Ambiguous truths? : people and animals in pre-christian Scandinavia

Jennbert, Kristina

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Ambiguous Truths? – People and Animals in Pre-Christian Scandinavia

Kristina Jennbert 2003

Abstract

In our modern society peoples attitudes towards animals are inconsistent, to say the least. Behind these heterogeneous attitudes there are several economic and cultural aspects. What possibilities do we have of studying relations between man and animal, between nature and culture, in the distant past? What are our starting-points? How do we understand realities that differ from our own? What are our challenges?

In pre-historic society animals were of great importance not only for the food supply and practical matters but also in religious cults. In the course of time man's views of animals and nature has changed, and both animals and nature have increasingly been subjected to man's devices. The traditional nature–culture dichotomy is problematic, and gives risé to intense discussion. This is a challenge to the archaeologists, who are forced to depart from their traditional trains of thought and their accustomed archaeological classifications.

Introduction

The material culture studied by archaeology opens up vistas of various relations between men and animals. However, a close inspection of the contextuality between men and animals in the pre-Christian period reveals a number of practices that do not serve a mundane purpose. Animals were integrated into symbolism and ritual practices, and in certain contexts the boundaries between men and animals are not always distinct. There seem to have been conceptions that differ radically from

the ideas prevalent in our time of man's unique position in the universe and of a predetermined differentiation of species. This anthropocentric approach does not, however, go unchallenged. For a considerable time there has been an intense debate which calls anthropocentrism in question and disapproves of our general attitude towards animals, as well as of our treatment of them.

Studying pre-Christian conceptions gives us a perspective on our present-day ideas of nature and culture, as well as on our attitudes towards animals. It is thus a desideratum that archaeologists analyse and discuss the problematic nature–culture dichotomy in the distant past.

The purpose of my contribution to this session – *Studies on relations in prehistoric procedures – fictions as truths?* – is to highlight a topical question in which archaeology gives us a perspective on attitudes in our own society. I also wish to emphasize the need for self-criticism among archaeologists, and for further consideration of the images created and conveyed by us.

THE PRESENT-DAY DEBATE ON ANIMALS

In today's society our perceptions of animals are inconsistent and problematic. Animals are significant in several ways, not only as living creatures but also as metaphors expressing man's thoughts. Domesticated animals are bred and consumed. Domesticated as well as wild animals appear in widely different contexts, such as food production, spectator sports, family life, recreation, and wildlife experiences. Nature programmes on television provide glimpses of every kind of wild animals from all over the world. Breeding on an industrial scale, as well as trading in domestic and exotic animals, indicates that animals have a market value. Animals are important in public life, but also in people's private lives – never before have there been so many veterinary hospitals, pet cemeteries and animal psychologists as in the 20th century (Ferry 1995: 51–52).

Medical research has found that cells taken from pigs can be used in human beings in the treatment of diabetes and other internal diseases. The regrowth of human skin after severe burns can be facilitated by skin grafts from pigs. Can a human heart bereplaced by a pig's heart? Tests are being conducted, and while experiments on animals are offensive to some people their results have contributed to the recovery of other people. On the anatomic and genetic level the boundaries between men and

animals are regarded as not altogether clear-cut. Medical research rules out sharp distinctions between man and animal. Cognitive research, on the other hand, stresses that the difference in their mental capacities is obvious, and that man's capacity for reasoning and reflection far exceeds what is within reach of animals (Gärdenfors 2000).

The elastic boundary between man and animal is notably apparent in the large number of animal metaphors concerning human behaviour and disposition found in literature and the visual arts. The animals act as our mirrors, and function as vehicles for human communication and human logic (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Is it possible? (after Grandville in Appelbaum 1974)

Thus, animals have several distinct significances, and the boundaries between what can be regarded as human and animal are not beyond dispute. Criticism of the anthropocentric approach is particularly strong in the ecological debate. That animals are an ethical concern to man is evident also from protests and manifestations by the «men in the street».

