

Counterpoint:  
Essays in Archaeology and  
Heritage Studies in Honour of  
Professor Kristian Kristiansen

Edited by

Sophie Bergerbrant  
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BAR International Series 2508  
2013

Published by

Archaeopress  
Publishers of British Archaeological Reports  
Gordon House  
276 Banbury Road  
Oxford OX2 7ED  
England  
[bar@archaeopress.com](mailto:bar@archaeopress.com)  
[www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

BAR S2508

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ISBN 978 1 4073 1126 5

Cover illustration: Gilded hilt of sword from Hallegård, Bornholm, Denmark. Published with kind permission from the National Museum of Denmark

Printed in England by Information Press, Oxford

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# COSMOLOGIES IN CLAY: SWEDISH HELMET BOWLS IN THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE OF THE CARPATHIAN BASIN

*Joanna Sofaer*

*Abstract: Sun and wheel motifs are characteristic of European Bronze Age iconography. This paper discusses the expression of these motifs on Swedish helmet bowls and other vessels from the Middle Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin. It explores the role of these vessels in materially expressing cosmological myths.*

*Keywords: Sun and wheel motifs, ceramic bowls, cosmology*

In writing a piece in honour of a Dane it may seem slightly incongruous to choose the topic of Swedish helmet bowls! Nonetheless, the motifs on these vessels and the contexts in which they are found are relevant to themes that Kristian Kristiansen has previously addressed in his work, in particular his interest in the cosmology and religion of the Bronze Age, as well as his involvement in research at the Bronze Age tell at Százhalombatta in Hungary. In this paper I want to discuss the motifs on Swedish helmet bowls and other contemporary vessels in the Carpathian Basin, and the ways that these vessels may have been used to materially express cosmological myths.

Sun motifs are characteristic of European Bronze Age iconography and have long been widely discussed in terms of Bronze Age cosmology. Recent years have seen a renaissance in such studies with increasingly sophisticated and detailed explorations of the contexts and meanings of sun symbols. Kristiansen has played an important role in these discussions through his analysis of Bronze Age imagery throughout Europe as well as further afield. He has described a shared Indo-European myth about the sun's journey in which the twin brothers and helpers of the sun maiden, the Divine or Heavenly Twins, come to help her in the guise of ships and horses so that the sun can rise in the morning (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005). Based on this analysis, he has created models describing changes in the iconographic articulation of the journey of the sun for the Earlier and Later Bronze Age (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005: 306-307) and has also proposed that Bronze Age rock art in Scandinavia contains scenes related to the journey of the sun (Kristiansen 2010). Such work has added substantially to previous research on Bronze Age iconography, such as Kaul's important and detailed study of the decoration on Late Bronze Age bronze objects from Denmark. Kaul (1998, 2005) has described a complex mythology of the sun and its voyage through different spheres of the cosmos assisted by different agents (the horse, snake and fish) with day and night ships facilitating the sun's transport. Bradley (2006) has argued that images on prehistoric rock art signal some of the same ideas. The myth of the journey of the sun is not only an expression of the cyclical progress of the day, but also of the annual cycle, and perhaps even of life itself (Kaul 1998: 270).

The 4-spoked wheel, or wheel-cross, motif has also been associated with the sun (Kaul 2004; Kristiansen & Larsson 2005). Kristiansen and Larsson (2005) have demonstrated an intimate metaphorical relationship between the spoked wheel and the sun in log coffin

burials where wheels can replace sun discs in female costumes, or where the hands of the deceased were placed over the belt plate to form a cross. Indeed, the high degree of stylization in this motif sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish a wheel from the sun, except where the wheel has a hub or occurs in a pair, in which case its interpretation as wheel seems more secure (Johannsen 2010). Yet even when a depiction is clearly of a wheel it may still be linked to cosmology and myth; the wheel is important to the story of the sun's journey as it is part of the chariot of the sun pulled by a horse as in the Trundholm chariot, or a chariot ridden by a bird-head figure as in the Dupljaja model. Spoked wheels and wheel motifs are also associated with a range of other well-known high status or ritual objects such as the identical bronze objects from Balkåkra, Sweden and Hasfalva, Hungary dated to Montelius period I and variously interpreted as drums or stools (Knape & Nordström 1994; Kristiansen and Larsson 2005), the Late Bronze Age gold 'hat' from Ezelsdorf-Buch (Springer 2000), or Urnfield cult wagons (Maraszek 1997).

