more than that. To pinpoint the nature of this amorphous category of 'more' I will reconsider the properties of the two helmets and their cultural contexts, where the association with ships may be especially noted. It is proposed that the answer to the question of the function of the Viksø helmets might be found both in the realm of warfare and sea travel and in the ritual practices of religious beliefs.

The fact that they occur as a pair is surely significant and has together with similar paired representations given rise to the notion of twin gods in several of Kristian's writings. His varied authorship has furthermore put much emphasis on travelling. My contribution pays tribute to both these interests, by suggesting that the twins should be understood not as gods but as semi-divine heroes able to travel between worlds. I shall furthermore argue that by the Late Bronze Age a hero cult had been established.

## **Bronze Age research – the Viksø helmets and beyond**

The helmets<sup>1</sup> were discovered during peat cutting in Brøns Mose at Viksø (Veksø), which forms part of a wider wetland area in north-eastern Zealand along the River Værebrosø, from which

numerous prehistoric offerings are known. The National Museum immediately undertook a rescue excavation that brought to light fragments of the helmets and additional pieces of pottery and wood. It was stated that the bronze objects had been recovered at a level c. 70 cm below the topsoil. The find was published by Norling-Christensen (1946a-b). He suggested that at least one helmet had been standing on an ash wood tray (or shield), but according to the archival report, the radiocarbon dates of the wooden remains thought to have derived from the so-called tray are much older than the helmets. According to the original descriptions of the peat workers, the collected sherds from a storage pot occurred at a level above the helmets and are perhaps not to be associated with them. A nineteenth-century map suggests that the 'Brøns Mose' bog was a pond or a lake in the Bronze Age; a northern extension of the present lake Løged Sø (Fig. 2). Even the overall place name 'Viksø' suggests open water: after deposition, the helmets were not likely to have been retrievable.

Even prior to discovery of the Viksø helmets debates raged about Bronze Age religion. Almgren's (1927) seminal work on rock art imagery stated that Bronze Age beliefs materialized in cultic processions to serve those forces that controlled fertility and death, and this interpretation still has relevance. The Viksø helmets have been associated with rituals and religion, while a possible association with warfare has not gained the same support (e.g. Althin 1952; Broholm 1965; Kaul 1998; 2004a; Thrane 2006 *contra* Goldhahn 2009). They have probably contributed to a keen interest in pre- and protohistoric religion (cf. Kaul 1998, 2004a; Andrén, Jennbert & Raudvere 2006).

Thrane (1990: 84) proposes the existence of a personified sun god in Bronze Age religion, exemplified by the depiction on the razor from Voel, while Glob (1969: 197) prefers 'twin gods' who personified the power of the sun. Kaul (1998, 2004a) interprets the Viksø helmets as cult objects that were used in enactments worshipping the eternal cycle of the sun. Objects and images, including those at Kivik, suggest a tripartite cosmology in which the sun travelled by means of a solar boat in the night time (Kaul

<sup>1</sup> SB 31 Veksø sogn, Ølstykke herred, Frederiksborg amt. <http://www.kulturarv.dk/fundogfortidsminder/Lokalitet/95258/>



Fig. 1A: The helmets from Viksø (after Jensen 2002).  
 1B: A close-up of the swan-headed devices on stern and rear (after Kaul 1998).

1998, 2004; Randsborg 1993). The souls of the dead were paddlers of the ships that transported the sun through all spheres, and they were honoured in cult houses. Although initially cautious about the idea of gods in Bronze Age beliefs, Kaul (2005) later mentions a sun god who was captain of the sun-boat and states that this god sometimes had a twin appearance.

A deviant genre is preoccupied with Bronze Age eschatology. Goldhahn (2007) has researched the ritual aspect of death, as has Kaliff (e.g. 1997). In the recent study of the burial from Hvidegården, Goldhahn (2009) hypothesizes that remembrance depended on death and warfare, and the Viksø helmets are interpreted as weapons of war.

Kristian argues for a Nordic version of the proto-Indo-European myth of divine twins although simultaneously insisting that the twins were heads of Bronze Age chiefly life, an important part of which was long-distance journeys (Kristiansen 1998, 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2010; Kristiansen & Larsson 2005). Like Ling (2008), he contends that the mythology was inspired by real journeys and that it was these expeditions in wheeled vehicles and in Hjortspring-type plank-built ships that literally made the chiefs who were honoured through the erection of monumental mounds and in the legends carved into rocks. Likewise, it is evident that pairs of identical males were significant. Kristian dubs them horned gods with reference to rock carvings, bronze figurines, and finds from the eastern Mediterranean and Mesopotamia (Kristiansen & Larson 2005: 232f; Kristiansen 2006b).

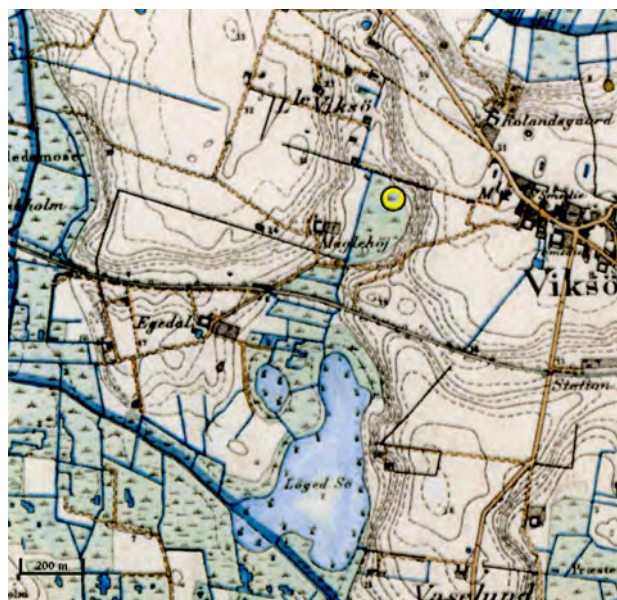


Fig. 2 The wetland area at Viksø with the find spot marked (yellow circle) on a nineteenth-century map (reproduced from <http://www.kulturarv.dk/fundogfortidsminder/> See Brøns Mose).



