

# Inter-human perspectivism and ancestor veneration in Late Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age Southwestern Norway

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## ABSTRACT

The transition of nomadic hunter-gatherers into sedentary farmers marks the beginning of the Neolithic period. However, the Neolithic was more than just a social and economic transition. It signified the onset of a new worldview which re-defined ways of thinking about the world, and the role and place of humans within it. As such, this era encompassed a lot more than simply the adoption of new technologies and the formation of new social structures. Drawing on ethnographic work on north Asian ontologies, this paper argues that the Late Neolithic (LN) transition in Rogaland, Southwestern Norway, was marked by a shift to inter-human perspectivism. This shift was accompanied by a growing interest in ancestral perspectives, leading to an increase in ancestor-oriented rituals that ranged from simple commemorative practices honouring the deceased to elaborate public spectacles and hero cults. While the primary focus of this paper is on the Late Neolithic/ Early Bronze Age, comparative insights from the Late Bronze Age are included, particularly in the discussion of hoards, due to the relative scarcity of material from Rogaland.

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## Introduction

The last years have witnessed a growing interest in ontological otherness in archaeology and related disciplines (Alberti 2016; Alberti and Marshall 2009; Alberti et al. 2011; Harris and Cipolla 2017; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell 2007; Holbraad 2009a, 2009b; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Thomas 2015). Within the new ontological framework, differences in how we relate to each other and the world, is understood, not as a matter of culture or worldview, but as a matter of ontology, of being. The ontological turn is thus a move away from the assumption that fundamental differences in human experience and perception are attributable to a particular culture or worldview. Rather than treating other people's beliefs as cultural representations, an ontological approach allows multiple worlds or realities to coexist. There is not one world "out there", independent of and prior to our knowledge, but multiple worlds, each as real and concrete as our own. In a very real sense then, people are seen to inhabit different worlds, one as real as another, but with conflicting values

and facts. The archaeology of ontology contributes to this debate by exploring, not only how pre-historic societies conceived of and apprehended the world, but also how non-modern ontologies differed from one another.

About 4000 years ago, the prehistoric cultures of Southwestern Norway underwent a series of profound changes, as former hunter-gatherers gave up their nomadic lifestyle and settled down to become farmers (Fredh, Prøsch-Danielsen and Jensen 2018; Glørstad and Prescott 2009; Hjelle, Prøsch-Danielsen and Soltvedt 2017; Hjelle et al. 2018; Prescott and Glørstad 2012; Prøsch-Danielsen and Høgestøl 2006; Prøsch-Danielsen, Prescott and Holst 2018). A new lifestyle took hold, replacing indigenous beliefs and traditions with new, and radically different, concepts and notions. Along with this came new social and political institutions, technological advances, monumental architecture as well as economic and dietary changes. By the late centuries of the third millennium BC, agriculture was firmly established as the main source of livelihood, and the early farming communities formed part of elaborate networks



of trade and interaction, reaching across Northern Germany, Denmark, Southern Sweden, and Southern Norway. From this time onwards, elaborate burials and ritual hoards also begin to appear with more regularity in the archaeological record, indicating a growing concern with lineage and ancestry.

The question addressed in this paper is whether these changes coincided with a more profound ontological shift, one that increasingly positioned ancestors as active participants in the social fabric of the living. In this context, ancestry may have emerged as more than a conceptual framework – it may have become a lived, reciprocal relationship, actively sustained through commemoration and ritual practices.

## **Ancestors in Scandinavian archaeology**

The idea that ancestors were central to the experiences and practices of the first farming population in Norway, aligns with longstanding interpretations of LN and NBA burial practices, which are often thought to involve elements of ancestor veneration (Brøndsted 1958; Jennbert 1993; Kaliff 1997; Sverdrup 1933; Wangen 1999). Similar ideas have been put forward in Rock Art research, where certain images have been interpreted as depicting ancestral or heroic and mythical figures (Kaul 2005; Melheim 2022; Vandkilde 2013; Østmo, 1997, 2017). Numerous studies have emphasised the potential role of burials and Rock Art in fostering connections with the past, imbuing it with immediacy and relevance and reinforcing social cohesion by linking communal identities to shared cosmological and ancestral narratives.

With the recent emphasis on shapeshifting in prehistoric iconography (Ahlqvist and Vandkilde 2018; Goldhahn 2019), attention has centred on how the magic of transformation and metamorphosis may be evoked through depictions of fantastical, potentially semi-divine creatures. Through carving and sculpting, these extraordinary beings were depicted not only in imaginative and awe-inspiring forms but also as active participants in the social world of the living. In this way, ancestors and other mythical or heroic beings were brought

into being – not merely as individuals of the past but as dynamic entities continually shaped and sustained through ritual practices.

