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Stone Age Magic? Animal-Headed Antler Staffs from Prehistoric Northern Europe as Magical Instruments

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This study investigates the use of animal-headed antler staffs as potential magical instruments in the Stone Age of northern Europe.¹ These staffs are found in both archaeological contexts and rock art, offering unique insights into their diverse uses. Their association with animals, humans, and symbolic power underscores their significance in prehistoric strategies for coping with uncertainty and interacting with the universe. The findings indicate that the animal-headed staffs served various mediating purposes, which can be understood as “magical.” Additionally, this study suggests that Stone Age magic in northern Europe was primarily, though not exclusively, related to human–animal relations.

Introduction

The view that “magic” was practiced during the Stone Age is more or less universally canonized among scholars. However, verifying this assumption remains a difficult task. This is particularly true in northern latitudes, where conditions for the preservation of organic materials are unfavorable and ritual buildings and deposits are generally lacking. Moreover, what exactly do prehistorians mean when they refer to Stone Age “magic”? What function does this standard explanation serve, especially when it is so often assumed and applied to characterize a vast spectrum of inexplicable beliefs and practices? In this article, I will explore the classification of magic and assess its relevance in contemporary scholarship by examining animal-headed staffs, a distinctive category of archaeological evidence from northern Europe.

The two main sources of evidence that scholars traditionally use to argue for the existence of Stone Age magic in the northern areas of Europe consist of unusual archaeological artifacts and rock art. Yet both of these categories are



Fig. 1
Elk(moose)-head
antler staff from the
settlement site of
Šventoji 3B, Lithuania,
dated approximately to
the period 3600–3400
BC. Length: 17 ¾ inches
(44 cm). © National
Museum of Lithuania,
EM 2132:396. Photo:
Ville Mantere.

laden with ambiguity and uncertainty. Rarely can rock art scenes or archaeological objects be unequivocally associated with even a loose definition of magic. However, some exceptional cases exist where peculiar artifacts found in archaeological contexts and rock art depictions seem to correspond with one another, providing better grounds for arguing that these may be associated with early magic. One such manifestation, characteristic of the Stone Age of northern Europe, is the category of animal-headed staffs. It represents one of only a few examples in this region of an artifact type that existed both as a physical object and as an important motif in hunter-gatherer rock art. A closer examination of animal-headed staffs may therefore shed light on the subject of prehistoric magic more generally.

Animal-Headed Staffs in Stone Age Northern Europe

Staffs, scepters, and wands of various kinds represent a near-universal phenomenon with roots in the Paleolithic era. While notable differences abound in their appearance, it is not uncommon for such objects to have some connection to animals, for instance, through their raw material or decoration. Regarding Stone Age northern Europe, a thought-provoking group of artifacts that manifests such a connection in a very straightforward way consists of some thirty staffs, or fragments thereof, with their upper ends shaped as animal heads. In most cases, the animal species is identifiable as the Eurasian elk (moose, *Alces alces*), whose antler is also the raw material of the majority of these artifacts (fig. 1). The staffs show a considerable distribution in time and space. They stem from burials and settlement layers across the boreal forest zone of northern Europe and seem to have been in use for several millennia, approximately in the period 6500–1500 BC.²

Previous scholarship interpreted the elk-head staffs as ritual items used for some kind of “magical” purposes.³ The striking, lifelike appearance of some items in this group and the fact that some stem from exceptional burials of elderly individuals are probably the key reasons why such interpretations have gained popularity. However, the fact that most of the finds were unearthed in settlement layers, often as fragmented and seemingly discarded items, has

Fig. 2

Animal-head (?)
antler staff from the
settlement site of
Vedbæk Maglemose,
Denmark, dated
approximately to the
period 6200–4000 BC.
Length: 12 5/8 inches
(32 cm). © National
Museum of Denmark,
A38879. Photo: Ville
Mantere.



received less attention.⁴ Some of the staffs also bear signs of wear and repair, indicating that they not only were used as grave goods but had importance among the living as well.