## Epic helmets

The introductory analogue may suggest that the Viksø helmets were objects with a rich cultural biography, possibly heirlooms and gifts circulating within the Bronze Age gentry, whereby myth and legend were remembered and renewed. The Homeric epics, more generally, serve to document just how deeply a warrior ethos permeated the high-status masculine self in Bronze Age Europe and how it was mediated jointly through elaborate weaponry and epic narratives (cf. Treherne 1995; Kristiansen 2002; Whitley 2002; Kristiansen & Larsson 2005; Vandkilde 2006a-c, 2011). The Homeric quote may especially serve to illustrate in what way wearing the helmets enabled the wearer to become part of the helmets' genealogy of previous owners and attached histories; in a sense the wearer became inseparable from them. The materiality and narrative power of the helmet were transferred to the wearer.

The Viksø helmets, however, possess strong cosmological references that point far beyond Homeric analogies. The fusion of animal and human features in their design is highly significant, as are the watery settings in which weapons and cultic gear were predominantly deposited.

## Helmet materiality

The Viksø helmets are almost identical and were surely considered a pair. They are made of high-tin bronze (16.8%), with low-level impurities of lead (0.35-0.95%), arsenic (0.22-0.24%), antimony (0.11-0.23%) and nickel (0.13-0.32%) and faint traces of silver (0.05-0.06%).<sup>2</sup> Their basic forms are simple hemispheres, resembling the masculine textile hats from oak-coffin burials, but also other metal helmet types of the Urnfield period (cf. Clausen 2001). The hemisphere was hammered into shape from two pieces, riveted together and secured by a heavy fitting across the top. The ornamentation included bosses of different sizes arranged in rows across the surface – a fashion employed on other items of the Urnfield period. At the front and back of the helmet, the lowest row of small bosses terminates in s-shaped figures of swan necks heraldically confronting each other: each helmet has two double-sterned ships, so-called *Vogelssonnenbarken*. The cast horns are turned in a way suggestive of a bull's horns, the twist recalling that of the lurs, which also occur in pairs. On each side of the crest is a circular fitting originally adorned with bird feathers.<sup>3</sup> Quite possibly the crest itself was adorned with hairs imitating a horse's mane (Fig. 3) (Kaul 2010: 82). The crest of the helmets ends at the front in a hook-like protrusion, which turns out to imitate the beak of a bird of prey, possibly that of a hawk or falcon. The beak is framed by huge bulging eyes beneath distinct eyebrows: a human-like face; literally a mask or the representation of one. That the face is humanoid is supported by parallels among the figurines (Fig. 3). The helmets unite select, distinct and significant parts of animals rather than their wholes. Likewise, the human face is also represented only in part; it lacks both nose and mouth.

The wearing of the crested helmets would have considerably increased the height of the wearers; an awe-inspiring advantage in warfare and in ritual performance. The bull horns are in keeping with this, as they are often interpreted as signs of divine power and strength. The helmets are furthermore objects rich in symbolic references meant to enable a transfer of meaning and vigour from helmet to wearer: A partial human-like face fused

with strong animal features. This should remind us that today's rigid distinction between species of humans and animals is a consequence of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and that human-animal hybrids (cf. Haraway 1991; Ingold 1994) were accepted categories in the Nordic Bronze Age (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005: 324ff).

## Mighty objects of transformation and transmission

The animals of the helmets refer to different spheres of the universe (cf. Kaul 2005, 2010); the bull horns pointing towards the celestial realm, whereas the suggested horse and hawk could be indicating both sky and netherworld (Green 2002, 2011). Swans conquer the sky, but are also creatures of the earth inhabiting ponds and lakes, and hence able to use their snake-like heads to look below water level into the realm below. Each animal may have been perceived as an upwards or downwards boundary-crosser from this world, or both these directions. Birds, especially birds of prey, can be seen as representatives of the human soul flying away after death. The horse is a true traveller between realms (Green 2011): like Odin's Sleipnir, able to journey back and forth between sky and underworld, most especially the latter (Hedeager 2011). Movement is further underlined by the presence of the ship for travelling. Taken together, putting on the helmets bestowed power on their wearers to move between worlds and in situations of war quite possibly enhanced bravery in combat. In short, the animal-human hybridity of the helmets was meant to transfer to their wearers.

The double character of the Viksø items as headgear and masks with hybrid features is in tune with the suggested ability to transfer exceptional power to their wearers and possibly the ability to transform into other beings or another state of existence. Through the mask or its qualities, the wearer would become someone else and was thereby able to achieve something beyond the human capabilities of everyday sociality.

