

Nordic and Celtic

Religion in Southern Scandinavia during the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age

BY MARIANNE GÖRMAN

This symposium is devoted to the study of ancient Nordic religion. Most of the talks have dealt with Nordic religion, as it appears in the Viking Age. Ancient Nordic religion, therefore, seems to be identical with religion in the Viking Age, and this is also the traditional way of looking at the matter. The reason for this view is, of course, the fact that religion in the Viking Age is comparatively well documented, above all through abundance of written sources. Our knowledge of the religious life of our Nordic ancestors before that is on the other hand meagre and fragmentary. Our knowledge here is based on archæological finds, as written sources are lacking. Because scholars of the history of religions normally work with texts, there has been great scepticism about conducting research into the history of religions on the basis of archæological finds — i.e. a non-written material.

A sceptical attitude towards the study of pre-history within the framework of comparative religion was perhaps once well founded. Developments in archæological research has been very rapid, however, particularly during the last decades, and extensive investigations of dwelling-places were carried out during the sixties and seventies. Thanks to the findings of these excavations we today have a more coherent and in several respects, completely new conception of Nordic pre-historic society. By means of modern archæological research it is today possible to gain much information even from non-written material, a point I have demonstrated in my recently published dissertation (Görman 1987). There I used results from recent research into the chronology of rock-carvings and Celtic-German pre-history as a basis for a study in comparative religion. To begin with I shall introduce my sources and the methods of work I have used. I shall then present some of the results I have obtained. Together they give a new and more detailed picture than before of the religion in Southern Scandinavia during the late bronze age and early iron age.

My investigation is limited with regard to time and place. It covers the late bronze age and early iron age, ca. 1000 B.C. –0. It is based on material from Denmark, the Southwest of Sweden, and the Southeast of Norway. This region formed a cultural unity since the sea bound the area together.

Our main sources of knowledge of Nordic religion during this time span are votive offerings and rock-carvings. Votive offerings are objects which, above all, have been deposited in lakes and peat-bogs. In prehistoric times these served as cult centres for entire districts, often over long periods.

Rock-carvings are to be found in many parts of the world, but they are particularly numerous and varied in Scandinavia. Those in the Northern parts of Scandinavia are usually very different from those in the South with respect to time of origin, locality and motifs.

The rock-carvings of Southern Scandinavia are generally situated close to cultivated land and connected with water. Their position in relation to arable and pasture land and their motifs, often taken from agriculture, show that they have been created by peasants. It is also common to label them "agricultural carvings". Modern research dates the majority of the rock-carvings of Southern Scandinavia to the bronze age, mainly its latter part, and to the early iron age, i.e. about 1800 B.C. –0, with its centre during the period 1000–500 B.C. A few scholars consider the carving to have continued until the late iron age. There are some reasons for believing this, but conclusive arguments are still missing. It is important to remember that not all figures on a rock-carving need to have the same time of origin. Sometimes the carving has continued on the same rock for several centuries. This is very evident when new pictures have been carved across others.

The rock-carvings of Southern Scandinavia have been subjected to a series of different interpretations. Today, however, most scholars agree that they reflect developed religious conceptions and cults. They believe that the engravers were trying to represent religious events in real life, i.e. cultic acts. Accordingly, the rock pictures are to be understood as representations of the cultic practices of the bronze and iron ages.

The purpose of the rites reproduced on the rock-carvings was to strengthen the fertility of the ground and the generative productivity of animals and men. Good growth and plentiful offspring among men and animals were pre-requisites for further existence and a good life for those men who created the rock-carvings. It is generally supposed that the powers to whom the rites were directed were sun-gods

and fertility gods. The frequent round figures on the rock-carvings speak for a cult of the sun and they are generally interpreted as symbols for the sun. The sexual character of the rock pictures is also striking. The sexual organs of animals and human beings are often very enlarged. When women appear, they are almost always to be found as partners in coitus.¹

As mentioned above, the carving extends over several thousands of years. During this time the structure of Nordic society changed, and different ideas penetrated into the Nordic area from the world around, influencing its artistic forms. In spite of this, scholars have often considered the rock-carvings to be a cultural and religious unity, and it is only during the last decades that archæologists have been able to reveal a chronological order in the huge amount of rock-carvings (see Marstrander 1963; Glob 1969; Burenhult 1980). The chronology they are just beginning to discern has made it possible for me to choose and investigate a number of motifs, which are recognized as contemporaneous. Consequently I have avoided making overall interpretations of rock-carvings. In other research this is common and can easily lead to false conclusions.

