

Research Article

Towards Ontological Alterity in the Nordic Bronze Age? Perspectives from Ornamented Personal Objects

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Abstract

This paper asks how an ontological perspective on Late Nordic Bronze Age art can advance archaeological interpretation of the ornamentation on personal objects used and carried directly on human bodies. To this end, the theoretical concepts perspectivism and ontological alterity are operationalized as an alternative to epistemological approaches to art. This entails framing the art on personal objects as a set of relations with the capacity to act and affect the lives of the humans interacting with it, rather than as representations. A central point is that this art should be considered as cosmology rather than *representations of cosmology*. The relational effects of this art in its bodily context are presented in examples illustrating how cosmology was encountered and experienced through the use of the objects. The paper concludes that art functioned as a medium for dialogue between the metaphysical and physical realities as it made cosmology present via personal objects.

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Introduction

Archaeological research into the figurative ornamentation of the Late Nordic Bronze Age (NBA, c. 1100–500 BCE) has generally assumed that the rich pictorial record found on ornamented personal objects represents the period's cosmology. Especially the composition of motifs on razor blades are commonly treated as a window to Late NBA beliefs. They have, for example, been interpreted to represent deities (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005), transfer of dead souls (Ohlmarks 1945), twin heroes (Vandkilde 2013), animistic shapeshifting (Ahlqvist & Vandkilde 2018) and a cyclical journey of the sun across the sky (Kaul 1998; 2004; 2005). Largely, the studies agree that the imagery portrays a cosmology centred around the sun, ships and various animal helpers, of which horses play a central role. Such interpretations have, for example, drawn upon the application of ethnography and methods from the study of religion; approaches whose applicability can be discussed on grounds of reduction of cultural complexity (Fuglestad 2018; Todd 2016; Ucko 1969; V. Watts 2013; Wylie 1985). A related critique might concern the all-encompassing representationalist focus in previous research: the art is assumed to be representations of concepts, allowing researchers to 'read off' their original meaning (Jones 2021). Considering that art

may function as a medium for dialogue (Ingold 2000), it may affirm and renew ancestral relations (Fowler 2021), be a social agent (Gell 1998) or be thought of as a function in itself (Sjöstrand 2017), it is thought-provoking that only representationalist perspectives have as yet been applied to Late NBA art. Broadly, art may be said to be a system of relations (Jones 2020), meaning that its properties go beyond what it represents. What happens to our understanding of Late NBA art and its context if we in our archaeological interpretations grant it the space to be more than mere *representations of cosmology*? What if this art is cosmology (cf. Holbraad 2007)? I pursue this central research question in the current paper.

Doing so entails a commitment and a 'leap of faith' (Alberti & Marshall 2009, 346); by regarding the art as cosmology instead of representations of it, I aim to move towards an engagement with Late NBA ontology which acknowledges it as a genuine alternative to Euro-American ontology, rather than 'Other' people's mistaken beliefs (Harris & Crellin 2018, 55). Put differently: having pursued whether we might see traces of animism in the Late NBA archaeological record, it is time to ask what we can learn if we allow the material to act animistically by appreciating its agential functions and the physicality that the context lends to the cosmology. Here, cosmology is understood as a narrative framework, which functions as an explanation of how the world works. It tends to be central in people's perception of the world and can in this sense be said to compose reality (Alberti 2016; Taves *et al.* 2018). Committing to this requires approaching Late NBA beliefs as ontology rather than epistemology, doing away

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with the assumption that the art *represents* cosmology, thus taking the aforementioned ‘leap of faith’. Rather, the art may be said to *be* cosmology, as real and agential as the bronze objects it is inscribed upon (cf. Holbraad 2007).

My errand with this paper is thus not to question whether previous interpretations of Late NBA art are incorrect, but to operationalize the theoretical implications of what is currently agreed upon in Late NBA research. In doing so, I draw on several complementary ideas and approaches that engage with ontological difference or alterity as a legitimate alternative to Euro-American dualism and humanist thought, generally encapsulated by the term posthumanism or the ‘ontological turn’ (Cipolla 2019; Fahlander 2017; Harris & Crellin 2018). Most prominently, I accept that art, objects and relations may act with real, felt impacts in the world, and I accept art as cosmology in a literal, not metaphorical sense (Holbraad 2007), to form an applied approach specifically tailored to my research question. Thus, I focus on the dynamic aspects of art and cosmology, which I consider to be entangled with the objects they inhabit and, consequently, with the people carrying and using these objects on their bodies.

