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Introduction

The visual art of the Late Nordic Bronze Age (NBA) is tantalisingly compelling in how *different* it is (fig. 1.1). Bodily adornment objects, grooming tools, small figurines, and rock surfaces present us with otherworldly creatures, ships that can carry the sun, supernatural anthropomorphs, metamorphoses, instability, and ambiguity. The imagery seems to invite us into a world where bodies can merge and transform and where something can be two things at once, challenging the traditional archaeological toolkit of categorisation and ordering. Throughout the research history of Scandinavian archaeology, this pictorial record has been argued to reflect a cosmology involving sun worship, animal helpers, fertility, and ritual specialists (e.g. Ahlqvist & Vandkilde, 2018; Fredell, 2003; Glob, 1969; Kaul, 1998b, 2005, 2021; Kristiansen & Larsson, 2005; Mandt, 1986; Müller, 1903; Vandkilde, 2013). But in this book, I ask what *more* the visual art does. What does its use reveal about the social reality that people wearing the art navigated in? What ideals are mediated in these bronze artefacts? In what way was the visual art made meaningful and how could it be understood? And how did the art and its properties entangle with human lives in the Late Nordic Bronze Age?

In the pursuit of answers to these questions, a general preoccupation with images and what they are, emerges. Images can be said to be many things simultaneously (cf. Danielsson & Jones, 2020, pp. 9–10), they have an inherent ambiguity within them, meaning that they can be approached from a palette of perspectives. Intriguingly, you get a different answer as to what images are, depending on your perspective: the tool defines the view. This also means that it is probably impossible to produce *one* finite, unambiguous answer as to what images are or what NBA art meant. With this book, however, I offer a suggestion of how best to work with Nordic Bronze Age art, as I lay out and discuss which tools I prefer to think with when approaching the social role of visual art. And which tools can bring our archaeological interpretations and knowledge forward.

1.1. Towards understanding images

Nordic Bronze Age researchers have traditionally been interested in NBA art almost as long as the archaeological discipline has existed. Particularly one question has been at the forefront of many inquiries: where does the ornamentation come from? (e.g. Kaul, 1998b; Kaul, 2013; Kristiansen & Larsson, 2005; Kveiborg *et al*., 2020; Montelius, 1922; Müller, 1921; Ohlmarks, 1945; Thrane, 1975, 1987; Vandkilde, 2013; Wirth, 2010). This question is often followed up with an exploration of external influences, connections between areas, and similarities in ornamentation (see Becker, 2015). While these and similar questions are important and have led to groundbreaking discoveries, they are not the only questions that can be asked of this material. Often, such questions have been accompanied by large datasets that then have been categorised and organised into similarities and differences; in this sense, the images risk becoming 'formularised'.

However, NBA art may be particularly ill suited for such a strategy, as it is characterised by a remarkable degree

a

b

Figure 1.1. Examples of visual art on bodily adornment (a, belt bowl) and grooming tools (b, razors). Photos by author, and modified photos by Roberto Fortuna, Kira Ursem and John Lee, courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark. All figures are not to scale, unless otherwise noted.

of ambiguity. Some motifs embed mirrored, repeated versions of the image within and others playfully incorporate elements from different motifs, ensuring that an image might resemble one being from one angle, and another with a shift in perspective. This side to NBA art has been gaining more and more attention in recent years (e.g. Ahlqvist & Vandkilde 2018; Goldhahn 2019, pp. 112–114; Rédei *et al*. 2020), however, the methodological and theoretical implications deserve more attention than they have thus far been given. Methods relying on categorisation may not be a well-chosen methodology for ornamentation that has deliberately been left ambiguous, meaning that an image may equally belong in several categories at once.

Along similar lines, the growing emphasis on statistical methods in archaeology and associated pressure to integrate them in projects may be at odds with the study of something as multifaceted as NBA art (Sørensen, 2016, 2017). Statistics generally assume that the most direct path to a result is the most likely and rely on measuring the solidity of observations through a number, a measurement of 'robustness'. A high number of variables makes it unlikely that the observations will be statistically significant, meaning that one is advised to keep the number of variables as low as possible. This involves a trade-off; the use of statistics may give insight into complex datasets and patterns of behaviour, but it also risks neglecting cultural complexity (Fowler, 2013, p. 24) and, in this case, differences between motifs that the NBA artists producing them had felt important enough to emphasise.

As such, a general preoccupation with combining insights from statistical analysis with theoretical approaches guides the framework of this book. Statistics are mostly applied as guiding tools that serve the purpose of directing attention to patterns that demand further exploration rather than serving ready-made results – in this sense, statistics are their own type of data. These data have guided the methodology employed in the book as they have made me aware of the need for an approach specifically tailored to NBA art. My exploration of natural scientific methods in the study of Late NBA art – and derived difficulties – has been instrumental in developing a framework for working with different modes of ambiguity in NBA imagery (see Sørensen, 2016). Instead of reducing the ambiguity or polyvalence by collapsing categories or declaring the 'stylisation' of NBA art too problematic to work with, the employment of ambiguity treats this concept as a productive space for further analysis and in some cases, even a result.

