

The Social Symbolism of Horns

There are so few people who pay any serious attention to design as a cultural document, in a deeper, more significant sense, with a historical view, that I feel my existence is justified—or will be eventually.

Carl Schuster

The antlers and horns of animals have served a symbolic function from the earliest times. I will summarize the existing evidence and expand it using the researches of the American art historian, Carl Schuster (1904-1969), who collected and analyzed a number of related symbols, including Y-posts, two-headed figures, and shaved sticks. In this way, I hope to get at the basic ideas that lie behind the various manifestations of the symbolism of horns.

Prehistoric Evidence



Figure 1: "Venus of Laussel" Abri de Cap Blanc, Dordogne, France

One of the earliest images of a horn is part of a limestone bas-relief found in the Dordogne region of France and dated between 29,000 B.C. and 22,000 B.C. The "Venus of Laussel" depicts a faceless woman holding a bison horn in her right hand with her left hand resting on her stomach or womb.¹ Her body type and facelessness are typical of many Paleolithic images of woman. The horn appears to be notched, a common feature of many Paleolithic mobiliary objects. Traces of red ocher have been found on the sculpture, which is about 18 inches in height.

The image is suggestive enough to have generated a lot of speculation about its meaning. Alexander Marshack and others have claimed that there are 13 notches on the horn and these may relate to the number of moons or menstrual cycles in a year.² Another suggestion is that she is drinking from the horn and it represents a kind of cornucopia, an idea we find in later periods. Or perhaps she is pouring liquid on herself. A last suggestion is that the horn is a wind or percussion instrument and that she is engaged in some kind of performance. No one has speculated about the red ocher but it may be significant since tribal groups in New Guinea and Australia rub it on decorated stones and churingas to make them "bleed"; a way of giving them life.

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1. Female figurines very similar to this one but lacking the horn are found in Neolithic times. See Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, pp. 140-43.
 2. I have addressed the work of Alexander Marshack and speculations about Paleolithic man's knowledge of numeration in a paper I posted on Academia.edu and elsewhere on the Web, "Lunar Calendars or Tribal Tattoos?"



Figure 2: Horned theriomorphic image from Trois-Freres cave, France (13,000 B.C.)

A second image, dating from about 13,000 B.C., comes from a cavern known as "The Sanctuary" in the Trois-Frères cave in Montesquieu-Avantès, Ariège, France. The cave is named in honor of the three sons of Count Henri Bégouën who discovered the cave in 1914. Abbé Breuil and Count Bégouën named the figure "The Sorcerer" and the name has stuck although debates continue about what the figure actually represents.

Breuil drew the first tracing of the image which he believed was a shaman dressed as a horned animal, perhaps a reindeer. This is certainly a possibility given that people in later time periods donned animal horns and dressed in skins during the performance of rituals. It might also be an image of a half-man, half-animal spirit or ancestor figure who featured in the folklore of these people, perhaps with totemic associations. These two ideas are not mutually exclusive since the performer might be impersonating such a figure.

Another element we find in later periods is the association of horns with sexuality, procreation and abundance, suggested here by the prominent genitals of the figure. Breuil felt that these kinds of rituals may have been intended to ensure success in hunting, perhaps through a spiritual identification with the animals who were to give their lives so that the humans could prosper and reproduce. Similar ideas were found among the Eskimo and other northern peoples, who preserved some very archaic practices and ideas.

The archeologist, Marija Gimbutas, identified a number of other Middle Magdalenian (11,000 B.C.–14,000 B.C.) engravings with the same horned male figure.

Was the bison man [at Les Trois Frères] a Master of Animals, a divine figure well known among the hunting peoples in the Americas and northern Eurasia? The wide distribution of a mythical figure with similar features suggests its prehistoric roots. Among the American Indians the Master of Animals is one of the most distinctive mythic ideas. He is a supernatural ruler whose function is to exercise stewardship over the wild animals, especially the animals hunted by men¹

1. Gimbutas, op. cit., pp. 175-76.



Figure 3: Middle Magdalenian Horned Figures

Number	Description
1	Les Trois Frère, Ariège, France, 13,000 B.C.
2	La Pileta, Spain, 13,000-11,000 B.C.
3	La Pileta, Spain, 13,000-11,000 B.C.
4	Teyjat, Dordogne, France, 10,000 B.C.

Moving into Mesolithic times we find evidence from the Maglemose Culture at the Starr Carr site in Yorkshire, England. The Maglemose were a northern European fishing and hunting people inhabiting the Baltic area, with most of the discovered sites in southern Scandinavia. Maglemose people used stone, bone, and antler tools and worked in wood. The Starr Carr site is dated to around 8700 B.C. and may have been a hunting camp.

Among the archaeological remains are antler frontlets, made from a male Red Deer, which appear to have been designed as headgear. Both the prehistoric and historic examples we have of such headgear suggests that they were used in rituals that involved identification with the animals being hunted and perhaps totemic affiliations with these animals by one group within the tribe. An 18th century engraving (Figure 4) depicts a Tungus shaman beating a drum. The Tungusic people are a group of related tribes inhabiting Eastern Siberia. Writing about deer symbolism among the Azerbaijan, Saltanat Rzayeva writes:



Figure 4: Maglemose antler frontlet, Starr Carr site, Yorkshire, England (8700 B.C.)



Figure 5: Engraving of a Tungus shaman. From Witsen's Noord en Oost Tartarye (1785)

Shamanism was practiced among the majority of Turkic people and the image of the deer had an important place in these religious activities. The deer was the assistant and a patron of an Altai shaman. As A.D. Grach noted, "deer were considered the main predecessor of the shaman and called the 'master of the tambourine.' The images of deer were depicted on the Altai shaman tambourines, and the tambourine was also covered with deer skin.

Z.P. Sokolova concurred: "The tambourine was perceived as a horse, an ox or a deer of the shaman, which he rides when he travels to the spirit world. Pendants depicting animals and birds, were also attached to the tambourine. Some shamans, such as Evenki, also had a staff, symbolizing a horse or deer. To the supreme world of spirit the shaman rode the 'deer' while the horse was used for travels into the world of the dead, to escort the souls of the dead. Also well-known, were costumes, symbolizing a deer.¹

It is not difficult to find similar examples of spirit animals among the Eskimo, Aleut and other northern peoples where many of these ideas survived for a longer period of time. Figure 6 is a photograph of a Koryak charm which served as the guardian of the village of Kuel. It was smeared with blood and fat to feed the guardian spirit. After a successful hunt, a dog was sacrificed on the site. The issue of sacrifice, human or animal, is of some consequence as we shall see later.



Figure 6: A Koryak charm (post surrounded by sedge grass, horns, and antlers). Jesup Expedition (1897-1902)

Not all of our examples are from hunting cultures. Continuing our brief survey, we return south to Anatolia to the famous Neolithic site of Çatal Hüyük (circa 7400 B.C.-6200 B.C). This large complex of houses was first discovered in the late 1950s and excavated by James Mellaart, a British archaeologist. Çatal Hüyük was a farming community which may have contained as many as 6000 persons. The houses were built of mud brick and abutted one another; they had no doors and people entered through hatches in the roofs, via ladders. The dead were often buried indoors and

1. Rzayeva, "The Symbol of Deer in the Ancient and Early Medieval Cultures of Azerbaijan," p. 203.

some of the rooms appear to contain altars or shrines with figurines made from clay and stone, as well as bull horns mounted on the walls or on stands, singly or in groups. Some of the crania are coated in plaster.

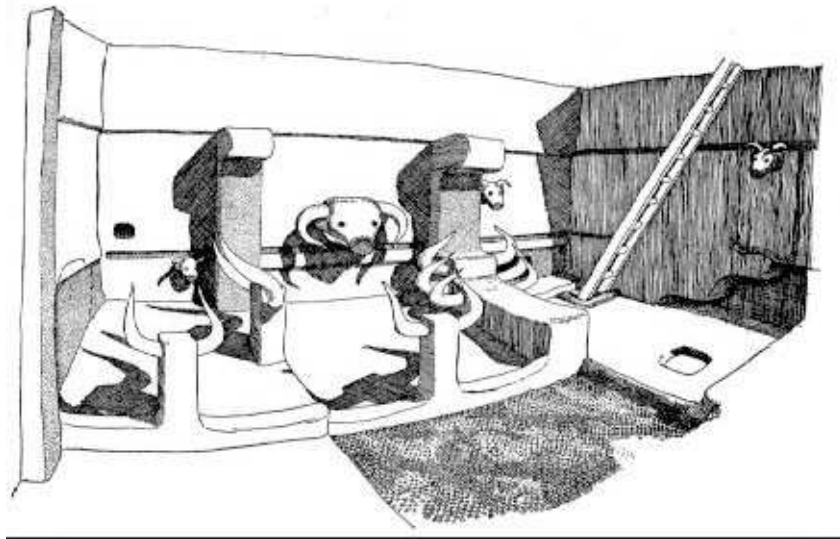


Figure 7: Çatal Hüyük room with bull crania and horns



Figure 8: Reconstruction of Çatal Hüyük room showing vertical arrangement of bull crania

Historical Evidence

Many of the cultures of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean provide evidence for the continuation of this symbolism. Bull horns were a common religious symbol in the Minoan/Mycenaean Middle Bronze Age culture (2000 B.C-1450 B.C.). They seem to be part of a bull cult and representations are found in a wide variety of media. Double horns made of clay, stone, or mortar were a typical feature of Minoan cult and were used to mark altars and sanctuaries. Sir Arthur Evans referred to them as “horns of consecration”. Horned altars were common throughout the Mediterranean world, as we shall see.



Figure 9: Minoan double horns, Crete (1900-1700 B.C)

Another common form in the Minoan-Mycenaean world was the drinking vessel (rhyton) in the form of a bull's head.



Figure 10: Silver repoussé rhyton with gold horns, Mycenae (16th century B.C.) Archaeological Museum, Athens.

Drinking from the skull of a horned animal is another widespread practice and appears to be related to the idea of the horn of plenty with its attendant notions of fertility and prosperity.



Figure 11: Bull's head rhyton, Knossos Palace, Crete

Another rhyton from Crete with gilded wooden horns (reconstructed) was filled with liquid via a hole in the neck. The gilding of horns and antlers is another common theme in antiquity. Gold, in many ancient cultures was associated with light, life, and immortality.

More homespun versions of the classical rhyton can be found in clay among the Turkic tribes. The earliest deer vessels in Azerbaijan can be dated to about 1000 B.C.¹ so there is no question of classical influence here. The idea is very old.

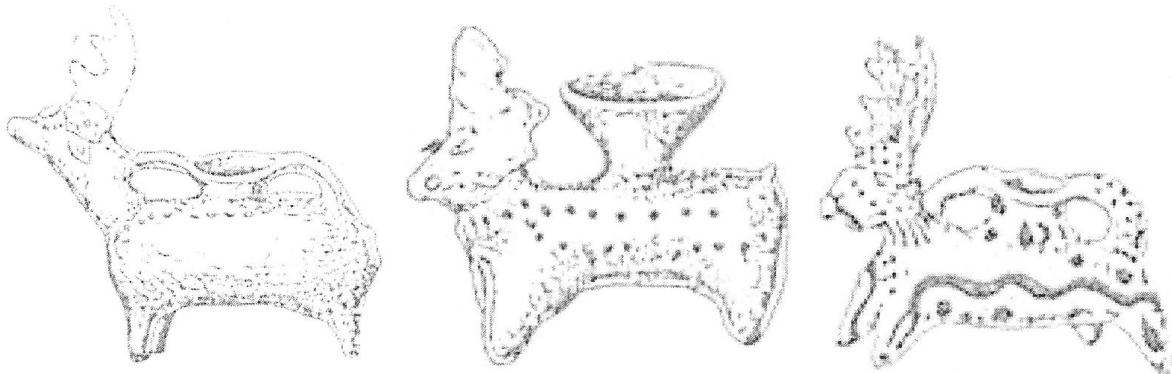


Figure 12: Ceramic Rhyton Deer Vessels, Mingachevir, Azerbaijan (1st to 3rd Century A.D.)

The horned helmet or headdress is also found in the ancient Near East, often on statues of gods or rulers.