The ecological debate is emotional, and questions prevailing fundamental views on the nature–culture, animal–man dichotomies. Here, too, there are a number of sociological and anthropological studies, as well as studies pertaining to the history of ideas, proving that views on nature and on animals are culture-specific and may differ radically from those of the modern West. Animal and environmental ethics are both major issues in today's public debate. During the past century genetic and biological research contributed to a more diversified picture of man and his place in the world. This may result in an extension of man's moral liabilities to include animals as well as plants, sceneries as well as eco-systems (Merchant 1980, Thomas 1984, Clarke 1993, Ferry 1995, Singer 1995, Gålmark 1997, Coetzee et. al. 1999, Lundmark 2000).

People and animals in pre-Christian northern Europe

Although the economic importance of animals cannot always be separated from their ritual role archaeological interpretations of the significance in pre-Christian northern Europe have fluctuated between the functional and the symbolic. There has been no real discussion among archaeologists of the boundaries between man and animal, at least not in connection with studies of material culture. Boundary-crossing and shamanist procedures have, however, been discussed in the field of comparative religion (e.g. Eliade 1964), particularly concerning Sami cult and ritual (e.g. Schanche 1997). Animals are given an important part in procedures crossing the boundary between man and animal in aspects of the Norse god Odin (Solli 1998), and also in connection with shape-shifting of gods and spirits in pre-Christian Norse myth (Clunies Ross 1994).

Pre-Christian archaeological contexts suggest approaches that might help distinguish potential boundary-crossings between men and animals. The following three archaeological examples bring upp death, sexuality and naming in the pre-Christian and early Christian periods, in situations where the boundaries between man and animal do not appear clear-cut.

Death, and the archaeological concept of burial

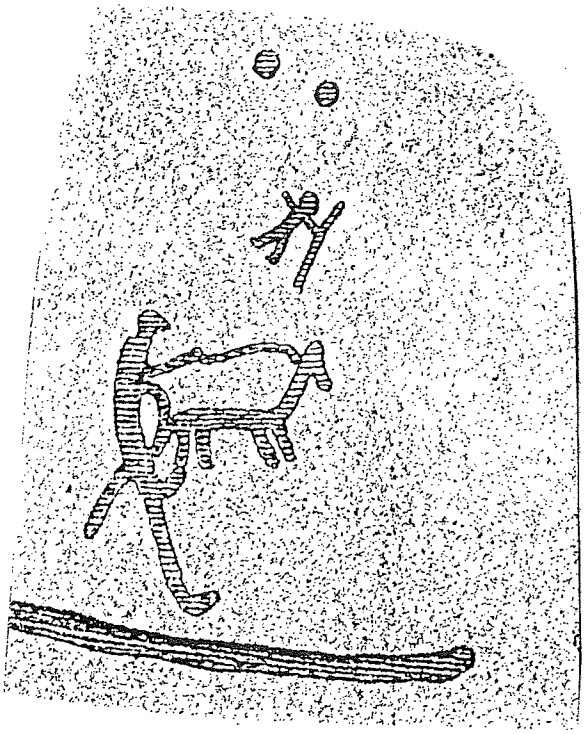
During the whole of the pre-Christian period the rituals practised at deaths and burials found a large number of expressions. Dead people and dead animals were taken care of in several ways. Human and animal bones were laid in graves, but also inside the settlements, and in other sites in the terrain. These bones are not necessarily found in what we normally call graves. During the whole of the pre-Christian period animal and human bones were disposed of in ways that cannot as yet be explained in terms of a traditional burial and a Christian outlook on death and the hereafter. Thus it seems that the concept of burial was much more diverse in the pre-Christian period than can be imagined in present-day western thought. Animals are found buried together with people, but also in specific animal graves for dogs, cattle, horses and bears (Jennbert 2002). Human and animal bones have also been deposited e.g. in wells and slag heaps, or in pits dug in farm yards and other types of enclosures (Backe et al. 1993, Olausson 1995, Nielsen 1996, Ullén 1996).

Thus there seems to be ample evidence that it was not any man who was laid to rest in a regular grave during the pre-Christian period. The bones found in the archaeological contexts mentioned above indicate that in certain circumstances human bodies and animal bodies were *disposed of* by similar methods and in manners much more varied than those included in our modern western burial concept. The rites used and the pre-Christian notion of death seem to unify men and animals so as almost to obliterate the distinctions between man and beast.

