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Seductive Similarities

A Comment on Gerum, Trans-Atlantic Contacts, and Analogies

Introduction

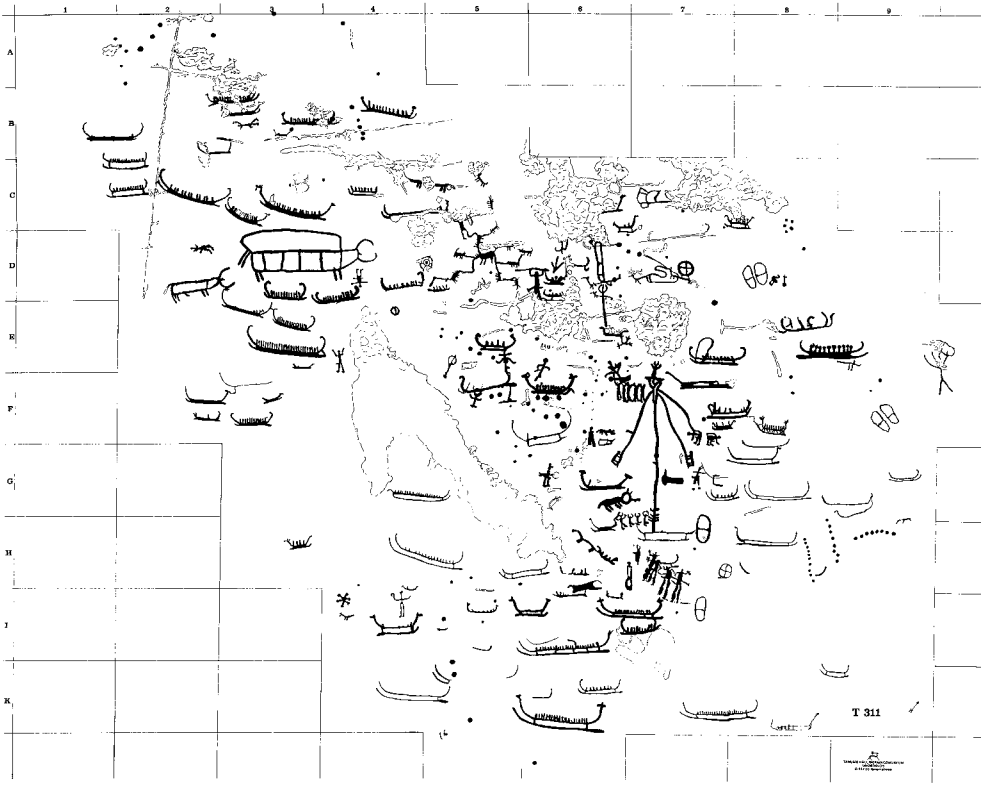
In 1991 Dietrich Evers published an article in *Adoranten* in which he considered the possibility of Scandinavian Bronze Age seafarers reaching the North American continent. According to Evers evidence suggests that the ancient Scandinavians came into contact with the civilizations of Mesoamerica and stayed there temporarily. Here they witnessed an impressive ritual – men "flying" around a tall pole, suspended in the air by ropes. The visitors returned to their own lands, in casu Bohuslän (Sweden), where they commemorated the ritual by carving a pictorial representation of it on a rock surface at Gerum (Evers 1991, see also Högberg 2000) (FIG. 1). However fascinating this scenario of Trans-Atlantic contact may be, there is no evidence to suggest it ever happened, and Evers' article raises the question, as old as it is fundamental, of how archaeologists explain the occurrence of seemingly identical cultural phenomena, motifs or material objects in places far apart, whether in space or time. Hence, the purpose of the present article is two-fold. First, it is a critical (and much delayed) response to Evers' hypothesis, and secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it seeks to provide a better background for evaluating the apparent similarity between the pole ritual allegedly depicted at Gerum and the Mesoamerican *volador* ritual. Thus, we suggest that the similarities, instead of being a result of diffusion through direct contact should rather be understood as a case of cultural convergence.