Another well-known motif in the ancient Near Eastern context is that of beings (probably anthropomorphic gods) depicted with horns. Such depictions were already in evidence in prehistoric times. According to several authorities in the field of ancient glyptic, the headdresses with horns symbolize divinity. To take a well known example, the Akkadian ruler Naram-Sin (ca. 2254-2218 B.C.) was depicted with horns to show his superiority as a ruler.²

Another example was found at Enkomi, a village near Famagusta in Cyprus. Enkomi was settled in the Middle Bronze Age and was occupied by Greeks in the 13th century B.C. The city was an important center in the copper trade. This small statue (about 22 inches in height) was discovered in a shrine with the remains of bull skulls, probably from sacrificed animals. Some scholars believe it depicts an early version of the Greek god, Apollo, who was worshipped on the island as the god of herdsmen.

1. Saltanat Rzayeva, "The Symbol of the Deer in the Ancient and Early Medieval Cultures of the Azerbaijan, p. 198.

2. Süring, "The Horn-Motif of the Bible and the Ancient Near East," p. 328-330.



Figure 13: Horned deity from Enkomi, Cyprus (early 12th century B.C.)

Cretan and Mycenaean “horns of consecration” find parallels in a variety of cultures.

Horned altars comprise a large and diversified group of objects and are found over a long period of time through a wide geographical area, particularly the Semitic Near East, Egypt and the Graeco-Roman world.¹

Altars with stone projections at each of their four corners are mentioned frequently in the Bible (Lev. 4:7, 18, 25; Ex. 29:12, 30:2; 38:2; 1 Kings 1:50; 2:28) where they are referred to as “horned” altars. These altars were common in the Iron Age and are found in a variety of sizes and settings, both public and private, from homes to temples.

1. Rosenthal-Heginbottom, “Roman Period Horned Altars—A Survey, p. 7.



Figure 14: Small horned altar from Megiddo, Israel

Altars were places of sacrifice. The example in Figure 14 may have served for offerings of wine, incense or grain meal mixed with oil. Larger structures were used for animal sacrifice, particularly horned animals.



Figure 15: Horned altar, Beersheba, Israel (9th to 8th centuries B.C.)

Other references to horns in the Old Testament are worth mentioning. The horned altar was a place of sanctuary as we learn in 1 Kings 1:50-51 where Adonijah, fearing the wrath of Solomon, “caught hold of the horns of the altar”. Solomon spares his life but when Joab in 1 Kings 2:28 tries the same tactic he is not so lucky. Other texts (2 Samuel 22:3 and Psalms 18:2) refer to God as “the horn of my salvation,” a metaphor signifying power or strength. God is also referred to as “my high tower” which is interesting since horns are often equated with elevation and status.

René Guénon discusses this matter in an essay on the symbolism of horns where he points out that the roots *krn*, *qrn* and *hrn* express the idea of power and elevation.¹ We have the Arabic *qarn* (horn), the Hebrew *keren* (horn, power, ray, corner), the English *horn*, and the Latin *cornu* (horn) and *corona* (crown). A crown is placed on the head as an indication of rank and elevation. Further, the rays of the crown are conceived as beams of light, another common association with horns. The glory and power of a leader was believed to derive from a supersolar source.²

A number of these associations come together in Michelangelo's sculpture depicting a horned Moses, created for the tomb of Pope Julius II (1443-1513).



Figure 16: Michelangelo's Horned Moses

Most scholars feel that this image was based on a mistranslation of St. Jerome, who first rendered the Bible into Latin. In the Vulgate, when Moses descends from Mount Sinai, his face is described as "horned" from his conversation with God (*cornuta esset facies sua ex consortio sermonis Dei*). A translation of "radiant" or "glorified"—as it is rendered in the Septuagint—would seem more appropriate since the Hebrew word *keren* also carries these meanings.

Not everyone agrees:

But Bena Elisha Medjuck, a McGill University Department of Jewish Studies graduate student, offered a more complex explanation in his 1988 thesis "Exodus 34:29-35: Moses' 'Horns' in Early Bible Translation and Interpretation." [1] Medjuck explains that Jerome was well-acquainted both with the variant meanings of "keren" and with the prevailing translation of his contemporary Jewish scholars – with whom he consulted! Jerome chose the "horned" translation as metaphor faithful to the text: a depiction of Moses' strength and authority, and a glorification of the Lord! Jerome even explained this in his accompanying commentary!³

This might be merely an academic quibble were horns and light not related symbolically. We have already seen that the practice of wearing horns to denote spiritual and political eminence was widely practiced in many periods and places. Further, Michelangelo's intentions were symbolic and not historical so it doesn't matter whether the Hebrews actually wore horned headgear.

1. Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, pp. 131-135.

2. I discuss some of these matters in *The Thread-Spirit*. Sunlight is required for the growth of plants so there is also an association with fertility in the solar symbolism. The leader has divine (solar) guidance and helps his people prosper and reproduce. In some African and Middle Eastern cultures, a strong leader was referred to as a "bull" for his combination of martial strength and fertility.

3. *Mosesbrunnen*, in Wikipedia.

Guénon makes a number of other associations with horns which are worth mentioning, most particularly his comments on Apollo Karneios:

Karneios is the god of the *Karn*, that is, of the 'high place', symbol of the sacred Mountain of the Pole and, for the Celts, represented either by the tumulus or by the *cairn* or mound of stones which has retained this name. The stone, moreover, is often directly related to the cult of Apollo as can be seen for example in the Omphalos of Delphi as well as in the cubic stone which served as altar at Delos and which the oracle ordered to be doubled in size.¹

We read of a Horned Altar at Delos (Odyssey 6.162-63; Theogony 347) where Theseus witnesses the Crane Dance after his escape from the Cretan labyrinth. The Horned Altar is described as made from animal horns but we aren't told what kind of animals. Perhaps it was an ancestor of the shrines at Çatal Hüyük. The island of Delos, we should recall, was legendary as the birthplace of Apollo. The word *Karneios* is generally considered a Dorian epithet for Apollo who was worshipped there in the form of a ram-horned god associated with shepherds, cultivation, and the beginning of the harvest season. There is clearly an association between this representation of Apollo and the Celtic Cernunnos, also a horned god, who is similarly associated with male animals, particularly the stag, and accordingly, with vegetation, trees and fertility.



Figure 17: Celtic god Cernunnos on the Gundestrup Cauldron (c.150 B.C.)

The peoples of the Eurasian steppes also preserved the symbolism of horns as we saw earlier. In her well researched essay "The Symbol of the Deer in the Ancient and Early Medieval Cultures of the Azerbaijan," Saltanat Rzayeva explores the history, art and folklore surrounding this symbolism. A number of her observations are worth repeating as they have a direct bearing on some of the most ancient ideas associated with horned animals.²

Writing about the Turkic peoples who inhabited Azerbaijan, Iran, Georgia and Armenia she notes that deer symbolism begins in Paleolithic times and extends down through the Iron Age, but begins to disappear in medieval times with the disappearance of totemism and the spread of newer religious ideas. Rock engravings of deer appear early, often with the horns emphasized.

1. Guénon, op. cit., p. 132.

2. Figures 17 to 20 are taken from her paper, which is available on the Web.



Figure 18: Rock Engravings, Gobustan, Azerbaijan (4000-3000 B.C.)

Other common themes found in the Bronze Age and later are horned male deer chasing hornless females; deer pursued by hunters or animal predators; archers aiming at deer; and deer in the presence of other animals and solar symbols. Representations occur in a wide variety of media including stone, ceramics and metal. Art historians include some of the Bronze Age metal work under the rubric of "Animal Style" art, which is found over a wide geographic area and among many nomadic groups.¹ A typical example would be this metal standard from Shamkir, Azerbaijan.

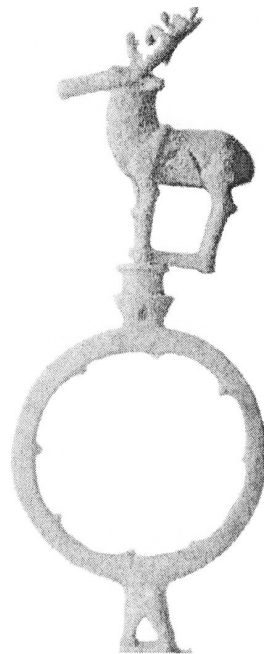


Figure 19: Bronze Metal Standard, Shamkir, Azerbaijan (15 century B.C.)

A standard like Figure 19 may have begun as a clan totem, like the Roman eagle, which was carried at the head of the group, particularly in battle.

Totems also influenced the appearance of flag-standards in the form of a deer and other animals. V. Bardavelidze wrote that Svan's flag and the flag of the Eastern-Georgian mountaineers were the transformations of the totemic objects. A. Okladnikov theorized that "totemic flag-standards of nomadic tribes were further developed into flags, while the standards of forest tribes became shamanic rods or disappeared." He noted that "Scythian flag-standards ...were obviously 'totemic signs,' distinctive emblems of tribal unities, 'intertribal and internationally accepted signs' and were used 'for

1. See Bunker, Chatwin, Farkas, "Animal Style Art" from East to West.

defense against hostile spiritual forces and for protection of ownership rights.¹

Turkic folklore also tells us of flying deer who act as vehicle for the shaman to enter the spirit world, as we saw earlier among the Altai.

Another common association is Mother Deer, a figure of folklore, related to fertility, lactation, and childbirth. She is often described in the literature as a goddess figure but whatever the state of religious belief in pre-Christian times, something we don't really know, her origins are not religious but social. She is a totemic figure and a founding ancestor of the group. This is more in keeping with tribal cultures before the advent of the great world religions reshaped these older ideas. A Mother Deer story illustrates some aspects of this complex of beliefs.

When a hunter named Nurali chased a Horned Deer to the edge of a cliff and aimed at her, milk started pouring down the rocks from the breasts of the deer. Witnessing this, Nurali condemns hunting, took the deer to the fawns, saving her from a jaguar along the road. Returning home, the hunter broke his gun, but memories of the witnessed scene on the cliff led him to an incurable illness. A sorcerer told him that the only medicine for Nurali is the plain yogurt from deer milk. Drinking this yogurt, Nurali will be born to life again. Once, in the middle of the night, Nurali asked his wife to take an empty bowl and step outside of the house, where the Horned Deer was waiting to give her milk. The woman brought a bowl close to the breasts of the deer and hot milk started pouring in. Then the deer dropped a tear from her eyes into the bowl and the milk turned into plain yogurt.²

This particular version of the story dates from more recent times since there is a reference to a gun, but the themes are quite old. The milk/yogurt is a kind of soma, or water of life, both in its capacity to revive the dying hunter but also in the implied association with breast-feeding. The related theme of the Churning of the Sea of Milk, or some version of it, appears in many cultures both in the Old and New World. Likewise the notion of creation or childbirth as churning or cheese making, an idea found in Aristotle, among the Basques, and in Renaissance Italy.³

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1. Saltanat Rzayeva, op. cit., p. 206. Anthony Jackson, the Scottish anthropologist, writes similarly about the symbolism of the Picts, who also included animals in their totemic repertoire and who indicated marriage alliances by mixing clan symbols on the same device, much in the manner of later European heraldry. See Anthony Jackson, *The Symbol Stones of Scotland*, The Orkney Press, 1984.
 2. Ibid., p. 200.
 3. See Siegeltuch, *The Thread-Spirit*, pp. 88-89; 128 ft. 106.

The ancestors of the Azerbaijan also gave many of their women names associated with horned animals such as *Maral* (deer) and *Djeyran* (Gazelle) and among the northern Kirghiz, one of the tribes was named *buqu* (male deer).