My source material is the vast corpus of Late NBA personal objects with figurative ornamentation, which is dominated, in particular, by razors, and belt bowls (*hængekar*) (Fig. 1). They mainly associate with the Nordic Bronze Age cultural area by convention, i.e. present day northern Germany, Denmark, southern and coastal Norway and southern Sweden; though some comparable material stems from the Baltic and further afield in Europe, I focus on the Scandinavian finds. Whereas the jewellery and swords mainly stem from hoards (Gibbs 1998; Heske 2012; Höckmann 2021; Jensen 1993; Johansen 1993; Kristiansen 1974a; 1998; Levy 1982), the razors and other grooming tools are almost all recovered from male urn burials (Bradley 2006; Müller 1897; Sørensen & Rebay-Salisbury 2023; Treherne 1995; but see also Thedéen 2003), but the cosmological imagery is shared between the object types regardless of their archaeological context, though its expression differs (Ahlqvist 2024; Kaul 1998, 148–59). As we have a fairly good idea regarding at least some of the ways these objects were used, the close relationship to the human body provides a salient point of departure to consider the physicality and agency of the objects and their art, and through this, the impact that cosmology may have had on human lives. The contemporary rock-art record does not offer similar proximity to human bodies and, as such, I do not engage with this here.

Towards ontological alterity

Recent contributions to the state of the art of research into Late NBA ideology have focused on its conceptual fluidity (Goldhahn 2019a), suggesting that it incorporated animistic notions (Ahlqvist & Vandkilde 2018). Whether the art expresses beliefs that align with animism or rather resonates with ontological systems that have been described as totemism or even analogism can be discussed (Descola 2014; Fowler 2021; Goldhahn 2019b, 64), but the question is

whether pursuing this question further is productive (see Jones 2017, 176) or possible; people’s worldviews tend to be flexible and may alternate between individual people or groups, incorporate aspects from multiple ontological ‘modes’, or place them somewhere within or outside (Fuglestad 2018; Goldhahn 2019b, 69). Perhaps, rather than debating how we best categorize the art and the society producing it, utilizing ontological difference as a resource is an appropriate next step in operationalizing these Late NBA beliefs as we think they could have functioned.

Representationalism which casts observations as indicative of natural phenomena regarded as true and absolute is at the heart of Euro-American ontology. This system is considered to be correct regardless of culture and, as such, the truth about the world. Thus, this ontology is uni-natural and representationalist; Euro-American ontology presupposes the existence of a natural world that ‘Other’ cultures have differing views on, meaning that we as Euro-American researchers can never fully commit to these; our perspective remains epistemological (Alberti & Marshall 2009). Ontologically different positions are automatically considered untrue by default as they perceive the world differently (Alberti & Marshall 2009; Cipolla 2019; V. Watts 2013). This means that our understanding of ontological alterity becomes limited and hierarchically orders some ways of knowing over others, restricting archaeological interpretation. Additionally, there are associated risks of academic imperialism (Cipolla 2021; Todd 2016; C. Watts 2018). One step to counter this may be granting archaeological material the space to act non-representationally—to ‘take ontological alterity seriously’, in the words of Alberti and Marshall (2009). Viveiros de Castro suggests approaching ontological alterity from a humbler perspective, which leaves room for the possibility that Euro-American thinking may be faulty. Following this, ontological alterity can be thought of as a resource that may bring forward Euro-American categories of thought (Viveiros de Castro 2002; 2003; see also Rosiek *et al.* 2020). My take on this in the current paper is twofold: to ask what happens to our archaeological interpretations if we, instead of merely viewing the material as representative of animist notions, allow it to act animistically, whilst accepting that the art embodies rather than depicts cosmology.

Relational ontologies are central to such an approach, as this ontological position considers the world as constructed through relations rather than substance (e.g. Barad 2007; Fowler 2013; Harris & Crellin 2018; Harvey 2018; see also V. Watts 2013). In this way, matter cannot be absolute because substance only becomes real when it is encountered, for example through human senses or scientific measuring equipment (Fowler 2013); it emerges through relations. This also means that substance is dynamic and relative because the relations that condition its existence change and vary (Conneller 2011). This cannot be conflated with sameness across all beings and entities; rather, the differences between them can be considered a matter of perspective rather than something constant detached from the context. Perspectivism, as most thoroughly explored by Viveiros de Castro (1998), regards perspective as conditioning understandings of difference. Perceived differences are



Figure 1. Examples of ornamented razors (left) and belt ornaments (right) from the Late NBA. (Photographs courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark (CC-BY-SA license, modified).)

dependent on one's seat in the world and as such adhere to the body, person, entity, etc. that experiences the world rather than a 'natural', pre-existing difference. What to us looks like difference between, for example, a human and a horse is constructed via perspective rather than stemming from 'true' difference (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 347; 2004). The world is created and understood in the relation between entity and the environment. Approaching matter this way stresses the ubiquity of relations even when not immediately present by showing how entities, whether organic, artificial or cosmological, only exist in relation to other entities (Barad 2007).