The geographically and chronologically widespread nature of both sun and wheel motifs suggest that they express cornerstone myths and beliefs prevalent throughout the European Bronze Age. In addition to rock art and special or unusual bronze and gold objects, they are also present in a variety of more common object types, for example Early Bronze Age wheel head pins, Middle Bronze Age ornaments, or Late Bronze Age pendants. They are also visible on pottery, however, with a few exceptions (e.g. Kaul 1998; Kovács 1977), ceramics have taken something of a back seat in discussions of Bronze Age cosmology. The so-called Swedish Helmet bowls are by no means the only type of decorated vessel in the Carpathian Basin, but they are particularly distinctive in the way that their shape permits the display of cosmological motifs. While other contemporary vessels may have decorative elements on the vessel body that are related to the sun and wheel (such as repeated small concentric circles), no other vessel type is deliberately designed to present the motifs in the same way as do the Swedish helmet bowls.

Swedish helmet bowls are large fine ware vessels characteristic of the later phases of the Middle Bronze Age in the Carpathian Basin. Found in both cemeteries and settlements, they are found in the Vátya cultural circle with variants of this vessel type at some other contemporary sites including those of the Gyulavarsánd group (Bóna 1975; Görsdorf et al. 2004). Named for their similarity with the shape of World War I helmets worn by Swedish soldiers



Fig. 1 Swedish helmet bowl from Százhalombatta, Hungary. Photo: J. Sofaer.

(Vicze pers. comm.<sup>1</sup>), they are frequently shallow with broad sweeping everted rims that are almost flat to the horizontal plane. A single disproportionately small handle loops from the rim to a strong carination that, in a Koszider variant of the vessel, may be elaborated with pointed bosses at the quarter points. Vessel interiors are burnished but undecorated while the exteriors are both burnished and decorated on the base (Fig. 1). All in all, these vessels are clearly designed to hang on a wall and be displayed, their flat rims fitting snugly against the surface with their bases visible to see (Sofaer 2011). Furthermore, the high levels of skill exhibited in the production and decoration of these technically complex vessels (Budden 2008) suggests that a significant level of investment was placed in their manufacture.

The form of Swedish Helmet bowls is designed to facilitate the display of decoration upon their large bases; indeed a key function of the vessel might be said to be the display of the motif. The range of decorative motifs on the base of Swedish Helmet Bowls is remarkably restricted. The motifs fall into two main categories reflecting Bronze Age cosmological concerns with the sun and the wheel. The articulation of these motifs is facilitated by the circular shape of the vessel base.

The sun motif (Fig. 2) is most frequently expressed by concentric circles incised around the base; sometimes there may be a single circle, but most often there are 2 or 3, and in some cases up to 5 circles. This may be further elaborated by the addition of four further concentric circles or half circles at the quarter points of the vessel, smaller impressed dots, or small circles depending on cultural affiliation. The sun motif is also found on bowls from

other contemporary cultural groups although their expression and the type of vessel on which they appear show stylistic variation depending on the cultural group in which they are found. In some Füzesabony fine-ware inverted rim bowls the incised circles may be replaced by rather baroque-looking pointed bosses surrounded by at least one, and more frequently two or three, concentric circles. In some Füzesabony, Gyulavarsánd, and occasional Vátya and Incrusted Pottery examples, circles may be drawn around an omphalos base, the dimple acting as an integral part of the motif. More rarely, the concentric circles at the centre of the base may be replaced by a spiral, as in examples from the Füzesabony site of Gelej (Bóna 1975). In another version of the sun motif found particularly on vessels in the Füzesabony group, the sun is represented through a star motif (cf. Kristiansen & Larsson 2005). Sometimes this is formed through the linking of five or more incised semi-circles, swags or zigzags around the base of the vessel, with a central circle or concentric circles in the centre. In some cases, where there are more than four bosses on a vessel, the baroque sun motifs of the Füzesabony and Gyulavarsánd groups can also be read as stars, depending on whether the viewer takes the bosses or the space between them as the focal point of the decoration.

The wheel motif (Fig. 3A and B) is expressed through the division of the circular vessel base into quarters with the four spokes of the wheel radiating from a central circle which may either be incised or an omphalos base. On some vessels, this central circle may double both as a wheel axle and as a sun through the use of concentric circles or repeated small incised dashes around the circle. The spokes of the wheel may also terminate in concentric half circles. In such cases, the decoration can be read as a combination of wheel and sun motifs. More rarely, this doubling up of motifs can be seen in the division of the central

<sup>1</sup> Dr Magdolna Vicze Matrica Múzeum, Százhalombatta, Hungary.