## **Defining ancestor veneration**

The term ancestor veneration has faced criticism for its broad and often indiscriminate application to a wide range of cultural practices. Whitley (2002), for instance, has argued that the term functions as an overly simplistic catch-all label, grouping together potentially diverse and context-specific activities under a single category. While the archaeological record provides abundant evidence of interactions with the dead, an uncritical reliance on the term ancestors risks oversimplifying the intricate beliefs, rituals, and socio-cultural dynamics that underpin ancestor-related practices. However, as Insoll (2011, 1047) contends, the concept of ancestors remains valid in archaeological interpretation when applied with appropriate care and nuance, and considered alongside related phenomena, such as sacrificial practices, whose configuration and significance are dynamic and subject to change over time.

In the ethnographical literature, the term ancestor veneration is generally used to refer to a set of practices based on the belief that the dead have a continued existence beyond physical death and that dead forbears are able to influence the lives of their descendants (Astuti 2007; Astuti and Bloch 2013, 104–106; Bloch 2010, 54). It has been recognized as an universal aspect of religion (Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley 1996), however, in a recent study by Peoples, Duda, and Marlowe (2016, 270–277) active ancestor worship (defined as a belief in ancestral beings who remain active in human affairs) was found to be absent in animistic cultures. Although rare among hunter-gatherers in general, it occurs more frequently in complex societies where kinship plays an important socio-economic role (Peoples, Duda, and Marlowe 2016, 275).

Ancestor veneration is common throughout the world, particularly in parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It is often an integral part of the culture, influencing everything from daily life to religion and politics (Hill and Hageman 2016b). In general, ancestors are regarded as superhuman

**Figure 1.** Two small pots and two slate pendants from a possible Late Neolithic stone cist at Hodne in Klepp, Rogaland (Photo: Annette Græsli Øvreliid, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger).



beings, capable of intervening in human affairs. They can be called upon for protection and guidance and asked to assist in disputes about inheritance and land ownership. The remembrance of ancestors is also central for understanding how people make sense of the world and their place in it (Hill and Hageman 2016b, 30-31). Ancestors are often the subject of myths and legends, shaping people's cultural identity and sense of belonging. Typically, ancestor veneration involves ritual practices intended to remember, honour, and appease the ancestors, such as offerings, monument building, and other acts of reverence shown towards the deceased (Hill and Hageman 2016a, 55-68).

### **The emergence of commemorative monuments: Honouring memories and ancestor heroes**

Monuments have long served as powerful symbols of remembrance, honouring loved ones and other members of the community, while offering comfort and connection to those left behind. Monuments can take various forms, ranging from simple stone blocks or modest heaps of stones to more intricate structures. Whether simple or elaborate, they fulfil a variety of roles, reflecting the complex ways in which communities and individuals engage with memory, identity and loss. Through their physical presence, monuments preserve legacies in a visible form, anchoring the past within the physical and cultural landscape. Additionally,

they can be used to signal territorial claims to land, demonstrating the significance of ancestry and tradition in shaping social and political structures.

In Southwestern Norway, there is no evidence of monumental burials prior to the LN, suggesting graves were simple pits dug into the ground without a covering mound or cairn. The earliest mounds to appear were simple constructions of stone or earth, covering a stone lined cist, within which the remains of the dead were interred. LN stone cists have been documented primarily in eastern Norway, particularly in the inner part of Østfold, as well as along Norway's southern coast, stretching from the Oslo Fjord through Rogaland and further along the western coastline (Solberg 2006; Østmo 2011). While the eastern examples typically feature open, rectangular cists designed for successive burials, the western examples are predominantly closed, single-room structures, in which the deceased were interred with items such as daggers and points (Østmo 2011). A small number of such graves have been found in Rogaland. At Austrått in Sandnes, a spearhead or a repurposed lanceolate dagger was discovered alongside now-missing pottery in a "beautifully constructed" chamber beneath a mound measuring 1.5 meters in height and 10 meters across (Helliesen 1903, 73). Another LN burial was excavated at Hodne in Klepp, where a possible cist – evidenced only by an upright slab – was uncovered, containing two small pots and two slate pendants (Figure 1) (Hauken 2003; Helliesen 1905, 72). Other finds reported included cremated bones.