Sexuality

Sexuality is a field that has been scantily discussed in Nordic archaeology. To be sure, talking about sexuality in archaeological terms may seem problematic. Still, the rock-carvings indicate that at least in Bronze Age society sexuality was amply expressed in the rituals. Bronze Age rock-carvings depict sexual intercourse between men and women but also between men and animals, and more than a quarter of the figures are phallic (Malmer 1981, table 24).

In a discussion of the boundaries between men and animals these images of bestiality are indicative of boundary-crossing actions. Most of them are found in well-known rock-carving districts in Bohuslän (Jørgensen 1987, Kallhovd and Magnusson 2000: 87, fig. 2a), but there is an instance by Lake Åbo in Ångermanland (Fandén 2001, fig. 2b). Another depiction of bestiality is found in the stone circle of the Older Bronze Age barrow at Sagaholm in Småland. Despite the difficulty of determining



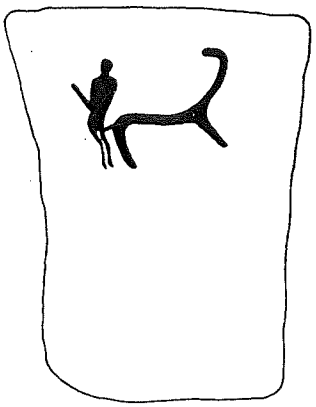


Fig. 2. Bestiality scenes: a. Vitlycke 1:4, Tanums sn; b. Åbosjön, Ångermanland; c. Häll nr 30, Sagaholmsgraven, Småland (Jørgensen 1987, Fandén 2001, Wihlborg 1978:121)

