THE HORSE AS A LIMINAL AGENT

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Abstract

Apart from being a status marker with strong ritual connotations it is suggested that the horse in prehistory is a liminal agent between sea and land. As gender he represents land. The ship is as female as the sea. But the gender is contextual and culture-specific. The connections of the horse with the ship are attributed to the opposition between the two elements. Since this opposition belongs to maritime cultures in the North the structural "cosmology" in question may have filtered over also to inland agrarian conditions. Symbols are polysemic and may even have represented different things to different social classes, like in recent times.

Key words: horse, ship, liminal agents, cosmology, ethnoarchaeology.

This text is about the Horse and the Ship in pagan pre-history. Not the real horse, nor the real ship. It is going to introduce an new aspect of a dual relationship between sea and land. In earlier hunting and fishing cultures their places would be taken rather by the whales and seals and the elks and stags, respectively. The structure of that relationship is reflected by a binary opposition, and as well of a combination of the opposites. In this structure the sea is female, represented by the ship, and the land is male, and represented by the horse. In early arctic (and subarctic) fishing and hunting cultures the same binary relationship would rather be incarnated by the whale and the elk. Several other oppositions are reasonable to assume as structural parallels, above all between life and death. According to my views the horse/ male/ land stands for life, the ship/ sea/ female for death. At least this seems reasonable, although I am referring to very different strands of various cosmologies. I am aware that this hypothesis is of course not possible to prove conclusively. It remains a reasonable conjecture, relying as it does on cross- disciplinary insights.

It is in fact a new aspect, so far only treated from an oblique lighting as a partly subconscious cosmology bound to a maritime culture (Westerdahl 2005; 2006). On the other hand, it would be a cosmology that has left significant traces in any common culture. The sea appears to be a category perceived as such far inland, as a structural reference and a sounding-board.

The Horse at Sea

An old man, aged about 85, in August 1964 told me a number of interesting things. We were sitting outside his small cottage on the Dalsland coast of Lake Vänern in Sweden. Suddenly he said: *Horses are good at sea* (or possibly *The Horse is strong* etc.).

The examples that he took up were rather far-fetched, i.e. not obvious, only associations in some way with the horse in a boat. But more tangible was the fact that old skippers and fishermen on Vänern "always" had put horse-hair in their tackle. Later, I would see the claim of „my" fisherman on the horse-hair ropes well substantiated in museums and collections around the lake and indeed elsewhere (recent information by the experienced Danish rope-maker Ole Magnus). Some ropes exclusively consisted of horse-hair, but generally these were only parts of the rigging, parts of rope-lengths, or otherwise mixed with hemp or other materials. Root fibres were the only material –seldom used in actual rigging- that was not mixed with horse-hair.

I did not see any further implications in this until much later, despite the fact that I came to possess a large material. My Bothnian (Northern Swedish) material comprised interviews with literally thousands of coastal people. But I must admit that the main interest never shifted during the surveys. Information of this type only was permitted to be elaborated insofar it did not interfere with the physical remains of the landscape, on land or under water.

My collection of place names at first only concerned such names which were immediately connected with the sea-side of maritime life, such as the names of the sea route, harbour names, foundering, wreck and cargo names. Fishing was only interesting insofar as it could bring more knowledge on the former. The general exploitation of the islands and the sea for other purposes, such as hunting, fowling, grazing or the taking of wood was not implied, although I realized that this would ultimately be utterly important in a holistic picture of the maritime cultural landscape. But this complex (and the term itself) was rather for the future.

This means that I did not conduct a thorough survey of the missing groups of names. In particular this would pertain to the *cognitive* aspects of naming. In this field no place names or place name groups could be ignored. For example I noticed the variety of *animal names,* and – like most people – applied a strictly functionalist view: they were either a sign of the use of the coasts by human beings for hunting, grazing etc or pointed to a similarity with the current animal species, be it domestic or wild.

This exclusively functionalist approach was anyway patently wrong, as I found out later, albeit the works in the 1940's of the Norwegian folklorist / linguists Solheim (1940) and Hovda (1941a; 1941b; cf also Henningsen 1960) were very much in my mind also at this early stage. There was indeed a ritual landscape at sea (Westerdahl 2002a; 2002b; 2005; 2006 forthcoming & manuscript). We have already found the view of the horse as strong at sea. On the other hand, according to the folklorists, anything pertaining to the horse was also *taboo* at sea; it was taboo to mention its species name. Instead were *noa* names used. In Shetland, the horse had at least 13 variants of noa names (Jakobsen 1921). How could these seemingly contradictory conditions be reconciled?

The Horse had other connotations at sea. Horace Beck gives some of them (1973, p.119ff): "Moreover, a number of items aboard ship bore names that included "horse" or had something to do with horses: a frame to test a broom on; "harness casks," barrels in which the week's supply of meat was kept, and deriving their name by the fact that they were usually secured to the break in the poop or fo´c´sle by horseshoes. A "Martingale" sometimes called a "dolphin striker", referred to a chain that went from the end of the bowsprit to the stem. Salt horse was the name invariably given to the wretched meat the sailor ate, and "horse pieces" referred to chunks of part-meat, part-blubber from a whale that were allowed to putrefy in a barrel. There is even a bit of doggerel, sometimes called the sailor's litany or sailor's grace, which goes:

Old horse, old horse, what do you here?
You've carried my bags for many a year
And now worn out with sore abuse
They salt you down for sailors use
They gaze on you with sad surprise'

They roll you over and bugger your eyes
They eat your meat and pick your bones
And send the rest to Davey Jones.

In the old sailing ships there was a tradition that sailors could draw on their advance wages- usually up to a month's salary. During Word War II it was still done in the United States Navy, and a man received such money was "drawing a dead horse". When he paid it back, he was "paying off a dead horse."

There used to be a ceremony to commemorate this event aboard ship after a month at sea. A mock horse would be constructed out of a "donkey's breakfast" (straw) and canvas, and it would be drawn around the deck while sailors kicked and struck it. After everyone had had a chance to abuse the effigy, it was thrown overboard, symbolizing the freeing of the sailor from his debt and *in a strange way his freedom from the land."*

It seemed that the *strange way* might be closely related to the words of my old informant in 1964, that horses were "strong at sea."

This is somewhat the starting point of this text.

The Horse on Land

There are indeed hundreds of maritime *Horse (Hest/en, Häst/en)* place names to be taken account of. And in several cases, especially those localities with prominent and dramatic features, there are not to be found any references there to grazing of horses or other animals, nor any similarity in form. Another possibility would be that horses had been killed there. According to the ancient (and Christian) prejudice towards the killing of horses this was only carried out by special (feared and detested) socio-cultural groups in society, e.g. certain Saamis in Middle Sweden, the hangmen in the South (Egardt 1962; Svanberg 1999). This might entail the rush of old horses down a precipitous rock. If the killing itself only followed from the rush, the act might even be done by the horse-owner himself (Lid 1924). Such an explanation of the name-type might be considered, but the sheer quantity of names demonstrated that it could not account for more than a trifle of them, and in fact only in inland milieux. On the other hand it was clear for most maritime occurrences of *Horse-* and many other animal names that they were important, sometimes exceedingly important, sighting points or constituted dangerous localities in navigation, particularly in exposed and/or narrow zones of water.