**Figure 2.** Reconstructed burial mound at Rege in Sola, Rogaland (Photo: Terje Tvedt, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger).

North of the study area, in Selje, Western Norway, archaeologists recently uncovered a stone-lined cist dating to around 2000 BC, containing the remains of at least five individuals (University Museum of Bergen 2023). This is the first grave of its kind to be found outside of Østfold in Southeastern Norway. Its discovery hints at the spread of a new burial custom, suggesting that such practices were beginning to take root in regions beyond their traditional geographic boundaries. A somewhat similar yet lesser-known collective burial was excavated by Jan Petersen in Sømme, in Rogaland, in 1931. Here, a rectangular chamber measuring 3.5 meters in length and 2.5 meters in width was discovered, containing the unburnt remains of at least six individuals, radiocarbon dated to 1885-1745 cal BC (Høgestøl 2003, 107). The number of individuals has recently been updated to 13 (Sean D. Denham, personal communication, August 29, 2025). A circular mound, measuring 12 meters across, was raised above them. Seven upright slabs may have formed part of a passage or divided the chamber into compartments. No artefacts were recovered.

The move towards more monumental burial customs may have transformed burials into more than resting places for the dead; they may have become sites where the living could return to honour

and reflect on the memories of the deceased. This change probably reshaped how communities understood their connection to the past, emphasizing continuity between the living and the dead. This developing practice likely laid the groundwork for the large-scale, communal burial rites that emerged during NBA period II, when burials became increasingly complex and elaborate (see Myhre 2004; Møllerop 1962). High status individuals were now buried in a cist or a piled stone construction, covered by an earth and stone-built mound (Austvoll 2017, 424, 2019, 21). Many of these graves are richly furnished with objects in bronze and gold. Notable examples include the Rege-mound in Sola in Rogaland (Figure 2), situated in an area with the largest concentration of NBA-mounds in Norway, comprising over 56 excavated mounds and 3 cairns (Austvoll 2019, 22). Another significant site is Reaheia in Karmøy, one of Scandinavia's most elaborate burial sites, and one of the few where barrows are arranged in a line. Excavations have produced several rich finds, including a twisted arming of gold and fragments of hammered gold leaf.

These barrows were part of a broader 'tumulus' complex that emerged in Northern and Central Europe in the Middle NBA (Holst 2013, 103). They probably served a variety of commemorative



**Figure 3.** Early Bronze Age cult axe recovered from a spring in Lunde in Vindafjord, Rogaland (Photo: Adnan Icgic, University Museum of Bergen, University of Bergen).

and performative functions, the most pressing of which may have been to commemorate and honour the dead (Brück and Fokkens 2013, 97; Darvill 2013, 144; see also Goldhahn 2008).

### **New ritual practices: The emergence and significance of ritual hoards**

The LN also saw the emergence of new forms of ritual activity. From this period onwards, there is a marked increase in ritual hoards – from a handful in the Early and Middle Neolithic to several dozen in the LN. A majority of these were buried in bogs or other wetlands like rivers, lakes, or fens. While most Early and Middle Neolithic bog finds are single finds (mostly incomplete axes, of which a majority could be accidental losses), LN bog finds occur both as single finds and as hoards, containing hundreds or even thousands of objects. Among the largest hoards in Norway is one from Hauskje in Rogaland, numbering 26 flint daggers and more than one thousand flakes. There is also a number of dry land hoards from this period. These are collections of objects buried together in the ground, or under or besides large rocks. The meanings of ritual hoards are not known, but they

are often thought to represent offerings to ancestral spirits (Karsten, 1994; Kaul, 2003). Although offerings may have served various purposes, one of their most significant (albeit likely unintended) roles may have been to endow the ancestors with agency, allowing them to emerge as active and dynamic participants in the social and spiritual fabric of life.

From the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, offering rituals appear to have undergone several changes (Kristiansen 2013, 87). Flint daggers, scrapers, and other utility items were to some extent replaced by offerings of a more ceremonial character, suggesting a new concern for ritual performance (Nordby and Sørgaard 2020). Cult axes and other ritual implements associated with chiefly authority and possibly divine or ancestral power (Kristiansen and Larsson 2005, 266), such as spiral gold arm rings, have been recovered from hoards from NBA period II (Figure 3). Solar/spiral motifs are also evident in female elite burials from this period, particularly in the Klepp region of Jæren, where it appears in the form inhumation graves furnished with bronze ornaments.