Accordingly, I have investigated a number of motifs which are all new in the Nordic pictorial world from the late bronze age. I have examined these symbols and pictures when they appear on archæological finds of sacred character, i.e. rock-carvings and votive offerings from the Southwest of Scandinavia. These motifs are not only contemporaneous, but they are also of the same origin. They all come from the Celtic Hallstatt culture in the Eastern part of Central Europe (Kossack 1954, 79–84; Marstrander 1963, 273 ff., 278; Glob 1969, 190–197. Marstrander as well as Glob use the results of Kossack).

During the bronze age and early iron age the Nordic peasant population had intensive contacts with the Southeastern and Central parts of Europe. A great quantity of imported objects bear evidence of widespread connections.² The inhabitants of the Nordic area not only brought home objects, but also ideas and religious conceptions. This is clearly reflected in the iconography, as we soon shall see.

The cultures with which connections were upheld and from which ideas were introduced were those of Hallstatt and La Tène. They were

¹ For a general introduction to rock-carvings see Fredsjö & Janson & Moberg 1969; Kühn 1971; Stenberger 1964, 228–249. For rock-carvings in special areas see Althin 1945; Glob 1969; Marstrander 1963; Gjessing 1939; Hagen 1969; Fredsjö 1971; Fredsjö 1975; Fredsjö 1981; Burenhult 1980.

² For influences from Central Europe on the Nordic material see Thrane 1975.

both Celtic iron age cultures prospering in Central Europe at the same time as the late bronze age and early iron age in the Nordic area.

As I have mentioned previously, the motifs of the Nordic pictorial world changed with the transition to the late bronze age. Some motifs became less frequent, while others gained in importance. Among the last mentioned are a number of new symbols and pictures. They are animal heads with horns, serpents with or without horns, complicated circles and spirals and hand-signs (Glob 1969, 184–197, 202 f.; Marstrander 1963, 275 ff.). In particular, these symbols are found on things connected with the cult, but they are less frequent on the large number of objects in daily use such as weapons and tools. Accordingly there is a difference between the profane and the religious pictorial world (Glob 1969, 131). The new motifs belong above all to the second sphere.

The prototypes for the new symbols are to be found in the Eastern part of the Hallstatt culture. This was, as I have mentioned, a Celtic culture. Here, too, the motifs in question are to be found in religious contexts.

This means that the new symbols in the Nordic area come from a Celtic environment. Consequently I have concluded that the Celtic religion, such as it may be found in the pre-Roman period, can clarify the meaning of the conceptions, linked with these symbols. I intend to discuss the motifs containing serpents, animal heads and deer hunting, and I shall try to elucidate these by means of a few examples.

In Celtic religion the name of Cernunnos is a collective title for gods of a special and similar character. Two main sub-groups may be discerned. The first type is reproduced with deer horns on his head and with torcs around his neck and in his hand. A torc is a Celtic neck-ring, which is almost fully closed. This god is accompanied by one or several ram-headed serpents and often by a deer and a bull. The second type of this horned god is portrayed with the horns of a ram or a bull on his head. He is often represented as a nude phallic warrior with a spear and a shield in his hands. From their animal attributes and companions it is evident that these horned gods were fertility gods. A goddess of the same type as Cernunnos is also known (for Cernunnos see Duval 1957, 33 ff.; MacCana 1970, 44, 47; Ross 1970, 211 ff.; Sjøestedt 1940, 26; Vries 1961, 104 ff.; Bober 1951). One of the best reproductions of Cernunnos we know is to be found on a silver cauldron from Gundestrup in Denmark. (Fig. 1) The cauldron, which represents a whole Celtic pantheon, is usually dated to the centuries around the birth of Christ. In some cases the god and his



Fig. 1.

female counterpart have been depicted together.