Our discussion of Evers' hypothesis and the consequences of Trans-Atlantic contacts in general both have a bearing on the use of analogies in the study of prehistoric cultures. In general, there are two kinds of analogical reasoning that have been discussed as "the direct historical approach" and the "general comparative approach" respectively (see Lyman & O'Brien 2001). In the former kind of analogical reasoning one typically uses living informants, or relevant written sources, that stem from a group of people whose ancestors are supposed to have inhabited a certain area in prehistoric times, to gain knowledge about that specific area's prehistoric culture. In the latter kind of analogical reasoning one builds on the notion that certain levels of technological and social development foster certain kinds of cultural traits. Thus, in the latter line of reasoning some researchers apply ethnographic knowledge of the culture of, for instance, 20th Century Kalahari Bushmen in their attempts to interpret archaeological artefacts and cave art from Upper Palaeolithic Europe because the two cultures' level of societal and technological development are seen as similar.

Lee Lyman and Michael O'Brien's discussion of analogy and the history of its use in North American archaeology is highly relevant to the methodological discussion of the use of analogies in the interpretation of Scandinavian Bronze Age rock art. While analogies based on historical sources - often in the form of the general comparative approach - and to a lesser

Fig. 1. The central part of the Gerum carving (Tanum 311) with its famous tree or pole and associated human figures (Photo by Thore Bjørnvig, 2009).

The whole panel of Tanum 311. Documented 1996 by Tanums Hällristningsmuseum.



degree ethnological sources (the direct historical approach) has a long history in Bronze Age rock art research, they were mostly used in the first three quarters of the 20th Century as an interpretative framework (e.g., Almgren 1927; Gelling & Davidson 1969; Hultkrantz 1989). In the beginning of the 1970s the field saw a new trend in research strategies and methods during which the use of both kinds of analogies were increasingly viewed as problematic, as were concomitant attempts to understand the specific meanings, including the possible religious meanings, of Bronze Age rock art and Bronze Age iconography in general (e.g., Nordbladh 1978; Fredell 2003: 10-11; see Kaul 2004: 31-71 for an overview of the research history of Bronze Age iconography and religion). Only recently the study of religion and the meaning of rock art and iconography has again become part of mainstream Scandinavian Bronze Age archaeology. It would seem that one of the issues that made, and still make, many archaeologists reluctant to approach the study of Bronze Age religion is the absence of written sources and the resulting reliance on analogies separated in both time and space from Bronze Age Scandinavia. In a work currently in progress and hopefully to be published at a later date, we will provide an in-depth methodological discussion of the analogy question, and suggest that, in principle, drawing on Scandinavian historical and ethnological sources of local origin offers new insights into certain motives and themes in Bronze Age iconography (Nielsen *et al*. nd).

The Question of Trans-Atlantic Journeys

Evers was not the first, nor was he the last, to discuss prehistoric Trans-Atlantic contacts and the diffusion of ideas from Old World civilizations to America (e.g., Wauchope 1962; Williams 1991; Sorenson & Raish 1996). However, despite centuries of debate and argument no credible evidence, whether archaeological, linguistic or genetic, of contact and exchange of ideas, resources or individuals has yet been brought forth. Recently, it has been suggested that North America was settled by Europeans as early as the Upper Palaeolithic by small bands of hunters who crossed the Atlantic and hence spurred the development of the widespread Clovis tool-making culture in the Americas (Bradley & Stanford 2004). The hypothesis, known as the Solutrean Hypothesis and based on certain similarities between Clovis and Solutrean[1] flint-knapping techniques, has not, however, gained acceptance among scholars and is not supported by additional archaeological evidence, nor by genetic and palaeooceanographic studies (e.g., Straus 2000; Straus *et al*. 2005). Likewise, a heated discussion recently arose concerning the possible Roman terracotta head purportedly found at the Late Postclassic Matlazinco site of Calixtlahuaca in the Toluca Valley west of Mexico City. Today, most archaeologists doubt the authenticity of the head and no valid documentation for its archaeological context exists (Hristov & Genovés 1999; Schaff & Wagner 2001; Smith 2009). Even still, should the head in fact be a rare Roman import, the contact must have been a brief and historically unimportant event, as no sign of Roman influence in language, architecture, ceramics or otherwise has been found in pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures. In most cases the evidence presented in favour of Trans-Atlantic contacts are the sporadic occurrences of more or less similar iconographic motives or, as in the case of the Solutrean Hypothesis, a certain likeness in tool-making techniques. Currently, the only secure and agreed-upon contact between Europeans and the indigenous population of the Americas before the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 is the brief Norse settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in northern Newfoundland, Canada around A.D. 1000. After a few years the small population of Norse settlers and traders (probably no more than around 100 individuals) gave up the settlement, and there is nothing to suggest that their presence resulted in any transmission of material culture, ideas or language between the Norse and the native Americans of the region (e.g., Wahlgren 2000; Linderoth Wallace 2003). However interesting and revolutionizing it would be to be able to present evidence for other prehistoric contacts between the Old and the New world, one has to accept the scientific demand for sound evidence if any serious discussion of the possibility of contact is to be conducted.