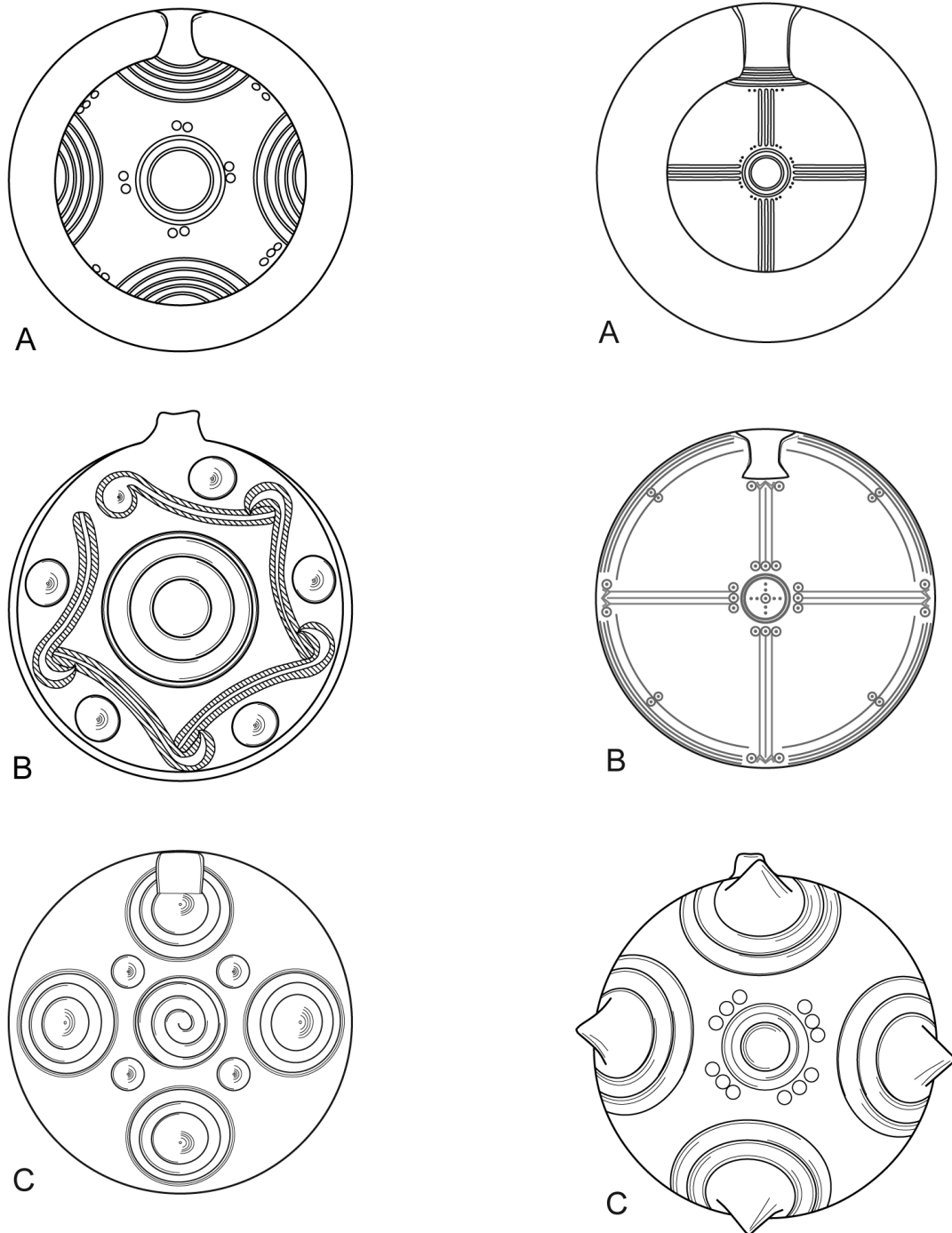


Fig. 2 Sun motifs on Middle Bronze Age bowls from the Carpathian Basin (after Bóna 1975).

A) Vátya bowl from Cegléd-Öreghegy

B) Füzesabony bowl from Megyaszó

C) Füzesabony bowl from Gelej-Kánálisdűlő

Fig. 3 Wheel motifs on Middle Bronze Age bowls from the Carpathian Basin (after Bóna 1975).