Relational ontologies mean that the study of intangible phenomena is as valid as the study of concrete substances, making for a more symmetrical or 'flat' approach than is for example purported by classic natural sciences. Focusing on relations rather than substance further seeks to avoid the automatic hierarchy afforded by classic Enlightenment substantivist paradigms that systematically values some substance—for example human—higher than others (Cipolla 2021, 510; Govier & Steel 2021). It challenges the inherent dualism in Euro-American thought where entities are generally viewed as separate and distinct. A central point in critiques of 'classic animism' claims that it perpetuates such dualism, by which it essentially ends up a distorted

inversion of Western nature/culture paradigms (Halbmayer 2012). Such takes on animism are still underscored by a Euro-American reference frame which risks overlooking the insights that may be gained from a more nuanced approach to ontological alterity. Furthermore, associated risks of cultural appropriation and lack of due credit extended to Indigenous thinkers have been pointed out (Rosiek *et al.* 2020; Todd 2016).

More recent engagements with relational paradigms gravitate towards an appreciation of the *difference* in ontology as a productive space for analysis rather than looking for 'signs of animism' when studying prehistoric worldviews (Fowler 2021). The 'new animism' as a theoretical turn explicates how ontologies diverting from enlightenment principles may assist academics as heuristic tools in exploring past ontologies (Harvey 2018). Focus is on actions, practices and relations as constructing the world rather than substance (Fowler 2021; Ingold 2000), pointing to the connectedness of entities—in line with some Indigenous philosophies (Rosiek *et al.* 2020) as explored by, for example, Bird-David (1990), Jordan (2003), Willerslev (2007) and C. Watts (2018). A central point is considering the possibility of agency beyond intention—and even matter—when trying to engage with ontological alterity as a way of furthering our understanding of the past (Fahlander 2017; Jones 2020).

Accepting more-than-human capacities for agency, for example, means that the agency of art and stories can be considered a presence directly affecting the lives and actions of people (Gell 1998; Sjöstrand 2017; V. Watts 2013). In this sense these entities are ‘animate’—not to be understood directly as imbued with a soul *per se* but as capable of affecting the world through their relations (cf. Jones 2020). Thus, even if Late NBA art *may have* represented something (e.g. Kaul 2005), the central point from such a perspective is not to provide a final answer as to what an image could represent or what this might say about society, but rather to explore how it affected the beings that it came into contact with—a fruitful approach to Late NBA art, historically subject to debates about the exact meaning of the stylized motifs (Müller 1921).

The relational effects of Late NBA art are intrinsically linked to the objects through its close entanglement with the artefacts—both as ornamentation engraved on the surfaces and through the shape of these objects which echoes the two-dimensional motifs. Both engravings and shape can be considered dimensions of the art (Ahlqvist 2023); as such, in order to consider the way that the art made itself present in the world through affect, I anchor my analysis in the social use of the objects themselves and their connection to the human wearers. The ornamentation on the objects should not be approached as detached from either the objects or the people wearing, handling and using them. Rather we need to look at the art-object as a new concept in itself (cf. Sjöstrand 2017), created via the relation between them: they become-with each other (Fowler 2021). When the objects are worn or used by humans, a new interspecies relationship emerges, created and animated through the connection between art-object-human. All entities in this relationship affect each other in differing ways, which has implications for the other parts of the relation and a range of associated relations (i.e. other objects and humans, etc.). In turn, these relations probably had wider social implications.

The significance of this relationship becomes particularly salient if we accept the art to *be* cosmology; as tangible as the objects themselves. As such, the terms art-object and cosmology are interchangeable terms in the following. Looking at art this way underlines the potency of these ornamented objects: the people wearing them wore literal cosmology—not just representations of it. The created relation on the one hand granted the cosmology a body with a set of associated relations, and on the other, the humans with the power of embodying the divine (Ahlqvist & Vandkilde 2018). But getting closer to an understanding of Late NBA ontological alterity entails a move beyond regarding the objects and the cosmology as *tools* used by humans for human purposes (Fahlander 2017, 77). Can we approach the social use of these objects from a more symmetrical perspective? Returning to the idea of allowing the archaeological material to act animistically, how did the cosmology, the art-object, make itself present in the world through its relations? As a first step towards an exploration of this, I consider its physicality as a way of becoming present in the lives of the humans interacting with it through the

personal art-objects (Jones 2020, 548), thus exploring the relational effects of the cosmology.