There are many examples of transformations connected to the wearing of masks. Through a ritual process, each of the Avatip men in lowland Papua New Guinea became transformed into another person: initiated men put on a ritual war mask, making them capable of extreme violence (Harrison 1993). When putting on one of the Viksø helmets the wearer presumably transformed into a being with animal-human qualities. By wielding the powers of certain animals, it might have been thought possible to transfer between worlds. I will suggest that this 'being' was a celebrated hero ancestor residing in the netherworld and that the wearer of the helmet took on his identity and supernatural powers. This may recall Nordic early history where people were thought to have several 'souls' that were able to leave the body in human or animal shape. Such shape-changing was an acknowledged part of society and belief systems; a perceptual reality where some people had alter egos – a new physical shape could be taken outside the primary body (Raudvere 2004; Hedeager 2011: 81ff).

## Physical-visual manifestations of Bronze Age rituals and myth

The Viksø helmets and their imagery belong to a wider complex of objects and images in which a high proportion of ships and an emphasis on horses underline the central position of journeying. One may distinguish between material presentations of mythological tales and objects used in ritual-religious celebrations of central themes in these myths, but the borderline seems deliberately blurred.

<sup>2</sup> Metal analysis undertaken by the company *Bergsøe og Søn* in 1944 and available in the archive of the Danish National Museum.

<sup>3</sup> Archive of the Danish National Museum.



*Fig. 3 The original appearance of the Vikso helmets (A) reconstructed (after Kaul 2010) in comparison with one of the Grevensvænge figurines (B) of twin horned males (after Jensen 1990) and the twins on the Fogdarp yoke (after Larsson 1990). Note their faces (C) with large eyes and accentuated eye brows.*





*Images and small-scale objects* may refer to a mythical world of interacting animals, humans, and hybrid creatures: horned males, ships with animal sterns, human-like figures with bird-of-prey-faces, ram-horned snakes, horses with horns, humans copulating with horses, etc. Notably the imagery on razors and rock allows glimpses into this mythology of epic voyages as do the Grevensvænge and Fårdal figurines (Glob 1962; Thrane 1999) and even the Trundholm sun-chariot. Such small-scale objects were presumably meant to be carried in a procession or exhibited on a platform. In my opinion, the focus on the eternal movement of the sun (Kaul 1998, 2004a, 2005) does not exclude the co-occurrence of other themes within the same epic cycle, or even other mythical cycles. Adventurous travels within and between realms arguably form the crux of the matter.

*Full-size objects* – helmets, paired axes and round-shields – were worn by human actors in ritual enactments in which certain objects, animals and humans acted together in prescribed ways, as the Kivik cist allows an early glimpse of. Later, dramas were often performed on a ship deck (Kaul 2004b). The horse yoke from Fogdarp in Scania (Larson 1974, 1990) belongs here, as do the lurs. Other helmets once existed as suggested by a single horn found at Grevinge. The full-size headgear from Viksø signifying the partial bodies of an animal-human may sustain the idea that such re-enactments of mythological events should enable shape-changing connected to the transfer between realms. The enactments may then have had the character of religious mysteries in which rituals were targeted towards the transfer to other worlds. Below, I shall propose that these rituals of transformation and transfer were spliced with a hero cult and hero worship in which the identity and life of named ancestor heroes of war and adventure were re-lived through prescribed celebratory re-enactments in which their favour could be requested. These rituals were accompanied by the sound of lurs and the drinking of mead from gold bowls with horse-headed handles.

The context of the helmets supports the idea that travelling within and between the spheres of the cosmos is one key to Bronze Age myths, religion, and cults. The mortality of humans is here an inescapable and thus central issue, since death was never far away. Therefore, the notion of an afterlife and the means of ensuring it must have been prominent concerns.

### Cosmology, death and travelling

Kaul's acknowledged cosmology for the Nordic Bronze Age (1998, 2004a, 2005; Kristiansen 2006a: 175ff; Bradley 2006; Nord 2009) has a basis in the so-called *axis mundi* model. Here the human world is perceived as flat with the celestial world above and an invisible underworld below. The three realms are united by a central pole enabling passage between them. There would have been numerous such world centres in that every community would have their own versions of sacred liminal points through which the other realms could be accessed. Alternative areas of transition would logically be located where the three realms met, namely at the sea shore: this would imply the attribution of special significance to water, ships, and creatures of the sea, below the surface of which the netherworld may have been thought to extend with the possibility of yet other worlds beyond the horizon. This perception (or similar) was common in pre-modern worldviews (Eliade 1957; Bradley 2000: 31), and therefore likely to have been relevant for the Bronze Age since we see the *axis mundi* model maintained in later periods (Hedeager 2011; Andrén, Jennbert and Raudvere 2006). *How is such a worldview manifested in funerary and sacrificial sources of the Bronze Age?*

Mortuary customs are in keeping with the hypothesis that death was perceived as a journey to other realms with the final destination likely to be the netherworld. Objects of profane character in burials suggest a belief in an afterlife (Green 2011: 111), which was imagined as not differing decidedly from earthly life. The mound occupied the realm of earth, but also reached towards the sky (Kristiansen 2006a: fig. 45) whereas interior constructions, including the burials, were perhaps areas of transit, not quite sky and not yet netherworld. Motion (and emotion) is integrated into both inhumations and cremations (Sørensen & Bille 2008). The deceased body was meticulously prepared for travel – in special cases clad in fine woollen clothes and accompanied by personal items, food and drink. At first the body was inhumed and later the transfer was accelerated by fire and light (Sørensen and Bille 2008; Sørensen and Rebay 2007). In the earlier Bronze Age, sun attributes were quite widespread in burials while horses, more ambiguously indicating both sky and underworld, occurred almost throughout the period as figure heads and images.