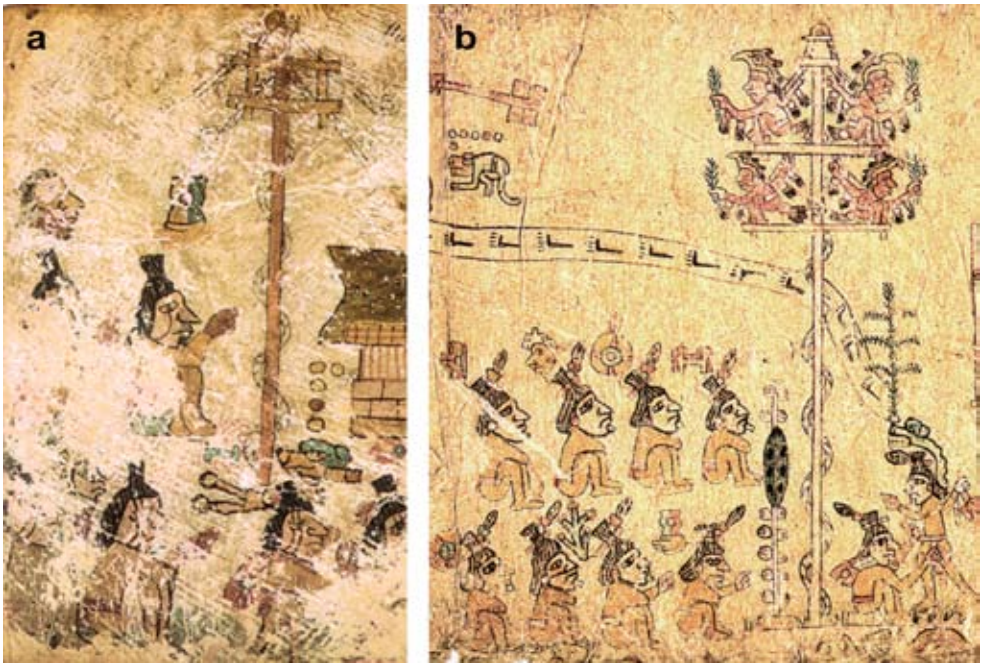


Fig. 2a-b. Two early Colonial representations of the Mesoamerican volador ritual from 16th Century Cuicatec codices from Oaxaca, Mexico a) Codex Fernández Leal *(p. 6) and b)* Codex Porfirio Díaz *(p. 35) (adapted from* Códices cuicatecos – Porfirio Díaz y Fernández Leal*, 2001, Edición facsimilar, contexto histórico e interpretación por Sebastián van Doesburg, Oaxaca, México).*

Pole Rituals in Bronze Age Scandinavia and Mesoamerica

Our critique of Evers will consist of a careful examination of his key arguments. First, we may note that many of Evers' ideas are phrased as open questions. With little effort spent on providing supporting evidence, this is a rather comfortable way of introducing spectacular thoughts and it is a rhetoric and method that characterizes a whole tradition of questionable research that includes authors like Erich von Däniken and Charles Berlitz, the latter whom Evers in fact refers to (Berlitz 1972). This notwithstanding, Evers' hypothesis is clearly stated: Bronze Age Scandinavians travelled across the Atlantic to Mesoamerica, witnessed the *volador* ritual, crossed the Atlantic back again and, when safely arrived in Bohuslän, carved a representation of the ritual on a rock surface at Gerum.