As such, *one* single unambiguous interpretation as to what NBA art *represents* will not be attempted, i.e. whether the ornamented bronze artefacts depict horses *or* ships *or* birds etc., and, following this, which aspect of the pictorial record was the most important (contra Kaul, 1998b, pp. 110–112). Similarly, the book is not concerned with identifying discursive meaning of the imagery, i.e., whether it can be regarded as representing a specific deity or myth, in some cases written down centuries after they supposedly were in circulation, (Kaul, 1998b, p. 50; Nordquist & Whittaker, 2007). Recent studies of the cultural transmission of folklore illustrate how orally transmitted information can change radically through various transmission processes, in some cases enough that it becomes unrecognisable. They also show the persistence of such narratives across time and space (Graça da Silva & Tehrani, 2016; Tehrani *et al*., 2016; Tehrani & D'Huy, 2017), lending support to the idea that myths and meanings *may* have existed cross-culturally in Bronze Age contexts. While this possibly was the case, focusing on the material within its social context generally seems the most productive way to proceed; we lack knowledge about the structure between different areas to make believable hypotheses about how Indo-European myths could have spread and transformed (Becker, 2015, pp. 47–82).

Engaging with Late NBA art has gradually shifted my understanding of this imagery as a static 'carrier of meaning' – something to be decoded and translated – into dynamic aspects of material culture with diverse and transformative functions (Danielsson & Jones, 2020, p. 1). In this sense, the approach to art undertaken in this book aligns with those of scholars who focus on the social relations that art engages in – its social significance – rather than discursive meaning (e.g. Becker, 2015; Eriksen, 2022; Fahlander, 2020; Fowler, 2021; Gell, 1998; Goldhahn, 2019b; Jones, 2017, 2020a, 2020b). As such, the framework laid out here examines the social aspects of the art and how they entangle with human bodies, lives, and experience.

While art-historical perspectives have long been central to the study of visual culture, my concern here is not to reconstruct artistic style or symbolism as ends in themselves. Instead, I focus on the sociological dimension of the imagery, asking how these objects worked within social contexts, how they related to human bodies, and how they contributed to the negotiation of gender and identity. This shift in emphasis reflects both the limitations of an art-historical framework for material without textual accompaniment and the advantages of a sociological perspective for addressing the questions pursued in this book.

The answer as to what images are is that they are multifaceted and fluid. They may be regarded as static categories representing orally transmitted information about cosmology, but they are also polyvalent entities, capable of being and doing different things at once. In this book, NBA images can be lines engraved in metal, strategies of legitimisation, compressed concepts, gendered identity expressed through differentiation and a way of relating to reality. Allowing the images to be all these things (and recognising that to the people of the past they may have been something else or something more) is a more holistic approach to the material than only considering how we can 'read off' meaning, and, I would argue, a more fruitful one.

1.2. Aim and material

In line with this understanding of images, this book targets the social role of visual art in the Late NBA, specifically the relationship between gender and ontology in the use and structure of the art. The extent of the NBA cultural area – as conventionally defined through distinct but internally similar material culture, powered by access to extensive trans-European exchange networks (Sørensen, 1989; Vandkilde, 2014) – constitutes the main area of study (fig. 1.2). The Late NBA, conventionally defined as Periods IV–VI in Montelius' system (c. 1100–500 BCE; Montelius 1885), constitutes the chronological scope of this study. Within this span, most of the material stems from Period V (c. 950–800 BCE), meaning that this circa 200-year-long phase often takes centre stage.

In order to situate the following discussion, a brief overview of the chronological framework of the Late Nordic Bronze Age is necessary. The period is conventionally divided into Periods IV–VI in Montelius' system, corresponding roughly to 1100–500 BCE (Montelius 1885). Period IV (c. 1100–950 BCE) is often regarded as a transitional phase, marked by shifts in burial practices and the introduction of new decorative styles (Baudou 1960). Period V (c. 950–800 BCE) sees the consolidation of these changes, with the emergence of large hoards, distinctive regional ornaments, and a diversification of decorative motifs (Sprockhoff 1956; Kaul 1998). Period VI (c. 800–500 BCE) is characterised by further developments in metalwork and ornamentation, alongside evidence for shifting long-distance contacts and cultural transformations that foreshadow the Early Iron Age (Earle *et al*. 2015; Vandkilde *et al*. 2022).

These chronological divisions provide a useful scaffolding for the present study, especially in relation to the catalogue and table of ornaments introduced below. The Montelian period system is widely used in NBA research and has been supported by available C14 dates, contexts as well as European comparative archaeological material (Thrane, 2013, p. 749). However, some amendments to the system have been suggested (i.e. Olsen *et al*. 2011; Kneisel 2013), and as such, the question of chronology is further treated and assessed in this book.