The body was sometimes accompanied by objects and images directly targeted towards ensuring a successful journey to the underworld, perhaps believed to enhance benevolent relations with chthonic creatures encountered en route. Of particular interest is a group of Period IB-II male burials with fish hooks, which match the fish hook and fish imagery in the Valsømagle hoards (Vandkilde 1996). Fish images also occur occasionally on other bronzes and on the Kivik cist (Kaul 2004a: 320ff). Fish images, fish bones, fish hooks and indeed eelgrass may have been perceived as symbolic manifestations of the underworld (cf. Goldhahn 2007: 187) or symbols intended to secure entry to the realm of the dead. The emphasis on ships in Bronze Age iconography, and the construction of stone ships for funerary purposes, is commonly interpreted as a means of transporting the souls of the dead (e.g. Kaul 2005).

Hvidegården and Maglehøj are among the best known among the so-called ritual specialist burials (Goldhahn 2007: 180ff) with their strange inclusions such as a snake tail, horse bones or teeth, a squirrel jaw, the foot of a falcon or hawk, and a Mediterranean sea snail. In a clear analogy with the imagery of Viksø, the animals represent or transgress different realms of the cosmos. The fact that these representations are of parts rather than wholes of animals may indicate a hybrid state in which the person in question – when empowered by these partial bodies – became an animal-human able to transfer between worlds. Interpreting boldly, these individuals were heads of the mysteries of transit, directing the ritual enactments taking place near perceived points of transition: at the world centre, or at the edge of the sea. Upon the death of these cult leaders, successful transfer to the other worlds was ensured through the accompanying items of their profession.

So-called cult houses associated with cemeteries are interpreted as sacred ancestral precincts (Victor 2002). Here, rituals should facilitate the transfer of the body from life to death, or even facilitate the release of the soul from its bodily existence in the liminal phase (cf. Kaliff 1997; Goldhahn 2007). This would suggest an alleged area of transit that antedated the final burial. Cult houses contain burnt debris with animal bones (including horse), burnt human bones, and bronze-working as well as other remains compatible with transformation through fire (cf. Goldhahn 2007: 279ff). The precinct may moreover have been subjected to commemorations of the dead through the consumption of ritual meals (Goldhahn 2007, 2009). In Jutland and the Danish Isles, a ritual building was erected at or near the foot of a mound

(Nielsen and Bech 2004). Finds suggest feasting to have taken place here (Nielsen and Bech 2004: 141), in commemoration of the ancestor who was first buried in the mound as well as the recently dead whose burnt bones were placed in urns and inserted into the now ancestral mound. This cult may then have targeted heroes residing in the underworld as well as a privileged class of would-be-heroic dead, in particular because of the associated horse bones and metal working. A similar worship and remembrance of ancestor heroes may have taken place in front of the rock panels where debris with the same characteristics occurs (cf. Bengtsson 2010; Ling 2008).

What kind of life did people imagine for the two horned helmets after letting them pass beyond the surface of the lake? Numerous other objects occur as wetland deposits in bogs and lakes. These wet places could well have been perceived as alternative points of passage and were likely often considered dangerous to access unprepared (Bradley 1990, 2000). It would be in tune with the argument that magnificent bronze objects were sent on the journey to the underworld through appropriate ritual. The passage through water must have been considered highly significant as weapons, ornaments and other objects became reunited with their owners now dwelling in the underworld. Extraordinary objects such as our helmets are indeed inseparable from their history; their return to their true owners would have been a natural dénouement (cf. Mauss 1990; Weiner 1992).

‘Gifts for the gods’ is a commonplace interpretation of Bronze Age hoards, but the presence of underworld gods in plural is perhaps not self-evident. Rather, the underworld was thought to be inhabited by humans enjoying their afterlife, chthonic creatures and accompanying individuals I would label semi-divine heroes, who during their life were able to travel between realms on an occasional basis, and who sometimes maintained this ability post-mortem. The Viksø helmets and other objects deposited in lakes were then not necessarily thought to disappear into a great watery void.

### Heroes and their cults

The sources for the southern Scandinavian Bronze Age propose heroic valour as a central issue of both life and death. Awe-inspiring weapons deposited in great mounds and in watery places as well as the images carved into rock sustain this point of view:

*.....travelling chiefs from the North, who instituted new crafts and new rituals upon their return. They created the first group of mythological sagas about distant and powerful origins, and in due time they themselves became local heroes, worshipped in oral tradition as well as in rituals at their famous burials, or at the panels of rock carvings describing their journeys.*

(Kristiansen and Larsson 2005: 208-209)

What is a hero, precisely, then? Here, the ancient Greek world and mythology offer inspiration (Farnell 1921; Kerényi 1958; Whitley 1995; Fox 2008; Albersmeier 2009). We tend to use the term in the same way Homer did in the Iliad, where aristocratic warriors fighting at Troy are dubbed ‘heroes’. While this is legitimate, the above quote touches a central matter, namely that a hero is most often dead and buried and becomes celebrated only posthumously, precisely due to the fame of deeds and accomplishments undertaken during his lifetime. To a certain extent, such renowned individuals defied death, but they are mortals and therefore also role models for average living humans. They are very big, and so

are their bones, and an impressive stature is underlined by ‘special effects’ such as Heracles’ lion skin and club, Jason’s golden fleece and the ship *Argo*, the shining armour and weapons of Achilles, etc. Perilous journeys were undertaken into other worlds; some familiar while others possess immense strangeness. Such journeys were interrupted mainly to fight opponents, be they humans or hybrid monsters.