First there is the problem of transportation. Evers claims that Bronze Age Scandinavians were capable of crossing the Atlantic Ocean, paddling what in all likelihood were large canoes, while following the North Equatorial Current from Portugal to Mesoamerica (Evers 1991: 15-18; on Scandinavian Bronze Age boat types see Jensen 1979: 55-57 and idem. 2002: 80-84). While this might have been theoretically possible, there is no evidence to suggest that such journeys *did* take place, and it is still uncertain whether Bronze Age boat technology and capacity as well as navigational skills would have allowed for crossing such huge stretches of open sea. Next, Evers points to ceramic Mesoamerican figurines which display certain traits that according to Evers can only be of European (Caucasian) origin (Evers 1991: 15-16). In general, it rarely makes much sense to try to identify specific racial features in the corpus of Mesoamerican ceramic figurines, as the majority is clearly not aimed at conveying naturalistic portrayals but rather impressionistic representations. More importantly,

though, is the fact that differences in ethnic groups or races, including facial traits, are not as outspoken and easily identifiable as postulated by Evers and others (e.g., Jensen 2007: 275-278).[2] Thus, one of the "European" traits mentioned by Evers is the prominent beard of a warrior on a Toltec period effigy jar (ca. AD 950-1150). Amerindians do in general have less body and facial hair than Europeans, but beards do occur and beards seem to have been associated with high age and wisdom, for instance among the ancient Maya. Thus, the Maya glyph for 'grandfather' or 'ancestor' consists of the face of an old male and is sometimes shown with a beard (see also Houston *et al*. 2006: 25-26). Some representations, however, suggest that the length and volume of the beard was sometimes exaggerated (e.g., Copan Stela C, Tikal Stela 39). The same Toltec warrior, whom Evers claims cannot be a Native American Indian, wears what is described as a "Scottish kilt" (Evers 1991: 16). This is a rather surprising statement, as this type of dress, a long tunic-like shirt combined with a belt, is a common form of dress in Mesoamerica from formative times onwards, and was known among the Aztecs as an *ehuatl* (Anawalt 1981: 50-53).

Evers also mentions copper metallurgy as a possible cultural import from Europe to the Americas, and although there is no evidence this should *not* have been developed independently by native Amerindian populations (e.g., Moseley 1992; Hosler 1994), he adds this feature to his list of possible evidence of Scandinavian presence and influence (Evers 1991: 17). Furthermore, he repeats the widespread misunderstanding that the Mesoamerican cultures, and in particular the Aztecs, believed in a myth foretelling the return of a white god and that this can be explained by earlier contacts between the Americas and Europe (Evers 1991: 21; see Gillespie 1989: chap. 6 for an analysis of how this idea only developed in post-Conquest Mexico). Finally, the recent insights into early human migrations and population history provided by genetic studies cast further doubt on Evers' hypothesis. Native Americans have four major so-called haplogroups in their mtDNA (mitochondrial DNA), which they share with Asian peoples – but *not* with Europeans or Africans (e.g., Straus et al. 2005; see also Jensen 2007: 111).

Evers' main argument, however, rests upon the assumption that the famous Gerum image of what seems to be a wooden pole with three individuals hanging suspended from the top of the pole by ropes depicts the Mesoamerican volador ritual.[3] According to Evers (1991: 18):

"Bronsealderens nord-europeere ser ut til å ha utstrakt sine ferder helt til Sentral-Amerika. Enten har de reist sydover langs kysten fra Labrador til Golfen, eller de har padlet fra Bohuslän til Portugal. Dette har de gjort på sine tinnreiser til Portugal. Fra Portugal må de ha brukt nordekvatorialstrømmen til Mellomamerika. Et velkjent indisium på dette er feststangen på Lilla Gerum i Bohuslän."

