The ship as symbol in the prehistory of Scandinavia and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

The ship is the dominant element in the visual culture of the South Scandinavian Bronze Age, appearing in several different media, including rock carvings, decorated metalwork and above-ground monuments. Discussion has divided between those scholars who interpret this imagery in terms of long-distance exchange networks and those who emphasize its more local significance, including its deployment in mortuary ritual. A strikingly similar system is identified in Southeast Asia and part of Melanesia and can be interpreted through archaeological and ethnographic sources, but in this case there is no need to distinguish between ‘practical’ and ‘symbolic’ interpretations of the depictions of ships. This paper summarizes the evidence from this region and suggests that it can offer a fruitful source of comparison for archaeologists working in northern Europe.

Keywords

Ships; travel; exchange; rock art; metalwork; mortuary ritual; cosmology; Scandinavia; Southeast Asia; Melanesia.

Introduction

For almost a century, scholars have debated the significance of the carved ships that form such a striking feature of the Bronze Age rock art of Scandinavia. For some, it is to be explained largely in practical terms, for this is an area in which it is easier to travel by sea than it is to move overland, and in any case the region seems to have been dependent on metal sources further to the south (Glob 1969; Malmer 1981). For that reason, it seems hardly surprising that the rock art of the Bronze Age should emphasize ships and the sea.

At the same time, the importance of the ship extends into other domains: carvings of boats are sometimes associated with burials, and there is a long history of funerary sites at which the grave or the covering monument takes the form of a ship. This is a tradition that became more prominent in the Late Iron Age, but it was one of considerable
antiquity. It is discussed in the edited volume from which this article takes its name (Crumlin-Pedersen and Thye 1995).

These two approaches should be complementary, but in the archaeological literature they tend to cancel one another out. It has been difficult to conceptualize a long-distance network that had both practical and cosmological aspects and which extended in different forms across an enormous area. To some extent Scandinavian scholars have been reluctant to think in these terms because they have no obvious sources of comparison on which to draw. This paper suggests that a system with similar characteristics did once exist and that it provides a useful source of ideas for those working in northern Europe. That system is recorded in island Southeast Asia.

In this article we compare the archaeological record in two distinct areas of the world, not because there can have been any direct links between them but because the same issues arise in both regions. There is one important difference between these cases. The Scandinavian evidence is confined to the remains of a prehistoric material culture, although it has sometimes been interpreted in the light of later written sources (Gelling and Ellis Davidson 1969). Because there is little unanimity on the usefulness of this procedure, interpretations are extremely diverse. In Southeast Asia, however, the evidence of material culture is supplemented by ethno-historical traditions, with the result that the purely archaeological evidence can be interpreted by reference to a wider range of evidence. As we shall see, that procedure raises problems of its own.

The archaeological record in South Scandinavia

Scandinavia is a region in which it would often have been easier to travel by boat than overland. The region has many separate components, from large landmasses such as Funen and Zealand to the small islands that follow the shores of the Baltic and the North Sea (Fig. 1). Parts of the interior are mountainous and experience harsh conditions during the winter, and the coastline is broken by fjords. The region has a long history of deep-sea fishing, and long-distance voyaging and international trade have also been important. All three elements are exemplified in the culture of the Iron Age and the Viking Age (Näsmar 1991). In the prehistoric period, however, Scandinavia lacked certain resources. Agriculture was introduced only gradually from areas to the south. This was a process that seems to have extended over nearly three thousand years (Zvelebil 1998). In the same way, it was without vital raw materials. Iron ore is widely distributed, but for supplies of bronze local communities would have been dependent on sources hundreds of miles to the south in Continental Europe. This is especially significant in view of the material richness of the Nordic Bronze Age (Kristiansen 1987).