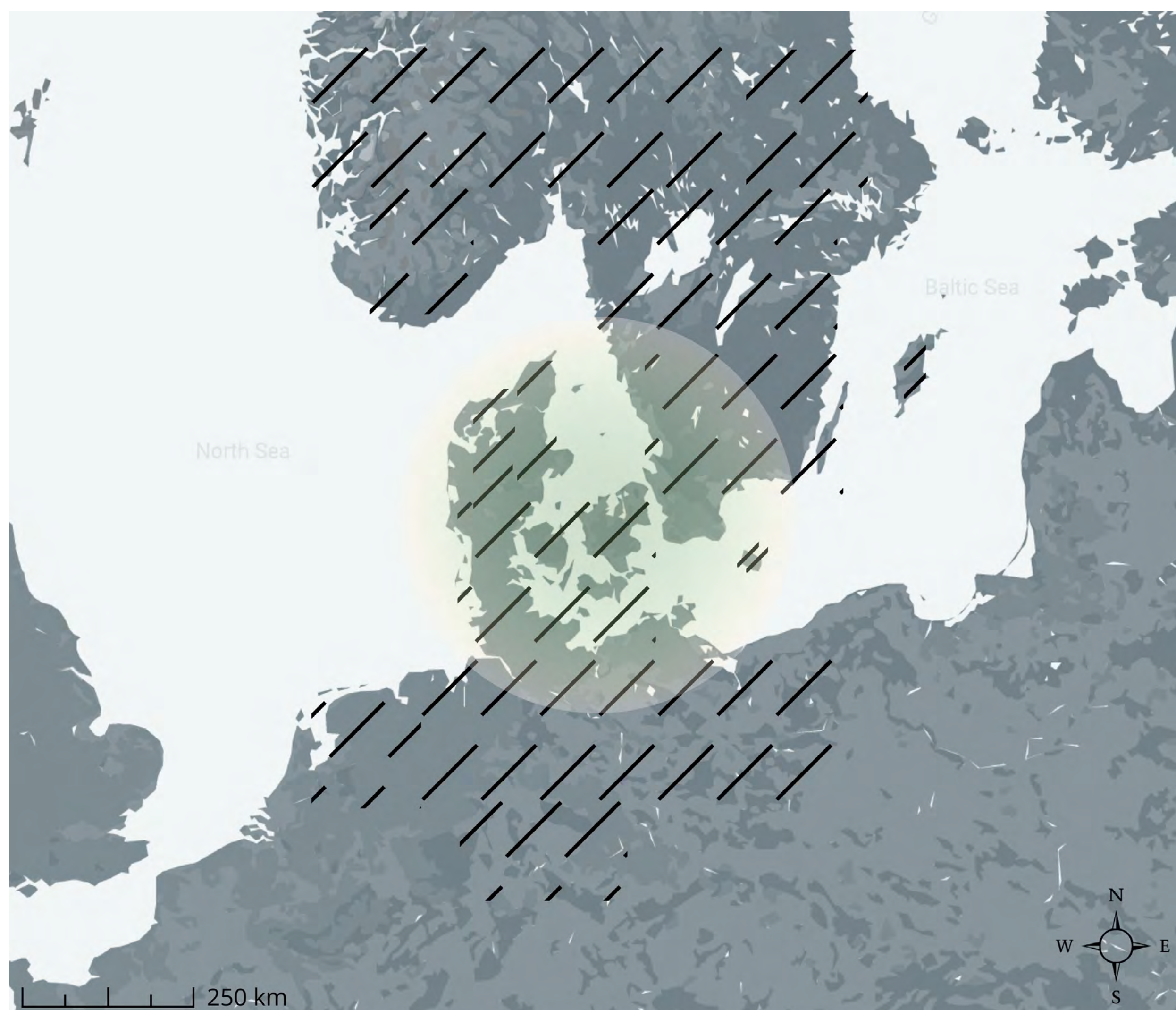

Figure 1.2. The area of study, the Nordic Bronze Age by convention. The majority of the finds discussed in the publication stem from the area marked by a translucent circle. Illustration by author.

1.2.1. Research questions and scope

This study's focus on the social aspects of Late NBA visual art, means that it is concerned with the relationship between art and the people *behind* the art. As a result, the choice of material stems from contexts where the encounter between human and art most obviously would have taken place: the ornamented objects carried and used directly on the human body, here often referred to as personal objects, or even 'body-objects'. The direct connection between object, art, and human, I argue, establishes a link between the visual art and its social context that enables the study of past people and their worlds. Rock art lacks this direct connection to human bodies, and as such, I focus on portable art. Incidentally, the personal objects are main media for the application of figurative imagery in the Late NBA (besides rock art), providing a rich and extensive empirical foundation for the discussions to follow.

My study mainly concerns belt bowls (*hængekar*) and razors (fig. 1.1), as these account for some of the most quantitatively and qualitatively impressive Late NBA art. As many of these objects show evidence of extensive use (Goldhahn, 2019a, p. 122; Kaul, 1998b, pp. 148–157; Kristiansen, 1974, pp. 56–57; Treherne, 1995, p. 121), there is good reason to consider these artefacts to have formed part of daily or repeated experience for the people using them. A dataset of the objects included in this study, listing their geographic context, typological date (per. IV–VI), their art, and any other relevant information, can be found after the main text. The dataset comprises of 415 belt bowls and 351 razors. Both object types are found mostly within the NBA cultural area, but a few belt bowls stem from as far away as Poland, the Netherlands and Switzerland (fig. 1.3). The study also incorporates neck-rings, belt 'buckles' (see fig. 1.4), spectacle fibulas, knives, tweezers, combs, miniature swords, and a few swords, which are used more anecdotally and not always explicitly mentioned throughout the book. In total, the material foundation of personal objects amounts to more than 1000 objects. Some, comparatively, more unusual objects are also included in the discussions, i.e. the Viksø helmets and a group of small bronze figurines. Whereas the other objects mentioned all were used on the human body, the bronze figurines included instead *display* human bodies.