According to the legend, a woman with antlers, the daughter of the sacred patron of deer, mountain sheep, and goat, originated (sic) was born of a deer and became the progenitor of the *buqu* tribe.¹

All of these ideas can be made more concrete by examining a design on a ceramic dish from Azerbaijan, dating from the 12th or 13th century B.C.²

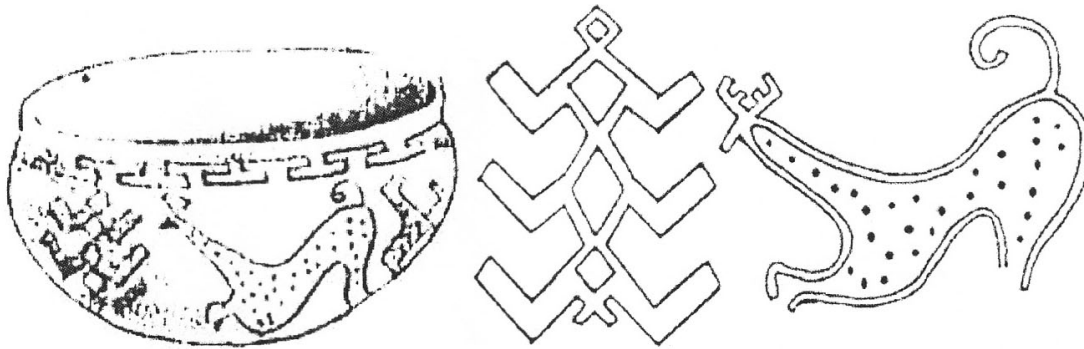


Figure 20: Ceramic dish, Big Khanlar barrow, Azerbaijan (12th or 13th century B.C.)

Rzayeva describes these figures as a deer standing next to a praying figure with either lifted or folded hands. Other human-like figures on ceramics and petroglyphs often have what appear to be raised hands. This figure is of some interest because it appears to be multi-limbed, or perhaps multi-branched, like a tree. The cut-out-like design is related to the horns of the adjacent deer both in meaning and in structure, as we will see later. I would also suggest that the stacking of the limbs on this figure might be compared to the stacking of the horns on the altars at Çatal Hüyük.

1. Saltanat Rzayeva, op. cit., p. 202.

2. Ibid. p. 190. After M. A. Guseynova, *Keramika Vostochnogo Zakavkazya epoxi pozdney bronzi i rannego zheleza XIV-IX vv. do n.e.* (Baku: Elm, 1989), table 12, figure 4.

Another engraving, taken from a stone fishing sinker or stamp, has a similar underlying connection.

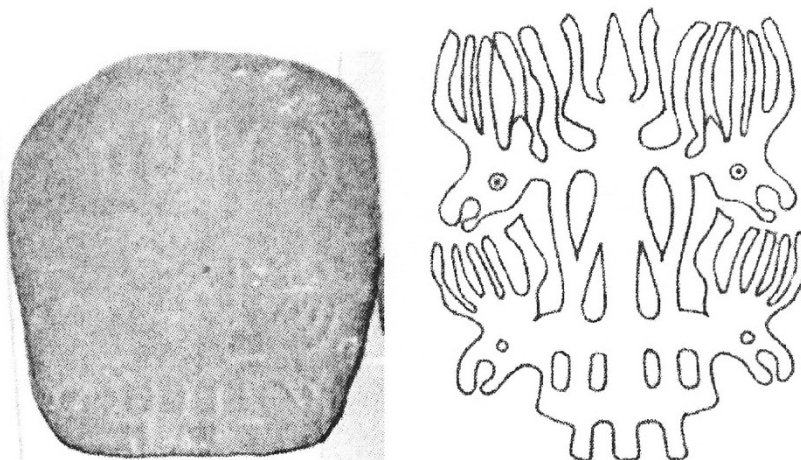


Figure 21: Stone fishing sinker or seal, Mingachevir, Azerbaijan (13th to 8th century B.C.)

Here the limbs of a human figure are extended in four directions as deer heads. Again, the limbs of the figure resemble the horns of the deer. Both this example and the previous one can find elucidation in other beliefs of Turkic peoples concerning antlers and the tree of life.

More complexly, the deer appears in the concept of the Turkic tree of life where the universe is divided vertically into three zones; the highest zone represents the world of the gods, depicted as birds; the middle world represents the world of humans, depicted through hoofed animals with antlers (deer, goats); while the lower world represents the under-world, depicted by snakes or fish.

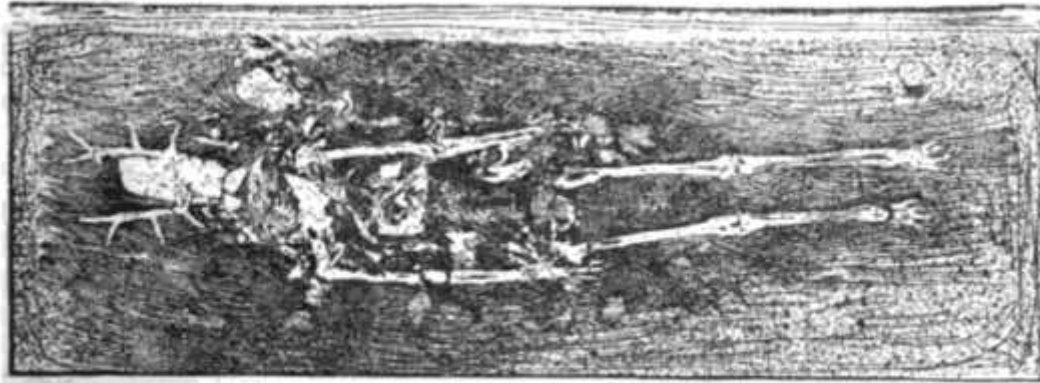
The resemblance between a deer's antlers and the branches of the tree of life caused their association. "Scythians and Sarmatians to (sic) directly correlate the symbol of the deer with the Tree of life," wrote V. Tsaqarayev.¹

The equation of horns with trees is central to the arguments presented in this paper and we should also note in this regard the ancient Iranian belief that the Gaokerena (ox horn) is the Tree of Life (haoma), the source of fertility in plants, animals, and men.

Let us round out our abbreviated set of examples with several from North America and one from Africa. Many other examples are available but I have tried to select those that best illustrate the complex of ideas that gives these symbols their meaning.

Excavations of the Hopewell (200 B.C. to 500 A.D.) and the older Adena (1000 B.C. to 200 B.C.) cultures of the Ohio Valley have uncovered both deer-antler masks and headdresses. Excavation of a Hopewell site in Ross County, Ohio, revealed a skeleton wearing a copper mask and horns (Figure 22).² It is not uncommon to find antlers reproduced in metal. Siberian shaman used both deer antlers and replicas made of iron. Perhaps the shine of metal was equated with light, particularly sunlight. We have already seen how horns were gilded in antiquity and how the Jews associated horns with radiance and glorification.

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1. Saltanat Rzayeva, op. cit., p. 205. Does the author mean divided "vertically" in this passage? A horizontal division would make more sense. A cosmology of this type is common to many cultures. The Middle-earth of Tolkien is derived from the Anglo-Saxon "Middenyard" where humans reside.
 2. Figure 22 from *Stephen Denison Peet, The Mound Builders and their Works* (1903).



Body Showing Copper Mask and Copper Horns.

Figure 22: Skeleton, Ross County, Ohio (Hopewell Culture c. 200 B.C. to A.D. 400)

A wooden mask with inlaid shell eyes and mouth from the Spiro Mound in Oklahoma provides a later example (Figure 23). It is unclear how the mask was used.



Figure 23: Horned Mask, Spiro Mound, Oklahoma ((c. AD 1200-1350)

Horned masks are common in many parts of Africa. Peter Mark has provided detailed documentation for their use among the Jola.¹ Certain Jola masks, called *ejumba*, are made from strips of palm fiber and crowned with cattle horns (Figure 24). They are worn by selected male dancers during initiation ceremonies (*bukut*) conducted once each generation. Bull horns are related to strength and masculinity among the Jola as they were in the ancient Near East where a cattle culture was also prevalent.

1. See Peter Mark, *The Wild Bull and the Sacred Forest*. Portuguese accounts from as early as the 15th century attest to the use of these masks among the Jola and forty-four specimens exist in European museums, the earliest dating from the late 18th century.

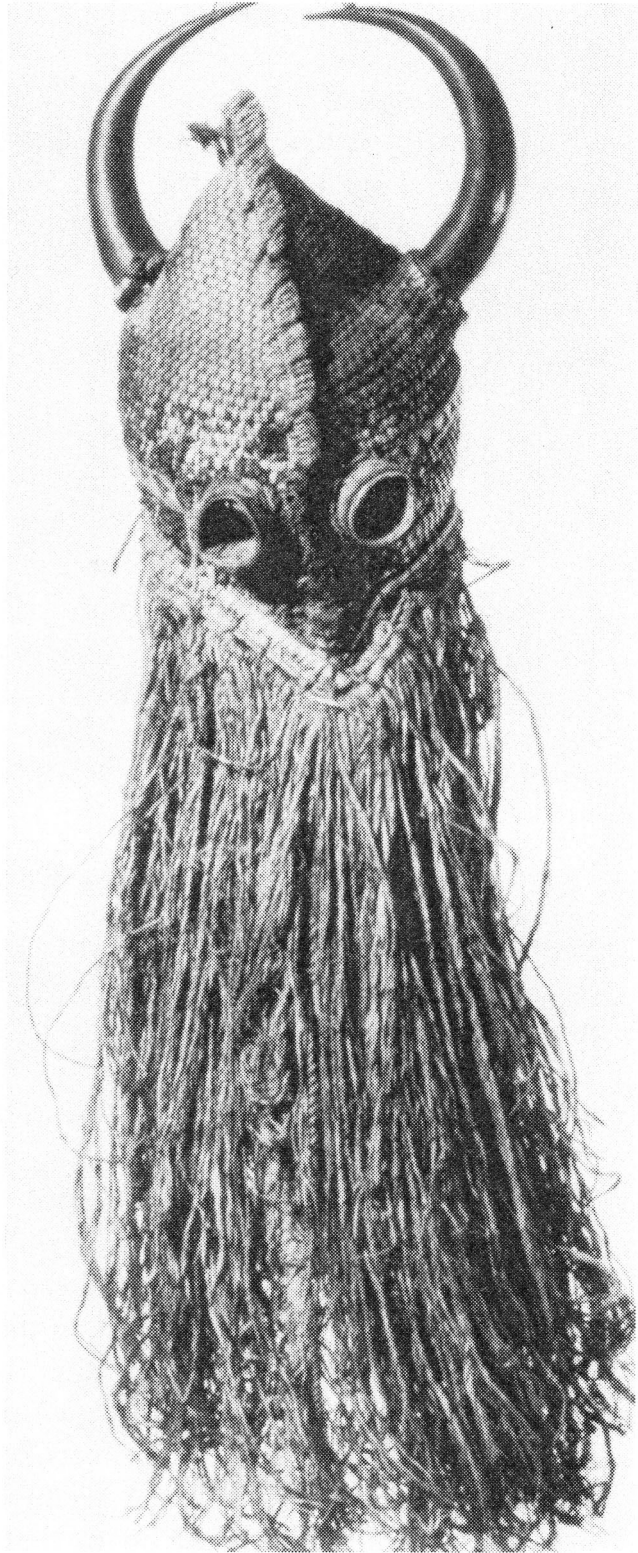


Figure 24: Jola ejumba mask, Senegal (1886)

Ejumba masks are woven creations that cover the face of the dancer. They have large projecting eye holes so the wearer can see out. A long fringe made from tree bark hangs from the bottom of the mask and further hides the identity of the initiate. Many are decorated with cowrie shells and red seeds.

The masks are used for an initiation ceremony that marks the passage of young men, 15 to 20 years of age, into adulthood. The ceremony begins privately with the retreat of the group into the forest where the initiates undergo hardships. There is a period of seclusion that involves circumcision and ritual scarification. Animal sacrifice and feasting follow. The initiates emerge from the forest dancing and a few among them are deemed worthy to wear the *ejumba* during this public part of the ceremony. The emphasis of the ceremony is on strength, virility and well being as an assurance of procreation and continuity with the ancestors, along with the toughness and martial spirit necessary for warfare.

Although the author is mainly concerned with the Jola, he mentions the practices of a neighboring people, the Balanta, who also wear masks topped by either cattle horns, or more interestingly, wooden horns (Figure 25).

Bernatzik's expedition to Portuguese Guinea in 1932 provided an extensive record of Balanta dances. His photographs published in 1933, even depict a combat between initiates wearing bulky, masklike fiber headdresses topped not by horns but by tree limbs. Using these logs as weapons, the youths endeavor to unmask their opponents. The masks [Figure 24] are far more massive than Jola *ejumba*. They look rather like inverted bushel baskets with logs in place of horns.¹

The difference here is not as far removed as the author believes since there is an equation between horns and tree branches as we noted earlier.