Serpents are to be found on about twenty rock-carvings in Scandinavia. Sometimes they are supplied with horns. An example of this is a rock-carving from Lökeberget in the parish of Foss in Bohuslän. (Fig. 2)

In Celtic religion the ram-headed serpent is no doubt the most typical cult animal. Usually it appears in connection with the Cernunnos gods. An example of this is a rock-carving from Val Camonica in Italy, which shows Cernunnos with a long serpent in his left hand (Fig. 3), whilst on the cauldron from Gundestrup in Denmark he is also represented with a horned snake. A number of rock-carvings

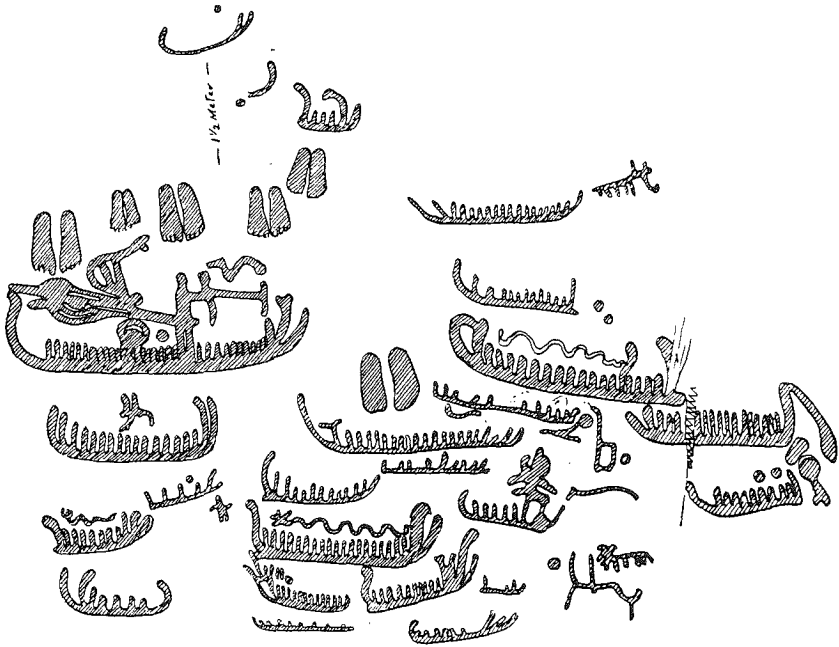


Fig. 2.

in Bohuslän contain serpents with this Celtic characteristic, which is important. On the carving from Foss the snakes are situated above ships, and these ships, accordingly, are cult ships, on which horned serpents are carried around in a religious ceremony. (See fig. 2.)

We have another example of the snake cult on the rock-carving from Vitlycke, also in Bohuslän. (Fig. 4) A man is depicted standing with lifted arms in front of two serpents. In one of his hands he is holding a ring. The photographer Per Hasselroth has recently revealed that the picture represents two snakes and that the man is holding a ring in his raised hand. This discovery was made possible through a new photographic technique, illuminating the carvings by means of searchlights at low altitude in the dark. The new details revealed by his photographs confirm my theories in several respects. We have already met both the serpent and the ring as attributes of Cernunnos. The man is depicted with an erect penis, which means that the fertility aspect had been emphasized in this picture. My suggestion is that the man on the carving from Vitlycke should be interpreted as a representative of a fertility god with the serpent and the ring as his symbols.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.

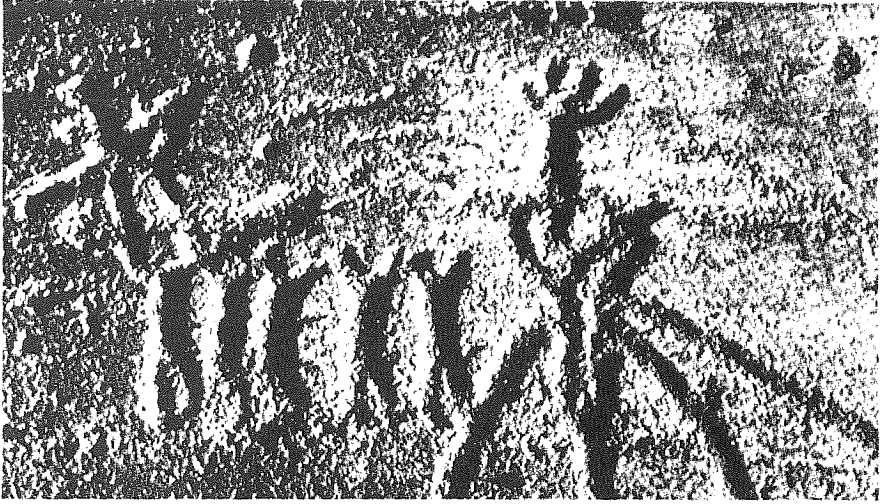


Fig. 5.