Generally, the focus is on figurative art, but some findings made make it questionable whether a binary distinction between figurative and non-figurative art is accurate or helpful for this context. As such, the book can be said to target a spectrum of diverse modes of art, some almost naturalistic and others almost entirely ambiguous or vague (see Sørensen, 2016).

Whereas some personal objects have emerged as stray finds, we do have a fairly good idea of the original archaeological context of the belt bowls and razors. The razors formed part of a rather standardised set of grave goods commonly referred to as a toiletry kit. Tweezers, awls and lanceolate tools of unknown function are common in these assemblages, which were included in unburnt condition in urn burials along with cremated human remains (Bradley, 2006; Kaul, 2005; Treherne, 1995). In almost all cases where it has been possible to anthropologically assign sex to the skeletal material, the bones are male (Müller, 1897; cf. Thedéen, 2003). Though renowned for their elaborate ornamentation, only ca. 1 in 10 of these razors are decorated (Goldhahn, 2019a, p. 100);

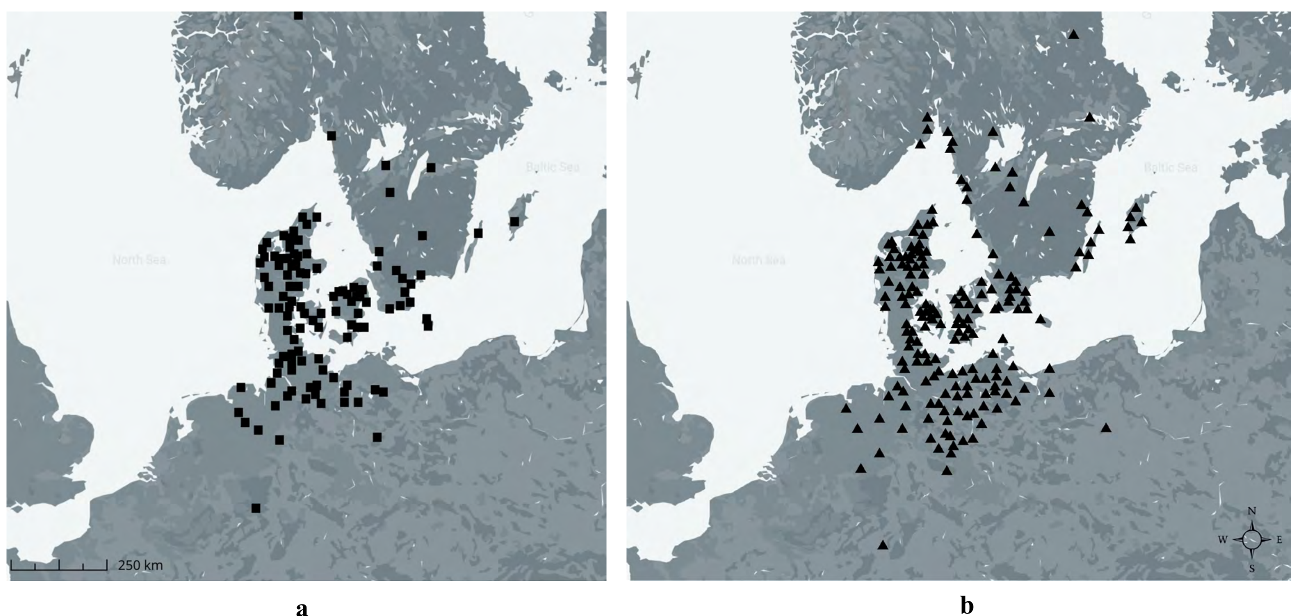

Figure 1.3. a: Distribution map of the find spots of razors and b: Distribution map of the find spots of the bel bowls included in this study. Note the wider distribution of belt bowls that extend for example further into Germany, Sweden and even in a few instances as far as Switzerland and Poland. Illustration by author.