A last point bearing on our topic concerns Jola religious shrines, "which took the form sometimes of a forked stake planted in the earth, sometimes of a more complex altar complete with animal horns and a receptacle for offerings of palm wine...". The relation between forked sticks and animal horns will be clarified when we discuss the work of Carl Schuster. What these things have in common is their relationship to ancestor worship and their branching, common to forked posts, trees, and some animal horns.

1. Peter Mark, *The Wild Bull and the Sacred Forest*, p. 80.



Figure 25: Balanta fighting with initiation masks (1930s)

Evidence from Language

Let us now turn to language, that great fossil-bed of ancient ideas. and in particular to a work of Richard B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate*. First published in 1951, this remarkable book provides a bridge between linguistics and anthropology through an excavation of the words and expressions used by ancient Greek and Roman writers, with supporting evidence from other cultures, ancient and modern.

Onians asks first why the ancient Greeks gilded the horns of sacrificial animals and why the Jewish horned altars held a special sanctity.

Why were the horns thus holy as if in them were concentrated the divine potency? Because, it can now be seen, they were a permanent concentration, an outcrop, of the life-substance in the head, of the seed that was also the strength, of the *εγκεφαλος* [*enkephalos*] in which was the *ψυχη* [*psyche*]. What grows out of the head is almost inevitably believed to be an issuing of what is in the head.¹

He cited a number of classical authors to this effect, including Aelian, Plutarch and Anaxagoras who all believed that the horns of an animal were the out-cropping of the brain; an excretion of fluid that had hardened on contact with the air in the same way that sap exuded from a tree hardens.² Thus we can understand why the words for “horn” and “brain” are related.

1. Onians, *Origins of European Thought*, p. 237.

2. *Ibid.*, pp 237-238.

We have seen that the distinctive importance of the head for the earliest Greeks, Romans, etc., was that it contained the stuff of life, the seed, and in it the procreative life-soul, and that *cerebrum* is related to *cereo*, *cerus*, [wax] etc. and expressive of procreation, fertility. That we may now see to be the root meaning of *κερας*, *cornu*, horn, *Hirn* (= 'brain'), etc.¹

We might also add the name "Ceres," the goddess of agriculture, grain and fertility. In English we have "create," "increase," and "crescent," a phase of the moon (growing) often correlated in antiquity with horns due to its shape and luminescence.

Observation of horned animals must have further reinforced these beliefs. Horns were seen as analogous to hair in that they grew from the face after puberty. Further, castrating a horned animal produces changes in the growth of the horns much as the castration of men produces physical changes such as lower testosterone levels and gynecomastia (the production of breast tissue). In addition, male animals use their horns in combat to establish dominance and secure a mate, which correlates to strength and fertility.

We have seen how common it was to drink from horns or from vessels in the shape of horned animals. Onians notes further that in the ancient Israel horns were used to store the oil used in anointing kings (1 Sam. xv¹, 1 and 1 Kings 1, xxxix). The idea being that the horn itself was an out-cropping of the oil, seen as a procreative or life-promoting fluid. Similarly, "a horn, the son of oil" (Isaiah v, 1) is the literal rendering of a passage translated into English as "a very fruitful hill". This leads us to the better known horn of plenty, most familiar from Greek and Roman mythology. The various versions of the myth are best summarized in the following account from a dictionary of Greek and Roman mythology:

AMALTHEIA (Αμάλθεια). The nurse of the infant Zeus after his birth in Crete. The ancients themselves appear to have been as uncertain about the etymology of the name as about the real nature of Amaltheia. Hesychius derives it from the verb *amaltheuein*, to nourish or to enrich; others from *amalthaktos*, i. c. firm or hard; and others again from *amalê* and *theia*, according to which it would signify the divine goat, or the tender goddess. The common derivation is from *amelgein*, to milk or suck. According to some traditions Amaltheia is the goat who suckled the infant Jove (Hygin. Poet. Astr. ii. 13; Arat. Phaen. 163; Callim. Hymn. in Jov. 49), and who was afterwards rewarded for this service by being placed among the stars. (Comp. Apollod. i. 1. § 6.) According to another set of traditions Amaltheia was a nymph, and daughter of Oceanus, Helios, Haemonius, or of the Cretan king Melisseus (Schol. ad Hom. Il. xxi. 194; Eratosth. Catast. 13; Apollod. ii. 7. § 5; Lactant. Instit. i. 22; Hygin. l. c., and Fab. 139, where he calls the nymph Adamanteia), and is said to have fed Zeus with the milk of a goat. When this goat once broke off one of her horns, the nymph Amaltheia filled it with fresh herbs and fruit and gave it to Zeus, who transplanted it together with the goat among the stars. (Ovid, Fast. v. 115, &c.) According to other accounts Zeus himself broke off one of the horns of the goat Amaltheia, gave it to the daughters of Melisseus, and endowed it with such powers that whenever the possessor wished, it would instantaneously become filled with whatever might be desired. (Apollod. l. c.; Schol. ad Callim. l. c.) This is the story about the origin of the celebrated horn of Amaltheia, commonly called the horn of plenty or cornucopia, which plays such a prominent part in the stories of Greece, and which was used in later times as the symbol of plenty in general. (Strab. x. p. 458, iii. p. 151; Diod. iv. 35.) Diodorus (iii. 68) gives an account of Amaltheia, which differs from all the other traditions.

1. Ibid. p. 238. Onians notes further that wax was seen as an excretion of the life-force from the bee's head. The word also means "increase" in English. Similarly, ambergris was seen as an excretion from the Sperm whale's head, though it actually comes from the intestines.

According to him the Libyan king Ammon married Amaltheia, a maiden of extraordinary beauty, and gave her a very fertile tract of land which had the form of a bull's horn, and received from its queen the name of the horn of Amaltheia. This account, however, is only one of the many specimens of a rationalistic interpretation of the ancient mythus. The horn appears to be one of the most ancient and simplest vessels for drinking, and thus we find the story of Amaltheia giving Zeus to drink from a horn represented in an ancient work of art still extant. (Galeria Giustiniani, ii. p. 61.) The horn of plenty was frequently given as an attribute to the representations of Tyche or Fortuna. (Paus. iv. 30. § 4, vii. 26. § 3.)¹



Figure 26: Ancient Greek vase depicting Pluto with Horn of Plenty (5th century B.C.)

All of the foregoing explain the better known association of horns with sexuality found in many cultures and surviving in our word “horny” and the fact that the male organ is often referred to as a horn. Note too, the claims that rhino horn is an aphrodisiac and that a cuckolded husband has been given horns, presumably to endow him with greater sexuality or to suggest that his wife has taken a lover.

Carl Schuster

Dr. Carl Schuster (1904–1969) was an American art historian and a pioneer in the study of traditional symbolism. His work drew from many disciplines including art history, archeology, and anthropology. Readers interested in his work should consult the Wikipedia article under his name. The present paper focuses primary on the issues raised in this paper and makes little mention of his extensive research in other areas.

It was his opinion that the symbolism of horns was closely related to the use of the tree as a symbol for social relations, in which the branching indicated marriages. We still use words like “roots,” “branches,” “off-shoots” and “family trees” to describe our own genealogy. In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss some of the evidence Schuster presented and show how it relates to the evidence adduced thus far.

1. Sir William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, Volume 1, page 136.

Genealogical Symbolism

Schuster believed that Paleolithic peoples developed a system for illustrating their ideas about genealogy. Not a kinship system — which depicts actual relations — but an idealized system linked to certain cosmological ideas. The resulting designs were used to decorate the body, clothing, and tools. Their function was to clothe the individual in his/her tribal ancestry. The basic units of the system were conventionalized human figures, linked like paper dolls, arm to arm to depict relation within the same generation, and leg to arm to depict descent. Linked together, these human bodies formed patterns, often of astonishing complexity (Figure 27).

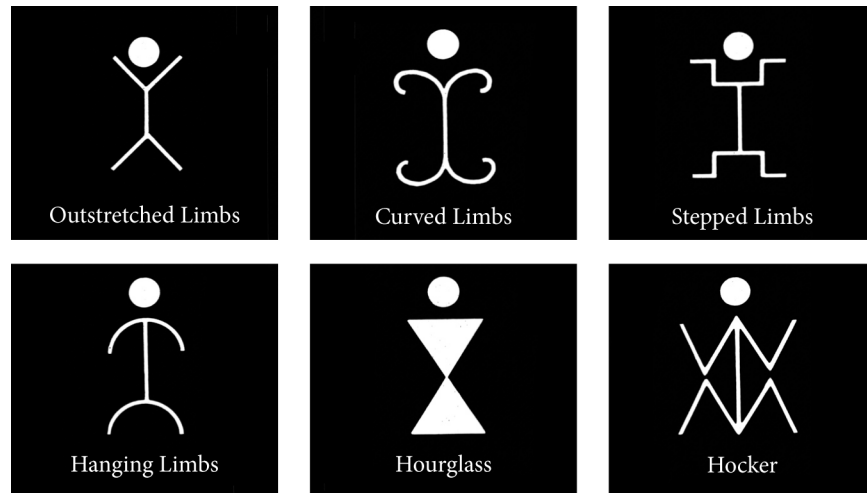


Figure 27: Schematic rendering of basic genealogical elements

To depict descent, the leg of one human figure is linked to the arm of a lower, adjacent one. Figures can also be linked if the adjacent figure is inverted.¹ The linkage serves to fuse the limbs to create an overall pattern (Figure 28). The notion is that people grow out of one another in the manner of plants grown from a cutting. This may seem strange to us but it essentially metaphoric and what we consider “figures of speech” were once “figures of thought” as Onians and others have shown.

1. The inversion may reflect exogamous marriage, where a man marries into another group, which in turn may relate to cross-cousin marriage in a matrilineal system. We know that in some traditional societies, a child and his grandfather have a special relationship since they belong to the same moiety and the child may be regarded as his grandfather reborn.

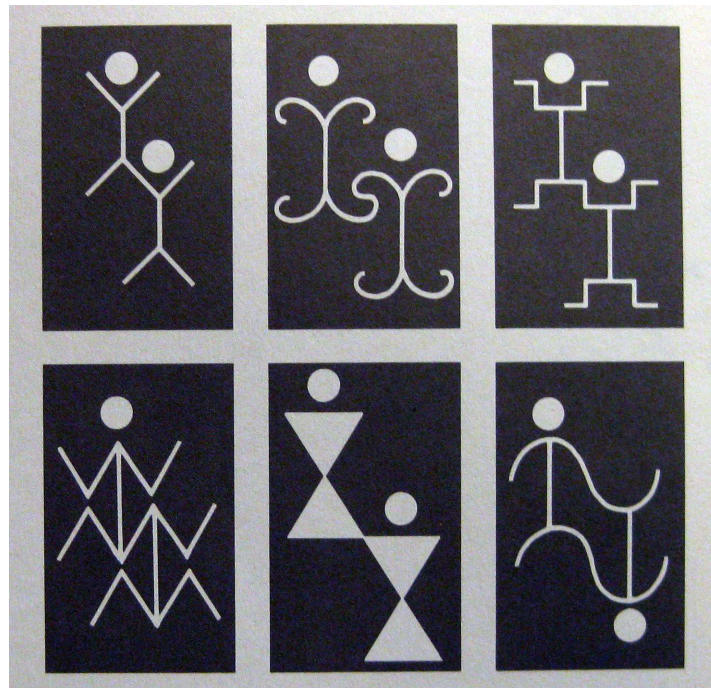


Figure 28: Descent

Figures can also be linked horizontally, arm to arm and leg to leg, to depict relationships within a single generation (Figure 29).