Practical considerations: carved ships and long-distance travel in the Bronze Age of South Scandinavia

Images of ships play a central role in the material culture of the period between about 1600 and 500 BC, and sometimes these have been related directly to the practicalities of travel in a maritime environment (Malmer 1981). The most abundant evidence consists of
Figure 1  South Scandinavia, showing the distribution of Bronze Age razors with drawings of ships. The shaded areas indicate the regions with the main groups of rock art featuring similar designs. Information from Malmer (1981) and Dotzler (1984).
carvings of boats, which are a particularly striking feature of South Scandinavian rock art. Many of these pictures were created on the shoreline, some of them in positions where they could be viewed from the water. Like the cairns of the same period, they can also be found along the margins of important sea channels (Théoden 2003).

A number of writers have argued that the symbolic significance of the ship reflects the location of Scandinavia in relation to Continental Europe (Malmer 1981; Kristiansen 1987). This was particularly obvious in the Bronze Age since there were no sources of copper anywhere nearer than the Alps. Despite the large amounts of metalwork that were deposited in the Nordic culture area, it would have had to be imported, either as finished artefacts or as raw material (Glob 1969). In fact the styles of metalwork that do characterize this region have something in common with the forms that were circulating in central and north-east Europe (Kristiansen 1987). Certain of these were adapted to meet local preferences, but a close relationship can still be observed between these different areas.

In the same paper Kristiansen proposed a more specific interpretation of this evidence. He notes that the distribution of large burial cairns follows the Swedish and Norwegian coastlines into regions which were still occupied by mobile populations during the Bronze Age. He suggests that such cairns may have provided important aids to navigation and puts forward the idea that furs from northern Scandinavia may have been exchanged for metalwork originating in the south. In his view much of the distinctiveness of the Nordic Bronze Age is explained by its intermediate position between elites living in Central Europe, who could have controlled the supply of metal, and hunters in the north of Scandinavia (Kristiansen 1987; Verlaeckt 2000). To some extent this model is based on analogy with later periods in the north-east Baltic, where a detailed study of animal bones provides evidence of the long-distance exchange of furs (Zvelebil 1985).

Like Kristiansen (1987), Randsborg (1993) and Larsson (1997) argue that some of the distinctive imagery found in the material culture of South Scandinavia referred to exotic styles of artefacts and to non-local systems of belief. This applies to material found in the richest graves and also to certain of the images in north European rock art. They have suggested a wide variety of sources of inspiration, extending southwards and eastwards from central Europe to Egypt, western Asia, Anatolia and Greece (for another view, see Kaul 2000: ch. 12). Among these symbols was the ship. The details of these connections are less important here than the suggestion that once again the population of the Nordic culture area was involved in alliances with distant areas. Some links reached from northern to southern Europe, but once again a number of regions were linked by major rivers or the sea. Even on a practical level, boats would have been vitally important. That is one way in which Scandinavian scholars have explained their role in Bronze Age art.

The symbolic dimension: the ship of death in South Scandinavia

It would be wrong to treat the drawings of ships in isolation. They also occur with other depictions, including humans, animals, wheeled vehicles and a variety of abstract images that cannot be linked in any obvious way with navigation or long-distance exchange. Moreover, the distribution of ship carvings even extends to parts of northern Scandinavia where the boundary between the land and the sea plays a special role in local cosmology. Here it is thought of as the meeting point between the worlds of the living and the dead (Helskog 1999).
In fact, there is some evidence that drawings of ships did play a part in mortuary ritual. They can be directly associated with mortuary cairns (Wrigglesworth 2002). They feature prominently on the Bronze Age metalwork of South Scandinavia, much of which has been recovered from burials or votive deposits (Kaul 2000; Thédeen 2003). The decorated razors of this period are especially relevant here as these are often found in cremation burials. The razors themselves do not seem to have been burnt, suggesting that they may have been used to prepare the corpse for the pyre. Razors with depictions of ships are found principally in Denmark (Dotzler 1984) and their distribution complements the carvings of boats that are found in regions further to the north (Figs 1 and 3A).