The use of ceremonial artefacts as offerings continues into the Late NBA, with several depositions of a more cultic character (Kaul 2003,



**Figure 4.** Gold serpent from Hesby in Stavanger, Rogaland (Photo: Annette Græsli Øvreliid, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger).

26). These include the bronze lurs from Revheim in Stavanger (period V), two torques from Vårå in Karmøy (period VI), a spiral decorated sword from Eia in Sokndal (Period IV) along with several other Scandinavian finds, among them the bronze hybrids from Vestby in Oppland, Eastern Norway (Bjørn 1929; Hagen 1954; Lund and Melheim 2011; Rosenqvist 1954), the bronze figures from Grevensvænge in Næstved (Djupedal and Broholm 1952; Iversen 2014), and the two-faced, horned bronze figure from Kallerup in Thy, Denmark (Enevold 2024; Posselt and Møller 2023). Mention should also be made of a gold figurine of a serpent from Hesby in Stavanger, which offers an interesting parallel to the snake-horse figurine from Fårdal in Denmark (Figure 4) (Kjeldsen and Sørgaard 2023, 79). The serpent is a stray find lacking contextual information; however, it is generally believed to date from the NBA/Early Iron Age. Objects like these, among many others, may have held important ritual or ceremonial functions, serving to consolidate myths and making them tangible in the present moment, while possibly shaping the myths themselves, influencing their content and narrative (Kjeldsen and Sørgaard 2023, 78-82; Melheim 2022, 212; Nordby and Sørgaard 2020, 143).

Given these developments, it seems likely that some form of ancestor veneration was practiced, perhaps widely, among the early farming population of Southwestern Norway. Although ancestor rituals may have existed in some form long before the introduction of agriculture, it was not until the

later centuries of the third millennium BC that they became common. A remarkable number of tools and weapons now found their way into the water, most likely as offerings, and from the middle of the second millennium onwards, dozens of burial monuments were raised. One of the questions that arises from this is whether these changes were part of a wider ontological shift towards inter-human perspectivism?

### **Ancestor veneration and inter-human perspectivism**

In a discussion of animism and totemism in North Asia, Pedersen (2001) argues that ancestor veneration is a special form of perspectivism, primarily focused on inter-human metamorphosis. The term ‘perspectivism’ was originally developed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004) to describe a set of ideas and practices found in Amerindian ontologies but has since been applied to other parts of the world, such as North and Inner Asia (Holbraad and Willerslev 2007; Pedersen 2001; Willerslev 2004). Perspectivism refers to a mode or view of the world where humanness is thought to be relative to the perspective of the observer. Animals perceive themselves as humans and humans as their prey. Conversely, humans see other humans as fellow beings and animals as potential prey (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 466). The idea is that different species apprehend the world from different points of view. What humans



perceive as nature may be culture to another species (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 471). Naturally, perspectivism fosters a deep interest in understanding how animals think and perceive the world.

At its core, perspectivism holds that humanity is shared by all beings, humans and animals alike (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 465). Although outwardly different from us, animals have a human soul, with their physical bodies acting as coverings that conceal their true human essence. In this view, the body – its shape, size, strengths, and functional capacities – is the primary factor distinguishing one species from another. Ontological identity, thus, is not biologically given; it is not located in a person's body but constructed through the eyes and experiences of other beings.

Inter-human perspectivism differs from perspectivism in having a human focus. It is widespread among pastoral groups inhabiting the southern parts of Mongolia and Siberia (Pedersen 2001). Rather than trying to internalize an animal's point of view through hunting magic and other ritual practices, inter-human perspectivists seek the perspectives of past human beings (Pedersen 2001, 423). The primary focus of much ritual activity is to see the world through the ancestors' eyes and share their perspectives (Pedersen 2001, 423).

One of the differences between perspectivism and inter-human perspectivism thus has to do with the number of available perspectives: Whereas perspectivism provides access to a multitude of perspectives (through shamanistic journeys, out-of-body experiences etc.), inter-human perspectivism limits perspective taking and identification with the nonhuman other. It is first and foremost an attempt to see the world from the ancestors' point of view.

### **LN/NBA inter-human perspectivism in context**

A central question is thus whether the early farming population of Southwestern Norway may have practiced some form of inter-human perspectivism. The concurrent emergence of phenomena such as sedentary communities, monumental architecture, and offerings is probably not coin-

cidental but rather reflects a change in attitudes towards ancestors and a growing concern with kinship and descent. As people became less dependent on wild animal foods, traditional animal spirits may have lost their importance and increasingly have come to be seen as detached from the human world, uncaring about things like soil fertility and crop yields. Ancestors were closer to humans and may therefore have been perceived as more interested in human affairs, desiring offerings, and devotion in exchange for protection and benevolence for the living.