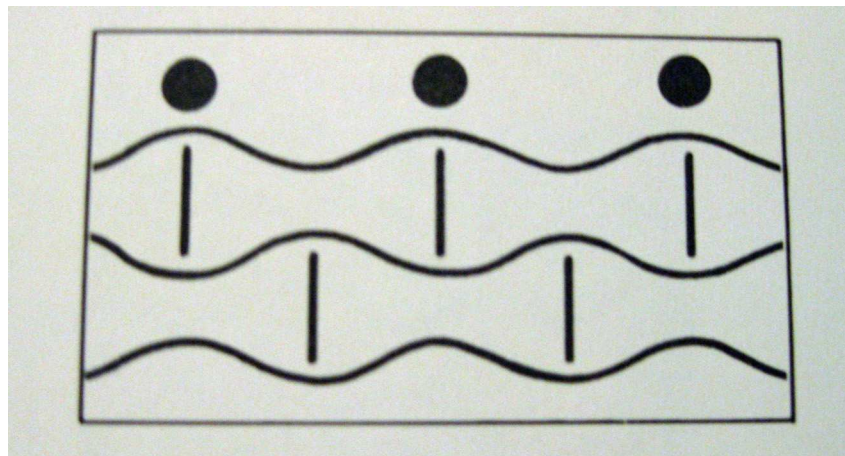


Figure 29: Relationship in a single generation

If we remove the heads from these patterns, bearing in mind that the figures represent ancestors and not living people, we are left with what is referred to as “geometric art,” most familiar to us as decorative motifs like hourglass figures, diamonds, St. Andrew’s crosses, meanders, and spiral patterns, which appear in the traditional art forms of many cultures throughout the world. These patterns are in fact figurative and have no roots in geometry despite their later devolution into decoration. They once had meaning to their makers.

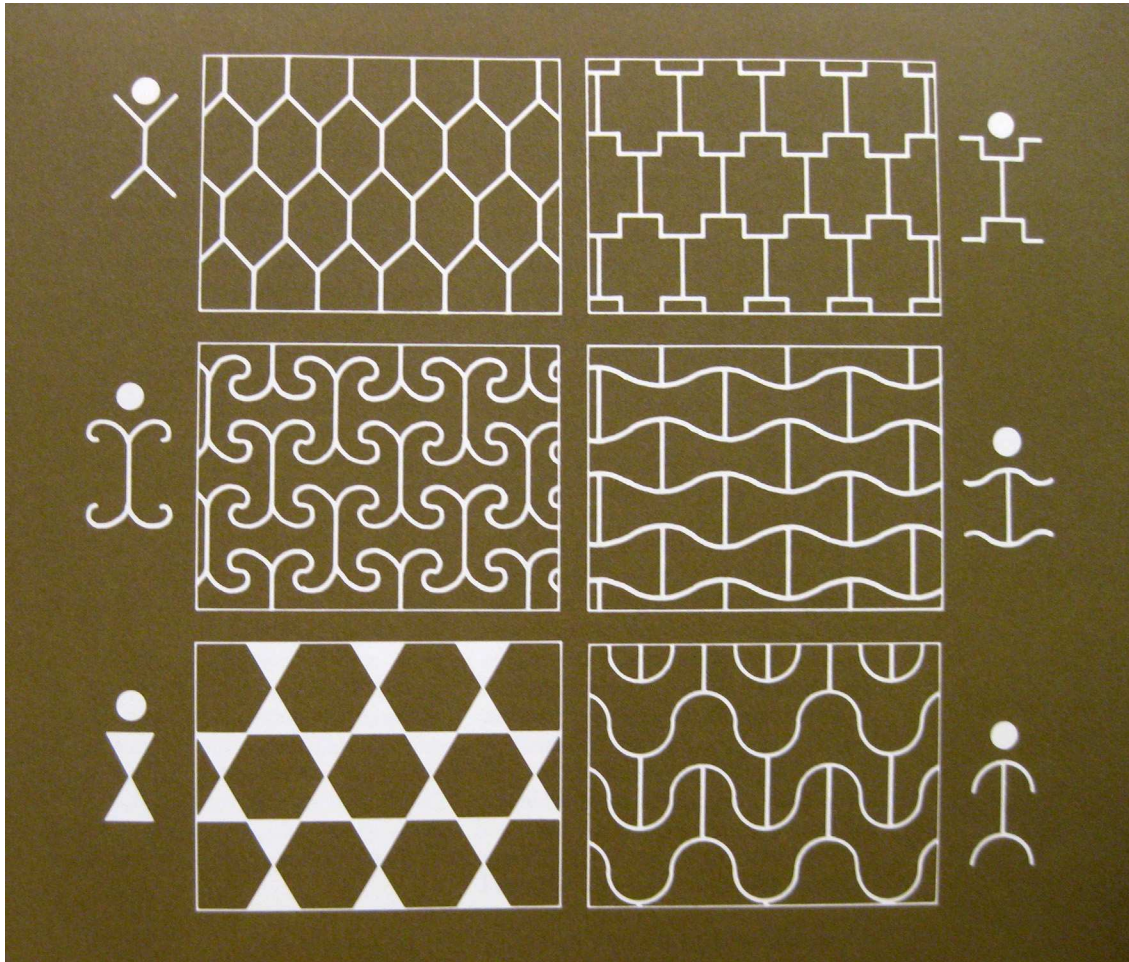


Figure 30: Linked ancestor figures

Our earliest evidence for this symbolism is also our earliest verified instance of human artwork, found in the Blombos Cave in South Africa and dating from about 80,000 B.C. (Figure 31).



Figure 31: Red ochre with inscribed hour-glass figures, Blombos Cave, South Africa

Continuous Limbs

This graphic system is well represented in Paleolithic and Mesolithic art and it survived among tribal peoples into modern time. It is so pervasive that it has escaped notice. Many different kinds of patterns were derived from these basic building blocks and it is not possible to provide examples for all of them here.¹ I will concentrate on those that relate to the topic at hand, the analogies between trees, horns, and genealogy.

Figure 32, a pictograph from Los Letreros cave in Almeria, Spain, dating from the Neolithic or Chalcolithic period, shows linked human figures in a kind of Tree of Jesse configuration. The same idea is reflected in Figure 33, a panel from an Australian opossum-skin robe in which several linked chains of human figures are overlaid, probably indicating marriages between moieties.



Figure 32: Pictographs, Almeria, Spain (3000 to 4000 B.C.)

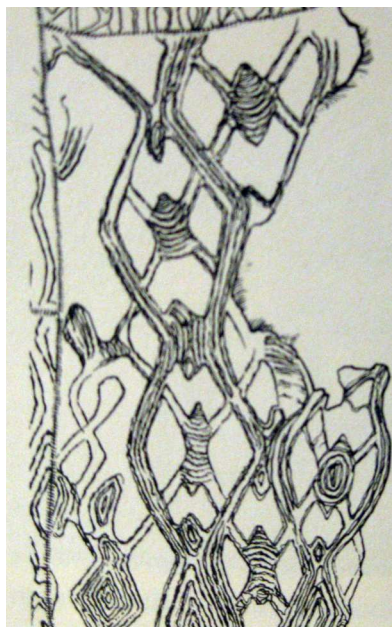


Figure 33: Panel of an Australian opossum-skin robe (19th century)

These linkages between human “limbs” — note the word itself— are fictional but they are a good way of expressing the continuity between generations, as if it were a continuous vine or runner that

1. See Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*. The Rock Foundation (1986-1988) 3 volumes.

bore human fruit. Initiation rituals found among the Wikmunkan and Wiknatara aborigines of Australia (Figure 34) and the Selk'nam (Ona) of Tierra del Fuego (Figure 35) both feature men linking their arms. It is more than likely that many of the European folk-dance patterns are derived from this conception.



Figure 34: Australian ritual at Cape York (1936). Photograph by U. McConnel.



Figure 35: Part of the Selk'nam Hain ceremony (1923). Photograph by M. Gusinde.

Further support for these metaphors is offered by folklore and mythology:

Common limbs and clasped hands serve as bonds between generations, not only in art & ritual, but in other traditions as well. Widespread myths tell of human being born from arms or fingers, more commonly from legs, and most commonly from knees. Those born in this way are generally described as "the first people"; and the limbs from which they spring are said to be those of the 'Ultimate Ancestors'.¹

1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Patterns That Connect*, p. 182.

The notion of birth from the knee is best illustrated by the genealogical symbolism incised on a club from New Ireland. The heads of the lower figures (descendents) rest on the knees of the upper figures (their ancestors).¹

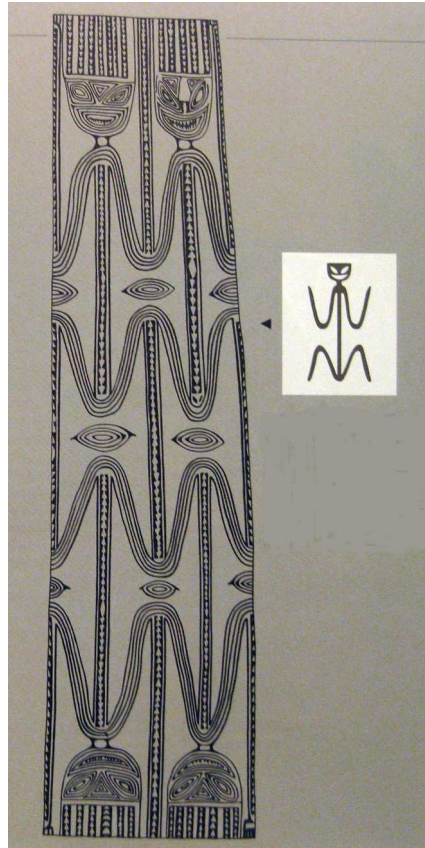


Figure 36: Design incised on a club, Byron Straits Islands, New Ireland

Stacked Ancestors

Another variation of these basic genealogical units is the use of stacked ancestors to represent a lineage, seen in another common Paleolithic image, the “plant form” as most scholars have referred to it (Figures 37 and 38). Abbé Breuil called the Mesolithic Mas d’Azil figures like those depicted in Figure 39, “pine-tree men”. Hugo Obermaier juxtaposed them with a group of Neolithic petroglyphs from Spain, a number of which have human-like heads (Figure 40).² Schuster reasoned these were stacked ancestor figures with the founder of the group at the top, similar to a totem pole. They weren’t plant forms or feather forms or even “fish bones” as they are sometimes referred to by Pacific Island peoples, but a common tribal motif based on an analogy with the plant world.

-
1. Onians has a good deal to say about the sanctity once attributed to both heads and knees, seen as generative organs and the source of seed. The word “knee” (*L. genus*) is related to the words for race, type, kind, and generation, among other associations. This is true in many languages.
 2. Hugo Obermaier, *Fossil Man in Spain*, New Haven (1925).



Figure 37: Painted motif, Almeria, Spain (Neolithic)

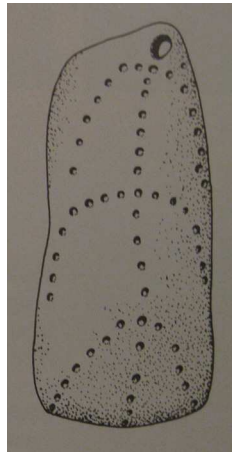


Figure 38: Drilled design on amber pendant, Denmark (Mesolithic)

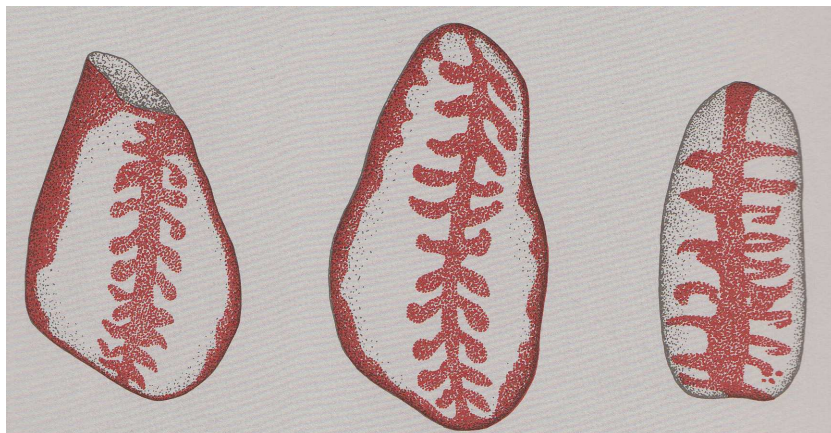


Figure 39: Painted pebbles from Mas-D'Azil, France (Mesolithic)

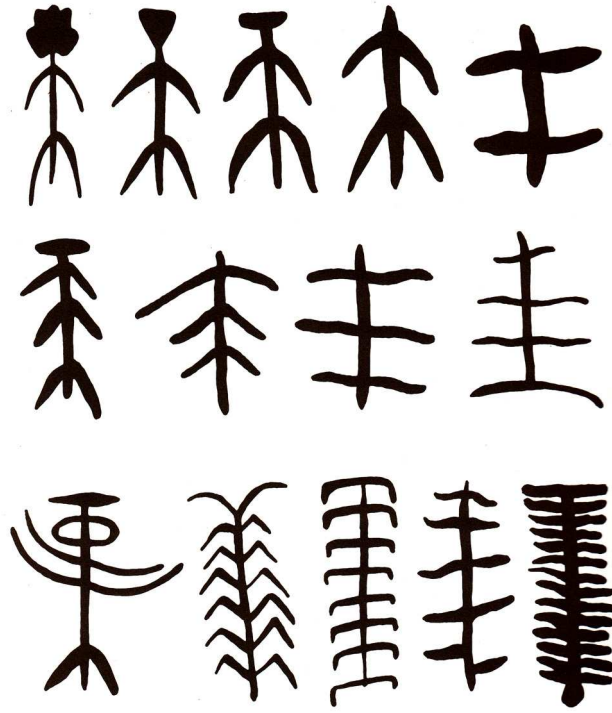


Figure 40: Iberian petroglyphs (Neolithic)

Schuster deduced that these and numerous other ancient and tribal designs were stacked to indicate descent from a First Ancestor (Figure 40). One can also ask why, if these forms were meant to represent actual plant life, they are so schematic, when animal depictions are so accurate we can recognize the species and subspecies. These designs are symbolic in intent, and a part of a series of connected symbolic statements which have been characterized wrongly as geometric.