In certain cases these carvings of ships are also known inside the stone coffins or cists associated with the dead (Mandt 1983; Randsborg 1993). These are by no means common, but two features are worth highlighting here. There are cases in which the carved boats are apparently empty or are even drawn upside down. This may provide an appropriate image of death, and it could be related to a series of open-air carvings in south-west Norway in which ships seem to lose definition as they travel across the decorated surface. Towards the centre of these panels the vessels are shown in detail and are provided with crews, but at the edges of the same compositions the boats become fragmented and the crew disappears. The same kind of composition may have been created inside the burial cist at Kivik in southern Sweden (Randsborg 1993).

There are further links between these images and mortuary rites in South Scandinavia. We mentioned the distribution of small islands along the coastlines of southern Sweden and Norway. These are of special interest as they contain some of the large burial cairns built during the Bronze Age, and yet a number of these islands were too small to have been inhabited at the time. They may have provided useful aids to navigation (Kristiansen 1987), but it seems just as important that the dead must have been carried across the water to the places where they were buried.

That connection is made still more apparent by three other features in the archaeology of this area. First, there seems to have been a long-running tradition of burying people in small boats: a practice that may have originated during the Mesolithic period (Skaarup 1995). This became much more obvious in Early Bronze Age Denmark where a significant number of the burials beneath the round barrows of this period were in graves which had the outline of a small boat. Sometimes this was emphasized by the provision of a low cairn, but in that case it was generally concealed beneath a circular mound (Aner and Kersten 1973–90; Artelius 1996).

The second link concerns the ‘ship settings’ of the Bronze Age (Fig. 4A). These are cairns which themselves take the form of an elongated boat (Capelle 1986; Artelius 1996; Nordenborg Myhre 1998). At times they were provided with additional details in order to enhance their resemblance to a seagoing vessel. Ship settings are usually associated with Late Bronze Age cremations. The main difference between these structures and those just mentioned is that they were above-ground monuments. In one case, a structure of this kind was directly associated with a burial cist which had been decorated with a drawing of a boat. The ship settings of the Bronze Age anticipate the better-known examples of the Iron Age. They also prefigure the famous ship burials of that period (Müller-Wille 1970).

The third connection is the association between carvings of ships and water. This takes many forms. Drawings of ships are often crossed by running water (Bradley et al. 2002;
Fredell 2003). They can also cluster around natural pools in the surface of the rock (Hauptman Wahlgren 1998), and one of the largest groups of drawings of boats, at Norrköping in Sweden, is located near to a major series of rapids (Hauptman Wahlgren 2002). Others are in locations that would sometimes be inundated. This may be no accident as many of the metal finds of the same period were deposited in springs and bogs (Bradley 2000: 51–60). According to Fredell (2003), some of these artefacts were embellished with images evoking water.

The archaeological record in Southeast Asia

Thus it is possible to make a case for the practical importance of ships in the Scandinavian Bronze Age and for the role that they must have played in long-distance exchange. It is just as tempting to interpret this imagery in terms of its local contexts, in which case it could have played a vital part in the commemoration of the dead. These interpretations are usually offered as alternatives to one another, but is there any way of bringing them closer together? It is here that analogy with the archaeology of Southeast Asia has a part to play.

In Southeast Asia the poverty of archaeological research is balanced by an exceptional wealth of ethnographic and ethno-historical information on the social and symbolic contexts of boat imagery. In this paper the term ‘Southeast Asia’ is used to cover a wider area than is usual in accounts of Pacific archaeology. In fact, it refers to both the littoral mainland regions (from southern China through to Thailand) and island Southeast Asia, as well as the lengthy archipelago that extends to the east, incorporating much of island Melanesia (Fig. 2). Our justification for this procedure is that, within this extensive super-region, it is possible to identify a series of related images and practices in which boats are linked to mortuary rituals and beliefs. Again such areas were linked by the sea. Rock art research allows us to propose a degree of antiquity for this complex. On the outer edge of this area is Vanuatu where direct dates are available for some of the images.