The wheel motif created through 'drawing' it on the vessel in Vátya and Incrusted Pottery groups

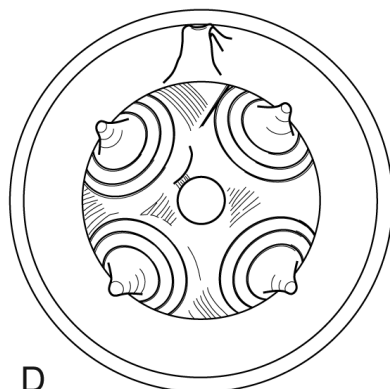
A) Vátya bowl from Kelebia

B) Incrusted Pottery bowl from Királyszentistván

The wheel motif created through the undecorated space between bosses on Füzesabony and Gyulavarsánd vessels

C) Füzesabony bowl from Golop

D) Gyulavarsánd bowl from Gyulavarsánd-Laposhalom





circle into quarters, turning the concentric circles of the sun into a wheel-cross. The wheel is particularly common as a motif in the Vátya and Incrusted Pottery groups, at first glance seeming less frequent in the Füzesabony and Gyulavarsánd groups where decorative traditions focus upon curvaceous rather than linear motifs. Nonetheless, here too the wheel is strongly present. On some Gyulavarsánd Swedish helmet bowls and on contemporary fine ware Füzesabony bowls with inverted rims, rather than 'drawing' the motif on the vessel, concentric circles at the centre of the base act as a sun / wheel axle, while the undecorated space between pointed bosses emerging from semi-circles placed at the quarter points of the vessel act as wheel spokes. In such cases the whole bowl is turned into a wheel, the rim of the vessel acting as its margin (Figg. 3C and D). These vessels can therefore be read in two ways; through the 'positive' added embellishments and the 'negative' of the decoration.

The sun and wheel motifs are well-known in contemporary metalwork in the Carpathian Basin, for example the bronze discs with concentric circles, wheel or wheel cross motifs termed variously ornaments, pendants or amulets (Bona 1975; Hänsel 1968), or the sun-star on the butt end of axes and on the tops of pins (Hänsel 1968). Much of this material, however, comes from hoards as the quantity of metalwork from cemeteries and settlements in the Carpathian Basin is relatively small. In the latter contexts pottery is by far the most abundant material. In cemeteries the relative quantities of metalwork and pottery has led to the suggestion that pots may be the primary means of displaying status (Viczé 2011). In some settlements there is evidence for metal production in the form of workshops such as at the site of Lovasberény (Kovács 1977), or moulds as at the tell site of Százhalombatta, but in domestic settings pottery was an important and highly visible medium for expression with typological and decorative developments reflecting the work of confident, creative craftspeople (Sofaer 2010, 2006). While Swedish helmet bowls are only one out of a wide and varied range of contemporary vessel types, and comprise only a fraction of the ceramic material in Vátya settlements, they are nonetheless more common than metal objects. Given the cosmologically charged nature of the motifs on Swedish helmet bowls and their evident use for display, they may have been the primary means of materially expressing cosmological references in household contexts.

The location of cosmological symbols in mortuary settings is frequently accepted but their positioning within domestic settings has been less often pointed out. It is possible to envisage that Swedish helmet bowls played a similar role to that of the crucifix in modern homes. In other words, the bowls were material mnemonics for the story of the sun's journey, acting as important reminders of identity and belief to the pre-literate occupants of the houses in which they were hung. Yet, in the same way that displaying a crucifix or any other religious symbol in a modern home does not necessarily require that the house is turned into a sacred space, nor does such an argument imply this in relation to the Bronze Age houses. Furthermore, excavations at Middle Bronze Age settlement sites such as at Százhalombatta in Hungary have revealed almost no evidence for 'special deposits' (cf. Brück 1999; Hill 1996) in the houses. What the display of the bowls may suggest, however, is that the currency of the myth of the sun was strong even in everyday life. The bowls brought cosmology into the houses in a clear and highly visible manner, presenting an image of the universe that continually reminded inhabitants of their place in the cosmos.

## Acknowledgements

This research was carried out as part of the HERA-funded project Creativity and Craft Production in Middle and Late Bronze Age Europe (CinBA) ([www.cinba.net](http://www.cinba.net)). The project CinBA is financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme ([www.heranet.info](http://www.heranet.info)) which is co-funded by AHRC, AKA, DASTI, ETF, FNR, FWF, HAZU, IRCHSS, MHEST, NWO, RANNIS, RCN, VR and The European Community FP7 2007-2013, under the Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities programme.

**Joanna Sofaer: J.R.Sofaer-Derevenski@soton.ac.uk**

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