In a recent letter appearing in Man (N.S. II, 440), Mr. William Fagg says that I made a curious omission in my article identifying a Bronze Age Scandinavian motif as the mushroom, Amanita muscaria (Man (N.S.) 10, 72-9). According to him, the motif looks like an X-ray drawing or median cross-section of a mushroom and that I am so interpreting it. He calls for some defence of this use. To offer a defence would be to imply agreement with Mr. Fagg’s contention. As this contention seems to be based on an unfamiliarity with the material and an inaccurate impression of the examples I presented, I will offer a clarification instead.

First, we must be precise. There are details indicating a hollow stem, the only interior detail, on three of the eight bronzes (Figs. 1a, 1b, and 4). Neither the other five bronzes nor the two petroglyphs have such markings. Three additional rock carvings of the mushroom motif, which have recently come to my attention, also have none. Thus, only a small fraction can be construed as "X-ray" pictures.

As for these, I must point out that the carvings are of a religious and symbolic nature. Thus, the portrayal could not have been limited by any notion that the artist was constrained to reproduce only that which was externally visible. A direct parallel occurs in the Scandinavian petroglyphs of "Arctic" type. Here we find examples of älgar portrayed with internal organs in the appropriate places (Englestad 1934, p1. X, XI, XVII; Gjessing 1936: p1. XXXVa). Am I not to interpret a carving as a moose simply because it looks exactly like an "X-ray drawing" of one? Parallels occur in other areas of the world as well. On birch bark scrolls created by the Ojibwe Indians there exists a sign for hunger consisting of an outline drawing of a man with the digestive tract indicated, a sign for courage with the heart drawn within the outline, a sign for the ritual Mide lodge with all the interior details depicted. "X-ray drawings" all. Philosophers of science tell us that an hypothesis is strengthened to the degree that it accounts for observed fact. So, rather than being weakened by these examples, the mushroom identification is made more plausible as it is the only theory which supplies an explanation of internal detail.

As for the overall style of depiction of the mushroom motifs, a cursory inspection might give the impression of a median cross-section. However, examination of the art of the period shows that it is a matter of perspective, or, rather, lack of it. The artist always has to solve the problem of portraying a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface. The difficulty is increased if the chosen medium is as hard to work as granite or quartzite. The Bronze Age Scandinavian artists almost always chose a flat projection, which is not to be confused with a cross section. The ship figures, for instance, or for that
matter, the human who holds the mushroom aloft, have no indication at all of their solid nature. This approach to perspective can sometimes take rather bizarre forms. The petroglyphs of horse-drawn wagons at Fränarp, Gryts Sn., Skane (Althin 1945: 102, Taf. 69-73) have been carved with the feet of the horses and the wagon wheels at right angles to the wagon bodies, as viewed from above. It must also be pointed out that this class of carving is schematic or stylised and, indeed, has been so named (Janson 1956: 49). Because of this, one never expects to see more than indications of features. Spots on the periphery of the mushroom cap standing for their distribution over a surface are wholly in keeping with this. Fagg might find it edifying to look at some of the published collections of carvings listed in the bibliography of my article. I am confident that he will find a miniscule proportion which looks like anything other than a stylised silhouette.

Fagg also asks if there is any evidence in ancient art for emanating rays indicating brightness such as those which appear on the mushroom motifs of figs. 1e, f and g. Indeed, there is abundant evidence. In fact, this symbolism may well be universal and is certainly not limited to comic-strips, as he suggests. It is well known from Egypt where rays emanating from a point form the hieroglyph for ‘star’ and ‘pray’ (Diringer 1948: 60; Mallery 1888-9: 695; Gelb 1969: 98). This same sign was used by the Hittites for the same purpose (Gelb 1969: 98) and by the Sumerians to mean ‘deity’, ‘sky’, and ‘star’ (Gelb 1969: 98). In the Americas, rays leading from points and discs and half discs were used from Alert Bay B.C. to Cuzco, Peru; Arizona to the northeastern woodlands as the signs for star, sun, light, spirit, and morning (Hoffman 1895: 187; Mallery 1888-9: 694-6). I have photographs of an Ojibwe scroll on which rays were used with pictographs of A. muscaria to indicate their luminous and supernatural quality. Finally, there is the Japanese insignia of disc and emanating rays.

I have mentioned above three additional, petroglyphs which were not cited in my article. I unaccountably overlooked one from Smörsten, Tanum (Baltzer 1881) and one located at Simris Nr. 4 (Althin 1945: Taf. 33). A third has recently been uncovered by Herr Göran Andersson of Aby at Lyckan, Tossene Sn. This last is very much like the Aby carving as the mushroom is held in the air by a human figure. This brings the total of known examples of this motif to thirteen and shows a geographic distribution completely around the southern Swedish coast from Tanum to Öland as well as Denmark. Thus, although far from common, the mushroom motif is not nearly as rare and localised as once was thought.

References


Aschehoug (W. Nygaard).