The physicality of Nordic Bronze Age cosmology

The art-objects constituted a physical presence in the lives of the people interacting with them in a range of ways, some of them very concrete. When explored like this, it emerges that the cosmology intervened in people's lives on different levels, which likely affected the way people thought about the art. The art-objects left a mark through their relations (Jones 2020) which shaped part of the human condition for the people wearing and interacting with it. The physicality of the art as it was engaged with and experienced in the Late NBA can be approached from different perspectives, which consider the entanglement between art and appearance, behaviour, mind, mood, sound, and tangibility.

Appearance and behaviour

The Late NBA art-objects affected their wearers' appearance in different ways. The potential of hair removal enmeshed in one of the main purposes of a razor is an obvious place to start. Shaving enables a bodily change that is both experienced (see below) and encountered by the surrounding society. The removal or sculpting of a beard may drastically alter the look of a face and, possibly related to this, shaved faces have been suggested to associate with particular identities in the Late NBA (Skogstrand 2016, 127–31; Treherne 1995). Performing in accordance with an identity may have elicited certain behaviour (George *et al.* 2019, 4–5; Jenkins 2008, 5–7); however, on a more concrete note, having a beard may affect the way a person eats, drinks, grooms, kisses, etc. In this way, the act of shaving may elicit behavioural changes that go beyond the act itself. The possibility of shaving other parts of the body, for example the head, should also be considered (Thedéen 2003), as possibly evident in some Late NBA figurines from Fårdal (Denmark) and Itzehoe (Germany) (Glob 1970, 129–31), where it appears that a shaved zone between the temples and crown of the head formed part of the coiffure (Glob 1969, 197–9).

Much of the period's ornamented attire is oversized and would have altered the shape of the wearer. The neck-rings accentuate the thickness of the neck, which can make it look shorter and the shoulders narrower. In relation to this it can be noted that a demarcation of shoulders is absent from Late NBA figurines showing female bodies wearing neck rings and belts (Fig. 2) (see Terberger *et al.* 2022). The oversized belt bowls worn on the back or the stomach may constitute the most dramatic transformation of the human shape, however (Fig. 3). The size of these art-objects varies throughout the Late NBA from smaller in the earlier phases (10–14 cm diameter with a height of 4–6 cm in the period 1100–900 BCE) to 16–24 cm diameter, height 7–10 cm in the period 900–750 BCE, up to very large (i.e. 32 cm diameter, height 11 cm) in the final phase (750–500 BCE) (Baudou 1960, 69–71). When worn, the objects would have stood out as large protrusions on the body, especially when the person was seen from the side. Use-wear traces on the objects indicate that they were



Figure 2. Three examples of Late NBA figurines without clearly demarcated shoulders, two of them wearing neck rings. (Photographs courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark (CC-BY-SA license, modified).)

suspended from the handles and on many of them the top part of the ornamentation appears worn. In some cases, it has been rubbed away almost entirely through repeated friction, for example caused by fabric. A cloak, probably woollen, overhanging the bodily ornaments causing the wear is one interpretation (Kristiansen 1974b, 28–35). Wearing a thick cloak over the over-sized objects would have caused radical modification of the human shape.

Wearing these over-sized objects comes with certain restrictions. Bending, running, climbing and jumping are all hindered by the presence of the objects on the human body, which needs to alter behavioural patterns accordingly. Likewise, the bodily ornaments limit physical proximity to other beings, more-than-human as well as human, as they form a boundary between the body and its surroundings. In this way, the art-objects affect both wearer and their surrounding environment.

Mind and mood

The engravings on the art-objects, especially on the belt bowls, are arranged in wavy patterns that tie together in complex systems where lines must meet up correctly to construct the perfect symmetry. If executed correctly, each wavy pattern incorporates an inverse reflection. The exact construction of these waves means that they bear

resemblance to some of the recognizable motifs that Late NBA art employs on other objects, suggesting that they embed several motifs in each composition (Fig. 4), partially concealed through optical illusion (Ahlqvist 2024). That Late NBA art incorporates ambiguous stimuli that play with visual psychological functions has recently been acknowledged and described as a phenomenon (Goldhahn 2019a; Rédei *et al.* 2020, 113–24). The process of decoding particularly ambiguous stimuli necessitates a relaxed but focused mental state, which is associated with positive emotions like joy and absence of self-awareness. The sense of success and reward following the identification of a ‘hidden’ figure—suddenly visible, almost as if by magic—makes the state self-reinforcing (Lindstrøm & Kristoffersen 2001, 76; cf. Gell 1992).