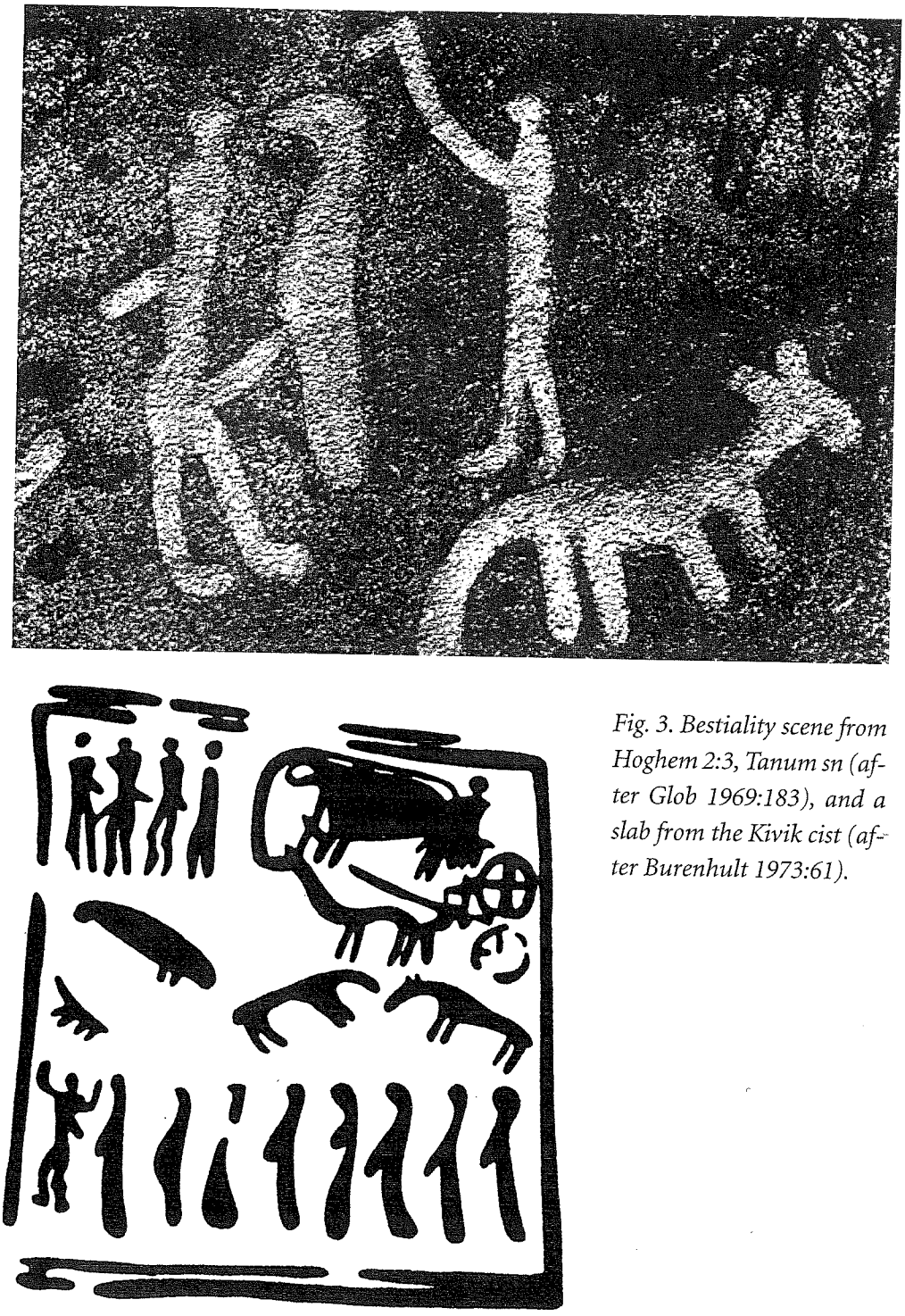


Fig. 3. Bestiality scene from Hoghem 2:3, Tanum sn (after Glob 1969:183), and a slab from the Kivik cist (after Burenhult 1973:61).

the species of the animals in the rock-carvings these images of bestiality show that the most frequent animals are horses and elks. Onone of the rocks in the Kivik tumulus in south-eastern Scania bird-like figures are depicted in procession. A similar bird-like figure occurs in a bestiality scene from Hoghem in Bohuslän (fig. 3). These bestiality themes form a link between rock-carvings and stone-built tombs. Burial rites are connected not only with burial sites but also with rock-carvings.

Bestiality has shocked and fascinated people throughout history. Sexual intercourse between men and animals has been a recurrent theme in mythology and religion. In the Bible bestiality is condemned as unnatural and sacrilegious. Sexual intercourse with animals was a dangerous and boundary-crossing activity in times when the boundaries between man, animal and the supernatural were difficult to define. In the 17th and 18th centuries bestiality was one of the most serious social problems (Granlund 1974, Liliequist 1991).

Bestiality is a boundary-crossing sexual activity in which man and animal are united. To be sure, sexuality involves love-making, emotions and reproduction, but it also entails power and domination. Perhaps the Bronze Age bestiality scenes can be interpreted in terms of power and domination, as representative of a patriarchal aristocracy. The patriarchal aristocracy of the Bronze Age favoured attributes linking ritual practices to rocks and funeral monuments. These attributes are associated with horses and metal objects. Like the rock-carvings these objects abound with images of horses, snakes, fishes, the sun, and ships, a Bronze Age cosmology (Kaul 1998). Perhaps the combination of ships, horses and death can be linked to an aristocratic yearning for a cosmological origin. At Kivik animals and men are represented, but also creatures intermediary between men and animals. At times the boundary between man and beast seems blurred, and no doubt sexuality was integrated in the rituals attending death and cult. Is bestiality an expression of affinity with animals, or a manifestation of power? The interpretations that archaeology can give to boundaries and bonds between man and beast are as varied as the conceptions of that distant past are likely to have been.

Naming

When children in the pre-Christian and early Christian periods were given names of animals the reasons were probably not the same as in our day. Personal names from the Viking Age and the early Middle Ages suggest interpretations involving the boundaries between man and animal. These names were most frequently taken from the

Arn-Örn-Ærn	Io-Iór-häst	Orm-orm/spjut	Ulf-Ulver-Varg
male	*male*	*male*	*male*
Arnbiorn	Ioar	Ormar	UlfrikR
Arnfin	IogeiR	Ormger	Ulvar
Arnniutr	Iostein	Ormsten	Ulvidh
Arnsten		Ormulf	Ulvidhin
Arnulf			
Arnvald		*female*	*female*
Arnvast		Ormløgh	Ulfhild
Arnvidh			
Ærnils			
Ærnulf			
Ærnvardht			
Ærnvast			
Ærnvidh			
Ærmund			
female			
Arnfridh			
Arngun			
Arnhild			
Ærngun			
Ærndis			
Ærgærdh			