As human-ancestor relations became increasingly institutionalized in the first half of the second millennium BC, the significance of offerings may have changed. Ancestor rituals may have become more complex, moving from simple offerings to large theatrical performances enlivened by costumes and props (Nordby and Sørsgaard 2020). Gradually, the rituals may have been more focused on individual ancestors and their accomplishments, perhaps signalling the beginning of an ancestor cult.

Changes are also evident in the mortuary practices of the LN/Early NBA. Over the centuries, burial mounds evolved from simple stone constructions into large and complex structures, erected to honour and commemorate the dead. Secondary burials were often inserted into the mounds at a later date – a practice characteristic of the Late NBA in Southwestern Norway (Bauer and Østmo 2017, 247; Dahl 2016; Myhre 1998, 143-144). Again, this may indicate that a hero cult was established by the Late NBA. This hypothesis aligns with the broader pattern of Late NBA imagery, which includes numerous depictions of possibly heroic figures (Skoglund 2015; Vandkilde 2013), often with oversized bodies and accentuated calves (see Fahlander 2019). At the site Kråkhaug in Sola, for example, an oversized (possibly headless?) being is depicted with accentuated calves, possibly holding a large axe (Figure 5). The figure is positioned to the left, and above, three other, smaller individuals, who seem to be participating in a sexual ritual (Kjeldsen and Sørsgaard 2023, 78-79). While alternative interpretations do exist for this and similar oversized figures (see Fahlander 2019), their often exaggerated human attributes and weapon carrying privileges suggest



**Figure 5.** Oversized human figure with accentuated calves, possibly holding an axe. Kråkhaug in Sola, Rogaland. (Photo: Åge Pedersen, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger).

extra-human qualities commonly associated with ancestors, warrior heroes and other mythical figures (Vandkilde 2013). In practice, distinguishing between these roles can be challenging, as ancestors may have featured in myths (Kaul 2005), or certain individuals may have either claimed mythic status, or acquired it over time.

Compared to regions with particularly rich concentrations of Rock Art, such as Østfold in Eastern Norway and Bohuslän in Sweden, human and animal depictions and ceremonial scenes are relatively uncommon in Rogaland. While such motifs do exist, they tend to be simpler and less detailed (Kjeldsen and Sørgeard 2023, 84). Rogaland nevertheless reflects the broader Scandinavian trend of a heightened focus on human figures and ceremonial scenes during the Late NBA. This development marks a distinct shift from the Early NBA, which is primarily characterized by stylized motifs such as ships, cup marks, circles, and geometric patterns (Kjeldsen and Sørgeard 2023, 84).

Skogslund (2015) interprets the marked increase in human depictions during the Late NBA, particularly after 800 BC, as indicative of a significant shift in societal dynamics. These depic-

tions, characterized by a growing attention to detail – showing humans engaged in activities such as riding horses, participating in marriage rituals, and ploughing – differ from the more stylized and abstract human representations so typical of the Early NBA. Skogslund suggests that this change signals the emergence of a new aristocracy, who may have sought to justify and solidify their elevated social status by emphasizing their grandeur and claiming legendary status. In doing so, they intertwined their lives and ambitions with that of important ancestors or mythical figures, legitimizing their status and ambitions as both desirable and inherently natural.

## Conclusion

It seems likely, based on the available data, that the first farming population of Southwestern Norway practiced some form of inter-human perspectivism, probably resulting in an increased importance of ancestor spirits. While there is no single agreed upon definition of ancestor veneration, certain commonalities do exist, including the belief that ancestors



live on after death and that they have the power to influence – for good or evil – the lives of their descendants. Ancestor veneration can thus be understood to comprise a broad variety of ritual practices intended to commemorate, honour, and appease the dead, including various ritual expressions, offerings and the construction of monumental burials. In Southwestern Norway, monumental burials and ritual offerings began to appear with regularity after 2300 BC, suggesting a preoccupation with the ancestors' views and experiences of the world. Initially, ancestor rituals may have consisted of simple offerings of tools and weapons. Over time, the rituals began to take on a more theatrical style, possibly integrating elements of drama and performance. In the Late NBA, ancestor veneration probably evolved into a cult of heroes and heroines. Local chiefs or clan groups may now have tried to legitimize their rule by claiming descent from an important ancestor.

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## Declaration of interest

There are no conflicts of interest related to this work that could compromise the integrity of the study.

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