In this way, the act of being able truly to see the art-object, to make meaning of the engravings, likely had psychological effects (Janik 2020). Interacting with the art-objects might thus have stimulated the brain activity of Late NBA people, perhaps even affecting their mood. Related to this, long-term visual exposure to the interweaving patterns may elicit a relaxed, almost semi-hypnotic state, similar to what can be achieved through meditation (Gell 1992; Oma 2008). The effect would be particularly strong if the object was moved or spun around or through play with light and shadow. Thus, it is possible that the composition of these art-objects—and



Figure 3. (Left) examples of an ornamented neck ring and belt bowl; (right) belt bowl, buckle, neck-ring, ear-ring and spectacle fibula in its bodily context. (Photographs courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark (CC-BY-SA license, modified) and illustration by Flemming Bau.)

the concomitant cosmology—had the capacity to affect the Bronze Age mind through their visual appearance (cf. Ahlqvist 2025).

Sound and tangibility

The visual and psychological effects of the art-objects must have been accompanied by other sensory properties. The physical proximity to the wearers (i.e. used and carried directly on the body) enabled sensory interaction defined by the intimate relationship between body and object. For example, the singing of the razor across the skin, broken up by the change of pitch as it slices through a hair, was part of the experience of shaving, along with the feeling of the engravings beneath one's fingers, felt whilst holding the object (Fig. 5). Handling bronze in general is accompanied by faint metallic sounds and especially when over-sized jewellery was handled, these sounds must have been noticeable. The art-objects sound differently depending on whether they are held, rubbed and polished, rubbing against cloth, spun around or used as containers, etc.; the different sounds associate with specific uses at different points in the objects' life (Conneller 2011).

The tactile dimension, the physicality of the art-object itself, is another sensory impact encountered by persons interacting with it. The bronze can be touched and feels different whether dry, wet, old and brittle or completely fresh, for example in the casting process (Jakob T. Hviid pers. comm., 22 October 2022). Thus, the art-objects embodied different manifestations from different perspectives: the

interactions of a bronze caster handling the bronze, first as constituent parts coming together in liquid form and later through the painstaking process of removing the object from the mould followed by hammering and/or polishing, are of a different kind than those of a wearer who may instead focus on the object's heaviness, sharpness, smoothness, coolness, etc. (Conneller 2011; Fowler & Harris 2015). In either of these cases and the wealth of other interactions centred around the art-objects, the physical properties of the bronze, its shape and the engravings afforded a tangibility and manifested its presence in the physical world. Like the effects on behaviour, some of the feelings elicited by the objects may have been experienced continuously even after the object was no longer in use or even present—a sort of delayed response. For example, the feeling of wind, rain or sunshine on a shaved face, the feeling of fabric on shaved skin, or the sensation of lightness and sudden change in centre of gravity when a heavy object is removed from one's back or stomach.

The alterations to the human body enabled by these objects may represent and intermingle with specific symbolic uses and identities; however, for the purpose of the current discussion, the definitive point is not what this presence *represented* but rather that it was *present*. Cosmology became manifest to people through its various ways of making a mark in the world, demanding attention by stimulating the sensory system. In this way, art-objects intervened in people's life through physical engagement, shaping behaviour and experience of the world in a process of becoming-with (cf. Barad 2007; Fowler 2021; Fowler & Harris 2015).

Art-objects enmeshed in relations

The physical reality of the art-objects was not limited to the wearers—their impact most often formed part of elaborate chains of actions and reactions that somehow integrate the objects. In this way, the relational effects of the cosmology go beyond immediate interaction. For example, the presence or absence of a beard may have signified a certain identity, which acts as a social cue for other people. This likely demanded a certain response or treatment of the bearded/non-bearded people, or it may simply have affected one's perception of the shaved person (Jenkins 2008, 112–17; Treherne 1995). Though there are a lot of unknowns in this example it is hardly a stretch to suggest that the use of these objects was socially significant; that much we can infer based on their number, the material wealth necessitated by their production, their depositional context and the investment of time and care in creating them (Höckmann 2021). Thus, we may not be able to pinpoint exactly *how* the effects of the cosmology were experienced and impacted other people, but we can expect them to have been there.

As already touched upon, the objects' way of becoming present changed throughout the use life of the objects. Thus, the physicality cannot be considered static but changed through the various relations that the artefacts formed part of through interactions with different actors, for example in the casting process as pointed to above (Conneller 2011; Fowler 2013, 29; Fowler & Harris 2015). These various relations can be thought of as transformations of the art-object with implications for its conceptualization, imbuing it with significance (Brück & Jones 2018; Zedeño 2009). People, practices and objects that have been in contact with a belt bowl throughout its life can be witnessed in the evidence of use and in the current context of the object, for example its inclusion in a hoard. Especially female jewellery was deposited in hoards in the Late NBA, likely taking part in ritual practices that perhaps involved the wider community (Fontijn 2002; Kristiansen 1974a) or maybe just people whose identity linked them to the artefacts (Melheim 2015).

