Designing birds, creating identities: a closer look at Bronze and Early Iron Age ornithographic art

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Bronze and Early Iron Age bird representations have long interested archaeologists. This interest has stemmed from both their variability and widespread distribution across most of central-eastern Europe (Fig. 1; 2). Unfortunately, however, bird representations have never been studied systematically, and existing interpretations revolve around a priori assumptions as to their possible role in the religious/ritual sphere.

My PhD research provides a new perspective on bird symbolism by looking at its material design, specifically the relationship between motifs and the objects on which they occur. Crucially, bird representations flourished at a time when writing was yet to be conceived, meaning that design was a crucial variable for the successful mediation of its meaning.

Based on a systematic review of published and unpublished material, it appears that the significance of bird representations shifted from individual to more communal functions in the course of the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age, a change that altered the relationship between motif and object. In the earlier half of the Urnfield period (Ha A1 - Ha A2), bird representations primarily occur on personal items, such as swords and body ornaments. The most common motif during this period is the bird boat (‘Vogelbarke’), consisting of two opposed bird heads (Fig. 3). While the motif itself is variable, its design is not. It primarily occurs on the hilt of solid hilted swords, suggesting that the object-motif relationship was geared towards haptic design - to use the sword, the motif had to be touched. At the same time, the motif would have been associated with people who carried swords, thus with a particular social category rather than with the community as a whole. This type of association changes in the second half of the Urnfield period (Ha B – Ha C) when bird representations start to encroach on communal items, primarily vessels. The relationship between motif and object is now highly repetitive and formalised in a number of different ways (Tab. 1). By the end of the Early Iron Age this trend towards formalised design culminates in the canonical reproduction of bird motifs on situlae, cauldrons and other vessels.

Thus, bird symbolism may have played an important role in Bronze and Early Iron Age identity politics, by providing a material channel for the articulation of personal and communal interests. Crucially, as much as this role may have depended on birds’ mythological meaning it was also the result of their material design. Through an increasingly canonical and standardised object-motif relationship, bird symbolism became part of people’s collective memory, a mnemonic anchor within illiterate societies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Haptic design</th>
<th>Symmetry</th>
<th>right-to-left directionality</th>
<th>transubstantiation</th>
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<td>motifs are placed on an object so as to be touched when handling/using it.</td>
<td>primarily associated with the bird boat motif, in itself symmetrical; placed on situlae and other vessels the motif tends to segment the vessel’s surface into two symmetrical halves</td>
<td>birds are shown facing to the left.</td>
<td>describes the semantic translation of one substance - the object itself (e.g. a vessel, a brooch) - into another substance - the bird.</td>
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Table 1: object-motif relationships, later Urnfield period/Early Iron Age.

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