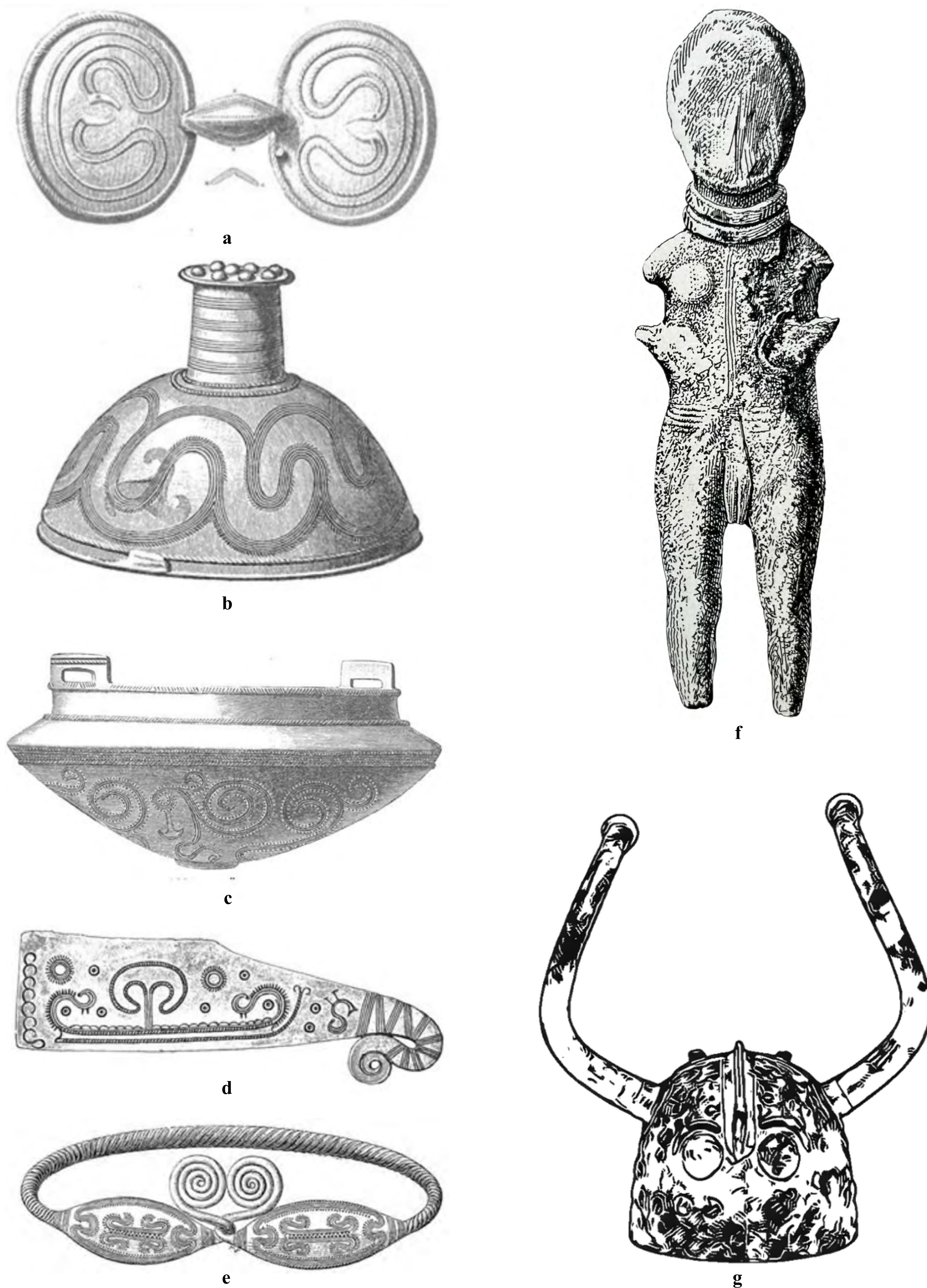

Figure 1.4. Examples of some of the types of portable art in focus in this book. a: Spectacle fibular brooch. b: Belt 'buckle'. c: Belt bowl. d: Razor. e: Neck-ring. f: Figurine. g: Viksø helmet. Modified from Müller, 1921, figs. 142, 145, 186; Montelius, 1922 figs. 1346, 1390, 1396 and modified photo by Lennart Larsen, courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark.

in contrast, the majority of belt bowls are ornamented (Höckmann, 2021).

The belt bowls stem from hoards where they are found with a wide array of material culture. Bits of amber and resin or wooden 'amulets', animal bones, braided hair, and in one case the cremated bones of an adult male (Goldhahn, 2019a, p. 122; Sprockhoff & Höckmann, 1979), constitute some of the more unusual finds in these hoards. Celts, horse gear and fragmentary swords are also fairly common, but most often, the belt bowls are found together with other bodily ornamentation. Neck-rings, belt buckles, arm rings, spirals (for hair or fingers) are common as well as brooches. Most often, the hoarded objects are found placed inside the belt bowl, or the belt bowl has been placed on top of the other artefacts, bottom up, as if a lid. Generally, many of these hoards appear to have been deliberately arranged (Kristiansen, 1974; Levy, 1982). A few razors have, however, been found in hoards.

Belt bowls were initially thought to have been suspended in a horizontal position, which is why they were originally named *hængekar,* i.e. hanging vessels. However, based on the similarity to belt plates and belt boxes, which are found lying on the stomach of female skeletons in Early Bronze Age graves, and on a per. V. representation of a woman on a knife handle who appears to have a round object strapped to her back (fig. 1.5), it appears that the objects were female jewellery, worn on the belt, possibly on the back. As such, Kristiansen has argued, they should be named belt bowls as this term fits better with their intended purpose (Kristiansen, 2013, p. 760). They are generally accepted as exclusively female jewellery based on these finds along with their frequent pairing with other bodily ornamentation, also thought to have been attributed females based on their well-established relationship to female skeletal remains in the Early NBA (i.e. neck-rings) (Felding, 2020). The Late NBA only rarely offers expressions of female gender in its burial record and as such, no opportunity to firmly link anthropologically female bones with the belt bowls; however, one Swedish grave (Hovgården in Scania) contained cremated bones of a young adult woman and three miniature clay models of belt bowls (Oldeberg, 1950). All this offers some circumstantial support for considering the belt bowls as primarily female artefacts (Gibbs, 1998, p. 235; Melheim, 2015, p. 85).