Moreover, besides the skillfully sculpted staffs that depict recognizable and more or less naturalistic animal-heads, there exist antler staffs that are very abstract or stylized. An enigmatic staff unearthed in a Stone Age settlement layer from Maglemose in Vedbæk, Denmark, for instance, does not have a naturalistic animal-head upper part but is probably still comparable to the more clear-cut elk-head staffs (fig. 2). This staff has rich carved ornamentations and is made of the same part of elk antler as the more elaborate ones.⁵ It has been proposed that the item was used as “a hammer, though the handsome decoration suggests that it was made for some special purpose—a drum-stick or something of that kind.”⁶ A similar, conjectural interpretation has been proposed for another comparable antler staff with rich ornamentations that was found in a Mesolithic dog burial at Skateholm II in Scania, Sweden.⁷

The common denominator of the aforementioned antler staffs is their relatedness to animals, but, beyond this, the staffs remain enigmatic. Scholars have often compared them to various kinds of staffs described in Siberian ethnography—where they are used by shamans during their spirit journeys, as drum sticks, as beating weapons, and so forth—but such parallels are far from convincing.⁸ As for what, exactly, the prehistoric animal-headed staffs were used for, there are no satisfactory answers provided by ethnographical sources or by the find contexts or the staffs themselves. However, similar staffs were depicted in the rock art of northern Europe around 5000–3000 BC, and this imagery may aid us in understanding the role and function of the physical antler staffs.⁹

In rock art compositions, animal-headed staffs are often depicted in the hands of anthropomorphic figures (fig. 3.1–6) but also as independent items that sometimes travel in boats (fig. 3.7), suggesting that the staffs were considered to



Fig. 3
Animal-headed staffs
in northern European
Stone Age rock art. 1–6:
Alta, northern Norway;
7: Nämforsen, northern
Sweden. Processed
photos: Ville Mantere.
Not to scale.

have agency of their own. It is common for the staff depictions to be found in close connection to animal figures (cervids in particular), but it is often impossible to say whether such scenes depict hunting or some other interaction with the animals in question (see fig. 3.1–4). The staffs perhaps belonged to hunting technology and were used for seducing prey.¹⁰ However, depictions of staffs also occur in scenes that do not involve animal figures (see fig. 3.5). In some instances, staffs are carried by anthropomorphic figures that seem to oppose one another (see fig. 3.6). In fact, while the animal-headed staffs depicted in rock art thus display a large variation of how they were used, the themes of confrontation and mediation often seem central.¹¹ What does this reveal about the meaning of the staffs and their possible link to magic?

Animal-Headed Staffs as Magical Implements?

Today, “magic” constitutes a polysemic, problematic, and contested category with no universal definition agreed upon by scholars. However, according to its early anthropological meaning, outlined by Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) and James George Frazer (1854–1941), among others, “magic” basically refers to the wish to manipulate the world through human action.¹² Leaving the magic-religion-science debate aside, this very elementary aspect of magic should perhaps deserve more attention among modern scholars of prehistory. Especially in northern latitudes, where available natural resources are limited and seasonal, it has always been vital for humans to come to terms with the environment as advantageously as possible. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that prehistoric hunter-gatherers, dependent on nature and its other-than-human species, coped with uncertainty by means of actions aimed at affecting, and interacting with, their environment. I would argue that such responses can by definition be labeled as “magical.”

The fact that the animal-headed staffs in rock art reflect the theme of confrontation points to the intention of exerting control over animals and anthropomorphic figures by means of the staffs. The rock art scenes suggest that staffs were used as mediating implements between humans and other beings and were thus aimed at affecting the relationships that existed between them. Irrespective of whether these depictions refer to “real” or “imaginary” events, we thus seem to have at least some grounds for associating the staffs with “magical” practices and beliefs, intended for manipulating the prevailing state of affairs. In other words, the staffs give the impression of representing functional and rational implements used to affect and communicate with their targets. There are, of course, obvious risks in transferring notions based on rock art depictions to the material antler staffs, but there is at least nothing that would speak against the assumption that these were similarly used in contexts where power was exercised by means of them to achieve a desired result. Given the zoomorphic appearance of the staffs and their raw material, it is moreover probable that this power was to some extent ascribed to the animal represented on, and within, them.

The use of animal-headed staffs—as indicated by the rock art depictions in particular—is characterized by variety. Importantly, the multitude of actions seemingly related to the staffs finds a parallel in the very concept of magic, which itself is ascribed with a wide range of heterogeneous beliefs and practices.¹³ Chris Gosden, for example, has identified various categories of magical practice, including different kinds of relationship work (such as hunting magic); protective magic; foretelling the future; understanding the past; dying and death; sickness and health; transformation; manipulating desire (such as seducing prey); sorcery; and so on.¹⁴ The animal-headed antler staffs could have been used for any of these purposes. Considering that some of the objects stem from burials and some from settlement layers, it is not difficult to draw the conclusion that the staffs, too, were most probably connected to various categories of magical activity. This gives reason to believe that magic in Stone Age northern Europe was also more generally practiced for various purposes involving, at least, animals as well as humans.