A characteristic trait during an eventful mortal life is to occasionally gain access to the underworld through particular channels of passage. Odysseus, for instance, visited Hades where the ordinary dead were mere shadows, whilst the former companions at Troy still maintained their bodily shapes because of their status as special dead, as heroes. A few heroes of the Greek mythology became demigods after death, able to leave the underworld and transfer to the world of heavenly gods, although only on special occasions, or partially. Castor and Polydeukes and Heracles are cases in point.

According to Greek sources, then, heroes are boundary-crossers in life and/or in death. They are a combination of warriors, travellers and adventurers and operate singly, in pairs or in groups. It is only after death – because of its glory and reinforced by the deeds of life – that the status as hero is granted. Long after the death of famed heroes, local cults arose at the alleged places of burial (e.g. Whitley 1995), and sometimes a regular temenos with cult house (*heroön*) was erected. Here, chthonic rituals were performed to worship the dead hero residing in the underworld, inducing him to bestow favour on the worshippers (Whitley 1995; Ekroth 2009). Hero cult furthermore contains aspects of venerating a grander past, an age of heroes, in comparison with peoples’ own dull present. The heroic events are themselves broadly Bronze Age in date, coming to an end with the sack of Troy.

### Aegean twins and other heroes in creative translations

The essence of the Greek hero figure and associated cults aligns well with the sources to the Nordic Bronze Age; not necessarily in detail, for the cultural differences were considerable, but in broad outline. A connecting thread of support exists, namely the fondness for twin representations. The very regularity of double lookalike deposits demands an explanation: Viksø with two ships on each helmet, the Rørby ship-shaped scimitars, giant axes and the lurs as well as the recurring theme of paired males at Fogdarp, Grevensvænge and Stockhult, on razors, and on rock carvings. That they are twins is suggested by the fact that each male is a mirror image of the other in posture, war-like attributes, and double symmetrical ships. However, were they heroes according to the above description?

I will argue for a yes. Kristian tracks the twins to a proto-Indo-European myth of divine double rulership (e.g. Kristiansen 2006b, 2009; cf. Ward 1968). I am sceptical towards the assumption of their combined status as gods and as political and religious rulers in Bronze Age Scandinavia although the twins’ bellicose attributes, stereotypical appearance and association with ship and horse do suggest a shared legend. In tune with the imagery they were clearly warriors engaging in fighting, they were travellers on board a ship, and the adventurous character of the whole enterprise may be implied. Counting on the correctness of Kaul’s reconstructed solar cycle, they were also able to transcend the realms of the universe. The horned helmet combined with a large axe is a particularly indicative trait (Figs. 3-4), easy to recognize for the audience, and it bestows an aggrandizing effect upon an



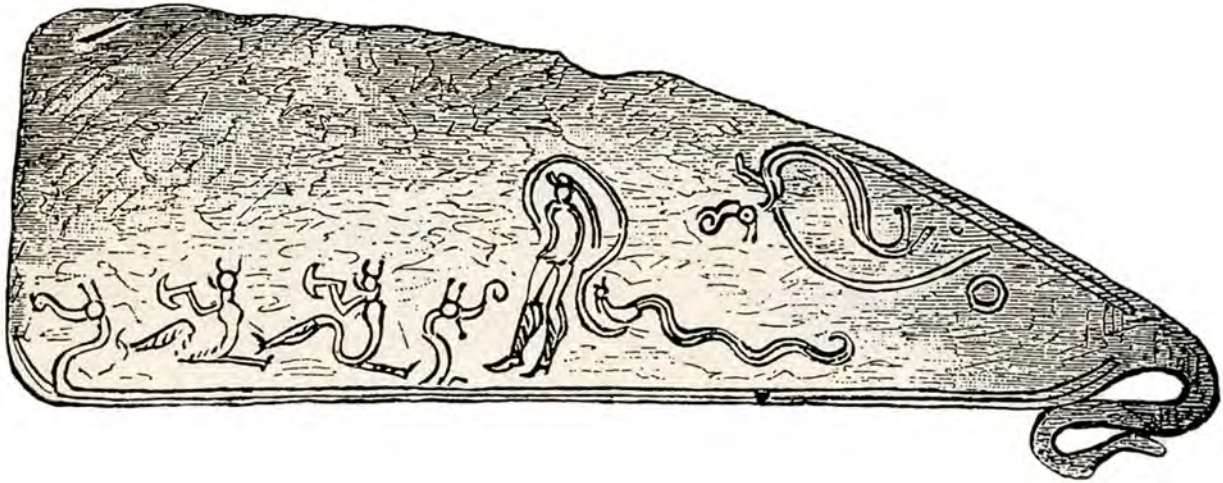


Fig. 4 The horned and axe-wielding twins aboard a ship with horse-headed stern and rear, a horse for each hero, on the razor from Vestrup. The twins are pursued by an over-sized human figure and a big snake, with other animals and cosmic (?) signs nearby (after Glob 1962).

already-oversized body with accentuated calves. These traits and ‘special effects’ recall the characteristics of a hero.