For many communities of littoral or maritime Southeast Asia, the sea unites rather than divides. Cultural and ethnic divisions are often more pronounced between coastal and interior communities than between coastal communities on neighbouring islands, among whom strong links can endure over considerable distances. Southeast Asia has been host to many groups: specialist long-distance maritime traders, such as the Butonese of Sulawesi (Southon 1995) and the Manus of Papua New Guinea (Ambrose 1978); seasonal coastal communities brought together around specific resources, as at Dobo in the Aru Islands of the Southeast Moluccas (Spyer 2000: 10f.); and ‘sea nomad’ communities almost entirely committed to life aboard ships, such as the Bajau, Orang Laut and Moken (Sather 1995).

Just as exotic artefacts traded over long distances are charged with a special significance, ships in Southeast Asia have always been more than sea-going vessels. The boat is ‘a metaphor for the ordered social group’ (Manguin 1986: 187), an expression of corporate identity and communal unity, and a critical symbol in rituals that mark major transitions in the lifecycle. After summarizing the features of this symbolic complex, our focus
The ship as symbol

I narrows to consider the specific elements of a tradition of ships of the dead. It is in these terms that we might account for the appearance of boats in rock art.

**Boat symbolism in Southeast Asia**

Boats have assumed an exceptional symbolic significance in Southeast Asian societies. Manguin (1986) identifies boats as fundamental metaphors for social organization throughout the region. Like houses and villages, boats stand for the basic social units of a family or community; indeed houses in many areas are either described in terms of the structure of a ship or fashioned after the form of ships (Lewcock and Brans 1976; Barraud 1985; Manguin 1986: 190). In the south-east Moluccas, villages are arranged around centrally placed stone enclosures or platforms that are shaped like boats and decorated with carved prows (de Jonge and van Dijk 1995). These ‘stone boats’ represent the original founding of the settlement by its ancestors; they symbolize the unity of the community and ground it in a terrestrial location (McKinnon 1988). Boats may denote the upper echelons of society. Thus high-ranking members of the Lampung communities of south Sumatra ride to ceremonies and meetings on wheeled boats (Manguin 1986: 191), and carvings of boat-prows are reserved for noble coffins among the Toraja of Sulawesi (Crystal 1985: 142–3). Perak Malays conceive their state institutions in the terms of the functions of a boat crew (Manguin 1986: 193). Manguin (1986: 201) argues that we have to look beyond the simple observation ‘that ships and shipping played a major role in an island society’ and direct future research towards the clear hierarchies that operate on board ships as the model for cosmological and social order that many communities have adopted on land.

Representations of boats appear in rituals associated with transitions in the lives of...
individuals, such as initiation, marriage and death. They include the *tampan* ‘ship cloths’ of the Lampung region in South Sumatra, which are employed in such ceremonies as ‘a concrete symbol of conveyance to a new state of being’ (Gittinger 1972: 202). These textiles commonly feature a large ship and are deployed in mortuary ceremonies to handle the corpse and the litter before being hung on a wall, but they are also exchanged through marriage, employed in ceremonies to mark occasions as diverse as circumcision, child presentation and the completion of a new house and used as wrappings for valuables or for ceremonial gifts to healers.

The metaphoric deployment of ships as vehicles for states of transition is extended through their use by shamans in divination. Eliade (1964: 356) identifies three categories of shamanic practice in Indonesia and Melanesia. Boats are invoked as vehicles for: the expulsion of illness or spirit-possession; the ecstatic travels of the shaman in search of the spirit of the supplicant; and the voyage of souls to the land of the dead. In many maritime Southeast Asian societies, the role of shaman or ritual celebrant was assumed by ships’ pilots or by specialists in boat construction (Manguin 1986: 198). Shamans also played a pivotal role in divination involving ancestors. In the Waropen area of western New Guinea, a corpse placed on a small canoe and questioned about the cause of death was held to signal its response by causing the canoe to rock (van Baaren 1968: 63). The combination of ancestors, divination and ships constitutes a significant framework for understanding the relationships between ship symbolism, mortuary practice and rock art in Southeast Asia.