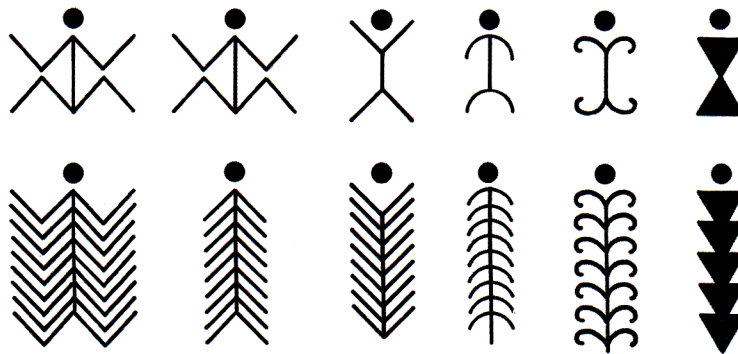


Figure 41: Ramiform designs

Shaved Sticks and Multi-Limbed Figures

Schuster found many analogies to these stacked figures which he termed “ramiforms”. One in particular, the shaved stick, was the subject of one of his monographs.¹ Those known best are the *inaos* of Ainu of Hokkaido and Sakhalin (Japan) but Schuster assembled a variety of related forms a few of which are shown in Figure 42.

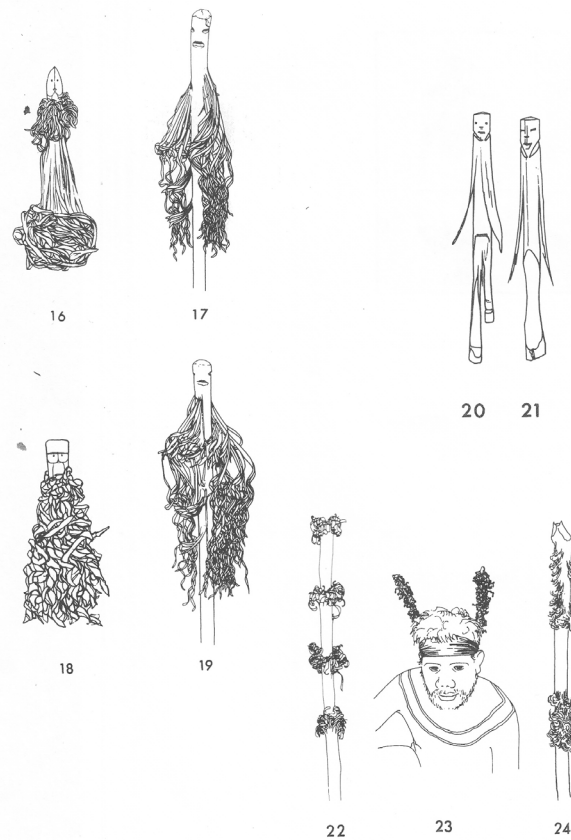


Figure 42: Shaved sticks

Number(s)	Description
16, 18	Anthropomorphic <i>inaos</i> , Orok, Sakhalin.
17	Anthropomorphic shaved stick, Penan, Sarawak, Borneo.
19	Anthropomorphic shaved stick, Eastern Penan, Sarawak, Borneo;
20, 21	Wooden effigies made by the Jah Hut and said to represent evil spirits, Pahang State, Malaya.
22	Stick with shavings to be stuck in the headband of a man participating in a vengeance raid, Aranda, Central Australia.
23	Pitjantjara man, decorated for the “eagle” dance, Warburton Range, Australia.
24	Shaved stick carried in the hand during “corroboree-dance,” Sherlock District, Australia.

Not included here are the “brave sticks” of the Menomini and Potawatomi Indians (Wisconsin). While the uses to which these objects were put varied, the anthropomorphic character of many of

1. Carl Schuster, “The Ainu *Inao*; Some Comparative Considerations,” in VIIIth Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Studies, pp. 86-98.

them is clear as is the similar method of construction. They were originally meant to represent human figures with many limbs. This was a family tree and the shavings represented its branches.

But it is important to realize that the image of a human figure with many limbs is by no means restricted to the shaved sticks of the Ainu and other people. In fact, this image as a type can be found in many different cultures, both ancient and modern.¹

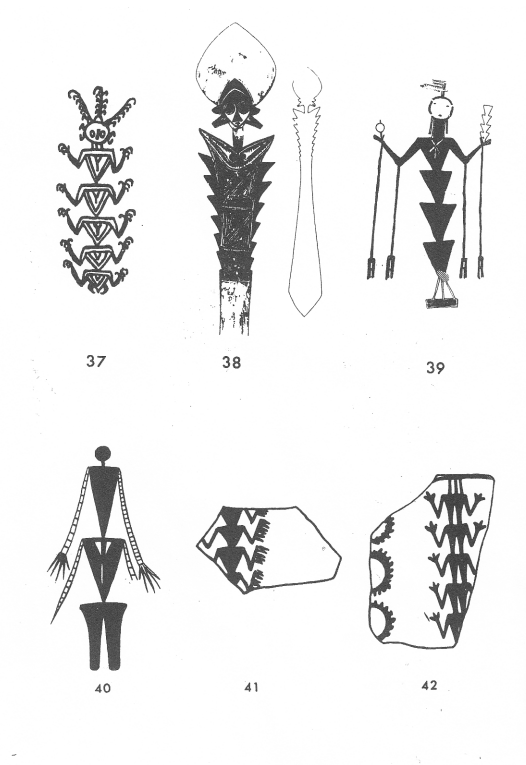


Figure 43: Multi-limbed figures

Number(s)	Description
37	Motif from a bark book of the Bataks, Sumatra.
38	Carved and painted decoration at the end of dance paddle, Solomon Islands.
39	One of four identical "cloud-men," painted in four different colors on buckskin, Navaho.
40	Painted design on a biconical vase, Petreny, Bessarabia (2nd millennium).
41	Painted pottery sherd, Tepe Giyan, Iran (4th millennium BC).
42	Painted pottery sherd, Tepe Moussian, Iran (4th millennium BC).

The examples in Figure 43 help explain Figures 7 and 8, our stacked bull crania from Çatal Hüyük and Figure 20, our multi-limbed image from Azerbaijan. The stacking is intended to represent a lineage with the founder at the top. Each body represents a generation so we should not be surprised to find notched mnemonic devices used to remember ancestors. The principle is the same; one notch per generation, back to the beginning.

1. Carl Schuster, "The Ainu *Inao*; Some Comparative Considerations," in VIIIth Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Studies, p. 88.

Family Trees, Y-Posts, and Two-Headed Figures

It is a commonplace in many cultures to equate the branching of a tree with the social divisions generated by marriage and procreation. We ourselves express our ancestry in terms of “family trees” “branches” and “roots” and these metaphors were there in the beginning. One of the many ways of expressing these ideas was to carve human heads or faces on trees limbs or posts. Carl Schuster collected examples from many cultures and periods. I will select a few relevant examples out of many.

Lets begin our brief tour in the Pacific where many examples survived into modern times. Figure 44 is a Y-post from New Ireland with carved heads on the ends. These kinds of posts were incorporated into stone walls surrounding sacred places. Entry into the sacred enclosure involved stepping through the crotch of post. Captured warriors were impaled on these posts before they were eaten.



Figure 44: Forked-post, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea.

Human sacrifice has been connected with Y-posts in other locations including Easter Island, but here the two-headed figure is made from stone, perhaps because wood was scarce. “According to native information transmitted to Palmer in 1870, the cup-shaped receptacle between the two human heads [in Figure 45] was designed to receive burnt offerings of human flesh at the time of cannibal feasts.”¹

1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, Vol 2, Book 1, p. 29.

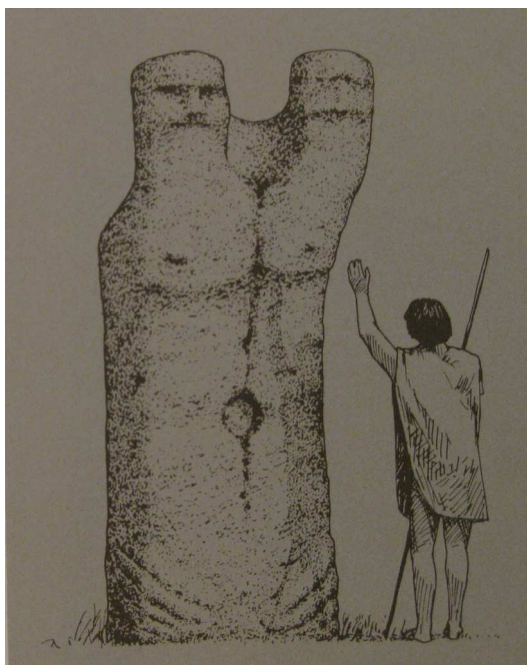


Figure 45: Two-headed "Cremation" stone, Vinapu, Easter Island

Further attestation is provided by a drawing from Buka in the northern Solomon Islands (Figure 46). According to local information, it was once customary to impale captured warriors on these posts before the victims were eaten.



Figure 46: Drawing from Buka, Solomon Islands

Forked-posts were also documented in Australia, some of them used in conjunction with cannibalism.¹ In later periods, we find that forked-posts, both large and small, are the site of animal sacrifice or of offerings of food to ancestors or gods.² We saw this earlier in relation to the Jola shrines.

A housepost from New Guinea has faces on each branch and human figures on the shaft, some of them inverted.

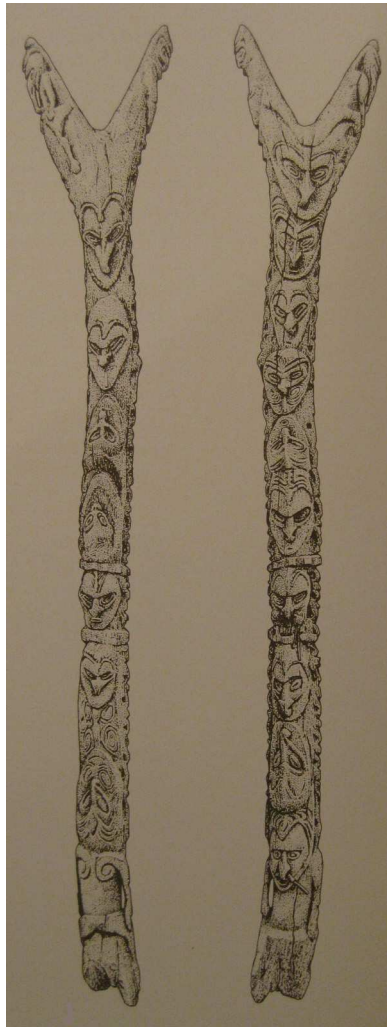


Figure 47: Housepost, Middle Sepik, Papua, New Guinea

Many examples are not figurative but exhibit the genealogical symbolism of linked human figures that Carl Schuster deciphered. Figure 48, a miniature model housepost from New Guinea is encircled by a common genealogical pattern in which the continuous lines represent connected bodies and the horizontal lines spinal columns. The pattern is meant to represent the descent of generations from the original pair at the top.