Such practices are made meaningful through a careful selection of objects, perhaps anchored in the object's use-life, its treatment and connection to specific people, objects, or events. Through such structuring acts, the ritual significance is established; the object transforms with its inclusion in the ritual and potentially further as it plays out (Bjørnevad-Ahlqvist 2020; Chapman 2000; Garrow 2012; Joy 2016; Murray & Mills 2013). Past relations are key here, as they impact the social notions controlling what and how objects are included in rituals. The object's connection to the past is still present in its contemporary appearance—for example, recognizable on resharpened blades or by engravings almost erased by wear—visible to the people encountering it. In this way, the object's former relations still inhabit it, shaping its conceptualization in human minds (Harrison-Buck & Hendon 2018). In a process of becoming-with (Fowler 2021), the art-objects emerged so that a belt bowl, for example, simultaneously embodies the entirety of relations that it has—and will?—participate in when it is worn. Each object in the depositions would thus embody its own set of

relations that become woven together in the ritual deposition (Chapman 2000; e.g. Bjørnevad-Ahlqvist 2020). In this way, the art-objects function as material anchors for a meshwork of relations (Ingold 2011) all incorporating the cosmology. This points to how strongly its presence might have been felt for people in the Late NBA: it affected their bodies and their senses, extended into their relationships and played a role in their practices.

In all the scenarios and contexts where the art-objects make themselves present in the lives of people, they do so through relations. It is in the interaction between art-object and people that cosmology comes through. This interaction goes both ways; the art is not a passive vessel for people's ideas about cosmology, a constant that allows academics to 'read off' past worldviews (Jones 2021). As art functions through relations, it is also in the relation to other entities—including humans—that its meaning is created and becomes real (Goldhahn 2019b, 71). In this sense, cosmology needs humans as much as humans need cosmology; through the connection, both emotionally and through physical proximity, it becomes manifest. The art-objects come to function as a conduit for cosmology, which breaks through to the physical world via the different human actors using the objects, linking up with the objects' use-lives and their inclusion in social practices. In this way, the objects become the necessary forum in which the dialogue between cosmology and humans can take place (cf. Ingold 2000). The relationship between people and art is one of co-dependence, as they rely on each other to compose ontological reality through creation and dialogue, a process enabled by the art-objects.

As such, we can accept that the art on these objects is cosmology, not representations of it. The horses, waves, ships and suns are magical and agential beings, as real and significant as the humans wearing them. By engaging with NBA art in this way, we remove ourselves from Euro-American representationalist thinking perhaps best encapsulated by Plato's Cave, which presupposes a distinction between observable matter and its adaptation into a cultural representation (Rouse 1996, 209). The allegory orders separate entities in a tripartite relationship: the real, the observed and the observer (Barad 2003, 804). Here, beings are regarded as separate due to the perception of an internal difference, i.e. of different essence (Webmoor 2007, 570). As such, it stands in contrast to for example, perspectivist thinking, which places emphasis on connections—relations—as constituent elements of the world(s) rather than separation and matter (Barad 2003). Doing away with the limiting hierarchy of representationalist thought allows us to regard the creatures shown in the art as cosmological beings entangling with NBA humans' lives, affecting, steering and assisting them. Cosmology and associated beliefs have the capacity to shape human behaviour significantly and direct our attention to the ways that our world is bigger than just us. In a sense, cosmology opens our world, helping us when navigating difficult or life-altering events and can give us a sense of safety and direction.

This points to the agency of the objects and perhaps why these ornamented artefacts primarily are found in liminal contexts, i.e. burials and hoards. Considering these objects as