Fig. 4a. Animals in first elements of personal names (simplification of list in Ivar Modéer 1964: 18–24)

Biorn-Bjørn	Orm	Ulf-Olf
Abiorn	Oddorm	Arnulf
Arnbiorn	Uddorm	Asulf
Asbiorn	Viorm	Biærghulf
Fastbiorn		Borgulf
Folkbiorn		Botulf
Frøbiorn		Bryniolf
Gerbiorn		Farulf
Gudhbiorn		Fastulf
Gunbiorn		Gerulf
Halbiorn		Grimulf
Hidhinbiorn		Gudhulf
Holmbiorn		Gunnulf
Hærbiorn		Gøtulf
Ighulbiorn		Hemulf
Ingebiorn		Hyggiulf
Kolbiorn		Hæghulf
Kætilbiorn		Hæriulf
Mæghinbiorn		Ingulf
Runbiorn		Nannulf
Sighbiorn		Oddulf
Stenbiorn		Ormulf
Styrbiorn		Radhulf
Sæbiorn		Ragnulf
Thingbiorn		Rikulf

Thorbiorn		Ringulf
Vibiorn		RunulfR
Vidhbiorn		Sighulf
Væbiorn		Stenulf
Ænbiorn		SæulfR
Ærinbiorn		Thingulf
Æsbiorn		Thiudulf
Ødhbiorn		Thorulf
		Unnulf
		Vighulf
		Ærnulf
		Ødhulf
		Øiulf
		Arnolf
		Asolf
		Botolf

Fig. 4b. Animals in final elements of personal names (simplification of list in Ivar Modéer 1964: 25–30)

wild animals. *Bjørn* (bear), *Ulv* (wolf), *Ari* (eagle) and *Orm* (snake) were the most common names, but there are also instances of *Ræv* (fox), *Iævur* (boar), *Biur* (beaver), *Ramn* (raven), *Hǫ̈k* (hawk), *Val* (falcon), *Hani* (cock), *Spirv* (sparrow) and *Gase* (goose). Of the domesticated animals *Ior* (horse) is the sole instance (Janzén 1947:261–263). Male personal names referring to an animal are considerably more common than female names (figs. 4a and 4b).

Were these animals used as personal names as metaphors for an accepted boundary-crossing act? Were they expressions of potential shape-shiftings with links to shamanism? Do the properties of the various animals reveal how the characters and family traits of these men were perceived? Do the names *Örn* (eagle) and *Björn* (bear) signify swiftness, strength and courage, or do they indicate a position in society? A close study of gender, class and genealogy might offer a better opportunity for a discussion of further aspects of naming and personal names. Animal names used as personal names suggest that these names and name elements were once profoundly significant.

These names may have been linked to forces good or evil, or to a philosophy of honour, honesty and authority. Perhaps the use of words for wild animals as elements in personal names is related to the nature–culture dichotomy in Norse mythology. Midgård is the abode of men, and in its midst lies Asgård, home of the gods. Beyond the pale of Midgård is Utgård, the realm of evil creatures such as the giants. The animal names mayexpress the need for an alliance with nature, with the giants and other fiends outside Midgård, an alliance that was sought also by the giants when they wooed Frigg, the goddess of fertility and farming. In this interpretation the personal names would not only be tokens of a bond between men and animals but also bridges between nature and culture, between the known and the unknown, between the finite and the infinite.

Obstacles to archaeological interpretations

In conclusion, these three archaeological contexts illustrate different types of problems that archaeologists are confronted with in interpreting the nature and import of pre-Christian delimitations between men and animals. These obstacles are manifold. A striking example is the limitation of the archaeological burial concept. Pre-Christian deaths and burials confront our present-day burial concept with quite unexpected ways of disposing of dead bodies. Another example is the interpretation of such pre-Christian manifestations of sexuality as are offensive to our ethics. The last con-

text – naming – might illustrate boundary-crossings between man and beast in the pre-Christian and early Christian periods. But to someone who today runs into Björn or Ulf these names have undoubtedly lost their original import.