Among the *Hesten* names in the North there is quite a number that do not connote the normal skerries, but quite conspicuous mountainous features at the classical passages exposed to the fury of the North Atlantic, like *Stemshesten* at Hustadvika, Møre and Romsdal, Norway (Fig. 1). This has been a well-known sighting

Fig. 1. The mountain Stemshesten, "the Horse of Stem", Norway (photograph by author).

point from times immemorial. *Hesten* is the alternative name of Stålet of Stad, at the border in the north of Sogn and Fjordane, Norway. At the entrance of Sognefjord is a well-known and important sighting point, the mountain *Lihesten.* There are indeed lots of such names. Place name specialists have therefore tried to explain the recurring name as a simple superlative of *hár,* 'high' (e.g. Stemshaug 1973, p.85). The sighting point would then "only" be "the highest" in a group of mountains or hills.

But the Horse names do not, as indicated, only connote the normal high places. As an example of small, very low, skerries at significant points, *Hesten* is outside Selja, the legendary island landing place of St. Sunniva can be mentioned. This locality is found immediately south of the dangerous promontory of Stad, with the elevated *Hesten* locality mentioned above. In Lake Vänern three small skerries are called *Grå Häst,* "Gray Horse." This name contains yet another special feature. Gray is, according to fairly recent folklore, a magic and liminal colour, between black (the land) and white (the sea). This function is demonstrated even stronger in place name forms like *Holmen Grå,* "Island Gray," where the position of the adjective is inverted. This name connotes quite a number of islands and skerries in Norway and in West Sweden, possibly elsewhere as well. A thorough survey would reveal a whole complex of such names, where the possibility of a background in grazing could never be considered, nor of any physical similarity (well, how do you prove that?).

Apart from this, and even more decisively, this is an international phenomen, not bound to superlative forms of the adjectives of Scandinavian languages. Horace Beck writes also about the Anglo-Saxon forms (Beck 1973, p.119f): "For some reason, horses have been prominent in the minds of seamen for a long time. All along the coasts of the British Isles, Ireland and North America we find White Horse, Horse, Black Horse and Colt Island as well as many bluffs or headlands incorporating the word."

There are more of them as well in other languages than English. Besides, many of these localities do not show any reasonable similarity with a horse or a horse's head.

Requirements of an illiterate society

In Nordic literature on folklore there are thus numerous references to the social demand for another ritual behaviour at sea than on land. The reversal takes place on board a boat, which thus acquires the quality of a *liminal* space. This space –of the boat- is full of dangers, but these dangers could be averted by ritual magic. Even the path on land to the boat acquires a transitional status of liminality. This folkloristic material has so far not been studied by archaeologists to obtain alternative interpretations of prehistoric phenomena. However, to maritime archaeologists this sphere would reasonably belong to the self-evident array of maritime culture that should be mobilized in order to understand *la longue durée* of maritime cognition. The possibility that the dicotomy of sea and land is fundamental and possibly has got far-reaching consequences has also been noted by prominent scientists of religion. Åke Hultkrantz, who formulated the direction which could called the school of ecology within this discipline points out quite succinctly in connection with the taboos of fishermen (Hultkrantz 1992b; 1992a):

"The opposition between sea and land within fishing and hunting culture undoubtedly contributed to the emergence of taboos in fishing. It is here the question of more than just categorization into a dichotomy between land and sea, motivated by the structural "order." It is a question of a deeply felt division between two worlds within surrounding reality.

The ancient fishing culture – ancient in structure and general patterns, not in details modified over time – has survived up to our own times in marginal zones, where it has existed since antiquity. Isolated but populous fishing settlements have best withstood modernizations following in the steps of agriculture, high culture and industrialization. In particular the fishing villages of the sea have preserved their continuity."

The rules for another behaviour at sea than on land is part of socialisation in maritime societies. They include the taboos which are supposed to be broken or transgressed in order to start initiation, it includes the entire cognitive world that has to be mastered by a novice. This means the use of transit lines in fishing, the repetition of formulas together with the naming process, everything appearing meant to bring cosmos into chaos, in the light of an urge for an illiterate taxonomy of the everyday world. From the fishermen / farmers of the coast the formulas, place names and other regulated

behaviour were transmitted to the sailors, in the way maritime societies work.

Place names like the *Horse* names were taboo at sea. Instead were *noa* names used. But the curious thing happens all too often that pronouncing even the taboo names are brought to give good luck. At first, however, work *noa* names, ingratiating and "secure," for loaded points in the landscape. Some classical examples are the *Jomfru (Jungfru),* "Virgin," names, like in *Blå Jungfrun* which is the *noa* name of *Blåkulla*, home of the witches, in Kalmarsund, Sweden, *Jomfruland* in Telemark, Norway, which was replaced by the noa name *Landet Gode,* accordingly inverted as "Land Good" (and reappearing at several other navigationally important places in the west). Both were recorded in sailor folklore in the 16th century. The same goes for the *Bonden,* "The Farmer", names, which have a more eastern main distribution (Fries 1989; Falck-Kjällquist 2006), referring e.g. to the noa name for *Kullen*, the most well-recorded site of sailor's baptism in the North. Kullen is the best documented example of the combination of a site of baptism and the name taboo, with further implications for a generalized interpretation. Its name-giving alternatives also demonstrate the gender quality of the relationship between sea and land. Even the *Hesten* names, although theoretically an abstract species word, denote a stallion rather than a mare. However, in this opposition there is no fixed place for either gender or sex.

In an illiterate society, which we may have enormous difficulties to understand, and whose peculiar difficulties are perhaps mentally too little taken account of, the learning process of navigation is to a large degree a matter of memorizing by way of a combination of names, words, formulas. The formulas applied by heart to remember the transit lines and their crossing points, called *me* or *med* in all Scandinavia (cf for Norway Hovda 1961), this word at the same time used as well to denote the formula itself. In the normal absence of rhyme in the stanzas the dangerous names gave the necessary "thrill" to remember them. It is, according to my firm belief, in this socializing process that we find the ultimate meaning and function of the *Horse* names and other animal names at the coasts. The young novice is brought to pronounce the tabooed names of the important features of the sea routes and forced by custom to compensate to his followers by an offer of some kind to them or to the sea. After this ritual was completed these tabooed names, not only in their *noa* disguise, are used in formulas fairly freely and supposedly to good advantage. But I fail to see why sometimes only the *taboo* name is preserved and sometimes only the *noa* name. This is, anyway, according to my view, the ultimate background in coastal maritime culture for the

Different transcendent spheres in connection with water & sea applied in different periods, mostly prehistoric, of northern Europe. A very schematic sketch

Stone Age

Mesolithic/ Neolithic: ritual, magic, supernatural =rock carvings
Neolithic (LN) =sacrificial deposits , rock carvings (rock paintings) early ship-formed graves

Bronze Age

Burial = coastal cairns/ mounds, ship settings (including islands and heights)
Ritual = rock carvings, sacrificial deposits

Iron Age

Burial (ritual processions, ships & boats) = ship graves/ coastal cairns
EIA sacrificial deposits, human & war offerings, ship parts
LIA burial deposits, ship settings, sacrificial, ships, ship parts

Middle Ages

Supernatural =mazes, burials of aliens (islands, tidal area)

Fig. 2. Hydroliminality in different periods.

ritual baptism of sailors on the High Seas (Westerdahl 2004; cf van Gennep 1960 on passage rites, Henningsen 1948; 1960; 1961 for the latter rite).