In the Early NBA, the relationship between anthropologically designated female and male bones and particular structuration in material culture suggests that some objects reflect gender categories corresponding to these anthropological categories (Bergerbrant, 2007; Sørensen, 1997). Recent work has further strengthened this point, emphasizing how osteological and artefactual evidence intersect to signal differentiated gender categories. Felding's (2020) analysis of bodily adornments in female graves demonstrates that particular ornaments operated as durable gendered markers, while Stott (2021) highlights the patterned associations between male skeletal remains and specific weapon types. Together, these studies underline the interpretive potential of linking anthropological sex

Figure 1.5. Knife handle (from Itzehoe, Germany) showing a woman with a string skirt, neck-ring, ear-ring, holding a vessel and carrying a belt bowl on her back. Photos by Roberto Fortuna and Kira Ursem, courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark, modified.

Table 1.1 Contexts and associations of the female attire and representation in the Early and Late NBA. Adapted from Gibbs 1998.

Early NBA	Late NBA
Many rich female graves	*Few detectable female burials*
Some female objects in hoards	*Majority of hoards contain female objects*
Female items rarely combined with other objects in hoards	*Female, male and ritual objects combined in hoards*
Females rarely represented in art	*Represented by female figurines*

with material culture when considering gender identities in the Early NBA. This means that some objects and their combinations can be argued to communicate and construct gendered categories that link up with female and male sexed bodies.

It is difficult to establish whether this organisation of sex and gender continued in the Late NBA as the dominating burial practice has left only few preserved bodies (Sørensen & Rebay-Salisbury, 2023). Furthermore, the number of female graves decreases drastically from the Early to the Late NBA (table 1.1) (Gibbs, 1998). A few clues are, however provided by the sparse material: The aforementioned correspondence between male bones and razors in the Late NBA appears to have been carried over directly from the Early NBA and as such indicates that this male gendered identity retained its relationship to biologically defined sex. The figurines depicting human bodies pair biologically defined female anatomy with bodily ornamentation; as such, breasts, sexual organs, neck-rings, and belt ornaments are demarcated on these statuettes, pointing to a continuous correspondence between sex and gender here, too. However, the female figurines and the belt bowls do not necessarily connote the same type of female identity and as such, an alignment between female sex and gender may not have been universal or stable.

Summarising all these considerations, currently the archaeological material, incomplete and circumstantial as it is, largely corroborates considering belt bowls and figurines as female gendered and sexed artefacts. The epistemological trouble associated with pondering about female gender in the Late NBA is perhaps one of the reasons why it has rarely been attempted, and so, research inquiries about Late NBA women have often been hesitant to go beyond the statement that *something* happens to female identity after the Early NBA (e.g. Gibbs, 1998; Jensen, 1993; Kaul, 1998b, p. 41). However, if the response to the lack of female bodies in the Late NBA is to not ask about women, I find it more appropriate to proceed with the evidence they seemingly *did* leave behind: their ornamented objects. Comparable challenges have been addressed in other contexts. Kneisel's (2012) study of decorated face urns shows how imagery can stand in for absent or fragmentary bodies, allowing questions of gender and identity to be pursued even where skeletal material is scarce. This perspective is useful for the Late NBA, where bodily remains are limited, yet ornamented objects and figurative representations provide alternative routes into understanding female identities. My decision to proceed this way further links up with the feminist standpoint employed in this book (Wylie, 2007), which I cover in more detail in the chapters to follow. The question of the relationship between the belt bowls, female gender and female sex and potential ramifications is a recurring theme throughout the book.

The data for this study has mainly been collected from two central publications: *Ships on Bronzes*, which partly consists of a catalogue of all razors with ship ornamentation found in present-day Denmark (Kaul, 1998) and *Die Gegossenen Bronzebecken der Jüngeren Nordischen Bronzezeit* (Sprockhoff & Höckmann, 1979), a catalogue of all known belt bowls found prior to publication. Further material was collected from Dotzler, 1984; Hansen, 1923; Heske, 2012; Höckmann, 2021; Ohlmarks, 1945; Oldeberg, 1935; Storn, 2008; Thedéen, 2003; Wollentz, 2013, during visits to museums and through photographs provided by various museums[1]. Artefacts that could not be viewed either in publications or directly by me were excluded from this study to not rely on written descriptions of the ornamentation. Rather than using Kaul's typological-iconographic chronology (Kaul, 1998, pp. 87–107), the razors have been assigned a typological date using Baudou's razor handle typology, which is anchored in the radiocarbon dates available to him at the time (Baudou, 1960, pp. 29–39, 199–219) (see fig. 1.6). This was done to avoid circular argumentation (i.e. investigating the chronological development of art anchored in a typology based on art). Similarly, my chronological designation of belt bowls follows Sprockhoff's dating system, which rests on a modified version of Baudou's chronology (Höckmann, 1979, pp. 17–19) (see fig. 1.6).

1.3. The structure of this book

Any discussion of structure must begin with a reflection on how the word 'art' is used in this study. My focus on and use of the term may seem controversial to some due to the Euro-American, representationalist notions tied up in the term and the way it has been wielded in the field of art history (Jones, 2020a, pp. 545–546). However, I fear that by reserving the term for contemporary, Western contexts, we automatically assign everything that does not conform

[1] National Museum of Denmark, Vendsyssel Historiske Museum, Viborg Museum, Odense Bys Museer, Museum Thy, Moesgaard Museum, Bornholms Museum, Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the British Museum.