This Nordic twin existence is strikingly similar to Castor and Polydeukes (Dioskouroi), the twin heroes popular among the Greeks (e.g. Kerényi 1958). One had a partly divine origin. Zeus came to Leda in the shape of a swan (!) and she bore two sets of twins: Helen and Polydeukes to Zeus and Castor and Klytaimnestra to her husband. Importantly, the Diskouroi lived a mortal, though adventurous, life and are often depicted identically on horseback wearing broad-brimmed travellers’ hats. They were in fact considered protectors of seamen and sea voyages, and were furthermore often associated with horses (Buxton 2004). They went on their own adventures, but also engaged in other endeavours such as the sea journeys of the Argonauts. This actually corresponds well with some Nordic rock carving scenes in which twin figures can be discerned among groups of fighting males near long-ships, animals and sometimes strange beings (Fig. 5). In between them, ambiguous signs may refer to different spheres of the universe (sun, bird, wheel, hand, feet etc.) (Kaul 1998, 2004a, 2005; Goldhahn 2007). These cosmological components fit well with the story of the Dioskouroi, who died while on a cattle raid. Afterwards, one twin was confined to the underworld, while the other was allowed to visit the celestial gods. The animal-humans with bird-of-prey faces on the rock carved panels, however, suggest an animalistic shape-changing element of transformation, which is vague in Greek myths and seems indigenously Nordic.

The Nordic images are not exactly focused on twin heroes with horned helmets. Singular figures of huge size or unusual strength also occur who are captains of ships or can lift a long-ship with one or two hands (Fig. 6), and these bear a great resemblance to the accomplishments of the physically powerful hero Heracles, who was able to escape the underworld in life as well as in death. In other situations, larger groups of males are shown in the rock carved scenes (Fig. 5), as when Greek heroes joined forces to overcome a perilous challenge as in the story of the Trojan War.

The Nordic epic cycles incorporated central heroic figures who travelled, warred and experienced incredible adventures within

and between realms of the cosmos. Many pictures, however, depict only the manned ships as if the rest of the story is deliberately left out. Ling (2008) has shown how such ship-only carvings occur primarily at the edge of the sea, only visible from the seaside and carved where water touches rock (Ling 2008). This was where the realms of the cosmos were, arguably, believed to meet and therefore a sanctified border zone: here between land and sea with access to other worlds long-ships were repeatedly carved. The central significance of the maritime component in life and death (Bradley 2006), and in between, thereby becomes still clearer.

#### Returning to Viksø: Myths and cosmologies in the making

For Kerényi, mythology is ‘a body of material contained in tales about gods and god-like beings, heroic battles and journeys to the Underworld’ (Jung and Kerényi 1985: 3). Reality, nevertheless, mattered in myth-making as inspirational material. Creative resources were likely extraordinary objects, ritual events, warfare and bravery, adventurous expeditions, long-distance travels, and the natural environment of animals and particular geographies. Archaeological sources broadly suggest, as argued above, that death was perceived as a perilous sea journey to other realms, eventually to the netherworld where an afterlife was envisioned even if access to the celestial realm may have been hoped for. This belief must surely have been deeply rooted in the world of the living. The sources are themselves indicative of the experienced entanglement of the profane and the sacred, indeed of life and death, in the minds of Bronze Age people. As scholars we can take the liberty to analytically keep those domains apart, and now turn to the social reality of long-distance travelling. Again, the Viksø helmets, and horned helmets as such, take centre stage, coupled with the insight that providing the raw materials for bronze was necessary for social interaction in southern Scandinavia.

The Viksø helmets fuse Nordic and Urnfield features and were produced in Scandinavia while European bronze-working techniques were employed. The swans of the ships’ rears and sterns reproduce the swimming bird symbol of Urnfield Europe (Kosack 1954), but most other features tally with a Nordic Bronze Age setting. The helmets were used in rituals, but likely also belonged among the paraphernalia of war leaders, along