It seems rather obvious that this principle could have been applied in various kinds of (what I call) *hydroliminality,* thought to bring luck, security and success in prehistoric societies (Fig. 2). The strongest magic possible seems to be applied by transgressing the border between the two elements, land & water. I have called the agents of such transgression *liminal agents,* "active" as well as "passive." One of these is the horse, maybe the most important.

The liminal zone along the coasts

Since we have now proposed that it is possible to perceive a link between the sea-land dichotomy of recent folklore and prehistoric cognition, it is crucial to establish *whether the border between these two elements has been marked in any special way by archaeological remains.* Any place where both elements could be implicated, seen or felt at the same time is liminal.

For the Atlantic coast of Europe, Brian Cunliffe points out that the 'cliff castles' or 'promontory forts,' as they are known in British Isles, seem to be less defensive than liminal in function, "the main imperative being to create a defined enclave at the interface between land and sea." He conjectures: "If, then, the domains of land and sea were conceived of as separate systems subject to their own very different supernatural powers, the interface between them was a liminal place, and as such was dangerous" (Cunliffe 2000, p.9).
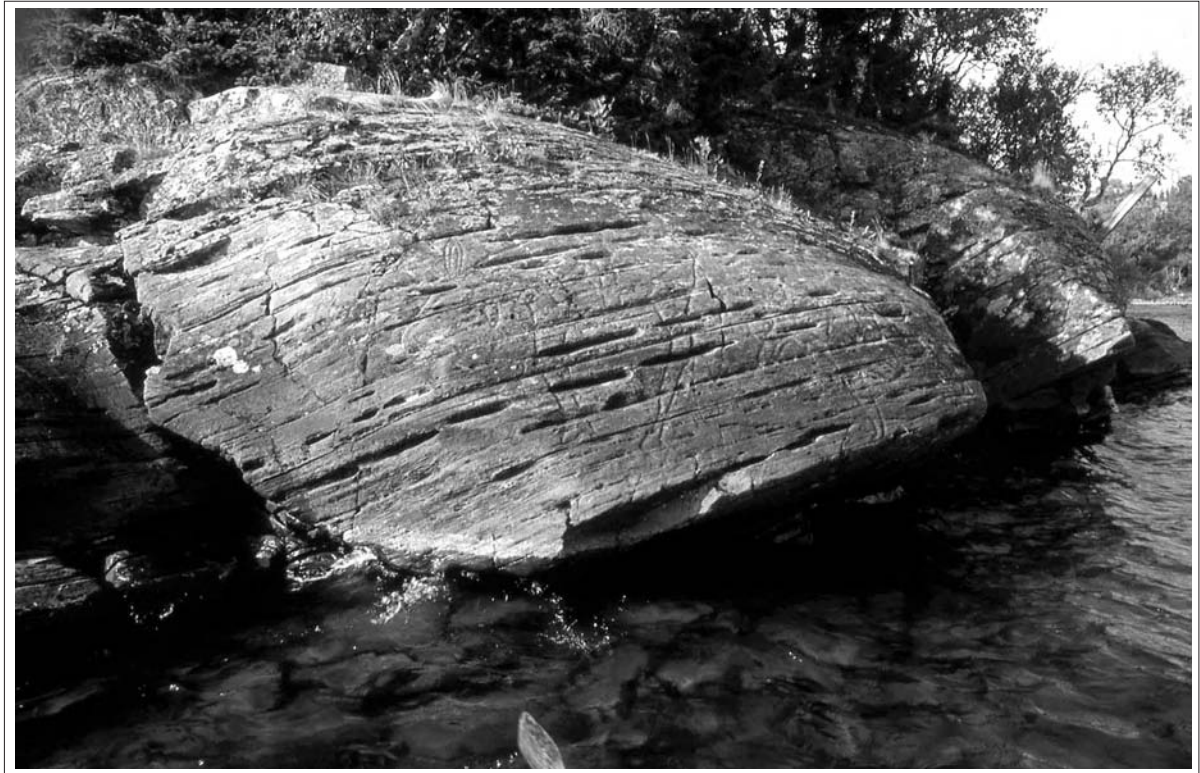
Fig. 3. Two elks carved at Ånn Lake in Jämtland, Sweden. The elks are depicted in large size and belong to the Stone Age (photograph by author).

In the north, the liminal zone at the water's edge is thus well illustrated by rock carvings (Fig. 3). This is particularly true of the arctic variety, that of the hunting and fishing cultures. With regard to Norway, this *location at the ancient shorelines* has been pointed out by Kalle Sognnes (1994) and Knut Helskog (1999). The contents of the carvings as well as their fusion of marine and terrestrial elements, referring to animals, have been emphasized by Christian Lindqvist (1994). There are exceptions to the role of the beach rocks, but they do not negate the general tendency. Besides, even the exceptions seem to exhibit a close relationship to other waters– not least in the later, Bronze Age, tradition (cf horse-headed ship on Fig. 4).

Unlike the coastal cairns and other fixed monuments on the shore (below), presumably in this case due to their contents (the burial, which would naturally require physical proximity to the liminal area), rock carvings may have been considered more independent. *The liminal area was presumably re-created by the imposition of figures on rocks.*

It is assumed here that the liminal content of the rock carving was the border between sea and land. Thus a physical closeness to the actual sea-front may not have been of crucial importance in some cases of rock carving panels far from the sea. In this sense one could perhaps compare them to the *re-creations of boat forms on land,* the ship settings, possibly the ship burials

and – who knows? – the alleged boat or boat model processions indicated by certain rock carving images. The sites farthest from the shore would then express the practical aspect of the distance to which the maritime dichotomy would have been thought to extend on land. Or perhaps the possibility that the strength of the *mana* would increase further inland?

The hunting culture of the north certainly depended on marine resources and maritime culture, with fishing and hunting sea mammals as the main themes. But the elk and other land animals were also hunted inland, at least seasonally, presumably by the same people.