The horned animal head has a central place in the pictorial world of the rock-carvings. An obvious cult scene with a horned animal head in its centre can be found on a rock picture from Lilla Gerum, in the parish of Tanum in Bohuslän. (Fig. 5) Some men are carrying an animal head on their shoulders. They walk in procession towards a man with raised arms and a horned helmet on his head. I suggest that this scene should be interpreted as an adoration of the god's attribute — the horned animal head.

Sometimes four-footed animals as well have been reproduced standing on ships in the rock-carvings. They are often deer. A rock-carving from Sandåker, in the parish of Näsinge in Bohuslän, depicts a pair having sexual intercourse on a ship as well as a boat with a deer in it, the latter being the central motif of the carving. (Fig. 6)

I would like to interpret this and similar pictures by analogy with the pictures of the snakes. They show deer being carried around on cult boats.

Deer hunting is another well known motif on the rock-carvings from Bohuslän. Through its appearance on a small carving from Bjergagergård on Jylland it has been possible to date this motif to 630 ± 100 B.C. The stone from Bjergagergård shows a man, armed with a spear, attacking three animals, one deer and two hinds. Behind the man may be found a double serpent, and in front of the deer there is a tree. (Fig. 7)

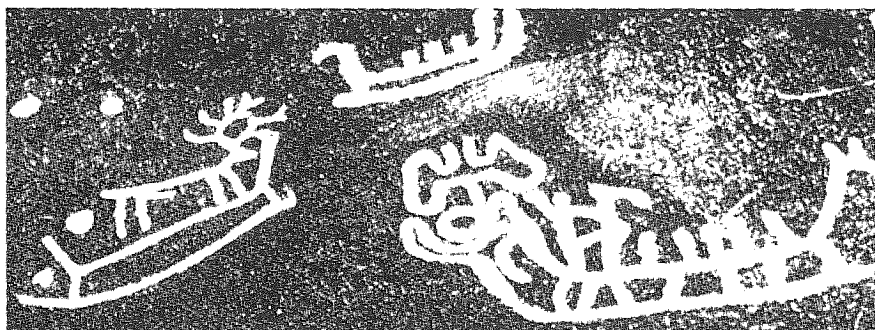


Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

The circumstances surrounding the discovery of the Bjergagergård stone, found in a sacrificial pit, together with the figures on it, suggest that it does not represent an ordinary hunting scene. The picture of the hunt is surrounded by snakes and trees, and in iconography these are common symbols of vital force and regeneration (for the serpent see for instance Duval 1957, 34 f.; for the tree see Almgren 1926–27, 103 ff.; Vries 1961, 187). Several scholars have interpreted deer hunting with a spear or bow as the reproduction of a sacrifice (for instance Almgren 1926–27, 123). The killing of the animal may be understood as a sacrifice to a god with the deer as his attribute. The deer as well as the serpent is the holy animal of Cernunnos. On the cauldron from Gundestrup he is portrayed with a ram-headed serpent

in his hand, deer horns on his head and with a large deer by his side. The picture on the stone from Bjergagergård and similar engravings may be understood as representing the sacrifice of a deer, dedicated to the Nordic equivalent of Cernunnos.

The motifs of serpents, horned animal heads and deer sacrifice have been taken from a Celtic environment. Animals in particular were the centre of the cult of the Celts. Gods in animal shape or with pronounced animal attributes are a typical trait of Celtic religion, and ram-headed serpents or horned animal heads occur in Celtic iconography in connection with gods of the Cernunnos type. When these motifs are found in a Nordic context I understand them as symbols of a Nordic variation of Cernunnos.

