

Encounters with Animals from Lost Worlds

// Håkon Reiersen //

'We are making an exhibition based on object shaped like animals. Can you help us, Håkon?'

Working as a keeper of the museum collections, you get intimate knowledge about different groups of objects. A very special and non-uniform group of objects is those shaped like animals. When I was asked about which objects might be suitable for this exhibition, it was an easy job to write the list. Many of these animal objects are like old friends whom you know well. Being unique and visually effective, several of the objects on my list are “classics” in our museum and have been on display since they were unearthed. Other objects are well-kept secrets that few other than the collection keepers know about. In this text, I share my reflections when thinking about these animal objects in the light of past and present worlds, focusing on my personal experience with some of the exhibited objects. As a group, they reflect a long prehistorical time span from the Mesolithic to the Viking Period.

Birds, Seals, Fishes, and Whales from Stone Age Worlds

Among the obvious museum classics are a bird and a seal made of soapstone. They are both

stray finds, found in 1931 and 1935 respectively, and they have been exhibited and photographed together. The seal from Nore Sunde in Stavanger is particularly expressive, smiling to us from a time long gone. The bird found in Høyland, Sandnes, has a hole underneath, so that it could be placed for instance on a stick. In the permanent exhibition made in the 1990s, the bird and the seal were associated with hunting magic.^[1] This brings my mind further to one of the large birds that were hunted in the Stone Age: the Great Auk. In the Mesolithic cave at Viste near Stavanger, bones of this bird were found in the midden.^[2] In Norwegian, it is called “geirfugl”, deriving from Old Norse “geirr” meaning “spear”, and alluding to its pointy beak. The Great Auk is the Dodo of the North Atlantic. It was a large bird who could not fly. In the modern era, it was hunted to extinction in 1844.

When the seal and the bird were catalogued by Jan Petersen in the 1930s, he assumed that they were of a Stone Age date. The museum catalogues of the 1990s mention the uncertainty of this dating, as there were few parallels

known from existing contexts. However, recent excavations in northwest Norway confirm that this group of soapstone figurines of birds and marine mammals stem from the Stone Age. A small bird figure found at Skatestraumen in Nordfjord is dated to the middle Neolithic.^[3] In 2012, a whale figure and a bird figure of soapstone was found at Mesolithic sites in Øygarden near Bergen.^[4]

In the 1980s, a soapstone fishing net sinker with a fish motif was found at Frøneset at the Hå river, south of Stavanger. Despite a lack of parallels, based on shoreline dating, Sveinung Bang-Andersen proposed a date between

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the late Mesolithic and the middle Neolithic.^[5] When I participated at the excavation of a Stone Age site in 2010 at Bjørøy near Bergen, a similar sinker with geometric patterns was found. A few years later, another sinker was found at Bildø.^[6] Leif Inge Åstveit interprets the motif on the Frøneset sinker as a halibut, well known from rock art. In Old Norse it was called “heilagr fiskr” – the holy fish.

Not far from Bjørøy, Bildø, and Øygarden, in 2017 a living whale was found severely injured at Vindenes in Sotra. Vindenes is an area with several known Stone Age sites.^[7] The young male goose whale had to be euthanised. When researchers opened his stomach, they uncovered a troublesome diet. He had swallowed about 40 plastic objects, mainly plastic bags.

Through media coverage, the story of the dead “plastic whale” raised international attention to the issue of plastic pollution in the sea. In 2017, Sky News UK made a documentary on this issue, called A Plastic Whale. The plastic waste from the whale’s stomach were shown in a temporary exhibition at the University Museum of Bergen in 2017–19. The skeleton of the plastic whale and its stomach contents is now on permanent display, as a reminder and a warning.

Mysterious Hybrid Animal from an Unknown Past

We then come to my more personal encounters with animal objects. The animal object that I have the most intimate relationship with is an object that literally caught my eye – or rather I caught its eye. One day in 2016 when I was working in the basement housing our collections, I felt as if I was being watched. Turning around, on a dark shelf I could see a stone figure with eyes staring right at me. I picked it up and did immediately realize that this was a remarkable object from the past (Fig. 1). But there were no markings on it that could point me in the direction of the context of the object. Many questions arose: What type of object was this? How old was it? Which being or beings was it supposed to represent? Where had it been found, and when?

Putting an image and a description out on a Facebook page on Norwegian archaeology, the editor of the page luckily recalled having seen this object in an article written in the 1970s. This proved to be correct. The archaeologist Odmund Møllerop indeed had published a short article on the figure in 1976, and its find context could thus be re-established. The figurine had been found in 1965, a few hundred metres from the sea at Dirdal, southeast of

// Figure 1. The mysterious soapstone figurine from Dirdal, phallic in shape and seemingly a hybrid combining attributes from various animal species – seal, fish, (polar) bear, amphibia, human? A 3D-model of the figurine is available at: sketchfab.com/arkeologiskmuseum. Photo: Terje Tveit, Museum of Archaeology,



Stavanger. However, the article of Møllerop did not adequately answer the questions of date, function, and which animal species this object represented. Still, with reference to the animal figures discussed above, a Stone Age date seems probable. I have previously written an online article about the figurine^[8], keeping several questions open for interpretation. In my view, having a mystery object like this in our collections truly has a value of its own.