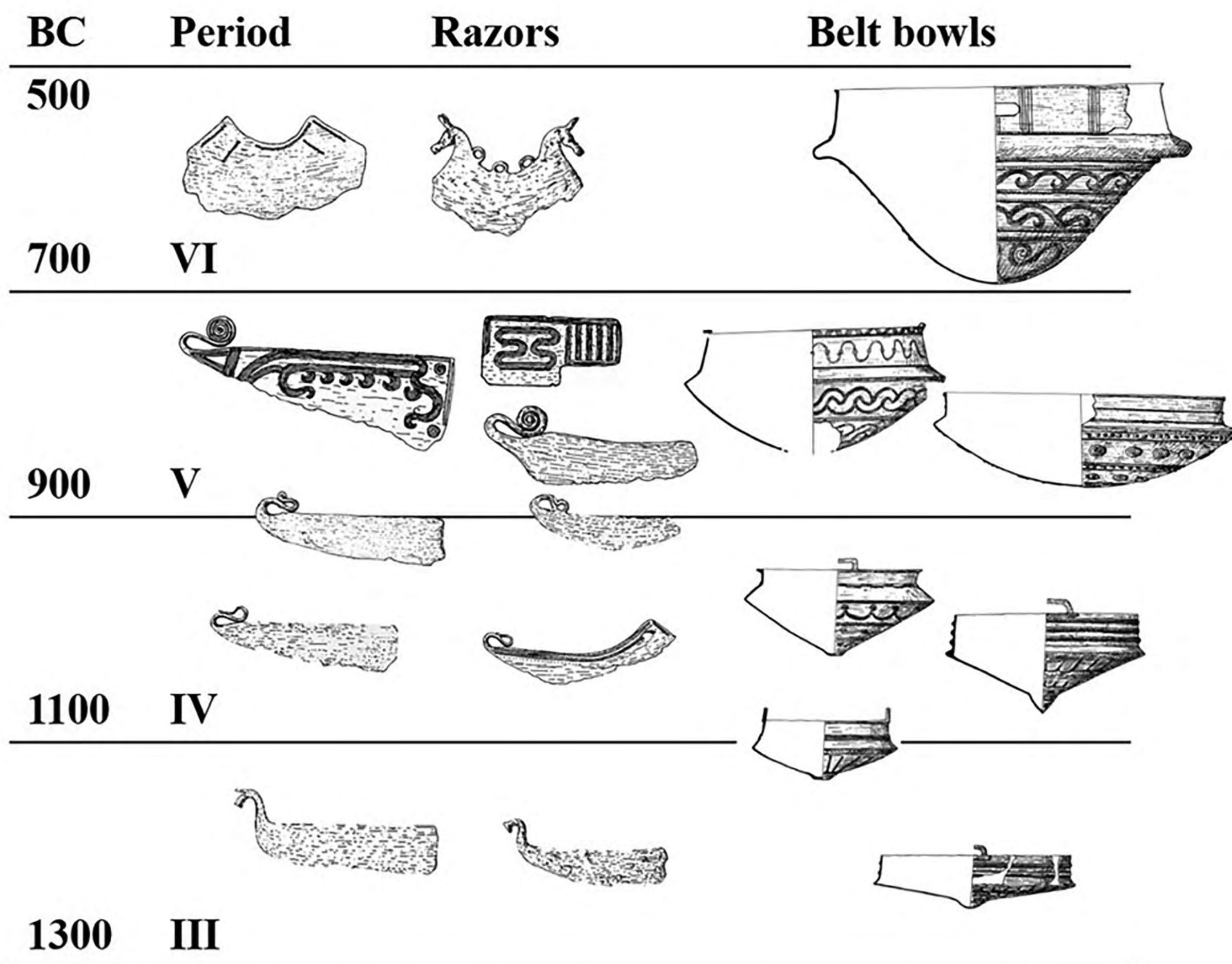

Figure 1.6. Baudou's typo-chronological ordering of razors and belt bowls, here modified to only include the object types with ornamentation, i.e. the ones included in this study. Modified from Baudou, 1960, taf. VII-VIII, XIV-XV.

to this idea of art, aesthetics, beauty, or value to a process of 'Othering' with associated troubling exoticisation and primitivizing notions (see Russell, 2021; Sjöstrand, 2017, pp. 375–376). Historically, these 'Other' forms of aesthetic expression tend to be thought of as 'crafts' or 'ornamentation', enforcing a hierarchy that regards art as the ultimate achievement of human civilisation (cf. Braidotti, 2013), treating Western ideals as a baseline for evaluating everything else (Phillips & Steiner, 1999, pp. 10–12; Porr, 2019). So even if the term art has problematic associations, to me it seems more problematic to leave it out entirely. That does not mean that we should not try to specify what we mean by the use of the term and, importantly, restrain from passing judgement over the aesthetic value of this art (Jones, 2018, pp. 17–18).

When I refer to the 'aesthetic properties' of the personal objects – the engravings applied to the surface or the shape of the object – I use the term 'art' as a broad denominator. My use of the term is deliberately broad and is not intended to capture the original purpose of the object; that is, I do not suggest that belt bowls and razors were 'art objects' to the people using them – I think they were something more. Rather, I employ the term as a means to refer to aspects of an object that engage the visual sense (and, indeed other senses, too); as such my use of the term broadly aligns with Alfred Gell's (1998, pp. 5–7), which is also why I use the terms art and visual art roughly interchangeably, the term 'visual' added, when I wish to clearly distinguish the art I examine from other aspects of 'the arts' i.e. music, theatre, dancing, etc. However, my approach to visual art differs significantly from Gell's in other aspects. There are however narrative elements visible within aspects of Late NBA art, meaning that the book moves back and forth between various approaches and understandings of the dynamic and polyvalent qualities of art.