Given the importance of maintaining beneficial relationships to the essential game animals in northern regions, it is not surprising that the type of magic practiced among prehistoric northern hunter-gatherers seems strongly linked to human–animal relationships. Moreover, while rock art scenes involving staffs suggest that magic was also used in contexts not involving animals directly, the zoomorphism of the staffs nevertheless indicates that the activities that they were used for were, in fact, concerned not only with human–animal or human–human but with human–animal–animal, and human–animal–human relations. In other words, whenever the staff-carriers intended to influence animals or humans, these interactions essentially occurred *through* the animal entity represented by their staff. In this way, the use of staffs involved both the staff-owner’s relationship with their staff and the staff’s connection to the intended target.

In the end, there are no ways of ascertaining whether the animal-headed antler staffs found in northern Europe were used by shamans for contacting the spirit realm or exerting malice toward rivals or by hunters for alluring prey animals or securing hunting luck. However, in all these potential scenarios, which are not mutually exclusive, the fundamental role of the staff would have been similar: an instrument by which humans could be in contact with and affect the (super) natural world. It is this realization, in particular, that makes me willing to concur with earlier scholars, who have, often quite uncritically, associated the staffs with magic.

Conclusion

It seems that animal-headed antler staffs were used in Stone Age northern Europe for multiple purposes and this notion *ipso facto* provides grounds for associating them with the sphere of “magic.” The multitude of beliefs and activities associated with the concept of magic need not to be a substantial problem for scholars but rather a useful key for considering what these have in common. Above, I have argued that Stone Age magic, as practiced in northern regions in particular, was ultimately concerned with strategies of coping with uncertainty and that the animal-headed antler staffs functioned as mediating devices that assisted humans in such tasks in various ways.

Without doubt, however, magic was not only about the use of staffs. It is to be expected that magical practices in Stone Age northern Europe were manifold, but we are left with little to study them in a meaningful way. Herein lies the exceptional value of the animal-headed antler staffs: those depicted in rock art can shed light on the ones found in archaeological layers in an unparalleled way. It is indeed important to stress that I would not dare to label the animal-headed antler staffs as “magic” artifacts simply because of their unusual appearance or occasional placement in burials, and archaeologists should, in my opinion, be more cautious in associating artifacts with magic solely based on their extraordinary nature and unknown function. Similarly, the staffs depicted in rock art would not provide us with much information alone. However, because of their analogues depicted in rock art scenes, we have the unique opportunity of making sense of an artifact category that provides sound reasons to argue

for their mediating role in efforts to manipulate and contact the universe of prehistoric hunter-gatherers.

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1 By northern Europe, I refer to present-day Scandinavia and Finland, the Baltic States, and the northwestern parts of Russia.

2 Ville N. Mantere and Ekaterina A. Kashina, “Elk-Head Staffs in Prehistoric Northern Europe and Northwestern Russia—Signs of Power and Prestige?,” *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 39, no. 1 (2020): 2–18.

3 See Evgeniy M. Kolpakov, “Losinogolovyye zhezly (topory) Severnoy Yevropy,” in *Stratum Plus* 1 (2018): 163–80.

4 Mantere and Kashina, “Elk-Head Staffs in Prehistoric Northern Europe and Northwestern Russia,” 11–16.

5 Peter Vang Petersen, “Eksotiske faunarester i Kongemose- og Ertebølletid: Et resultat af udveksling?,” in *Hikuin* 16 (1990): 19–20.

6 Therkel Mathiassen, “Two New Danish Implements of Reindeer Antler,” in *Acta Archaeologica*, vol. 12 (Levin & Munksgaard, 1941), 131.

7 Lars Larsson, *Ett fångstsamhälle för 7000 år sedan: Boplatser och gravar i Skateholm* (Signum, 1988), 148–49.

8 See Ville N. Mantere, “The Relationship between Humans and Elks (*Alces alces*) in Northern Europe c. 12 000–1200 calBC” (PhD diss., University of Turku, 2023), 260–62.

9 Mantere, “The Relationship between Humans and Elks (*Alces alces*) in Northern Europe,” 186–211.

10 Ingrid Fuglestad, *Rock Art and the Wild Mind: Visual Imagery in Mesolithic Northern Europe* (Routledge, 2018), 120.

11 Fuglestad, *Rock Art and the Wild Mind*, 119.

12 See, e.g., Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg, eds., *Defining Magic: A Reader* (Routledge, 2017); and the articles by Pamela A. Moro (“Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Magic”) and Jesper Sørensen (“Magic”) in *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Hilary Callan (Wiley, 2018).

13 Otto and Stausberg, *Defining Magic*, 8–10; Sørensen, “Magic,” 1.

14 Chris Gosden, *The History of Magic: From Alchemy to Witchcraft, from the Ice Age to the Present* (Penguin Books, 2021), 19–24.