Complicated circles and spirals and hand-signs are also new motifs in the Nordic pictorial world at the end of the bronze age. They appear on rock-carvings from Southern Scandinavia in obvious cult scenes. They arise from the Celtic Hallstatt culture in the Eastern part of Central Europe. In their Celtic environment the circle and the spiral were typical attributes of the celestial god Taranis. Consequently, when these motifs appear in the Nordic area, I understand them as symbols of a Nordic counterpart of Taranis (for Taranis see Duval 1957, 23 f., 108; MacCana 1970, 31; Ross 1967, 136). The hand as a symbol can be connected to the Celtic god Lugh (for Lugh see Vries 1961, 50-55; MacCana 1970, 27 ff.; Duval 1957, 22 f.). In a Nordic context I understand it as a symbol of a god corresponding to the Celtic god Lugh. The arguments for this are developed in greater detail in my dissertation.

The religious life, such as it is manifested in the rock-carvings, had a Celtic character in parts of Southern Scandinavia. Belief and rite during the late bronze age and early iron age were linked with three gods with obvious Celtic traits. On the basis of the rock-carvings it is impossible to estimate for how long time the cult dedicated to them continued into the iron age, as scholars disagree on the duration of the carving.

The votive offerings as well as the rock-carvings also cast light on religious life. By means of a few examples I shall prove that among other things, they reflect the cult of a pair of gods with the typical attributes of Cernunnos, i.e. horn of deer, bull or ram, serpent, and neck-ring.

Three votive offerings are of special interest. These are the finds from Fårdal in the neighbourhood of Viborg in Denmark, Rovalls on the isle of Gotland, and Fogdarp in Skåne. The objects in all these

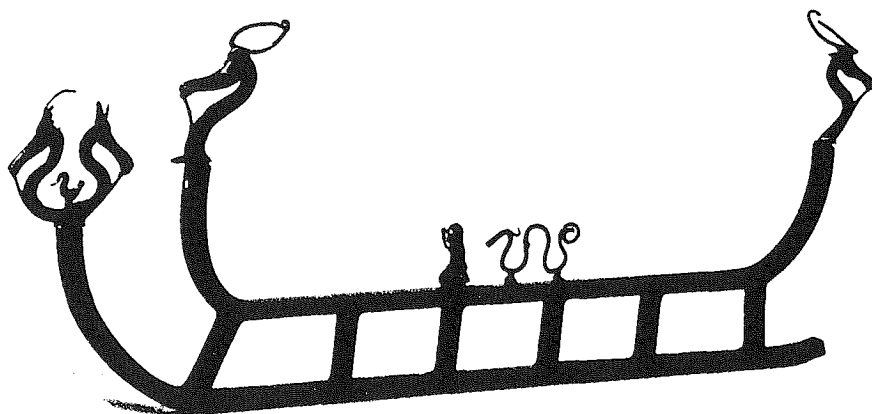


Fig. 8.

finds had been sacrificed in period V of the late bronze age.

The find from Fårdal contains a great number of women's jewels, and at least one hiding-place with an amulet. The find also contains a kneeling woman, dressed in a short skirt, a neckring and a bracelet. (Fig. 8) She holds her left arm over her breast, the right arm being held upright. Only the breasts are marked out. The rest of the body is without details. Her posture indicates that the woman is a mother goddess. The find also contains a serpent with horns, four horned animal heads, and a bird. The animal heads are generally considered to belong to deer and ram.

All figures are provided with pins, indicating that they had been placed on a foundation, although this has now disappeared. Probably they once formed a unit. Several different reconstructions have been made. Here I reproduce the reconstruction suggested by the Danish King's Custodian of Antiquities P. V. Glob, which seems to be very reasonable. After comparing the figures with pictures on rock-carvings and razors, he drew the conclusion that the figures had probably been placed on a wooden cult ship, which is lost.

In the woman from Fårdal we recognize a fertility goddess with a neck-ring, horned serpent, bird and deer, bull or ram as her attributes. These symbols are in their original Celtic surrounding typical for the Cernunnos gods. There the female part is not infrequently also accompanied by a bird.

