

THE CRANE IN VALCAMONICA AND THE GERANOS DANCE ON DELOS. A LINK?

Kristina BERGGREN

On the Valcamonica petroglyphs a wading bird often stands above the labyrinth. The only written testimony that has come down to us about the labyrinth is the Greek myth about Theseus and the labyrinth of Knossos. Does this myth explain the petroglyph? It does, but in a very roundabout way. First, it is important to remember that the story about Theseus' adventures in the labyrinth is a ploy, a propaganda story, a clever act of imagination, created by a citizen of Athens, a city that had grown rich and important far too quickly. Athens in the fifth century BCE was at the head of the Delian League and needed its own hero, somebody who had done heroic deeds in other parts of Greece, somebody like the god-like Herakles. Theseus was a perfect choice, but he remains a pure, hypothetical figure. Second, although a Minoan, Linear B tablet refers to "the Mistress of the Labyrinth" we don't know what it refers to. The labyrinths in Valcamonica and in Spain may or may not have had the same meaning in Greece.

However, one link exists between Theseus and the labyrinth and Valcamonica: the Geranos dance. According to Plutarch, (Theseus 21) Theseus dances the géranos dance in front of Apollo's altar on Delos: "he danced with his youths a dance which they say is still performed by the Delians... This kind of dance, as Dicaearchus tells us, the Delians call the Crane". Géranos is the Greek word for the crane, the waterbird, that in spring makes a limping, complicated "dance" of mating.

The earliest representations of waterbirds are from the Upper Palaeolithic Period and come from Mal'ta near the Lake Baikal in Siberia (Gimbutas, 1989, p. 26, fig. 37). It is impossible to determine if they are swans or geese, but they seem to belong to the Anatidae family. The representations of these birds, which are easy to recognize because of their flattened beaks and large, round eyes, reach their first peak at Anza in Macedonia in the end of the sixth millennium (Gimbutas, 1982, p. 136) and their second in the Urnfield culture in the second millennium (Berggren, 1991). The Anatidae live close to the water and incorporate its large symbolism: to be ritually immersed in water is to die-symbolically. Water, however, also precedes birth, when the amniotic liquid, in which the foetus has hitherto lived, flows out from the woman's body. Water kills and precedes birth. This concept is as valid for the Christian baptism as for the bath of the statue of the goddess and the sprinkling of holy, that is, life-giving water on the faithful. When the priestesses bathed the statue of Hera in the spring of Kanathos (near Nauplion in the Argolis), after the birth of the new moon, they did it in memory of her descent to Hades that Homer alludes to in the Iliad (8, 477-88) and her new birth (Kerényi, 1976, p. 125).

Still today, in Scandinavian and German hospitals the dead are washed -and not because they are dirty. As the Anatidae live near water and water precedes birth, as they make the sign of a "V" on the sky when they fly and in the water when they swim- the

“V” being an ideogram of femininity from the beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic Age (Rydh, 1929) -they bring the embryo to the mother to-be- as the stork brings the baby to the cribs in Italy.

Although the crane is a waterbird, it is absent on Neolithic objects, but appears in the Bronze Age. We find it on the Middle Minoan seals from tombs in Crete (Ruuskanen, 1992) and numerically they exceed the geese on the Geometric funerary vases in Greece. In my opinion, the appearance of the crane during the Bronze Age is linked to the appearance of metal. Native copper in shape of small beads is present already in the ninth millennium in South West Iran, Anatolia, and Syria and in the 6th millennium in Europe. The earliest traces of copper mining, however, only appear in the second half of the fifth millennium (Jovanovic, 1979). Copper is softer than flint and obsidian, so the explanation lies not in the efficiency of the new metal but in something else. What is new about metal? It reflects the light of the sun, moon, and fire. From the beginning, the fascination with copper is symbolic. The smith, personifying the god, creates objects that mirror the light. The first act of creation is light.

In the womb of Mother Earth the minerals slowly mature with the terrestrial rhythm of their mother. When they are ready to be born, She will give birth to them (Berggren, 1993). As Mother Earth gives birth to both plants and metals, it is possible for Her to give birth to plants of metal. This image is not as strange as it may seem: we accept, without question, metal candle-holders with flowers on them and silver and golden Christmas trees. However, the Earth also gives birth to human objects: King Arthur draws his sword from a stone, which symbolically means that England, his Mother Earth, gives it to him.

The minerals extracted from the mines, the womb of the Earth, are still immature, yet-to-be-born. It becomes the task of the smith to give birth to them, transforming them into objects. Thus, the smith replaces the Mother and gives birth to her children, who become his objects (Berggren, 1993). Still in South Europe all metal objects accentuate male fertility. As the Anatidae symbolize feminine fertility, the cranes, the Gruidae, symbolize male fertility, the smith giving birth. The géranos dance is a male fertility dance imitating the male crane's mating movements.

Plutarch's text makes us believe that Theseus initiated the Crane dance on Delos. That is impossible. Theseus is *kalos kai agathos*; he is the perfect Athenian youth without any physical blemish and he certainly doesn't limp. The only figure in Greek mythology that both limps and is a smith and, therefore, has the right to lead the géranos dance is Hephaestus, the limping, divine smith.

I propose that the wading bird above the labyrinths in Valcamonica is a male fertility symbol. He represents the smith -whose place was taken by Theseus- that once was married to the Mistress of the labyrinth, Ariadne-Athena. This hypothesis is strengthened by the finds from the eighth century BCE, outside the earliest temple of Athena Alea on Peloponnesos: between the temple and the altar - occupying the sacred space between the house of the goddess and the place where she received her sacrifices - a bronze smith had his workshop. The pottery, given to the goddess and found by the excavators, was decorated with water birds. In Greece we find Ariadne-Athena, the smith and the crane; in Valcamonica the crane and the labyrinth. Is it only a coincidence? I don't believe so.

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Riassunto

L'autore riflette sulla possibilità di una connessione tra le immagini di uccelli acquatici, spesso rappresentate in associazione con il labirinto sui petroglifi della Valcamonica, il mito greco di Teseo e del labirinto, e in modo particolare la danza "Geranos" (danza della gru) che Teseo eseguiva di fronte all'altare di Apollo. Si riflette inoltre sulla presenza della gru nell'età del Bronzo e la si collega alla comparsa del metallo; questo argomento viene sviluppato per suggerire che l'uccello acquatico associato al labirinto in Valcamonica, sia un simbolo di fertilità maschile.

Summary

The author proposes that there is a connection between the images of wading birds, often depicted above the labyrinths, on the Valcamonica petroglyphs and the Greek myth of Theseus and the labyrinth; principally the "Geranos" dance that Theseus performs in front of Apollo's altar on Delos. He argues that this appearance of the crane during the Bronze Age is linked to the appearance of metal and he develops this argument to suggest that the wading bird above the labyrinths in Valcamonica is a male fertility symbol.

Résumé

L'auteur réfléchit sur la possibilité d'une connexion entre les images d'oiseaux aquatiques, souvent représentées avec le labyrinthe dans les gravures du Valcamonica, le mythe grec de Thésée et du labyrinthe, et surtout la danse "Geranos" (danse de la grue) que Thésée exécutait face à l'autel d'Apollon. Il s'interroge aussi sur la présence de la grue à l'Age du Bronze, qu'il lie à l'apparition du métal; cet argument est développé pour suggérer que l'oiseau aquatique associé au labyrinthe au Valcamonica est un symbole de fertilité masculine.