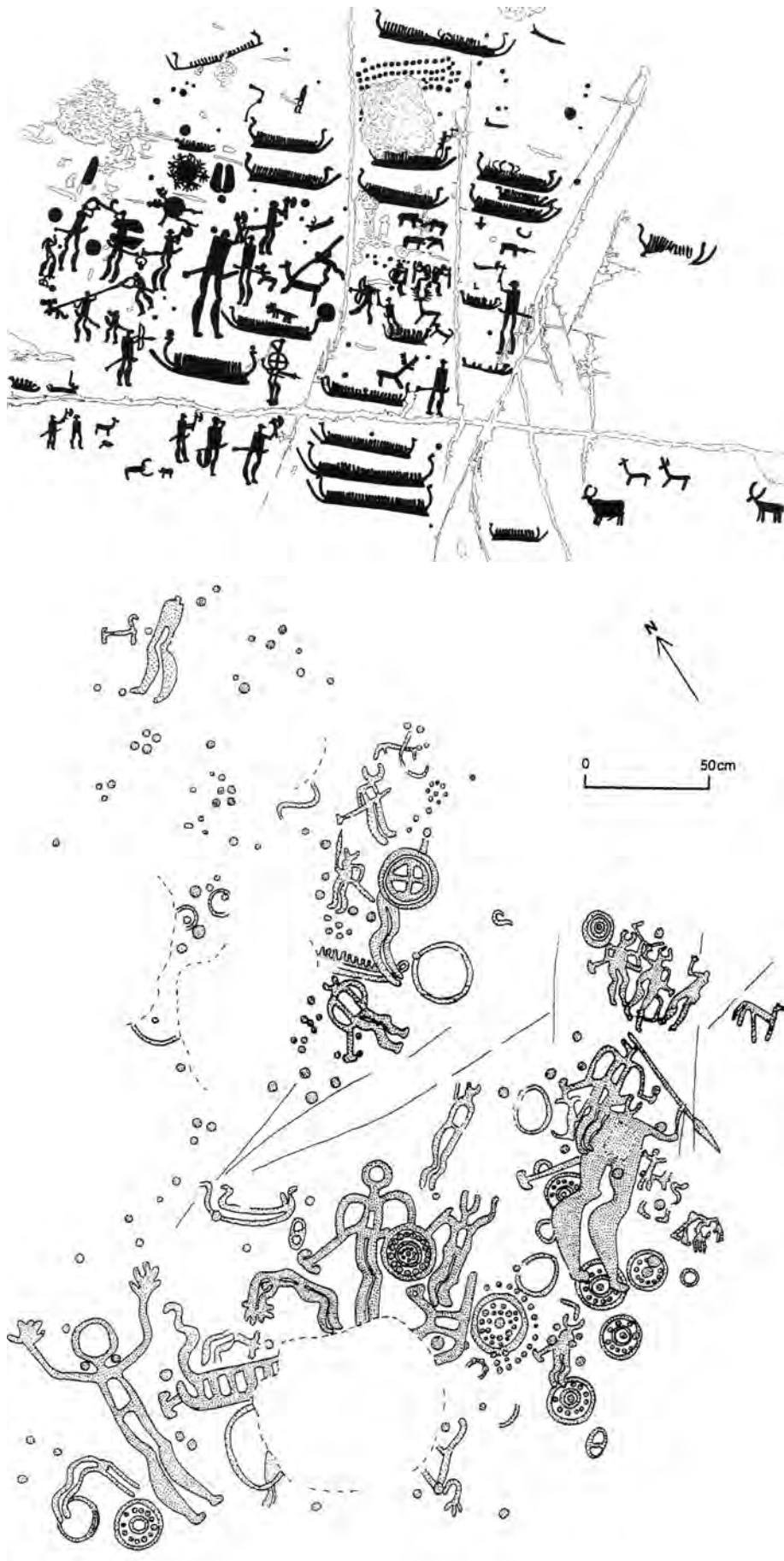


Fig. 5 Rock carving scenes from Tanum 255 (A) and Kville 124 (B) showing complex events with several fighting warriors, ships and signs (after Ling 2008).



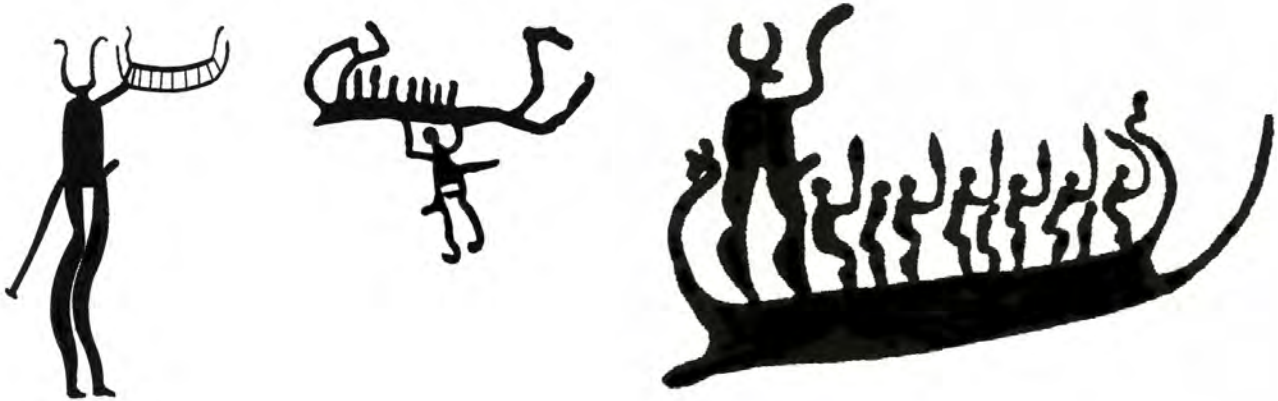


Fig. 6 Super-hero lifting a ship (A) at two different rock carving panels in Bohuslän (after Kaul 2004a). Another scene (B) at Tanum 325 similarly shows the leading warrior hero of the ship with oversized body, accentuated calves and horned helmet setting him apart from the crew (after Ling 2008).



Fig. 7 Bronze figurine of Sardinian warrior wearing a horned and crested helmet of considerable likeness to the Viksø helmets. Note also the round-shield, the greaves, corselet, sword and bow (?) (after Harding 2007).

with large round-shields and offensive weapons. Molloy (2009) has convincingly shown that, despite their thinness, Herzprung type bronze round-shields and variations thereof were perfectly functional in battle. The same would be valid for our two helmets. Symbol-rich weaponry may well have been thought to remove fear of death, thereby boosting bravery in combat: By putting on the Viksø helmets in battles or war raids, the wearer would become an invincible animal-human hero ancestor.



Fig. 8 Images from two Iberian grave stelae showing warriors with horned helmets. In addition, these and other pictures represent a panoply of weapons, notably large round shields and horse-pulled carts (after Brandherm 2008).