-
1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, Vol 2, Book 1, p. 29.
 2. This is the same pattern we find in religious rituals such as the Catholic Mass, where the blood and body of Christ are more civilized versions of animal or human sacrifice. Sacrifice, real or symbolic, is central to religion.

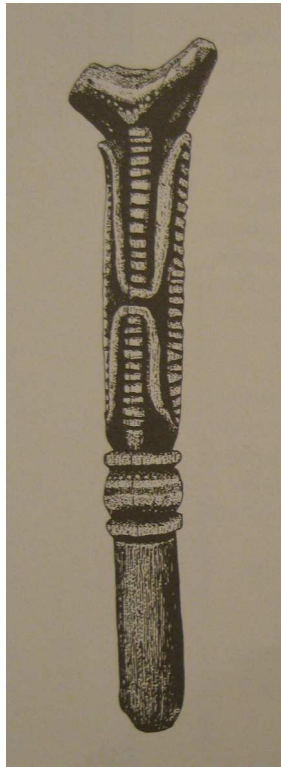


Figure 48: Miniature housepost, Sepik, New Guinea

Moving into Polynesia, we find anthropomorphic posts in Hawaii, erected in an underground ceremonial center.

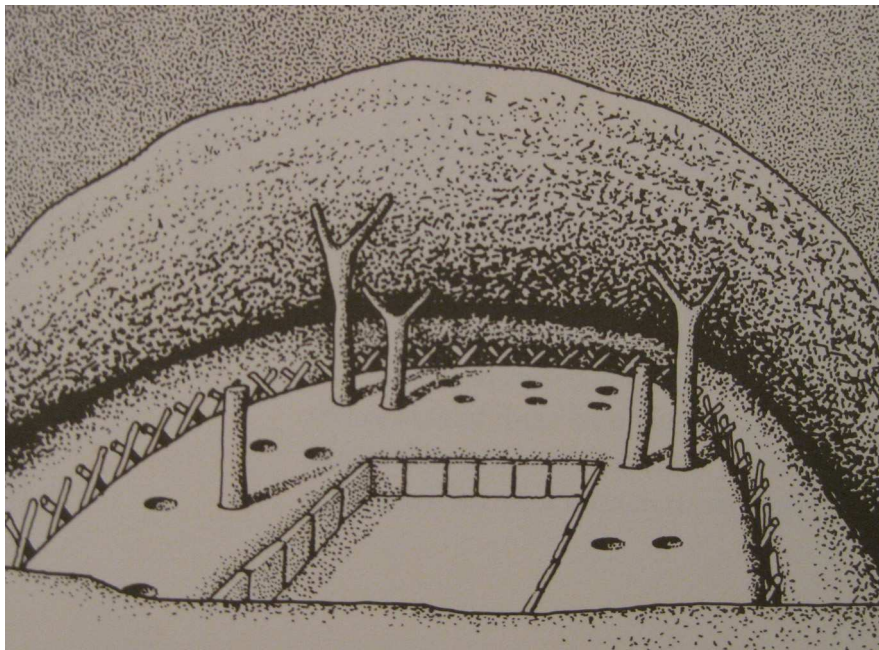


Figure 49: Y-Posts from underground ceremonial center, Hawaii

Among the Nias of Indonesia, miniature Y-sticks existed alongside Y-posts and megaliths, all associated with ancestors and often, human sacrifice.

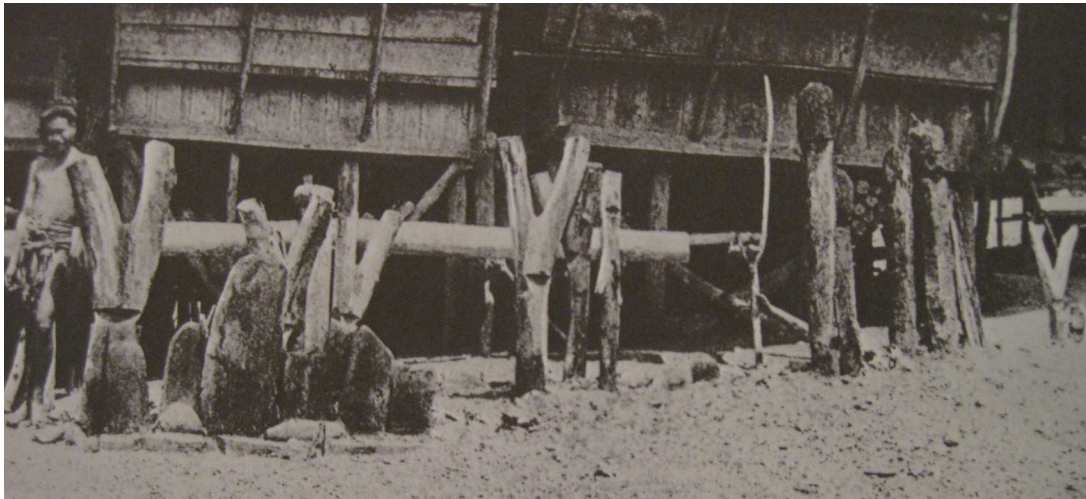


Figure 50: Nias house with ancestral figures, Indonesia.

In the Naga Hills of India, stone menhirs and wooden Y-posts are interchangeable. The post in Figure 51 was a monument to an Ao warrior. The erection of such a post was connected to the sacrifice of a buffalo that was tied to the post during the sacrifice.

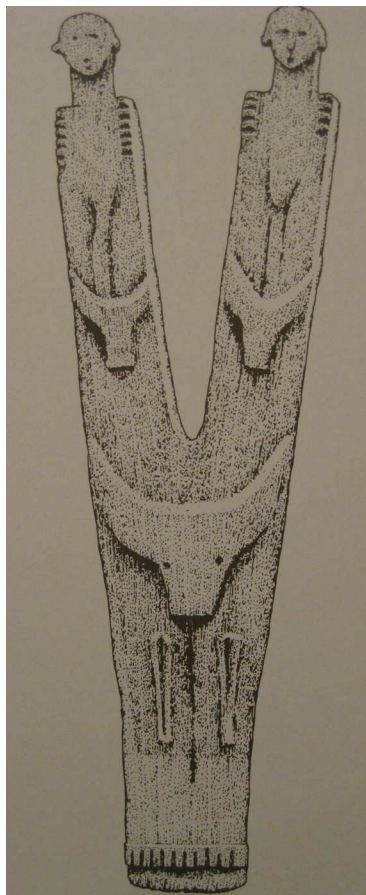


Figure 51: Monument for an Ao Naga warrior, Assam, India

The Y-post is also known in Siberia. Figure 52, which features two small human heads, is from the Ude of eastern Siberia. It was collected by the Russian explorer, Vladimir Arsenyev, in the 1930s, but he was not able to obtain any information about it from the residents. Perhaps they no longer knew what the symbolism meant. It was referred to as “the shaman post”.¹

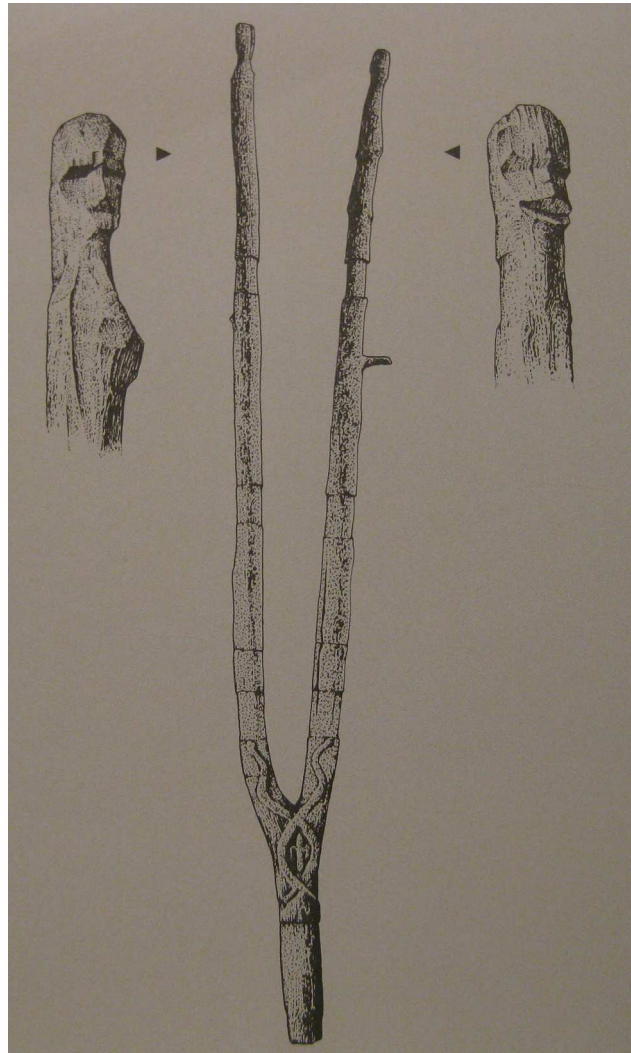


Figure 52: Forked post, Ude, Samarga River, eastern Siberia.

A shaved stick from the Ainu of Sakhalin resembles two human heads on a forked, shaved stick (Figure 53). The stick was put at the top of a tree to which a sacrificial bear was bound during the bear festival.² We have already discussed the symbolism connected with shaved sticks. It is likely that the heads represent a first male and female from whom the group or clan were descended. An early Adam and Eve, if you will.

1. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, Vol 2, Book 1, p. 57.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 59.



Figure 53: Ainu inao, Sakhalin, Russia.

Forked posts and double-head images appear as shamanic equipment among the Ostyaks, Enets (Samoyads), Koryaks and other northern peoples. An Ostyak's shaman's drum displays carved faces on each of its supporting "arms" (Figure 54). Similarly, a clothed two-headed figure described as the "spirit of the tent" was found among the Nganasan or Tavgi Samoyads on the Taimyr Peninsula in the far north of Asia (Figure 55).



Figure 54: Ostyak shaman's drum (inside), Siberia, Russia.



Figure 55: Wooden image, Nganasan, Siberia, Russia

Y-posts and two-headed figures are also found in North and South America but there are not as many examples. A Delaware housepost (Figure 56), one of twelve that lined the walls of the Big House, has a human face and a fork at the top. A pair of Lenape-Delaware drumsticks feature male and female heads (Figure 57).

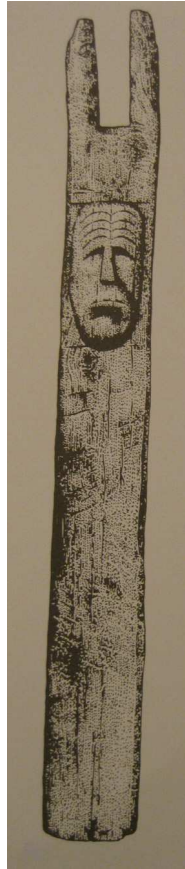


Figure 56: Delaware housepost, Dewey, Oklahoma

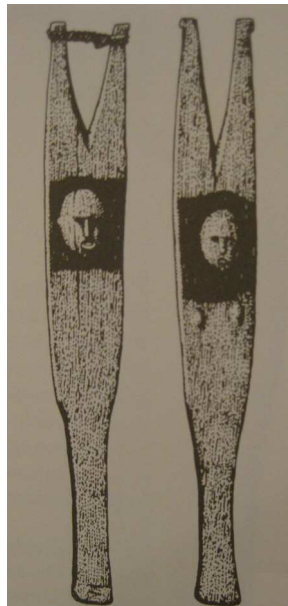


Figure 57: Drumsticks, Delaware, Oklahoma

Central and South America provide a number of examples both in wood and clay. Figure 58, an ancient Peruvian memorial post with a single head.