(The North-Europeans of the Bronze Age seem to have journeyed all the way to Central America. Either, they have travelled south along the coast from Labrador to the Gulf, or they have paddled from Bohuslän to Portugal. This they have done on their tin journeys to Portugal. From Portugal they must have used the North Equitorial current to Central America. A well-known indicium to this effect is the festival pole at Little Gerum in Bohuslän.)

Fig. 3. 16th Century graffiti from the walls of the monastery of Tepoztlán (Morelos, Mexico) showing schematic rendering of the volador ritual. From Russo, Alessandra, 2005, El realismo circular – tierras, espacios y paisajes de la cartografía novohispana, siglos XVI y XVII *(p. 78). UNAM, México, D.F.*

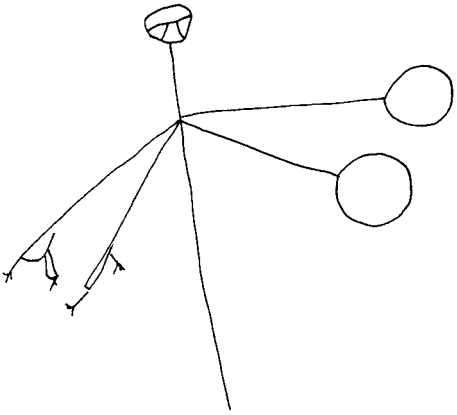


Fig. 4. Present-day volador performance at the entrance to the pre-Columbian ruins of El Tajín (Veracruz, Mexico). Photo by Mette Haakonsen, 2007.

Indeed, post-Conquest renderings, including examples of graffiti, of the volador ritual have a striking similarity to the Gerum image (FIGS. 2a-b & 3), and the idea that there must be some kind of direct association of the Mesoamerican ritual with the event carved on the rock at Gerum is tempting. Thus, to Evers the central motif from Gerum is not European, but originated in ancient Mexico and represents the volador ritual (Evers 1991: 18-21), and as such what he proposes is an extremely rare incidence of what could be called "reverse diffusion", that is, Amerindian influence on the Old World. The similarities Evers finds, however, are rather superficial and his comparative endeavours show little concern for chronology, detail or cultural context.

The volador ritual is only known from the Late Postclassic period (ca. AD 900-1519), and while it has been suggested that it was in use among the Classic Maya around AD 600-800 there is no direct evidence for this, and currently we have no indication, iconographic or otherwise, that it existed in Middle Preclassic Mesoamerica (ca. 1500-300 BC) roughly equivalent with the Scandinavian Bronze Age. The volador (Spanish for 'flyer') ritual originated among the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican civilizations, and continues to be performed in isolated communities in the eastern part of central Mexico, as well as being performed for tourists all over Mexico and in other Central American countries (FIG. 4) (Stresser-Peán 2005; 2009: 255-280).[4] The Aztec term for the

ritual is *cuauh-patlanqui* ('those who fly by help of a pole') and in Totonac *kosni* ('those who fly') (Stresser-Péan 2009: 267), a name that does not reveal much of the underlying significance of the ritual.