The boundaries between man and animal are thus at the same time peculiar and familiar. Archaeological interpretations are by definition problematic and complex. On the one hand there is the consciousness of influences from present-day ideas, ethical values and conceptions of what is human. On the other is the consciousness the things were in fact different in the past. The apparatus of archaeological concepts that are used to describe and analyse material culture in various contexts is usually based on this perception. The comprehension of unfamiliar phenomena is thus limited by the conventional classifications and concepts of archaeology. In order to find analogies offering perspectives on the interpretations of material culture and relations between men and animals we must rid ourselves of our present-day notions.

Conceptions of man and beast

«How can we explain that something which seem obvious in one world is absolutely incomprehensible in another?» Those are the words of Luc Ferry in his discussion of trials of animals (Ferry 1995:16). This dilemma is well known to us archaeologists, who work with periods in a distant past. Normally it is the *material culture* that gives us evidence for interpretations of periods long before our era. As for our capacity to isolate and visualize *relations* – evenly matched, as it were – between animals and men it may be the result of strong influence from an anthropocentric notion of the world founded in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Like other disciplines archaeology is affected by its position in time. It is thus not remarkable that our interpretational range restricts our chances to reach beyond the familiar horizons of our comprehension.

It is an established fact in archaeology that archaeologists specialise in working in just one of the many prehistoric periods. This specialisation has had its impact on their views of nature and culture, in particular since a social-evolutionist approach has permeated the whole fabric of the discipline. Thus, Stone Age research has been influenced primarily by visions of a harmonic co-existence between man, animals and plants. The more distant the periods studied the stronger is the impact of the idea of man as a «primitive being at one with nature» (Rudebeck 1999).

However, the anthropocentric outlook did not reign supreme, as Ferry showed in his study of trials of animals (1995). Court records from such trials, dating from the 13th to the 18th century, are still extant. These trials raise questions on the boundary between man and animal, as well as on man's ethical and moral precedence. As the age of scientific discoveries began in the late 16th century man's uniquely privileged position in culture and nature was undermined.

How archaeologists interpret the differences between man and animal depends on their views of nature and the classical culture–nature dichotomy. This dichotomy has become axiomatic in the west. Almost as fundamental to the archaeologists is their inspiration, whether conscious or unconscious, by a structuralist view of man's reasoning and categorization of the concepts of culture and nature (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

The scope of archaeological interpretations is extended through studies of attitudes towardsnature, as well as of interplay with nature, undertaken in e.g. ecology, sociology, anthropology and the history of ideas. Ever since the pre-socratic philosophers relations between man and nature have been brought out in poetry and philosophical texts. In the world literature, both in the west and in other cultures, there is a complexity in commitment and political will, with an external as well as an internal perspective (Clarke 1993). In the course of time man's view of animals and nature has changed, and nature has increasingly become subjected to man's devices. Very briefly we may say that the views of nature have changed, from a organismic view to a rational view which would turn into a post-modern view of nature as a creation of culture. To be sure, this process does not move by fits and starts, it is continuous and complex and rests on a large number of religious and ideological strata (Merchant 1980, Thomas 1984). The views of nature have differed in keeping with different cultures, regions and epochs. Among these views we find the understanding of nature as a resource and a commodity, as threatening, awe-inspiring, magical, or inanimate. The view that the sole purpose of nature is to be a resource for man has been increasingly questioned in catastrophy and chaos theories, as well as in ecological, philosophical and feminist research (Sörlin 1991).

Studies of attitudes towards nature, as well as of interplay with nature, within other disciplines provide a large number of opportunities, as well as with the inspiration, to interpret pre-Christian conditions. It would seem that attitudes towards nature are affected not only by the level of knowledge or the intensity of emotions. Inherent in every society, group or individual there is a comprehensive cosmological explanation, teleological opinion, of the design of the universe. Ethical conceptions

of nature are found in most religions. Regarding men and animals in the pre-Christian period a variety of approaches give the impression that the relations betweeen them go beyond specific physical, organismic or rational notions of nature and culture. Thus, archaeological interpretations should preferably be based on the specific pre-Christian Nordic religions and rituals, in the terms previously outlined in connection with the three examples introduced – death, sexuality, and naming. Thus the archaeological interpretation of material culture presupposes collations with theories of ritual pracices, as well as of social agency.