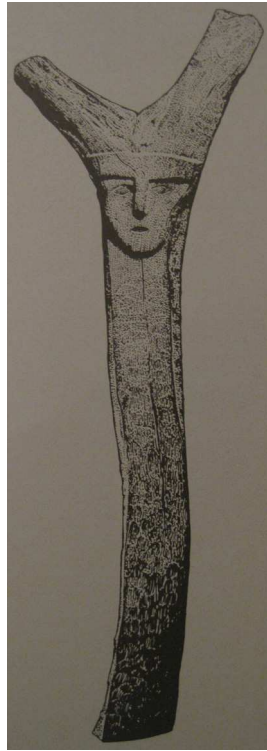


Figure 58: Nazca grave-post, southern Peru (c. AD 100-1300)

Another example from Peru is part of a spear-thrower, or a ritual object resembling a spear-thrower, with both a male and female head (Figure 59).



Figure 59: Bone finial of a spear-thrower, Chancay, Peru (AD 1300-1450)

In Africa, Y-posts are found primarily in West Africa but occur as far east as Ethiopia. A wealth of examples exist. The Dogon of Mali carve anthropomorphic posts with female figures (Figure 60). Many posts are segmented and notched, where each division represents a generation.

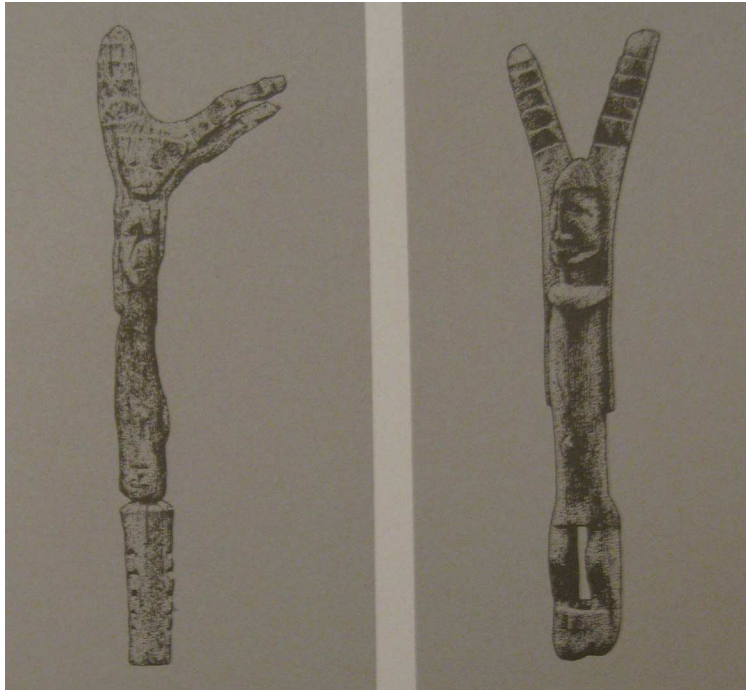


Figure 60: Dogon wooden figure (left) and "spirit ladder (right)," Mali

Many Y-posts serve as grave markers. A Moro funeral post in Sudan has both naturalistic ancestor figures in addition to two more conventionalized figures with legs, torsos and upraised arms (Figure 61). Note the cattle horns on the burial mound.



Figure 61: Moro funeral post, Nilotic Sudan

From the Mbaye of Moissala, Chad, a photograph shows an eldest brother, at the death of his father, sitting before a shrine of miniature forked-posts (Figure 62).



Figure 62: Funeral rite with forked-posts, Sara tribe, Chad.

Other examples could be adduced from the Ivory Coast, Upper Volta, Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria, Congo, Ethiopia and Madagascar as well as the Senegalese forked shrine discussed earlier.¹

European examples are rare probably because most wooden posts did not survive. One exception is Figure 63, three poles excavated from a Neolithic lacustrine deposit in northern Germany, dated from the 4th millennium. The center pole is single-headed and it is likely that the carver used the kink in the trunk to suggest steatopygia, as is common in many Paleolithic images. Two shorter posts flank the central one and appear to have been attached by cords to the main post. They may have represented children of what would be a clan ancestress.

The anthropologist, Edmund Carpenter, suggested that some Paleolithic objects may be miniature Y-posts, or at least, share the same symbolic purpose.

No satisfactory explanation has been offered to date for pierced staffs common in the Upper Paleolithic in Europe, from Aurignacian I through terminal Magdalenian. Each consists of a reindeer horn, cut & perforated at its branching, [Figure 64], Many are richly decorated. About a third have phallic handles.

They were first called *batons de commandement*, as if they were ancient swaggersticks. But this hardly explains their form. Next, they were compared to arrow-straighteners used by 19th century Eskimos around Bering Strait. But they show little evidence of any use, least of all as spear-straighteners, though a few are broken at the hole.

I think it more likely they were ceremonial staffs, ie miniature Y-posts, like Y-posts ...from West Africa. Conceivably, the hole or round motif represented a vagina. In many ancient cultures, horns were regarded as both symbols & sources of fertility, possessing a divine potency, an outcropping of the life-substance of the head.²

1. See Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, Vol 2, Book 1.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

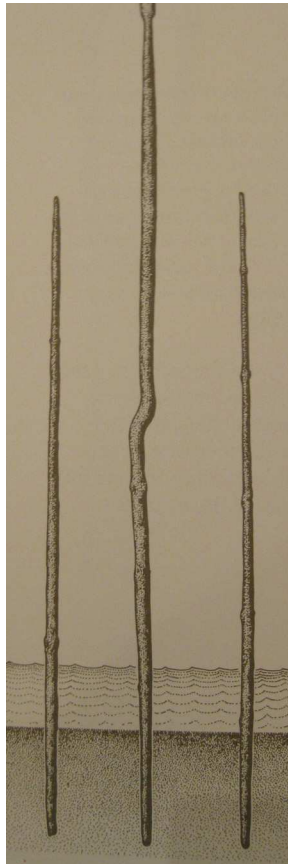


Figure 63: Three poles in lacustrine deposit, Ahrensburg, Germany (c. 4th millennium)

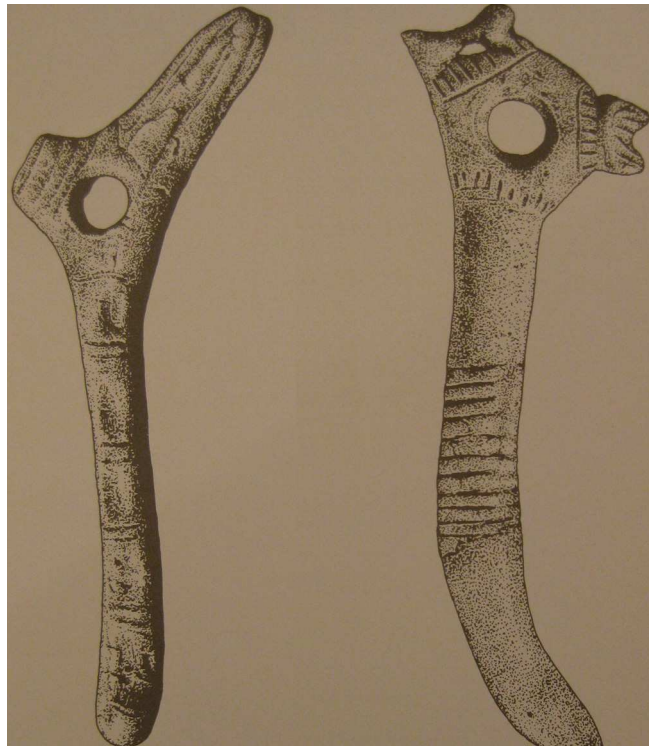


Figure 64: Pierced antler staffs, (left) Saint-Michael, France (right) Laugerie, France, Magdalenian

Horns as Social Symbols

The shaft of an antler's horn is called a "stock," a word that is defined by Webster's New International Dictionary as follows:

The original progenitor, as a man, a race, or a language, from which others have descended or have been derived. The race or line of a family; the progenitor of a family and his direct descendants; line of descent; lineage; family.¹

Figure 65, a Mesolithic incised stag horn from Sweden, features a common genealogical motif, bands of headless human figures. The branching was meant to symbolize branching families. The engraving is a form of heraldry.



Figure 65: Incised Red Deer antler, Sjöholmen Site, Skåne, Sweden (Mesolithic)

1. Webster's New International Dictionary (1928 edition). Quoted from Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, Vol 2, Book 1, p. 93a.

The shaft of a stag's horn is also called a "beam," a word that refers to both timber and light. We have seen earlier how horns and light were connected symbolically. The central beam of a house was conceived by many peoples as a World Tree, sometimes envisioned as a pillar of light extending to the Upper World.¹ The same image served as an anthropomorphic post, a sacrificial stake, an *axis mundi*, or the Holy Rood on which Christ was sacrificed. All of these images supported one another in what Edmund Carpenter referred to as "a symmetry of silent assumptions."

Putting antlers ('horns of consecration') on the head of a Siberian shaman of Iroquois chief, or on a European folk performer or Hopewellian noble in Ohio circa AD 300, transformed each into a living Y-post, ie a symbol of tribal unity.²

It doesn't take much imagination to see how a tree or branch can function as a genealogical symbol and by extension, how a forked post or antler can serve the same function. Man thinks, in part, in images, and these images served to convey ideas, from the earliest times. Cultures that lack writing depend on memory and the objects of daily life must help preserve and reiterate culture or all is lost. There is no decoration, which can only exist once symbols have lost their meaning. Decoration comes with cities, empires, the palace and its fashions. Even when the meaning was lost, forms survived and on occasion, meaning could be rediscovered. Later cultures continued using this iconography without always knowing what it meant.³ They knew only when to use a traditional form and where to put it. Figure 66, a 16th century Austrian marriage memorial, bears the family arms of husband and wife.

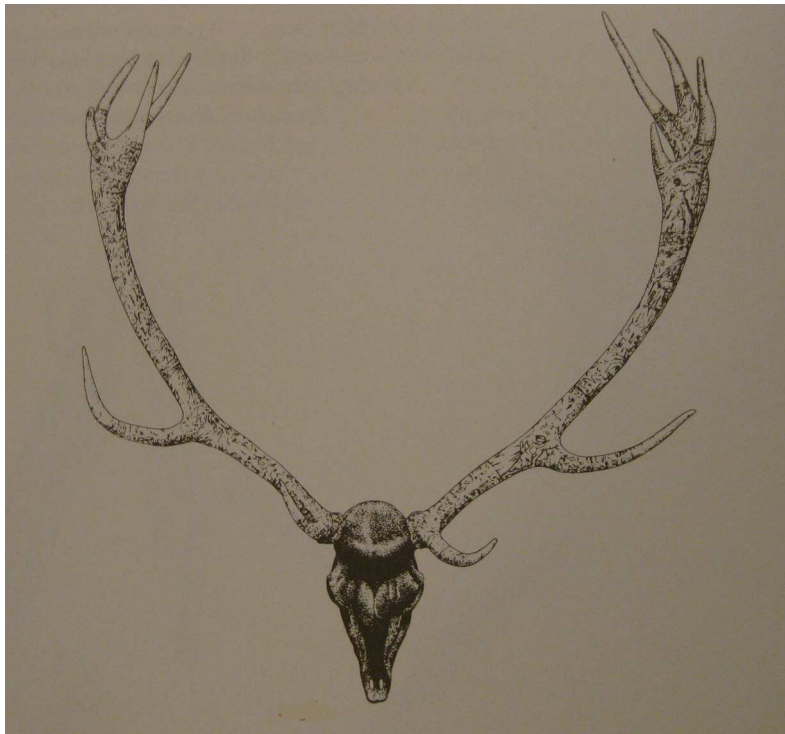


Figure 66: Crown of antlers engraved with the arms of Lang von Wellenburg and von Kuenburg, Tirol, Austria

1. Wood was often conceived as "containing" light and heat that could be released. This is the burning bush of the Bible. Fire is often a religious symbol for God's creative power (Agni or Mercury are fire gods). This is what William Blake meant by "Tiger, Tiger, burning bright." These images carried down through time and served to help people understand the world even after the invention of writing.
2. Carl Schuster and Edmund Carpenter, *Social Symbolism in Ancient and Tribal Art*, Vol 2, Book 1, p. 93c.
3. The Classical Greek meander is a good example. It once offered the protection of ancestors and was often placed on the borders or thresholds of objects (pots, clothes, buildings).

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