Considerably increased close range and long distance mobility characterized Urnfield Europe (Thrane 1975; Kristiansen 1998; Vandkilde 2007). Horned helmets and variants of large bossed round-shields concentrate in the Iberian Peninsula and on Sardinia (Harrison 2004) (Figs. 7-8). Brandherm (2008) argues for an early development of horned helmets in Iberia from around 1100-1000 BC, independent of Near Eastern bull-headed figures. The early horned helmets on Sardinian figurines are thought to date to the period around 1200 BC (Brandherm 2008). This is the time when chaotic upheavals in the Aegean and the Levant lead to the collapse of palace-organized state hierarchies (cf. Dickinson 2006; Suchowska-Ducke in press), *inter alia* connected with the legend of the Trojan war. Notably related to these events was a group





Fig. 9 Horned helmets, round-shields and bird-shaped ship sterns connected to the Sea People warriors named Shardana (probably Sardinians) c. 1200 BC. (A) Sea battle scene depicted at the temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu (Battle of Delta 1178 BC) - A close-up of warriors is shown. Note the bird-shaped sterns in the right margin of the photo (Lessing Photos). (B) Sherd from wine crater from the final habitation at the citadel of Tyrys (after Wachsmann 1998).

of the Sea People who fought naked wearing horned helmets and round-shields in the Battle of the Delta 1178 BC, depicted in propagandist style on the temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu (Fig. 9)(cf. Oren 2000).

The warships in the Mediterranean final Bronze Age sometimes had bird-headed devices on stern and rear (Fig. 9) and Homer mentions trunked or beaked ships (Wachsmann 1998), analogous to the Viksø helmets and other Urnfield items with *Vogelsonnenbarke*. Some of the ship-borne ‘Sea People’ warriors probably came from the western Mediterranean, and may even have included maritime warriors from the Atlantic zone and northern Europe. This idea of Urnfield-Mediterranean connections from c. 1200 BC onwards is not new (e.g. Kimmig 1964; Wachsmann 1981, 1998; Kristiansen 1998: 96, 170ff), but it now gains new relevance by revisiting an old find. A thread leads from war and social upheaval in the east Mediterranean over Sardinia and Iberia to Viksø with offshoots to adventurous sea travels, warfare, material culture emulation, transfer of cosmological elements, myth-making and the transport of bronze along the Atlantic coasts.

Nordic horned helmets, and likely the round-shields, can be seen in the context of sea journeys, combining trade with raids and battles. The stelae and rock imagery of Iberia furthermore share some elements with the Scandinavian images, suggesting a link between the two regions (Fredell 2010). Iberia and Sardinia are copper-rich regions, which, according to recent science-supported results, were important resources for the bronze-working traditions of the later Nordic Bronze Age and even insular western Europe (Ling et al. 2013). The ingot-carrying shipwrecks recovered off the coasts of Britain<sup>4</sup> are thus coupled with trade in metals in the European Atlantic zone after c. 1200 BC. Frequent south-west-bound sea voyages must have been undertaken to secure regular supplies of copper and probably tin. The extremely high proportion of tin in the two Viksø bronzes favours regular supplies rather than the use of recycled metal.

Atlantic-Mediterranean sea travels arguably fuelled the epic myths encountered in glimpses on Nordic Late Bronze Age bronzework and rock. It is likely that some of the myths in circulation had older roots associated with earlier phases of sea travel between 2000 and 1300 BC, but the onset of the Late Bronze Age brought a changed way of life. Changed religious beliefs materialized most clearly in the cremation rites. Forming part of these beliefs were ideas of boundary-transgressing mortal heroes, derivatives of the Aegean Dioskouroi, Heracles, Jason and others. The story emerging from Leda and the swan concerns semi-divinity in combination with mortality, and seems to have moved westward and northward in a process of creative translation that included the ship. This and other tales likely moved along the Mediterranean-Atlantic track and over time became inseparable from Nordic heroic myths. Returnees may well have claimed a heroic identity based on the cultural and economic capital appropriated in distant lands (cf. Vandkilde 2008).

All this may have renewed centuries-old travelling cultures<sup>5</sup> as well as instituted refinements of the cosmology. Over the course of their evolution, these developments became more targeted

towards ensuring a safe transfer of the dead to an afterlife in the netherworld. The Earlier Bronze Age had in the Late Bronze Age become the era of great deeds and great men (Kristiansen 2010). In the Late Bronze Age, tales of famed ancestors may have been coupled with individuals buried in old mounds, as Kristiansen contends. The cults which I have argued were established in the Late Bronze Age seem to have been genuine hero cults built on constructed genealogies rather than true kinship: a place or a monument claimed to be associated with the death of the hero (Whitley 1995; Ekroth 2009). The epic nature of the adventurous, travelling and fighting heroic figures in rock-cut and bronze-cast images supports this conclusion.

Life was a hair’s breadth away from death, on the battle field and when voyaging. Fame and death were partners. The hypothesis of a hero cult goes well with the striking Bronze Age preoccupation with death and warfare (Goldhahn 2009; Green 2011). The delight in, and reverence of, magnificent weapons (Goldhahn 2009; Green 2011) dispatched on their final water-enfolded journey to reach their rightful owners in the chthonic netherworld illustrates the intertwinement of death, war and travels. We may even wonder if these offerings were sometimes made from aboard a ship in celebration of a long-dead ancestor hero and maybe coincided with the assumed death of a would-be hero, unreturned from a sea voyage. The making of heroes is, after all, an ongoing business.

### Closing words

In this essay, I have speculated more than usual in honour of a living hero of mine, Kristian Kristiansen. I dedicate this tale of the twin helmets from Viksø to you Kristian in thankful acknowledgement of the inspiration you have given me over the years.

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<sup>4</sup> September 2011. Please consult: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/environment/archaeology/7228108/Bronze-Age-shipwreck-found-off-Devon-coast.html>, <http://www.machuproject.eu/news/news-55.htm>, <http://174.122.234.116/showthread.php?t=169486>

<sup>5</sup> September 2011. Please consult: “Forging Identities: The Mobility of Culture in Bronze Age Europe” <http://www.forging-identities.com>



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