Death may be only one among a series of life transitions in which ship imagery is deployed (Manguin 1986: 190), but it is in the context of mortuary ceremonies and beliefs about the dead that it is most in evidence. Ships are the principal vehicles employed in ferrying souls to the land of the dead, which is often conceived of in terms of an original village or homeland across the sea, or a heaven which is attained by means of a boat passing along the arc of a rainbow (Schärer 1963: 61–2; Spiegel 1971; Tenazas 1983: 17). Representations of boats take various forms in mortuary contexts: coffins carved in wood or stone and images painted on barkcloth or wood at burial sites. In most Austronesian-speaking communities the link between ships and the dead is so strong that the terms for ‘boat’ and ‘coffin’ can be interchangeable (Manguin 1986: 196). The performance of mortuary rites is another area in which ships and ship symbolism are strongly in evidence, with burial processions mimicking the structure of a ship (Gittinger 1972: 63) and entire fleets putting out to sea in mourning for royalty (Manguin 1986: 195).

Ancestors play a central role, particularly during life transitions. In north-western New Guinea, the *korwar* or carved image of an ancestor was formerly present at each of the life transition ceremonies such as birth or marriage (van Baaren 1968: 22). It is the association between ancestors and boat imagery that accounts for its importance in so many other spheres. Describing the host of Southeast Asian ship images and associated practices in terms of a single, broad symbolic complex obscures local variation, but, where earlier authors sought to ascribe a unitary tradition to ship symbolism in order to identify a single point of origin (e.g. Steinmann 1965; Heine-Geldern 1966), our intention is to propose a dispersed, region-wide complex of beliefs and practices which have been expressed in different media over time.

In the most general terms, evidence for a symbolic complex which links ancestral cults,
mortuary practices and ship symbolism is widespread across a region that encompasses littoral and archipelagic Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands at least as far east as the Solomon Islands. This complex is present in an exceptional range of media, among which the most famous are perhaps the Dong Son drums produced in the Tonkin area of northern Vietnam and southern China from the middle of the first millennium BC (Bernet Kempers 1988). They were widely distributed throughout island Southeast Asia as far as the western New Guinea mainland and the island of Manus (Ambrose 1996–7). The Dong Son drums of Heger I type, which are those most widely distributed throughout maritime Southeast Asia, are classically decorated with frieves of ‘figured scenes’ featuring boats and warriors wearing elaborate feather head-dresses (Bernet Kempers 1988). One of the more striking bronze finds is an elaborate model ship found in Flores and attributed to Dong Son manufacture (Adams 1977; Spennemann 1985a, 1985b). The ship supports three platforms on its upper deck, manned by armed warriors, and features a distinctive open-jawed prow: elements which appear both in classic Dong Son drum designs and in rock art.

Textiles are a common register of this symbolic complex, although they are by no means limited to mortuary contexts. Among the other media in which ships are associated with mortuary practices are: tattoos of warrior ancestors standing on boats (e.g. Galis 1961: 118); boat-shaped coffins fashioned in wood or stone; and burial containers painted with boat designs. Actual boats may be employed as coffins, a practice with a continuous distribution extending from Peninsular Malaysia in the west (Bulbeck 1996–7) to the Philippines in the north (Tenazas 1983), and to at least the Solomon Islands in the east (de Coppet 1981). There are boat-shaped enclosures marked out by stone dolmens in western New Guinea, within which the bones of the dead were hung from a sacred tree (Elmberg 1968: 190–1); combs and head ornaments feature ancestors on boats (Adams 1977: 98; de Jonge and van Dijk 1995: 36); and model ‘soul boats’ for the dead (Spiegel 1971) are suspended from the rafters of houses in some areas (Heermann 2002: 193; Sumnik-Dekovich 1985: 106) or launched into the sea during mortuary ceremonies (Badner 1974: 601).