During the ritual, five (or sometimes fewer) men climb a wooden pole (the height vary, but ca. 20 m high), and upon reaching the top the four of them sit down on a revolving wooden platform and frame. They tie a rope around the waist with a rope fastened to the frame, while the fifth man starts to perform a dance on a small platform on the pole's top. After the dance the four men lean back and drop off the platform causing the frame to spin around the pole. The ropes slowly unfold and with arms spread wide the four men spiral headfirst around the pole until nearly touching the ground. Other types of Mesoamerican pole rituals are also attested in the colonial documents, and so the volador ritual is far from the only religious ritual involving a central pole, though it is the only one involving an aerial dance. Today multiple meanings of the ritual exist, varying from place to place and probably also over time, but the bird theme seems to be a core feature. From depictions in 16th-17th Century sources we know that the dancers were dressed as birds, most often impersonating eagles or hawks. (Fig. 2b). Thus, the dancer on top of the pole blow a whistle said to make the sound of an eagle. After the Spanish conquest the dance ritual was transformed due to pressure from the Catholic Church, and presumable many of its pre-Columbian meanings were lost. The original meaning or meanings of the ritual, then, are not accessible today, but there are indications that the eagles were associated with the sun and deceased ancestors (mainly warriors). In historical times this theme has merged with the ascension of Christ to heaven. The dance is also associated with thunder, the four winds of the cardinal directions and the coming of the rains as well as with fertility and harvest celebrations (Stresser-Péan 2009: 255-280; see also Galinier 2004: 165-175). From ethnographic records we know that the tree used for the pole is carefully selected, and in some areas prayers and offerings are presented to the god of the trees before the chosen tree is cut down and transported to the village and treated with great reverence. Furthermore, the dancers must follow strict rules of abstinence and moral in preparation for the dance (Toor 1947: 320).

An obvious problem in Evers' comparative construal of similarities is the fact that the individuals shown at Gerum are not clearly acting as or dressed as birds, and to compensate for this inconsistence Evers refers to the "bird-men" from Kallsängen (Bohuslän, Sweden) although these are not shown in any association with a pole or a tree (Evers 1991: 20). He further posits that the pole motif has no connection to other motives on the Gerum rock surface - e.g. ships and animals - something to which for instance Johan Ling does not agree (2008: 136-140). In a similar vein, we would like to point out that several of the participants on the Gerum scene wear what appear to be horned helmets. This is also the case for one of the figures in what might be "abbreviated" versions of the Gerum scene (Tegneby and Balken, both in Bohuslän, Sweden). Thus, the Gerum carving could suggest a relation between certain members of the Bronze Age societies of Bohuslän, oxen (or livestock in a more generic sense) and trees (Hultkrantz 1989: 57; Nielsen *et al*. nd), and perhaps also with ships. This interpretation could place the origin and the meaning of the pole ritual depicted on the Gerum panel within Scandinavian Bronze Age culture and its web of religious, social, and economic practices, without the need to invoke complicated theories of contacts with Mesoamerican civilizations.

Conclusion and Discussion

To back up such far-reaching hypotheses as contact between Bronze Age Europe and Mesoamerica, solid evidence is needed. Sustained contact between Europe and Mesoamerica would have resulted in unequivocal material, linguistic and genetic evidence, evidence that is simply not available (Williams 1991: 270-273; Straus et al. 2005). Admittedly, Evers only suggests "midlertidige opphold" ("temporary settlements") - whatever spans of time this is supposed to indicate - but the question still remains why the postulated contact would result in the transmission of only one particular ritual

and nothing else? Why, of all the things they would also have seen in Mexico - tall temple pyramids, ball courts, large palatial structures, etc. - did they decide to commemorate only the volador ritual? Why did they not bring back other ideas, materials, objects, plants, or animals? In our opinion Evers' comparison, as well as the subsequent reconstructed historical scenario, is an example of a too simplistic approach to a complex phenomenon - and a too complex theory of something that might be explained in a simpler way. Evers builds upon the basic diffusionist view that the occurrence of two partially similar motives *must* mean that one was directly derived from the other. However striking the appearance of the Gerum scene and the volador ritual may be, there is currently no sign that any contacts existed between the two areas, and the pole ritual alone can not be used as evidence for Trans-Atlantic journeys and diffusion of ideas, just as the volador ceremony is not well-suited for attempts of understanding and explaining the Gerum image. Our own preliminary work on pole rituals, including ones with ropes and swinging, suggest that such rituals involving poles and trees were in fact widespread in the both prehistoric and historic times.