Challenges to archaeology

I would like to sum up my attitude to archaeological interpretations, in particular to those involving relations between man and animal. At the same time I wish to emphasize that there is not one single history of the past. Antiquity is a conglomerateof a large number of simultaneous conceptions of reality in which man has a number of ambiguous relations – as is our own time! Consequently, the material culture does not provide prehistory with unambiguous relations between men and animals in the pre-Christian period in the North. A deconstruction of conventional archaeological classifications on the other hand, as well as a sound scepticism of a reconstructed past, provides a history that is heterogeneous and at times contradictory.

What might otherwise happen is that archaeology, if the interpretations it provides are accommodated to a contemporary set of concepts, is reduced to an indolent and unintellectual pursuit. To be sure, simplified representations of the past, with ready-made reiterated interpretations, may be well suited to people who prefer to live in an unreflecting and conservative society. This type of archaeology follows the lead of traditionalism and conservatism and encourages an unconscious view of history.

An active and provocative archaeology, on the other hand, might help people realise that the ideas of today are not all-inclusive. Other eras have had other horizons and insights, in which other realities challenge present-day western opinion. Four points summarize the challenges that confront archaeology and archaeologists:

1. Man and animal

The three archaeological examples given – death, sexuality and naming – indicate that boundary-crossings between man and animal occurred in the pre-Christian pe-

riod. Archaeology offers perspectives on a topical issue and may even contribute to the animal rights debate.

2. Ambiguous truths

The material culture studied by archaeologists, as well as the long time-frame of archaeology, challenge conventional concepts and classifications of e.g. settlements, graves and sacrificial objects. The traditional archaeological classifications are insufficient for the discussion of all the various types of deposits that archaeological methods can distinguish. They cannot do justice to such unfamiliar truths as held good in the prehistoric period.

3. Obstacles to archaeological interpretation

Archaeology is a challenge to the general and inclusive theories on human agency, and to our view of the relationship between culture and nature. Pre-Christian contexts imply complex obstacles to interpretation, obstacles most likely built on an anthropocentric bias.

4. Fictions as truths?

The theme of this session invites us to consider what sort of images of the past are created and conveyed by archaeologists. What additional conventional representations can be distinguished and differentiated?

In my belief the theme of this session on relations in prehistoric procedures is fundamental to archaeology. As a result of the alternation between the present and our reconstructions of the past our conventional categorizations are highlighted. Archaeology becomes a challenge to general and present-day theories about cultures and societies. The proposition *Fictions as truths?* provokes us to reflect on what archaeology is really about. The theme of the session also announces a vital

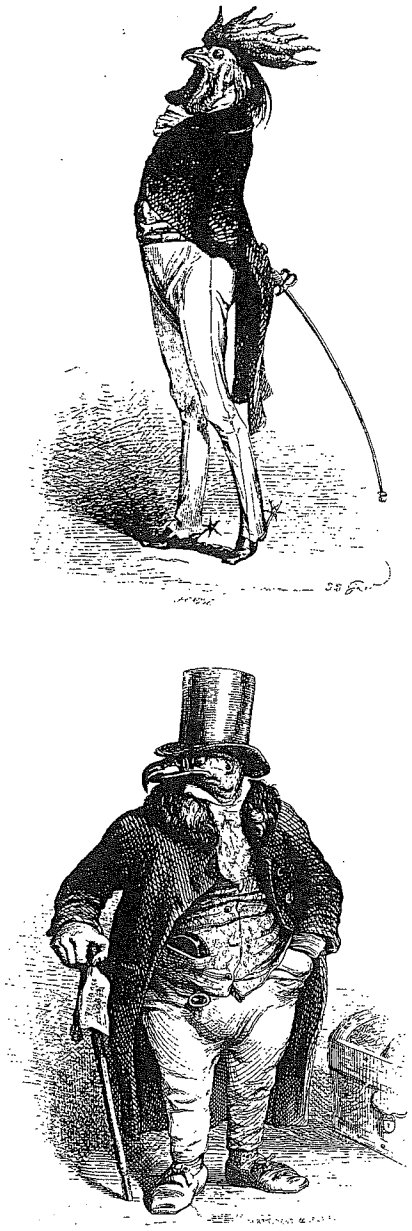


Fig. 5. Creative archaeologists? (after Grandville in Appelbaum 1974)

reflection on how the humanities, and archaeology in particular, are perceived in the academic world and in society at large.

[Translation: Bengt Ellenberger]

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