

Primitive

tider



22

arkeologisk
tidsskrift



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tider

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ISSN 1501-0430

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0130 Oslo

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Internett: <https://journals.uio.no/PT/index>

Ombrekk: Hege S. Gjerde

Trykk: Reprosentralen ved Universitetet i Oslo

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Forsideillustrasjon: Gravrøys fra førromersk jernalder på tomten til den katolske kirken under utgraving. Til venstre vises en profil kuttet gjennom rasleiren. Foto: C. McLees. Fra artikkelen "Nidarneset før Nidaros. Trondheims landskaps- og bosetningshistorie i perioden 500 f.Kr.-1000 e.Kr." av Cadamarteri *et al.* s.51-73.

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Joakim Goldhahn 2019: *Birds in the Bronze Age. A North European Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 417 p. ISBN 978-1-108-49909-5.

Kristin Armstrong Oma
Archaeological Museum, University of Stavanger

Birds in the Bronze Age sets out to explore past societies from a multi-species perspective, and author Joakim Goldhahn presents a well-crafted, different approach to Bronze Age society. He takes aim at birds and opens our eyes to that teeming world of feathers, in the air, on land, under water, on rock art, in bog sacrifices, on bronzes, in graves, in folklore and in sagas. Goldhahn points out that birds have been largely ignored in archaeology, and the book offers an antidote to the one-sided focus on agricultural practices and communities in the Nordic Bronze Age discourse. As such, the book is a much needed pursuit of the flighty winged creatures that were clearly highly significant to the Nordic Bronze Age cultures.

But the book is also much more than this. It is a thorough re-examination of well-known finds, and Goldhahn goes in depth into original documentation and accounts of for example the Hvidegaard grave, which any archaeologist would find fascinating. It addresses all kinds of contexts where birds are to be found, and covers osteology, archaeological contexts of graves, settlements, and depositions, as well as representations. Put together, the wealth of birds in all these kinds of contexts is surprising, and as such, the book is both a thick and a rich description. The book is very solid and well researched throughout, and Goldhahn has an impressive grasp of the material at hand, both the

archaeology and the biological and folkloristic specificities of the different breeds of bird.

Goldhahn has a somewhat flamboyant language, and often communicates successfully with his imaginative writing style. Sometimes, however, it tips over and becomes flippant, for example his comment on p. 225: “The inflamed Mr. Duck-Face rules the panel. Sometimes size does matter.” He is at his best when he writes about graves, rock art and iconography – he excels at interpretative discussions and the text is very engaging. In comparison, he is less engaging (and possibly engaged) when he presents settlement evidence in chapter 5, *Birds for the living*. The chapter is short and he seems to see limitations rather than possibilities in the data sets.

The structure of the book appropriately sets out according to the flight of a bird and starts with a lift-off; setting the stage and presenting the framework for the book. However, the rest of the book feels somewhat awkwardly structured, and my impression is that it might have benefited from a partially different structure. Goldhahn has so much that he wants to tell us, and the result is sometimes slightly disorganized. It feels more logical to start with the “birds for the living” (chapter 4), and “bird intra-actions” (chapter 10) to let the reader become familiar with both the physically present birds in the Bronze Age and the birdness of birds – or their species’ specificities.

The engagement with real birds would surely set the stage for different kinds of intra-actions, both in staged rituals and in using birds' mantle to switch perspectivism. Having said this, the plethora of birds feel very much alive throughout the book, and it is not often that a bird is just a bird. Goldhahn succeeds in bringing out the great variety of feathered beings. In short, reflective bursts of text he brings the past alive beautifully by describing possible multispecies birdscapes. Since the book covers a lot of ground it would maybe have benefited from killing some darlings. It might elegantly have ended at p. 248, and parts of what comes after could have been included in earlier discussions. Chapter 9 (The animacy of rocks) feels like a huge digression. It is a very interesting read, well researched and presented, but it does not sit well. Also chapter 11, Cave birds: becoming bird, feel somewhat repetitive and seems like a case study that is meant to confirm conclusions already drawn.

As an author, Goldhahn is very much present throughout the text, by referring to himself as «I» and staying visible in the text: Whether to use «I», «we» or another more neutral denotation is often ascribed simply to style, but to me it is more than that – by daring to use «I» the writer renders themselves visible and acknowledge that the research we present is not a “god-trick” (e.g. Haraway 1991). We should not pretend to be neutral observers of universal facts. By making our own voices visible we accept that archaeology is where the researcher's imaginative qualities meet often sparse traces of past practice and actions. Within the current climate of methodologically oriented and scientifically based archaeology, Goldhahn acts as an important counter-weight. The book feels like a very personal endeavour and reads like a mix of the view of an insider in Nordic Bronze Age research and also of one that has taken a step back to regard the European Bronze Age discourse from a vantage point.

Goldhahn rightly points out that Bronze Age research has, for a long time, been victim to a bias in which the farm and the farmer has been the main research focus. Wild animals

have been written off as a subsistence side-line and considerations of engagements with wild animals or undomesticated landscapes are few and far between. A notable exception to this is, however, the so-called cultural dualism debate in Norwegian Bronze Age archaeology, which hypothesized that Bronze Age farmers lived along the coast and ethnic groups that were remnants of Stone Age hunter-gatherers lived inland, with an unknown level of contact between them. However, these hunter-gatherer groups have not been considered to be “real” Bronze Age people – rather, they have traditionally been considered as an evolutionary backwater and certainly very little heed has been paid to their engagements with the wilderness and wild animals whose world they were immersed in. It is therefore timely to take up the mantle of study of the wild side of the Bronze Age, and for my part I hope that many similar studies follow in the wake of Goldhahn's. This book also goes some way towards a broader understanding of such groups by discussing a few caves on the Norwegian coastline.