A potentially more fruitful approach to understanding the similarities between the volador ritual and the Gerum image is to consider them an example of convergent evolution, that is, as an example of remotely related phenomena that develop similar adaptive designs. The benefits of using models developed in evolutionary biology to analyse cultural phenomena is a contested issue (see Mesoudi *et al*. 2006), and while we do not in particular want to speak in favour of this theoretical trend, we nevertheless find some of the ideas developed in this approach useful. Rather than appealing to something like an essential common core in the human psyche, or in human spirituality, as in the cases of e.g. Mircea Eliade and Carl Gustav Jung, or reverting to 18th Century evolutionistic ideas of cultural stages as in the general comparative approach, to using analogy in archaeology (see Lyman and O'Brien 2001), the biological evolutionary perspective opens up the possibility of considering similar cultural phenomena as products of selective pressure on the spread of ideas and behaviour. Thus, the widely distributed habits of conducting rituals in connection with tree-poles does not necessarily indicate either historical diffusion, the existence of transcendent archetypes, or orthogenetic stages of cultural development. Rather, they may simply be the result of convergence in the sense of being cultural behaviour that evolves as a consequence of selective pressure on human ideas and behaviour that produce similar - though not identical - phenomena. We do not, however, think that the use of analogy in interpreting the Gerum image is futile - quite the opposite, in fact. But in understanding the image we suggest that the direct historical approach to analogy should be used instead of the general comparative approach, or ideas of historical diffusion. In effect, what we want to suggest is an interpretation of the Gerum image that uses historical and ethnographic accounts of Scandinavian tree and may pole rituals as analogical source material. This approach has a long tradition in the study of Bronze Age religion but has been somewhat neglected in terms of documentation as well as theoretical and methodological reflection. Whether it is worthwhile is something we will discuss in much more detail in a future article.

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Notes

1 The first inhabitants of the Americas were hunter-gatherers who relatively quickly spread across both continents. In North- and Middle America the so-called Clovis culture or horizon produced characteristically fluted, bifacial projectile points and knives in a period from around 11.000 to 8000 years ago (e.g., Fagan 1996). In Europe the Upper Palaeolithic Solutrean culture spanned a time period from ca. 20.500 to 17.000 years ago. Solutrean artifacts and cave art are found mainly in south-western France and northern Spain (e.g., Straus *et al*. 2005).

2 An extreme example of what he himself calls "faciology" can be found in Alexander von Wuthenau's book *Pre-Columbian Terracottas* (1969) where a rather fantastic migration history of the Americas is established based on ceramic figurine heads. Most of the examples analyzed by von Wuthenau are from private collections, including his own, most are without provenience and some are clearly fakes. Von Wuthenau claims that Europeans, whom he also refers to as 'Ancient Whites' or 'Urweisse' reached the Americas as well as did 'Semites' and Africans before Columbus, and that these migrations shaped the development of the civilizations of the New World. The racist undertones of von Wuthenau's perspective become clear when he comments on a female figurine: "a particular elegant girl who can hardly have been an 'Indian'" (von Wuthenau 1969: 79). Von Wuthenau also exposes his lack of familiarity with the indigenous population of Middle America when he, as many others, describe the famous Olmec colossal heads as being of Negroid appearance, although they look perfectly like the native population of the present-day Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco (von Wuthenau 1969: 187; see also Berlitz 1972).

3 Though Almgren once suggested that the Gerum scene depicted a sledge being pulled by humans (Almgren 1927: 103-105), there seem to be a general consensus now that it depicts a wooden pole on top of which stands a horned man and from which ropes are suspended with humans hanging from the ends; see e.g. Coles 2005: 72-73 and Hygen and Bengtsson 2000: 160, though Coles thinks that two of the ropes hold animals, not humans (Coles 2005: 73). For now, we will circumvent the issue of what the Gerum image may and may not depict and accept the general consensus.

4 On September 30 of 2009 the *volador* ceremony of Papantla (Veracruz, Mexico), one of the main centers of the performance and teaching of the ritual, was declared Intangible Cultural Patrimony by the UNESCO.