Among the features that are most clearly echoed in rock art are boats represented in varying degrees of realism. They are often shown with raised platforms, drums or burial enclosures on the deck. Warriors, commonly bearing weapons and with their legs flexed and arms extended as if in dance, are portrayed with wavy head-dresses thought to be composed of plumes, as shown in the detail from a Dong Son bronze drum in Fig. 3B (see also Swadling n.d.). Animals associated either directly or in conjunction with these ship forms include cocks (on the prow or stern of the ship), crocodiles or other toothed monsters, lizards, or lizard-like zoomorphs, and birds. Within a more restricted area, and most elaborately illustrated in the Lampung textiles, a ‘tree of life’ is shown emerging from the deck.

**Ships of the dead in Southeast Asian rock art**

How far are the features of this complex manifested in the rock art of the region (see Fig. 2)? It has been little researched and documented, and in some cases its chronology remains to be established. Individual sites are recorded in detail (e.g. Röder 1959;
O’Connor 2003; Wilson 2002), and there are some preliminary surveys (e.g. Kosasih 1991), but few authors have attempted to generate any broader models (Specht 1979; Rosenfeld 1988). The following account builds on arguments developed by Ballard (1992), to account for painted art in coastal locations, and by Wilson (2002), who has studied the rock art sequence of Vanuatu.

Following the lead established by Specht (1979), Ballard proposed a class of painted rock-art sites typically found ‘in inaccessible but highly visible locations, most commonly sea cliffs, and in areas associated with Austronesian-speaking settlement’ (1992: 98). Ballard suggested that these rock-art sites post-dated the first appearance of Austronesian-speaking communities within the region bounded by East Timor in the west and Bougainville in the east. Wilson’s (2002) doctoral study addressed both the painted and engraved rock-art traditions of Vanuatu, and their place within the art of the western Pacific. She analyses both the designs and the environmental characteristics of rock-art sites in the region. In addition, a project of direct dating has yielded a basic chronological framework for Vanuatu (Wilson in press; Zoppi et al. 2002). The earliest art coincides with initial colonization at about 3000 BP and is characterized by a largely non-figurative design corpus consisting of hand stencils, patches of pigment and a few face motifs. The subsequent history of rock-art styles is one of elaboration and local diversification, albeit within the terms of an enduring region-wide symbolic tradition.

The concept of the ‘ship of the dead’ allows us to expand these models to larger areas of littoral Southeast Asia. We propose that many of the paintings, together with a more limited proportion of rock engravings, are associated with mortuary practices, and that the art symbolizes widely shared beliefs and activities associated with death. Sites within this broad tradition are located in the Philippines, in both the Indonesian and Malaysian portions of Borneo, eastern Indonesia, mainland New Guinea and island Melanesia, at least as far as the Solomon Islands.

There appears to be an emphasis on areas that are removed from daily social life. Throughout the region, remote islets, cliff-faces, caves and their surroundings are favoured for the art. Such locations are inaccessible by virtue of ritual proscription and may be unsuitable for certain of the ceremonies in which ship symbols play a role, such as those associated with birth or marriage. These places are linked with mortuary practices through ethnographic observation or material evidence.

Boat designs are found in rock-art sites throughout most (but not all) of the region associated with ship symbolism. The principal concentrations of these sites are in Borneo (Harrisson 1958), southern Sulawesi (Kosasih 1991), the maritime eastern Indonesian region bounded by the Moluccas, Timor and the western end of New Guinea (Röder 1938a, 1938b, 1959; Ballard 1988; O’Connor 2003) and the Solomon Islands (Roe 1992). Not all images of boats denote ships of the dead; boats of obvious recent design, such as European whaling ships or nineteenth-century trading vessels, for example, are not considered, although there is no reason why they should not have been understood and incorporated within wider systems of belief about the cosmological function of boats.