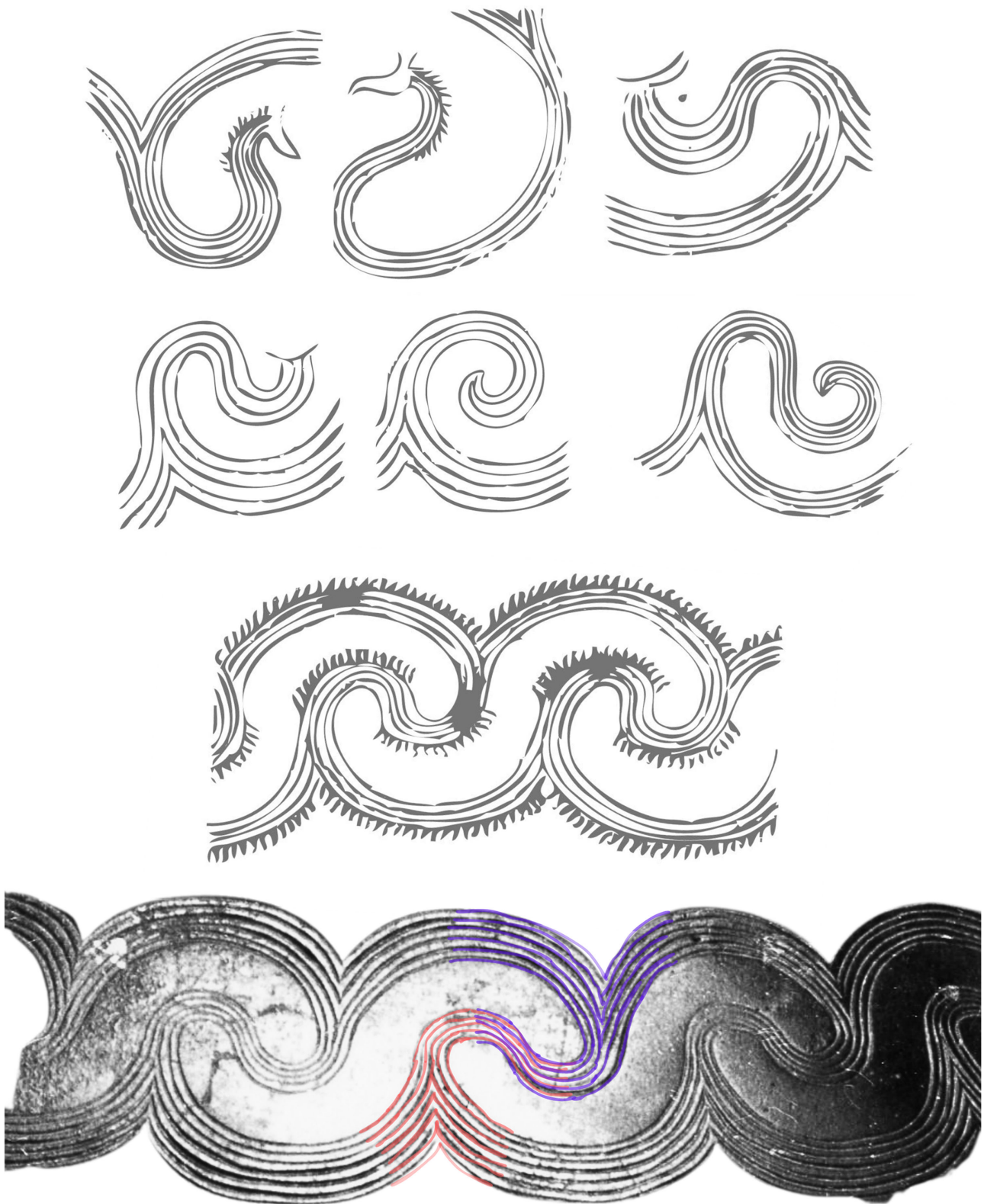


Figure 4. (Top) Various ways that a horse is represented on belt bowls, emphasizing how the omission of defining anatomical attributes leaves the image more ambiguous. (Bottom) belt bowl motif which, initially appearing as a wave, embeds an ambiguous figure of two mirrored horses in a style typical for the Late NBA. The embedded, mirrored horse image is traced out in blue and red, respectively. (Illustration by author; photograph by Lennart Larsen, courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark (CC-BY-SA license, modified).)



Figure 5. Two razors with engraved art. (Photographs courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark (CC-BY-SA license, modified).)

fundamental in the foundation of a dialogue between the physical and metaphysical reality links up with their significance in liminal contexts concerned with the passing of one state to another (Thedéen 2003; van Gennep 1960). People tend to rely on spirituality and rituals when grappling with such transitions, which may explain why Late NBA people turned to their cosmological imagery when burying their community members or depositing their personal objects and concomitant relations in the landscape (Bradley 2006; Goldhahn 2019a; Kristiansen 1974b; Melheim 2015). The razor and other toiletries included in the burial together with the burnt bones sustained the deceased through their past relations and the tangible connection to the art-object's use on the body while it was still alive; an emotional connection probably familiar to most people in contemporary society in that, for example, a loved one's possessions hold meaning even after they are lost to us. Such objects transgress separation between life and death, the here and there, challenging these categories as they allow the deceased's or the deposited objects' relations to remain in the world (Büster 2021). Perhaps this is one main reason

that personal objects, bodily ornamentation and grooming tools were the objects of choice for cosmology in the Late NBA. Their liminality links up with cosmology crossing the boundary between physical and metaphysical reality, rendering these objects as transformative agents able to negotiate between worlds.