Bird pins and golden serpents – the end of an era and the start of a new

Wading birds was a motif already in the Stone Age and are also known from Bronze Age imagery.^[9] In the Iron Age, the Migration Period seems to be the end of the era of the thick wading birds. A senior researcher once pinpointed to me the change in imagery from the wading birds to the far more aggressive animal imagery like ravens in the Merovingian and Viking periods. An example is the bird brooches of the Merovingian period. This change in symbolism and mentality was a sign of a new era – the rise of kingdoms and aggressive warrior ideologies.^[10] In such a context, the small bird pins of bronze, depicting swans or ducks, represent the world that was. Such pins are found in Norwegian and Finnish female graves from the Migration Period.^[11] As to their function, the common interpretation is that these were hair pins.^[12] The birds in the hair give me associations to 1968, Woodstock and peace on earth. But this is an illusion, as the Migration Period by no means was a peaceful time.

The changes in iconography between the Migration Period and the Merovingian Period might well reflect real changes in society. The last decades, scientific evidence has shown that

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there was a climatic catastrophe at this time, The Fimbul Winter of Norse mythology.^[13] The climatic changes led to death and conflict and was probably one major factor explaining the dramatic shifts of the 6th and 7th centuries. In this light, another animal object is of interest: The small golden serpent found in 1969 at Hesby in Stavanger.^[14] Yet again, this was a stray-find, with an uncertain date and function. However, due to new parallels from the Staffordshire Hoard in England^[15], it might tentatively be interpreted as a sword sheath mounting from the Merovingian Period. To me, the skin-shifting serpent is a powerful symbol of the transformations of the time, at the start of a new era.

Killer whales in the Viking world and the Anthropocene

We might finish this article with a soapstone sinker showing a whale’s head in each of its two ends. The whale sinker was found in 1947 in a potato field near the sea at Førland in Tysvær, north of Stavanger.

In my opinion, it is a killer whale that is depicted here.^[16] The sinker might well have been modelled this way to transfer the great fishing skills of the killer whale to the object. In many ways, the soapstone sinker with killer

whale motif gives associations to Stone Age imagery and hunting magic. However, the unique sinker was catalogued by Viking Period specialist Jan Petersen as a sinker from this period. In respect of his deep knowledge of objects from the Viking Period, and his engagement with the museum collections through half a century, it is fair to assume that this is the correct date.

The date fits well with my simplified narrative going from depictions of the “friendly” seals, whales, flatfishes, and wading birds to the more “aggressive” species like ravens, serpents – and killer whales. In our era of Anthropocene, it is rather evident that the most aggressive species in fact is our own. Although we never were a “noble hunter”, we surely can do better.

The killer whale is one of the master hunters of the sea. Second after homo sapiens, it is the animal species with the widest geographical distribution on our blue planet. It is a highly intelligent and well-adapted species, beautifully coloured in black and white.

In the 1990s exhibition, the whale sinker was displayed laying helpless on its back. For an exhibition in 2016, I turned it around so that its beautiful head was facing the visitors. The craftsperson making the soapstone sinker, surely had great respect for this animal. And so should we. ♦

Endnotes

- [1] Oddveig Foldøy, (ed.), *Museoteket ved Arkeologisk museum i Stavanger: Rogalandsfunn fra istid til middelalder*. *Ams-Småtrykk*, no. 30. (Stavanger: Arkeologisk Museum, 1995).
- [2] Sveinung Bang-Andersen, *Svarthåla på Viste: boplass i 6000 år*. *Ams-Småtrykk*, no. 13. (Stavanger: Arkeologisk Museum, 1983).
- [3] Knut Andreas Bergsvik, *Arkeologiske undersøkelser ved Skatestraumen, 1*. *Arkeologiske avhandlinger og rapporter fra Universitetet i Bergen*, no. 8. (Bergen: Universitetet i Bergen, 2002), Fig. 85.
- [4] Cato Guhnfeldt, “Fant unik steinalderkunst”. *Aftenposten*, 10 June 2012: 4.
- [5] Leif Inge Åstveit, “Kleber, kunst og kveite – om å finne ting fra steinalderen”. *Universitetsmuseet i Bergen Årbok*, 2018: 7-16.
- [6] Anne Ågotnes, “Lokaliteter fra steinbrukende tid på Vindenes, Sotra”. *Arkeo*, 1979: 6-12.
- [7] Håkon Reiersen, “En mystisk dyrefigur”. *Norark.no*, 10. June 2016. Url: <http://www.norark.no/innsikt/en-mystisk-dyrefigur/>. Viewed 17 April 2022.
- [8] Joakim Goldhahn, *Birds in the Bronze Age. A North European Perspective*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
- [9] Lotte Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality: An Archaeology of Scandinavia AD 400-1000*. (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2011).
- [10] Asbjørn Engevik, “Fenno-Scandinavian bird-headed bronze pins of the Migration Period”. In: Babette Ludowici (ed.) *Individual and individuality? Approaches towards an archaeology of personhood. Neue Studien zur Sachsenforschung*, no. 4. (Stuttgart: Theiss Verlag, 2013), p. 177-188.
- [11] Håkon Reiersen, “Fuglenåler. Gjenstander fra fortiden 7”. *Frå haug ok heiðni*, 2016 no. 1: 23.
- [12] Bo Gräslund & Neil Price, “Twilight of the gods? The ‘dust veil event’ of AD 536 in critical perspective”. *Antiquity*, no. 86 (332, June 2012): 428-443.
- [13] Håkon Reiersen, “Ormen frå Hesby. Gullfunn frå ei krisetid? Gjenstandar frå fortida 24”. *Frå haug ok heiðni*, 2021 no. 1: 16.
- [14] Chris Fern, Tania Dickinson & Leslie Webster (eds.): *The Staffordshire Hoard: An Anglo-Saxon Treasure. Reports of the Research*

Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London. (London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 2020).

[15] Håkon Reiersen, "Mordarkvalens fiskelykke. Gjenstandar frå fortida 19". *Frá haug ok heiðni*, 2019 no. 4: 16.

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