The find from Rovalls in the parish of Vänge on the isle of Gotland

contains among other things a bronze needle. (Fig. 9) The needle itself is formed like a snake. At its end it has a human head, crowned by the horns of a bull. Around the horns hang three rings, whilst the head, which gives the impression of belonging to a man, carries a ram head in its turn. Again we meet the snake, the ring and the horned animal head, but this time the symbols are assembled around a man's head.

An interesting find in this connection, finally, is a votive offering from Fogdarp, from the parish of Bosjökloster in Skåne. In 1972 two tubes, in the form of half circles and decorated with men's heads, were found underneath a stone block, together with parts of two lurs, women's jewels, and parts of horses' equipment. The two bronze tubes, decorated with men's heads, are of special interest. (Fig. 10) One of them shows two heads with staring eyes, round like balls, open mouths and beaks like birds of prey. The heads are equipped with horns which grow thicker towards the ends. Probably, the two heads are not wearing helmets, but rather horned masks. The second bronze tube, which is damaged, is decorated with two female heads. All the heads are wearing necklaces. On one of the female heads the necklace is obviously formed like a serpent. The symbols are the same as in the two finds mentioned earlier. The attributes in question are typical of the Cernunnos gods. Accordingly, the Fogdarp find represents this pair of gods.

The votive offerings from Fårdal, Rovalls, and Fogdarp are signs of cult of a pair of gods with the characteristic attributes of the Cernunnos during the end of the late bronze age.

The Nordic votive offerings from this period, like those of the early iron age, are characterized to a high degree by neck-rings. The neck-rings have been deposited separately, in pairs, or three together. In general, the rings had been carried before the offering, but also very small rings are found, which must have been made exclusively to be sacrificed. Extremely large and heavy rings are also to be found, sometimes without signs of wear and tear. They are generally supposed to have been produced for use as sacrifices, or to be carried by images of gods.

Also on Celtic territory large quantities of neck-rings of varying appearance have been deposited in the ground or in lakes and peat-bogs during the Hallstatt and La Tène periods. We know, furthermore, that the neck-ring had an important social and religious role in the Celtic world at this time. It was a social sign of dignity, but it was above all an attribute of the gods. Gods and goddesses were often reproduced with a torc around their neck and sometimes even with

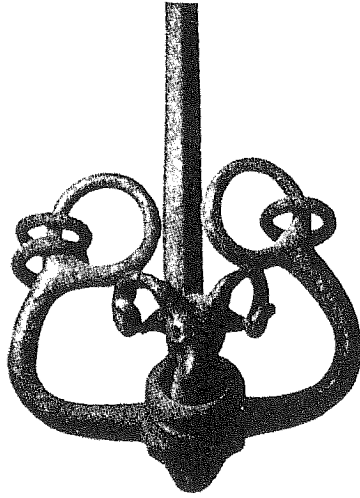


Fig. 9.

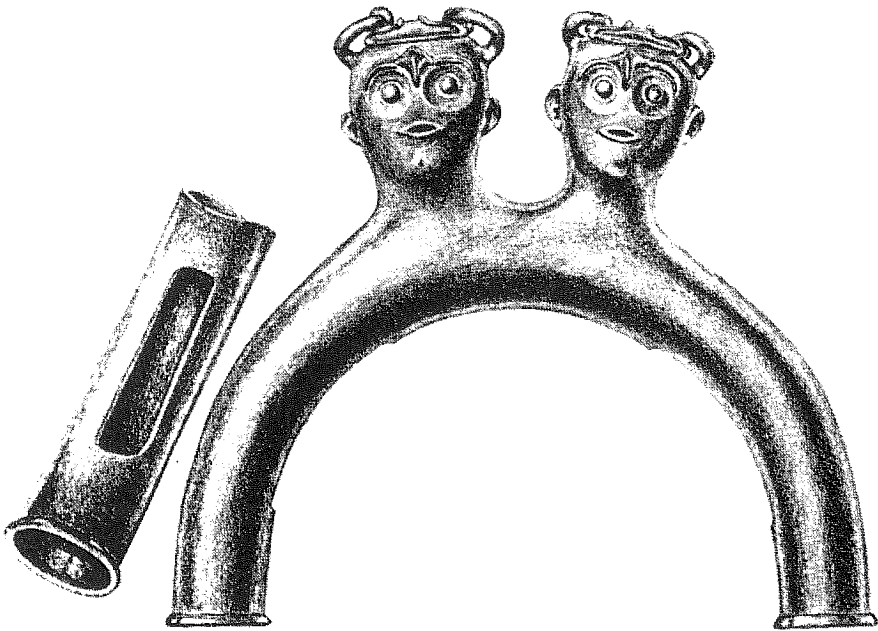


Fig. 10.

one in their hand. But even if the torc is a common Celtic attribute, it is a symbol specially connected with Cernunnos. The Cernunnos-gods are as a rule reproduced with at least one, and sometimes with several torcs.