Related terms such as 'ornamentation', 'iconography' and 'symbols' are every so often employed as broadly synonymous with art – a decision made to improve readability and making the text more enjoyable. This is however only done to a relatively limited extent as I am aware of the representational associations of especially 'iconography', which are not necessarily appropriate in the context. The term 'symbols' is furthermore sometimes employed to connote paraphernalia; even though the effects of some of the paraphernalia discussed go beyond symbolism.

1.3.1. Three analytical levels

To move from terminology to practice, this book addresses its aim via three analytical levels, utilising formal, iconographic and relational analysis, which together target what the art looks like, what it means and what it does. These three levels have come about organically through consultancy with various previous approaches to similar material or questions (Danielsson & Jones, 2020; Janik, 2020; Jones, 2020a; Sørensen, 2000, 2006, 2012) as well as inputs from colleagues. The terminology of these levels – formal, iconographic, and relational – is rooted in art historical analysis where *formal* and *iconographic* analysis approach composition and symbolism in art respectively, whereas the term *relational* refers to the properties of art inferred by the relationships it partakes in (Jones, 2020a, p. 546).

These levels are not intended to impose rigid categories but to provide a flexible framework for exploring the Late NBA imagery in ways that capture its complexity. Together, the levels form the foundation for the analyses presented in the chapters that follow.

Each of these analytical levels has been developed to suit the particularities of prehistoric archaeological material, where textual commentary and specific cultural knowledge are absent. While art-historical analysis has often prioritised representational meaning and symbolism, such an approach proves less fruitful here. The imagery of the Late NBA resists a reading that depends on fixed iconological categories or specific cultural knowledge transmitted in texts (cf. Leuthold 2010). Instead, a sociological perspective, attentive to the social significance and entanglements of art, is better suited to addressing the questions posed here.

In the pursuit of the social role of art, the majority of the results and discussions are based on the iconographic analysis, which concerns itself with what we see on the objects, their interpretation and associated meaning and use; in other words, *what does the art mean?* Here, I do not wish to connote the word *meaning* with *representation*, and the goal is not to formulate a final, unambiguous answer to what the renderings on these objects represent. Rather, it is a pursuit of the social significance behind the possible interpretations of the renderings and the way they were employed in society. This analytical level explores how the art was meaningful in its social use and its connection to the people displaying it. This ties in with my focus on cosmology: cosmology here is not treated as a fixed symbolic code or doctrine but as a set of ideas and practices through which art articulated relationships between humans, deities, landscapes, and celestial bodies. Cosmology emerges through imagery not (just) as representation but rather as practice – enacted, circulated, and embodied.

The relational level – *what does the art do?* – is closely entangled with the iconographic level with some overlaps as it considers what we gain from a shift in perspective allowing the art the type of animacy that it supposedly held in the NBA (cf. Ahlqvist & Vandkilde, 2018; Oma, 2013). This level plays with art as a set of relations rather than representation as it asks about the effects of the art. Some of these effects are concrete and measurable, others are emotional or psychological and intangible. The relational level views the art within its context, not just understood in archaeological terms but rather as an entity engaging in a meshwork of other entities (Danielsson & Jones, 2020; cf. Ingold, 2011, pp. 85–91; Jones, 2020a). Here, ontology becomes central: it concerns the way that I engage with the art, which is in opposition to epistemological approaches (sensu Alberti and Marshall, 2009). As such ontology is used to highlight how imagery configures categories of personhood, gender, and spirituality, and how these categories may differ from our own modern assumptions. Thus, ontology is approached through the material and visual practices themselves, rather than imposed from outside.

These two levels are underpinned by formal analysis, another analytical level. This level concerns the structure of the art, the character of the engravings and the composition of discrete motifs; in other words *what does the art look like?* For example, it is informative to view the art on an object and disentangle the motif from the structure: what do the lines look like? What is the composition like, symmetrical, repeated? Such enquiries reveal that some ornamentation crosscuts motifs and social categories and lead to findings that are then informative when analysed iconographically and relationally. In this way, the formal level anchors the exploration of cosmology and ontology, providing the concrete patterns through which broader interpretive questions can be pursued.

While my theoretical stance is primarily grounded in archaeological debates, it also resonates with wider cross-disciplinary discussions about the nature of images, suggesting that images should not be treated as passive carriers of meaning but as active participants in social life, shaping practices, relations, and even knowledge (Mitchell 2005; Leuthold 2011; Rosengren 2012). Such perspectives provide a useful backdrop for the more specific frameworks engaged here, serving as a reminder that Late NBA imagery can productively be approached as dynamic, socially embedded, and contextually grounded rather than as fixed or closed systems of representation.

Beyond the chapters outlining the theoretical and methodological framework, the main analytical contribution of the book is presented in three chapters that follow this three-tier structure, starting with formal analysis, moving on to iconographic and relational levels. Effectively, the three levels inform each other and are all invoked to different degrees throughout the book. This approach targets the central question of the social role of Late NBA visual art through multiple scales: from microscopic analysis of individual motif details on razors to largescale systems of gender and ontology.