The depictions of boats are highly variable, even within the same site, such as the Dudumahan site in the Kai Islands of the southeastern Moluccas, eastern Indonesia, where no two images are alike (Fig. 5D, E, F). Some are elaborate and include many of the details associated with ships of the dead. For example, boats at Dudumahan feature
dancing warriors with feather head-dresses (Fig. 5D) and what appears to be a drum or platform on the deck of a boat, in addition to distinctive prow and stern decorations (Fig. 5F) which are strikingly similar to those on a Dong Son drum also found in the Kai Islands (Bernet Kempers 1988: pl. 7.05j). The ‘x-ray’ style of boat evident at Kai (Fig. 5F) is also found in East Timor (O’Connor 2003: 99), along with similar platforms or drums positioned on the centre of the deck (O’Connor 2003: 115, 119) and boats with dancing warriors (de Almeida 1967: fig. 1). At the Sosorra site, in the MacCluer Gulf site complex of western New Guinea, this platform or drum motif is replaced by a form reminiscent of the ‘tree of life’ motif associated with the Lampung ship-cloth textiles (Röder 1959: 137, fig. 10). Other boat images are highly schematic, consisting of little more than a single curved line, occasionally elaborated with a mast or with a row of single lines presumably representing human figures; these schematized boats are found in East Timor (O’Connor 2003: 117), the MacCluer Gulf (Röder 1959: 139, 155) and the Solomon Islands (Roe 1992). At the Watu Weti site on the eastern Indonesian island of Flores, the engraved boats are so schematic as to be virtually unrecognizable (Verhoeven 1956: 1078), but a comparison with similar forms on Dong Son drums (Spennemann 1985b: 157) offers convincing analogues.

Along with the Solomon Islands boats, the Flores boats are among the very few examples of engraved motifs. Other designs appear to be linked to the ‘ship of the dead’. Here discussion is limited to one of these associated motifs: the sun symbol, which is depicted as a spiral, a single circle or a set of concentric circles, with fringing rays. Along with anthropomorphs, sun symbols are usually the dominant motif in sites containing images of boats, but it is their appearance in other media which links them to mortuary and divination practices. Sun symbols appear widely in mortuary contexts as decorative motifs on pottery (e.g. Glover 1972: pl. 9: 2a for East Timor), barkcloth (Kooijman 1963), the ceremonial barkcloth blouses worn by shamans (Kotilainen 1992: 148), and the prows of boat coffins (Röder 1938b: 88). The significance of sun symbols in eastern Indonesia is interpreted by Kooijman (1963: 34ff.) in terms of beliefs about initiation and head-hunting, both of which necessarily invoke ancestral cults. In his discussion of wooden ancestral figures and rock-art sites in the MacCluer Gulf, Kooijman (1962: 74) relates the sun specifically to the ancestors.

Finds of other materials or artefacts at these rock art sites tend to confirm their association with mortuary practices. Some or all of the following elements occur at sites depicting boats: skeletal material; carvings of ancestral figures; what seem to be funerary gifts including pottery or chinaware, boat-building tools and household goods; and raised burial platforms, burial canoes or boat coffins (e.g. Röder 1959; Kooijman 1962; Tenazas 1983).

Rock art that features the ship of the dead appears to be associated with the distribution of Austronesian-speaking communities, particularly in the Moluccas and along the coastline of western New Guinea. This conforms to an earlier proposal by Ballard (1992), which linked many of the coastal rock sites of western Melanesia to Austronesian settlement, a model apparently confirmed for the East Timor sites by O’Connor (2003). The same design elements do not appear to be present at the few rock-art sites that pre-date the local emergence of proto-Austronesian languages: sites in Kalimantan (Borneo) that have returned dates older than 9000 BP (Chazine 2001) contain massed red hand-stencils...
but no boat images or sun symbols. Röder (1959) and Wilson (2002) have also identified red hand-stencils as the earliest forms of rock art in west New Guinea and Vanuatu respectively.

As a working hypothesis, the emergence of sun symbols in conjunction with boat images in Southeast Asian rock art might be regarded as a development subsequent to initial Austronesian colonization of eastern Indonesia and western Melanesia (from c. 3500 BP) (Ballard 1992). The most plausible model is that a generalized ship of the dead symbolism was a very widespread feature of regional cosmologies, and possibly one of considerable antiquity, pre-dating Austronesian colonization in eastern Indonesia and Melanesia. Within this region-wide symbolic complex, historically and locally specific forms of expression such as the Dong Son bronzes may then have exerted a degree of influence within certain regional networks and particular periods of time.