Hence we can conclude that neck-rings of differing appearance were deposited in the ground or in peat-bogs and were used to decorate images of gods. I draw the following conclusion: as neck-rings were used in similar ways in the Celtic and the Nordic worlds, they reflect one and the same religion, i.e. cult of gods of the Cernunnos type.

My main ideas may be summarized in two points. First: it is possible today to conduct research in comparative religion by means of archaeological material. Second: my study of the first millenium B.C. demonstrates that religion in Southern Scandinavia at that time had obvious Celtic traits.

Bibliography

- Almgren, O. 1926-27. *Hällristningar och kultbruk*. Bidrag till belysning av de nordiska bronsåldersristningarnas innebörd. (Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademiens Handlingar 35.) Stockholm.
- Althin, C.-A. 1945. *Studien zu den bronzezeitlichen Felszeichnungen von Skåne* 1-2. Lund.
- Bober, Ph. P. 1951. Cernunnos: Origin and transformation of a Celtic divinity. *American Journal of Archaeology* 55. Boston.
- Burenhult, G. 1980. *Götalands hällristningar* 1. (Theses and Papers in North-European archaeology 10.) Stockholm.
- Duval, P.-M. 1957. *Les dieux de la Gaule*. (Mythes et religions 33.) Paris.
- Fredsjö, Å. 1971. Hällristningar i Kville härad, Svenneby socken. *Studier i nordisk arkeologi* 7. Göteborg.
- 1975. Hällristningar i Kville härad, Bottne socken. *Studier i nordisk arkeologi* 13. Göteborg.
- 1981. Hällristningar i Kville härad, Kville socken 1-2. *Studier i nordisk arkeologi* 14-15. Göteborg.
- Fredsjö, Å. & Janson, S. & Moberg, C.-A. 1969. *Hällristningar i Sverige*. Oskarshamn.
- Gjessing, G. 1939. *Østfolds jordbruksristninger*. Idd, Berg og delvis Skjeberg. (Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning B, 37.) Oslo.
- Glob, P. V. 1969. *Helleristninger i Danmark*. (Jysk arkæologisk selskabs skrifter 7.) København.
- Görman, M. 1987. *Nordiskt och keltiskt*. Sydskandinavisk religion under yngre bronsålder och keltisk järnålder. Lund.

- Hagen, A. 1969. Studier i vestnorsk bergkunst. Ausevik i Flora. *Årbok for universitetet i Bergen*. Hum. ser. 1969, 3. Bergen.
- Kossack, G. 1954. *Studien zum Symbolgut der Urnenfelder- und Hallstattzeit Mitteleuropas*. (Römisch-germanische Forschungen 20.) Berlin.
- Kühn, H. 1971. *Die Felsbilder Europas*. Stuttgart.
- MacCana, P. 1970. *Celtic mythology*. London.
- Marstrander, S. 1963. *Østfolds jordbruksristninger*. Skjeberg. (Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning B, 53.) Oslo.
- Ross, A. 1967. *Pagan Celtic Britain*. Studies in iconography and tradition. London.
- 1970. *Everyday life of the Pagan Celts*. London.
- Sjøestedt, M.-L. 1940. *Dieux et héros des celtes*. (Mythes et religions 7.) Paris.
- Stenberger, M. 1964. *Det forntida Sverige*. Stockholm.
- Thrane, H. 1975. *Europæiske forbindelser*. Bidrag til studiet af fremmede forbindelser i Danmarks yngre bronzealder (periode IV-V). (Nationalmuseets skrifter, arkæologisk-historisk række 16.) København.
- Vries, J. de 1961. *Keltische Religion*. (Die Religionen der Menschheit 18.) Stuttgart.