It is striking that the wide range of data discussed in the book renders very visible that the beings in the different situations and places presented were definitely not all birds: one of the main impressions I am left with is the wide range of species in settlements, in graves, on rocks, on bronze, and in wetland depositions. I know that within the bounds of this book, it is too much to ask that Goldhahn would go in depth into multi-species intra-agencies between a broader variety of species, but his presentations opens up an avenue into new areas of research. How are birds and other kinds of beings beyond humans interacting on rock art? He is discussing birds and horses from the perspective of hybridity, but there is more to be done here. I also wonder if Goldhahn sometimes sees birds everywhere when the figures on bronzes and rock art could more rightly be labelled as hybrids (e.g. Ahlqvist & Vankilde 2018). Also, I am not always convinced by the proposed birds on bronzes. Goldhahn makes a very interesting point of transformations between horses and birds on

bronzes; some of these I find convincing, others not so much. For example, I struggle to see that birds are born out of the mouths of horses on the Neder Hvolris razor. I am also not convinced that the figures in the Solem cave are bird-people, or that rock art figures of humans with a pronounced nose are beak-people. But the idea is tantalizing.

The various discussions that emerge throughout the book go beyond birds, and when interpreting the archaeological record, many interesting discussions emerge that have a bearing on the wider Bronze Age discourse. One example is the interpretation of the cloak of the Hvidegård individual(s) – the cloak of a shaman or a commoner? Goldhahn uncloaks the different discourses of textile specialists and rock art researchers, and suggests a middle ground: “following agential realist perspectivism, a cloak does not so much represent or signify a fast or firm economic, social, or ideological value per se, but it possesses the capacity to unfold such values depending on the context.” (p.79). The mundane and the ritual sphere cannot, according to Goldhahn, be separated. This blending of aspects of reality are in keeping with a theoretical framework founded on ontological considerations – and bent on unfolding a Bronze Age worlding. Orienting the archaeological record consistently within this theoretical framework is possibly the strongest aspect of the book, and the vector that to the largest degree holds potential to move the frontier of research.

Within this Bronze Age worlding, Goldhahn finds birds that are often interpreted as magical beings with magical abilities and materialities. Gizzard stones in the Hvidegaard burial (p. 91), sculpted and drawn birds on bronzes hidden from view, are examples of how birds were used for magic (p.105), as is the practice of bird extispicy (divination by studying entrails), bird-horse hybrids on bronzes, and the sun as an egg. However, it is not the magical abilities for and by themselves that are important here. By setting up a framework in which agential realism and subsequent worldings are the foremost analytical prism, the magical birds become so because by unfolding the knowledge of them as themselves

reveal that they are so many other things, and their birdness is deeply delved into.

Returning to the question “were they all birds”, and looking at the data presented, I wonder whether the interchangeable, and fluid, is key rather than pinpointing species and singling out the birds. What is remarkable is not just the presence of bird bones in, for example, graves and caves but the wide range of species. What I find remarkable is the presence of variety, intermingled and mixed. It reminds me of Anja Mansrud’s (2006) study of Iron Age cremations in Eastern Norway, in which she concluded that the graves signified a flat ontology with intermingled animals and humans. From this perspective, the book could have been tweaked to be “The Animals of the Bronze Age”. Having said this, I fully acknowledge that the focus on birds is very important and much needed. The bias of looking at one kind of being or animal and become blind to the others is mostly reserved for studies of human animals, and in order to broaden the scope of our analytical endeavors forwards as well as moving the research frontier, it is necessary to acknowledge and make space for other kinds of beings. For example, Goldhahn rightly points out a bias in which studies of horses have taken precedence over birds (and other animals) in the Nordic Bronze Age whilst horses are, in fact, underrepresented in numbers (p.100), e.g. on razors.

To sum up, I found the book, with its flair, to be an immensely enjoyable read. It dives into spectacular finds, fantastic bronzes that are nicely drawn, thick description of very interesting archaeological finds, a broad geographical range and not least it treats birds foremost as themselves – in all of their delightful variations. Goldhahn succeeds in conjuring images of flocks of birds flying into the sunset, swooping low over the sea, with plaintive calls.

Let me end on a personal note, in tune with the book under review: whilst reading this book, I have been raising chickens for the first time. The process from broody hen laying on eggs, to the hatching of little feathery fluffballs, to caring for chickens in life and death, was a

fitting companion to the book. In a double sense, I became aware of birds as beings, both in the material record of the Bronze Age, and the domestic ones in the coop and the backyard, and the wild ones that come to pinch the chicken feed. I also became aware of the intense intra-actions between birds and humans, and how meaningful they can be. Such an experience – worlding – runs tandem with Goldhahn's starting point, as he describes the different birds and personalities he has encountered in Australia. His book is a poignant reminder that when we have seen something, we cannot un-see it. And we can never un-see the birds that swooped down on Bronze Age societies after reading Goldhahn's wonderful book.

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