During the Neolithic, the maritime connection remained – generally speaking – but inland hunting was partially replaced by agrarian pursuits. Even today, Bronze Age rock art often has a liminal location, but not always at the very seaboard. To a considerable extent, this is a result of land uplift over 3,000 years. As already observed, it should not be denied, however, that there are a couple of carvings and, above all paintings, which do not conform to this pattern of relative proximity to larger bodies of water. However, it has long since been observed that rock carving panels often lie in *vannsigen,* a Norwegian term for precisely that part of the rock which is trickled over by any ground excess water, at many places shown clearly by brown manganese sediments. As pointed out above, perhaps this was seen as a re-creation of the liminal status of the water-
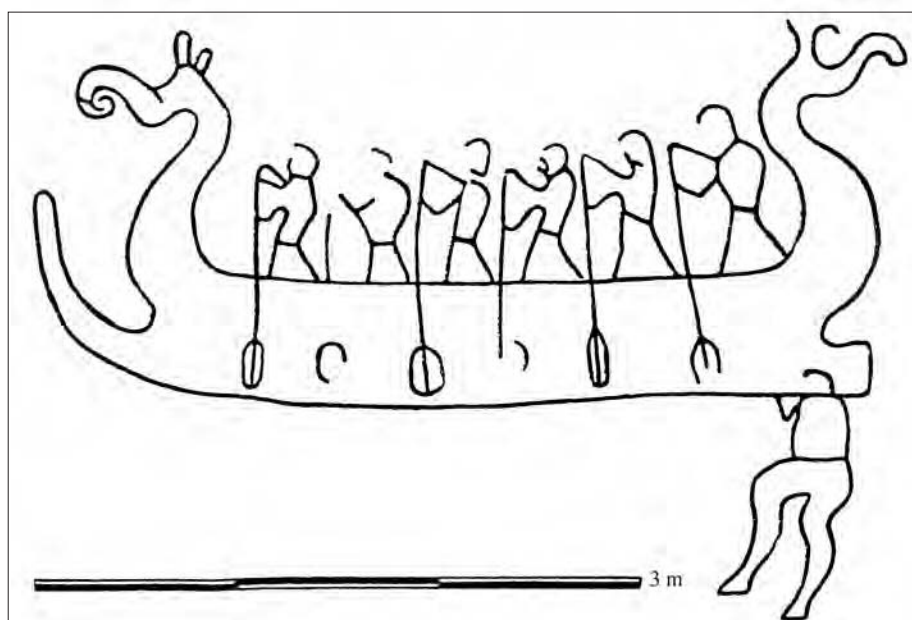
Fig. 4. The Horse (or elk?) ship of Brandskog, Uppland, Sweden (drawing by author).

line. On the other hand it must be pointed out that in prehistory this dark colouring, if it existed, must have been a good place to knock down pictures since they would presumably stand out white against this background, at least when the rock was dry.

The contemporary Bronze Age location of the many *coastal burial cairns,* as well as the location of those certain to have been erected during the Iron Age, indicates that this liminal position is fundamental to cosmology. A striking fact in some parts of the north, especially Swedish Norrland, is that the cairns were indeed erected precisely at the shore, although the land upheaval may have lifted them up to 25–45 metres above sea level today. What is more, there are no signs of settlement in the vicinity, a condition only to be expected since this is quite a barren zone, unsuitable for any kind of agrarian activity or permanent settlement. Although the material for building cairns is found in rounded stones and boulders typical of the shore, soil for building mounds is available inland. But there seem to be no mounds at all of the period in the area of concern. Even if this regional picture is most striking there is also general tendency in many traditional societies to see "the contact zone between the sea and the land… as a liminal zone, resource-rich but also appropriate for the disposal of the dead" (Cooney 2003, p.326).

The Iron Age mounds, on the other hand, were often erected on the very doorstep of the farm, i.e. the grave field was an integrated part of the *inmark* (Baudou 1989). Nevertheless, the shore was still used for individual burials in cairns. My own experience concerns the province Ångermanland of northern Middle Sweden, the very core area being investigated in-depth by Evert Baudou (Baudou 1968). These cairns have often

been plundered. Since there is a strict rule in ancient times to respect and actively protect graves, even between enemies, I have suggested that this grave robbery indicates that the cairns had lost their liminality, or 'maritimity' as I put it once, when the plunderers dug their holes, desecrating the burial. The land upheaval then lifted them beyond the sacral line (Westerdahl 1999).

If this is correct, it would be reasonable to assume that the liminal zone is quite limited, whereas I have proposed elsewhere that it extends all the way up to the point where the cairn is not visible from the sea, or rather the sea is not visible from the cairn. Of course, both ideas are equally speculative. The interpretations of these coastal cairns range basically from territorial markers in an economic landscape to primary or secondary use as sailing marks in a transport landscape. None of the proposed functions would be excluded *a priori* as an additional function to this cosmographic scheme, especially when it comes to the *precise* location of individual cairns along the shores.

The cognitive location of the border between the liminal and the non-liminal states is thus still enigmatic. But an answer to the question is suggested by the analyses of the Finnish archaeologist Tapani Tuovinen. His material is the cairns of the Åboland archipelago of southwestern Finland. There are two main periods, the Late Bronze Age, ca. 1000 BC, and the Iron Age, in this case approx. 500–1000 AD. Tuovinen's point of departure is the issue as to whether the main view from the cairns is directed towards the sea or inland. There is a tendency for a direction inland during the older period, the (Late) Bronze Age, and for a direction towards

the sea during the later period, the Iron Age (Tuovinen 2002). I think that the border between the liminal state and the non-liminal would be in this cognitive orbit, either with the cairn visible from the water or with a possible view of the sea from the cairn.

If a cognitive borderline is to be drawn, there is little more to refer to than to the senses. An example of a situation where the border to forbidden behaviour was the sighting distance to the sea is what Vestergaard (1972) retells about the Faroese woman who has recently given birth to a child but not yet been received into the bosom of the church. She then was preferably not even supposed to leave her house, but if she had to, it was possible only *if she could still see either the church or the sea.* Evidently this is also a suitable reminder of the overall dualism, either the land or the sea, since in this juncture the woman was in a liminal state.

In historical times, starting in the Middle Ages, stone *labyrinths* or *mazes* were laid out in the same liminal zone, especially along the Baltic coasts of Sweden and Finland, but also in other archipelagos, although more sporadically. There are at least three hundred along the Swedish coasts and more than two hundred along the Finnish. They appear in smaller numbers in Norway, Estonia and North Atlantic Russia. John Kraft has characterized the function of the stone labyrinths as a *universal medium of magic* (Kraft 1982). I think this is basically correct, not only for mazes but for all kinds of magic spaces or magic charms.

The liminal state along any water-line

In ancient lore the border between any body of water, including rivers, and the "earth" is loaded with magical meaning. It is here that wisdom can be procured, and where supernatural duels are settled in Celtic (Irish) cosmology (Rees & Rees 1973). At sea it is called *flomålet* in Norwegian, with reference precisely to the tidal area at the seaboard (with very little tide, however), the area where corpses of anonymous outsiders or dangerous evil-doers were buried so they would not walk the earth inland. Ghosts cannot cross water anyway, according to tradition (Haavio 1947), and drowned sailors are therefore also buried on islands as a special precaution. The burial grounds in consecrated graveyards of the archipelagos comprise several ritual dimensions, not only the official, Christian one.

As can easily be imagined, the liminal state is found also in wetlands, again situated between water and land. One of the obvious cases is the ships or boats or parts of such – to some extent raw material – found in bogs and marshes (Shetelig & Johannessen 1929). The water vessels are strong on land, as we have indicat-

ed, but their elements probably become even stronger when they lie immersed for whatever polysemic purpose intended – for a grave, for universal intentions of magic, or for actual use in a planned construction according to the "wet" wooden technology practised by the Scandinavians. Function is indeed parallel to symbol. An obvious case of liminal significance would be human constructions for ritual purposes, on the sides of lakes or in bogs and marshes, such as pile dwellings of a less everyday type, if this can be established. A Neolithic structure at *Alvastra,* Östergötland, Sweden appears to have been just such a large, seasonally used construction (Browall 1986; Malmer 1991).