A rather similar mixture of influences has been suggested for Scandinavian rock art (Bradley 2000: ch. 9).

**Islands in a wider sea**

This paper is concerned with comparison, as its aim is to treat the archaeology and ethnography of Southeast Asia as a source of ideas for those working on Bronze Age Scandinavia. The reason why this exercise could be important is that Northern European scholars have been facing a seemingly intractable problem in deciding the relationship between an exchange system based on travel by sea and the symbolic significance of boats in mortuary rites and rock art. These two elements juxtapose the practical and the cosmological in a way that has been difficult to imagine. As a result, discussions of this period have polarized to an unnecessary extent. The evidence from the Pacific suggests that the problem may be unreal.

Comparisons of this kind need to be carefully controlled if they are to have any meaning. It is important to consider the principles behind these different systems rather than their surface details. In comparing the archaeology of such different areas, it would be all too easy to become obsessed with minute particulars; for example, there are drawings of ships carrying trees and sun symbols in the art of both these regions. It is better to compare their archaeology at a more general level, for in each case such vessels seem to have played an important part in local systems of belief, while they also had a critical role in long-distance exchange.

We can compare these systems because in some ways they were based on common principles. Matters such as the selection of sites for the production of rock art, or of boats as motifs, are inevitably embedded in pragmatic considerations. Almost all the rock art of Southeast Asia is close to the sea and thus to boats as models. Its presence on sites which address the sea reflects this fundamental engagement with the material world. However, the depiction of boats in rock art is also inescapably symbolic. Even those images of European ships that mark some of the last phases of rock art in Southeast Asia and Melanesia would have been transformed in terms of local understandings of the world.

The Southeast Asian material invites a further observation. Here the rock art is not distinct from the circulation of motifs and the expression of related beliefs in other media,
such as wood, barkcloth or bronze. Only where rock art can be addressed as one among a series of such media deployed in combination is it possible to talk of a symbolic tradition grounded in a coherent and communicable system of beliefs.

The same was surely true in Bronze Age Scandinavia where similar features occur. Again much of the rock art is found close to water and in areas in which navigation would have been of central importance, and yet the images also occur in other media where they were directly associated with the dead. These include the carved designs found inside cists, the stone ship settings which are associated with cremation burials and even the decoration on bronze razors and other artefacts. The latter are particularly important since the nearest source of the metal was far away. Some of these features are illustrated in Figures 3 to 5 which compare examples from both the regions discussed in this article. These show drawings of boats on pieces of fine metalwork (Fig. 3); there were burial cairns constructed in the form of a ship (Fig. 4); and in each area sea-going vessels are also depicted in rock art (Fig. 5).

Figure 3  (Upper) Drawing of a ship on a Bronze Age razor from Kongstrup, Denmark (after Kaul 2000).  (Lower) Drawing of a ship on a Dong Son kettledrum from Ngoc Lu, Vietnam (after Swadling n.d).
Such similarities are reassuring for those who would like to propose a more rounded interpretation of Scandinavian rock art: one which breaks free of the rather arbitrary division between symbolic systems and practical affairs. On that level, the analogy provides an important source of inspiration. But why were there such striking similarities between peoples who would have been geographically and chronologically remote from one another? Perhaps that is because specialized beliefs often grow out of everyday concerns through the process that has been described as ritualization (Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). This seems to have happened quite independently on opposite sides of the world. In each case cosmologies, long-distance travel and beliefs about death and supernatural were closely intertwined, and these connections were manifested on both the local and regional levels. It is true that they were expressed in visual images that show a certain resemblance to one another, but that is surely because they developed from similar preoccupations. It seems hardly surprising that societies whose daily lives may have involved travel by sea should have chosen the ship as a symbol.
The ship as symbol

Figure 5  A–C. Bronze Age ship carvings at Gisslegäde, Western Sweden (after Fredsjö 1975), D–F. Paintings of ships at Kai Kecil, Southeast Moluccas (after Ballard 1988).

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