Concluding discussion

All this does not necessarily mean that the art on the personal objects from the Late NBA did not represent something—the rich archaeological research history into the topic has provided us with a fairly good idea of how it might have done (Kaul 1998; 2005; 2021; e.g. Bradley 2006; Goldhahn 2019a)—but rather that it did much more than that. A work of art surpasses its iconographic image as it is bound up in the production sequence necessitated for its production and has interaction as one of its key intents—art *acts*. It becomes meaningful when it is encountered, and so relationality should be central in the study of it (Danielsson & Jones 2020). Coupling this with a drive to 'take ontological alterity

seriously' by considering how this might look from an ontological rather than an epistemological perspective (Alberti & Marshall 2009; Cipolla 2019) meant taking seriously the possibility that the art-objects perhaps did more than represent the cosmology; they may have become it. Thus, the study of the art on the personal objects and its impact is more than a study of art; it is a study of cosmology inhabiting these artefacts.

A question arising from these discussions concerns whether the term art can even be used to discuss the complex interconnectedness between ornamentation, cosmology, object and human. Rather than 'art' in the Euro-American sense, the images are a way of relating to the world (Goldhahn 2019b, 67; Ingold 2000, 112). However, I fear that by giving up on the word 'art' when we describe contexts and phenomena that we are not a part of, academics condemn them to a process of othering (see Russell 2021), implicitly claiming that only Euro-Americans are able to produce 'art' (Sjöstrand 2017, 375–6). One of the biggest issues with this is the risk of reproducing Eurocentric hierarchies by denying non-Western visual culture the status of art (Phillips & Steiner 1999, 10–12; Porr 2019). However, it is important to nuance the term and specify how it should be thought of in this context, as the art discussed in the present paper differs markedly from the Euro-American general use of the word.

Considering the relational aspect of cosmological art in the Late NBA from a symmetrical perspective has unfolded how it encountered the people associated with the art-objects throughout their lives. Repeated acts, psychological and sensory stimulation and ensued social responses were tied up in the art-objects, enforcing the presence of the cosmology in the human world. Viewed through this lens, the cosmology and the humans shared a tight-knit, mutually beneficial relationship. Through the interaction, people embodied the cosmology, ensuring its presence within the physical world. In turn, the cosmology assisted people during transitions in liminal contexts. And the connection between humans and the sacred was probably also meaningful in human communications of, for example, power and gender (Ahlqvist 2020; 2024; Vandkilde *et al.* 2022).

Returning to a more epistemological perspective on all this, it interestingly posits an idea of how ubiquitous cosmology might have been to people in the Late NBA. Directly attached to the body, connected through intimate acts such as shaving, affecting movement and perception by others, cosmology might have presented as an omnipresent force in the lives of these people, as tangible and agential as the physical objects it entangled with. This perspective allows us to consider the cosmology as more than 'pretty pictures' on items, nuancing our view on Late NBA life. There is, of course, the very real possibility that the art held no further meaning to Late NBA people than mere decoration, ornamentation on everyday tools and jewellery. However, only pursuing an interpretation of the art as 'empty decoration' would be to neglect the long research tradition on Late NBA art and cosmology which has generally agreed upon considering the art as cosmological in nature (Kaul 2018). Instead, the purpose of operationalizing the theoretical toolbox the way I am doing here is to allow the art to have

functioned in the Late NBA as it is currently conceptualized in contemporary academic thought.

What I am doing in this paper can be viewed as a first step towards a new understanding of Nordic Bronze Age ontological alterity. The way I see it, such an approach is an appropriate way to bring forward our interpretative frameworks in that regard. Decades of research into the complex concept that art is illustrate how we should proceed with caution when attempting to read specific meanings or even myths into images from a different temporal or spatial context than our own. Then how to move forward with studying prehistoric art and cosmology? Rather than pursuing the identification of representational meaning, we can get at what the art does (Jones 2020). In the case of the Late NBA, one answer could be that it brought cosmology into the lives of Late NBA people and gave it a material presence via the objects that it inhabited. The effects of the art, its entanglement with cosmology and the ubiquitous presence in human lives then reveal something about the ontology of the Late NBA, which may have been fundamentally different than contemporary Euro-American thought. If that is the case, then let us try to explore the possibility of ontological alterity on its own terms.

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