Pit dwellings, crannogs on islands in lakes and other sites at the water's edges may as well have had something to do with similar beliefs on the properties of a liminal state. The perspectives of recent wetland archaeology are opening up somewhat in this direction (Van de Noort & Sullivan 2006).

On the other hand some studies indicate that fresh water and salty sea water appear to have different cosmological and other properties. However, I doubt that this meaning could be generalized.

The liminal state is also found in several other maritime (and other) dimensions. As an example, colours are implied. Black is the colour of the land and is therefore taboo on a boat. The prohibition on wearing black clothes on boats may be primary to the taboos of the priest onboard -as e.g. the counter-magicians of the land. White is of course to some extent permitted at sea. But the only truly liminal, and accordingly "safe," colour is grey, the colour between black and white. This is apparently the reason for naming magically charged islands *Holmen Grå*, 'the Gray Island," *Grå Häst,* "Gray Horse," and similar names with the element grå, 'grey.' In the case of *Holmen Grå* and *Landet Gode,* also mentioned above, the special character of their name is accordingly clearly indicated by the inverted position of the adjective (cf Weise 1969).

Land animals on boats

Why do the ships of the rock carvings almost invariably bear heads of land animals on their stem-pieces? In the North, the heads are without a doubt those of elks. In this arctic hunting and fishing tradition, the majority of figurative motifs probably depict elks, to some extent other wild animals, including reindeer in the far north. Whales are widespread. Seals and land animals like the bear are graphically much more difficult to identify. Presumably this is part of the reason why they are nor depicted so often. The elk is the predominant motif also in rock paintings. Already from 5700 BC we
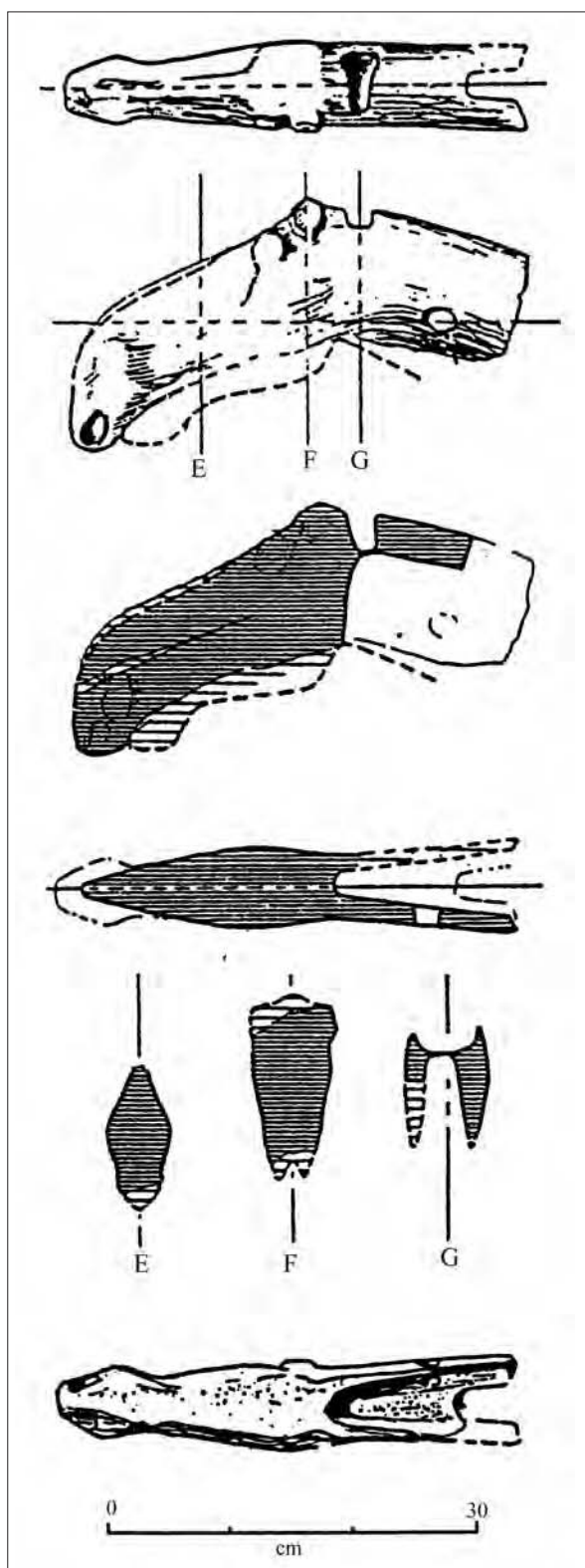
Fig. 5. The wooden elk-head of Lehtojärvi, Rovaniemi, Finland, dated to c. 5700 BC (after Erä-Esko 1958).

have a unique dated wooden sculpture of an elk head with this potential, that of *Lehtojärvi* in Rovaniemi, northern Finland (Erä-Esko 1958) (Fig. 5). This find is contemporary with some of the oldest dated rock carvings in Northern Norway, ca. 6000 BC.

During the Bronze Age in the south, ca. 1800-500 BC, it appears that horse's heads adorned the stems of the ships on the rocks (cf fig. 4). It seems as if a wild animal, the elk, in a context of hunting and fishing is replaced as the prototype animal species by a domestic animal in an agricultural context. Thus, land animals were taboo, like in historical times (below) as liminal agents at sea during the Bronze Age, and they may have had an apotropaeic function, i.e. protective and averting, at sea. Besides I assume that they conferred particular magic power by passing the border between sea and land.

This is not a phenomenon, at least not superficially, restricted to the north. *Hippos,* plur. *hippoi,* Greek for 'horse,' was the term for a well-known ship type, apparently of Phoenician origin in the Eastern Mediterranean during the Iron Age, probably emerging somewhat later than 1000 BC, but contemporary with the later part of the Nordic Bronze Age. Its stem had a horse's head**.** Such boats were still sailing the Mediterranean in the beginning of the second century AD, according to Strabo. The fishermen of Cadiz in south Spain used to carve wooden horse heads and put them at the stems of their boats in the first part of the 20th century AD (e.g. Braudel 2002, p.101).

A mighty stag with impressive antlers is attached to the stem in the *navicelli*, the Sardinian bronze ship models, probably lamps, of the Early Iron Age (Late Iron Age, ca. 700–400 BC; Calcagno 1998; 2006). The cranium of an ox was the figurehead of a large Irish curragh depicted in the late seventeenth century (e.g. in Johnstone 1980, p.130 fig.10.13).

But the ship itself must also have been significant on land. As to the figures in rock carvings of the arctic tradition, the large number of whales depicted may have borne a related significance to land.

From a far later time we do in fact possess an illustrative record of the use of a real horse's head in strong magic directly associated with the relationship between sea and land. It is a famous passage in the *Saga of Egil Skallagrimsson.* The Prototype Sea Viking Egil is certainly a historical personality living in the tenth century although his saga was written during the 13th. Egil, coming from the sea to the island of Herdla, challenges his adversary Eirik Blood-Axe, the King of Norway, by the following magic means. He sets up a horse head on a hazel pole and turns it towards the mainland, with the declared intention to scare the *landvættir,* the gnomes of the land. It is pointed out that the pole is carved with magic runes. This was called a *nidstöng,* a "libel" pole, and even though this act is unique in the sense that it is the only recorded, the process was clearly not unknown to the Northerners. It is obviously

the audacity of challenging a king that makes it worth recording in detail.

Unfortunately we do not know- or rather we will never know- the full significance of this act and the cosmology behind it. But it is abundantly clear that the binary relationship sea to land is implied, although in this case personified, by reference to Egil and his king. Apart from this the magic involved is considered extremely strong- and I would suggest- potentially extremely dangerous to both parties. Another overriding consideration concerns the lack of other records of the same act. During a period when this belonged to the common heritage of the Norse the knowledge of the *praxis* of magic was not only restricted, it was jealously guarded as such. *As in later times magic was supposed to be powerless if commonly known.*

Hengist & Horsa

There is some personal names in Anglo-Saxon tradition which may be relevant. We meet two legendary brothers which lead the first invasions of south England, purportedly in AD 449. They are called *Hengist* and *Horsa,* literally `(the) stallion´ and `(the) horse´ (a generic name for horse). Hengist was the most important chieftain of these first invaders. Horsa is more anonymous, and was killed fairly early in the fighting against the British (e.g. Ward 1949).

These names have not been much discussed, except that it is commonly held that they are not personal names. Perhaps they are rather nick-names. More specifically, it has been proposed that they refer to horses on the crests of their helmets, rather in the vein of the boar of Nordic Migration Age helmets (and later).

It is interesting that *Hengist* reappears in a number of place names in England, also along the coast. But the most interesting of us, *Hengistbury Head,* with obvious archaeological references (by the excavator, e.g. Cunliffe 2001 etc.) has not been recorded very early. Another word for horse is *Hæst* or *Hest. Haestingas* is the old form of the place name *Hastings*, and it appears in plural, as a name of a group of people, almost like that of a dynastic line in the North.

However it seems a considerable possibility that these are *names of ships,* symbolizing, perhaps, in the sense of an original social unit, the crew of the first ships to land on the English shores. A strong indication of this might be the fact that Hengist's son was called *Aesc,* literally 'ash (tree),' but also in later Anglo-Saxon a type name of a longship. The Viking invaders four hundred years later could be called *aescmenn* by the Anglo-Saxons. Adam of Bremen still uses a Latinization, *Ascomanni,* in the 1080's. However, even if the
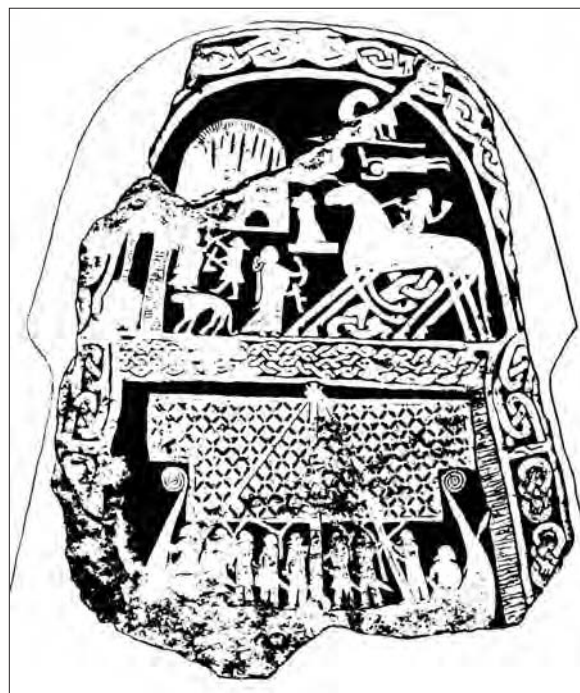

Fig. 6. The horse of Odin, the eight-footed Sleipnir, on a Gotlandic picture stone, Tjängvide of Alskog parish, the ninth century AD (after Nylén & Lamm 1988, p.69).

ash was used as ship's wood it has only been found in the upper strakes, but only in much later ships. In the present state of knowledge such a name would presumably be a *pars-pro-toto* nickname. The same goes for ash as a normal wood for spears. Personal names, derived from spears seem, however, at least in Scandinavia, mainly to refer to the (iron) point, not to the shaft (*Odd, Geir* etc.). Maybe, as an alternative, *ash* could be seen as well as a generic name for wood?

I would guess that these ships *carried horse-heads on their stems,* like the *hippoi* or for that matter, even Roman ships. It seems that ships in the Southern Baltic may have carried such heads as well. The 12th century bronze doors of the cathedral at Gniezno in Poland depict the martyrdom of St. Adalbert. The ships are adorned with animal heads. Tree-nailed ship wrecks were found in 1800 during the canal works of Södertälje, which carried human faces on their stems, according to a report by the chief engineer Eric Nordewall. Birka, which was presumably the goal of these ships, received ships from Sembia or Samland according to Rimbert´s *Vita Anskari.* The remains were very brittle and fell apart almost instantaneously after being dug out. Nothing remains today.

Ship and horse in graves

The most salient example of an liminal object returning to land would be the all-embracing prehistoric use of boats and ships as symbols and markings in burials/
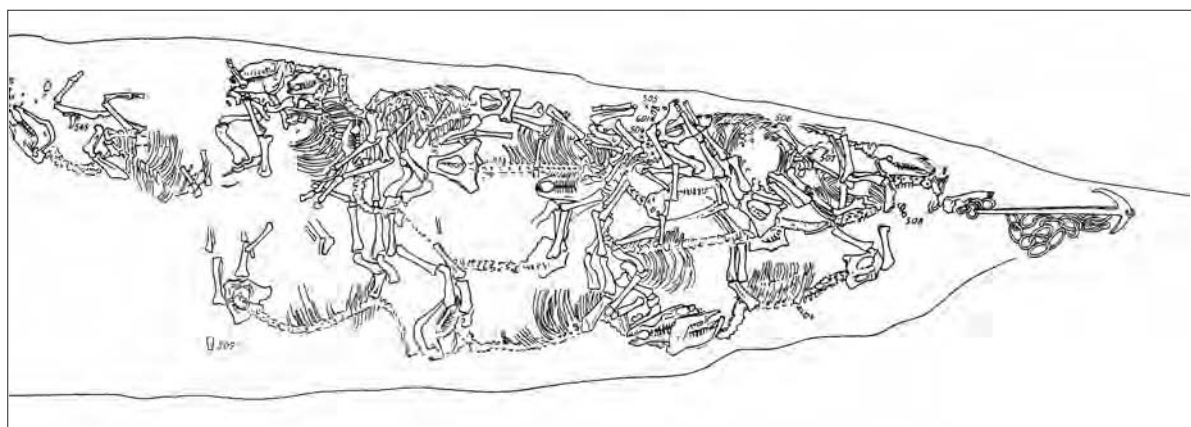
322

Fig. 7. The horse sacrifices at the ship grave of Ladby, Funen, Denmark, the tenth century AD. After Thorvildsen 1957 (cf Sørensen 2001).
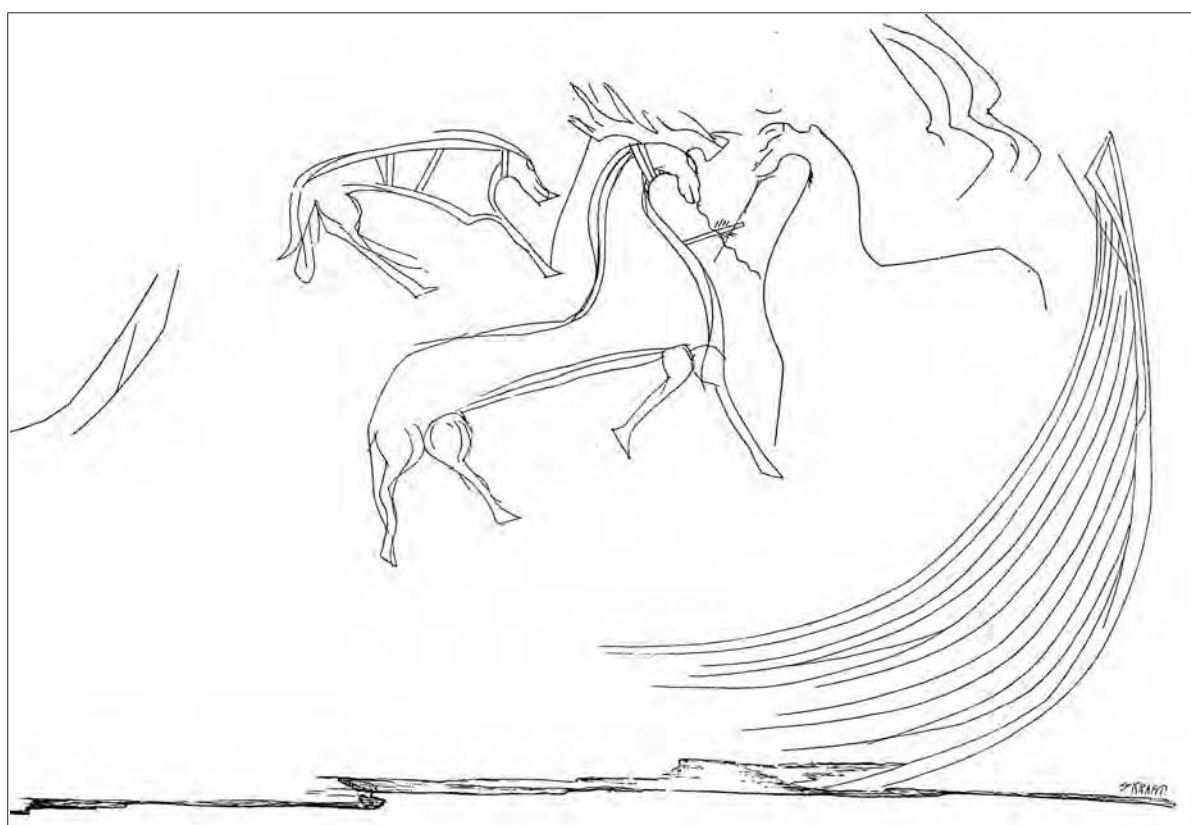
Fig. 8. Depictions of a horse-fight and a ship prow on one of the planks of the Oseberg ship grave (dendro-dated AD 834) (after Brøgger, Falk and Schetelig 1917, p.317).

graves, pictures, votive ships, boat pageants and processions, presumably all occasions for socially important rituals.

But the liminal state works in several cognitive dimensions. Life and death is another, especially in connection with the ship as the carrier of the sun, from light to darkness and back again (Kaul 1998). These seem to be some of the combined reasons for the significance of the ship in burials.

Here I pass by the ship settings (e.g. Capelle 1986; 1995; Artelius 1996) and other ship-related symbols and stick only to the actual material ship in ship graves as well as the material horse. There are few works dealing with both the ship-settings and the ship in the grave, notably Ohlmarks (1946) and Müller-Wille (1970; 1995).

The sepulchral role of the horse has been a characteristic feature of the Balts, not least belonging to the Lithuanian heritage (e.g. Bertašius & Daugnora 2001).
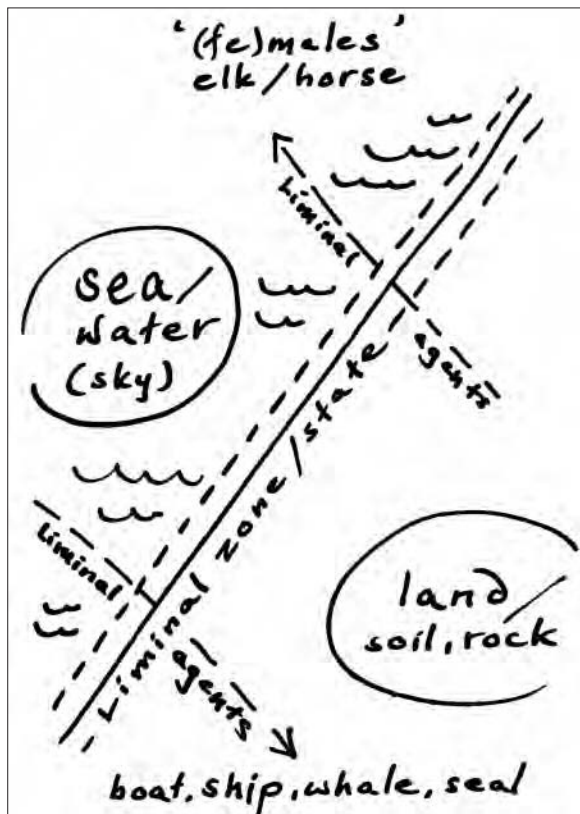
Fig. 9. Liminality at the shore.

It is in fact a fairly common trait in the northern European cultures. The liminal role of the horse in the sepulchral sphere can be pointed out also in connection with its quality of *psychopomp* in Nordic mythology. Sleipnir, the horse of Odin has got eight feet and it is lent out to a person of high status to take him to Valhall. The arrival is depicted on Gotlandic picture stones from the Viking Age (Fig. 6).

In Scandinavia, the horse(s) occurs also in rider graves, and great status burials. Some of the most lavishly equipped burials contain both ship/ boat and horse(s). Vendel, Valsgärde, Ladby (Fig. 7), Oseberg. But the boat is also common in fairly ordinary graves, also including women (Müller-Wille 1970; 1995). The importance of the horse has been pointed out, and certainly given sufficient attention as a –perhaps divine- status marker (Gjessing 1943). Lately, more many-sided and versatile ideas have been introduced (Oma 2000).

It should be noted that the appearance of sacrificial horses in ship burials would make the representation of land- and sea-based liminal agents complete. Not mainly because they do occur together in graves. It is far more rewarding, I believe, to consider the notion that both were needed, materially nor not, to make up the balance of the world view. The representation of a horse-fight together with ships has been depicted in several epochs (Fig. 8; Plate VIII.1-2).

If I am correct in this, the duality of sea and land has indeed a significance expressed in various societal contexts. Perhaps one would wonder in this context at what kind of maritime experience e.g. the Balts would possess during the Iron Age and Early Medieval Times? Certainly there was such experience. But this is not relevant at all to the question. The sea is a reference point in most cultures, even those centred inland. The cognitive duality of sea and land, in each element "the other", would be natural in any case (Fig. 9).

Conclusions

It is suggested that the ethnohistorical material of maritime culture illustrates a structural opposition between sea and land. This dual relationship is marked by the transition, the shore, which appears as a liminal area. The border between different behaviour is drawn here. This area is the main location in the North for a number of prehistoric ritual activities, including rock carvings, burial cairns and in later times by stone mazes. A probable inference would be that this dual cognitive set, sea to land, was present also in prehistory.

The cognitive equivalents to the abstract division between sea and land appear mainly to be horse and ship in agrarian cultures. Both are represented strongly as symbols in depictions on rock carvings and standing stones. The predecessors in hunting and gathering groups would have applied the sea mammals, seals and whales, and above all the elk, in the same cognitive roles. Fragments of other ethnohistorical material reflect related conceptions.

This cosmology is not the only one. Symbols are notoriously polysemic, i.e. they represent different cognitive factors to different people. In this case e.g. the solar cosmology (Kaul 1998) certainly belongs to the ruling class, coloured as it is by foreign prestige-loaded elements, but the underlying magic and ritual modelled on the liminal shore and its two elements is presumably native, with deep roots in conditions of the past.

A basic example of a specialised and highly sophisticated prehistoric hunting culture is that of the Inuit, the Thule culture in particular. Social life is regulated by strict taboos. It has been shown in archaeological analyses by Robert McGhee (1977) that only material from the sea, `ivory for the sea woman,´ could be used for sea hunting and vice versa in land. However, the dualism between sea and land expressed here is rather the opposite. The land-produced elk antler harpoon was certainly used in the prehistoric Baltic for sealing in the sea. The gender opposition in other cultures may or may not be the reverse to the Inuit version. What is

important is the basic idea of profound difference, of contrast, between what is effectively two worlds.

The dual structure unfolds in two-sided representations of fundamental opposites in human culture, between which interaction strengthens their application: such as gender, male to female, fundamentals, life to death, even colours as black to white. It is to be observed that fairly recent folklore identifies precisely these opposites with sea and land, respectively. Between them transfer is most obviously made in the case of life to death by the main liminal agents, the ship and the horse. The ritual or ceremonial transfer of the ship and its form to land has so far no such direct parallel with a transfer of the horse to the sea, except in the application of horse's heads to ship prows. But in folklore the naming of land forms from the sea is a strong factor indicating still unknown and unexplored fields. Hydroliminality, the extension of the possible, and indeed probable, significance of the sea to all forms of water is an intriguing problem further to be discussed. There are also problems of interpretation to be analysed in connection with the cognitive function of e.g. the horse-fight. Perhaps is best to suggest at this stage that the cosmological universe was multi-layered, and that the dual components ultimately also were individualized, not only personified, but more or less as divine with accompanying complex rituals expressing myth and expressed *by* myths. Human beings seemingly interceded in the same way between the opposites, and could be considered as liminal agents. Normally we refer to them as shamans or wizards, but other categories or even sociocultural groups may also be considered in this light.

Translated by author

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ŽIRGAS KAIP RIBINIS VEIKĖJAS

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Santrauka

Darbe teigiama, kad etnoistorinė medžiaga jūrinėje kultūroje iliustruoja struktūrinę priešpriešą tarp jūros ir žemyno. Šiame dualistiniame ryšyje išsiskiria pereinamoji zona – pakrantė, kuri jame tampa ribine vieta. Į ją nukreipta skirtingų veiklų sandūra. Šiaurėje tai pagrindinė vieta, kurioje aptinkama daug ritualinės veiklos pasireiškimų, taip pat ir uolų raižinių, palaidojimų akmenų krūsnyse, vėlesniais laikais – iš akmenų sukrautų labirintų. Tikėtina, kad ši dualistinio kognityvumo (pažinumo) sfera – ryšys tarp žemės ir jūros – egzistavo taip pat ir priešistorėje (1–9 pav.; VIII iliustr.).

Abstraktaus jūros ir žemės atskyrimo kognityvumo (pažinumo) atitikmenimis agrarinėse kultūrose dažniausiai tampa arklys ir laivas. Abu jie kaip simboliai dažnai aptinkami raižiniuose ant uolų ir akmeninių stelų (3; 4; 8 pav.). Prieš tai gyvenę žvejų ir medžiotojų bendruomenių žmonės šioje kognityvumo sferoje naudodavo jūros žinduolių – ruonių ir banginių, o visų pirma briedžio simbolius. Panašų požiūrį atskleidžia ir kiti etnoistorinės medžiagos fragmentai.

Ši kosmologija nėra vienintelė. Gerai žinoma, kad simboliai yra polisemantiniai (daugiareikšmiai), t. y. ženklina kognityvumo veiksnius, įvairiems žmonėms skirtingus. Šiuo atveju valdančiajai klasei neabejotinai priklauso saulės kosmologija, kuri yra nuspalvinta įvežtiniais prestižo kupinais elementais, tačiau užslėpta magija ir ritualai, sumodeliuoti į ribinę pakrantę ir du jos elementus, turbūt yra vietiniai, turintys gilias šaknis praeityje.

Dualistinė struktūra atsiskleidžia pagrindinėse dvilypėse žmonijos kultūros priešpriešose, sąveika tarp kurių tik sustiprina jų pritaikymą: lyties – nuo vyro iki moters, būties – nuo gyvenimo iki mirties ir netgi spalvų – nuo baltos iki juodos. Pastebėta, kad net gana nesenas folkloras aiškiai išskiria šias priešpriešas, taip pat ir tarp jūros ir žemės. Tarp jų ryškiausias yra perėjimo iš gyvenimo į mirtį atvejis, kurį atlieka pagrindiniai ribiniai veikėjai – laivas ir arklys. Ritualiniam ar ceremonialiniam laivo ar jo formos perkėlimui į krantą kol kas nėra tiesioginių atitikmenų perkeliant arklį į jūrą, išskyrus tai, kad laivo pirmagaliai buvo puošiami arklio galvos atvaizdais. Tačiau folklore žemės formų įvardijimas jūros įvardais yra stiprus veiksnys, žymintis iki šiol nežinomą ir neištirtą sritį. Tikėtina, kad ribinė vandens, t. y. jūros, reikšmė buvo suteikta kitoms vandens formoms, ir tai yra intriguojantis klausimas ateities diskusijoms. Taip pat analizuotinos interpretacijos problemos, susijusios, pavyzdžiui, su arklio – kovos kognityviomis funkcijomis. Ko gero, šiame tyrimų etape geriausia iškelti prielaidą, kad kosmologinis pasaulis buvo daugiasluoksnis, ir dualistiniai elementai galiausiai buvo daugiau ar mažiau individualizuoti kaip dievybės su jas lydinčiu ritualų kompleksu, išreiškiančiu mitus ir išreikštu mituose. Žmonės, atrodo, taip pat buvo tuo pačiu būdu įterpiami į priešpriešas ir gali būti laikomi ribiniais veikėjais. Paprastai tokiais veikėjais mes laikome šamanus ir burtininkus, tačiau šiame kontekste galima svarstyti ir apie kitas žmonių kategorijas.

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