

Tour of the exhibition

Humans. Carved in Stone

17/9/2021 – 16/1/2022

They're the first of the large-sized sculptures in Europe: so far we know of more than 1,300 human-shaped stone stelae, and their number is steadily increasing with new discoveries. Found over a wide area between the Atlantic Ocean and the Caucasus, these stone likenesses with human features are eloquent witnesses to the Neolithic period. The Swiss National Museum's major autumn exhibition brings together for the first time around 40 stelae that have never been shown side by side in this form, including some spectacular new finds.

Stelae and menhirs

The exhibition opens with a monolith from Bevaix (Canton of Neuchâtel). This artefact is an example of the 'menhirs' erected in many places as early as the 5th millennium BC. These large, oblong stones, roughly hewn or even left unworked, suggest the barest outline of a human form. They are considered the forerunners of the stelae that became widespread throughout Europe around a thousand years later. The difference between a menhir and a human-shaped stele becomes apparent to visitors when they view the following set of sculptures from the Canton of Valais, including a significant new find from 2018. In contrast to the menhirs, the stelae have a head that is set apart from the body on broad, square shoulders. The face, which is usually very rudimentary, consists of a prominent nose and eyes or eyebrow arches; most do not feature a mouth. Arms are engraved into the stone body or executed in relief. Particular emphasis was placed on the adjuncts carried or worn on the body: weapons, jewellery and other elements of dress are depicted with meticulous care and detail. A belt separates the upper body from the lower body. Exhibited together with the associated excavation documentation, plans and photographs, the sculptures on display give an insight into Switzerland's most significant find site for prehistoric sculptures: in Sion, on the Avenue du Petit-Chasseur and in Don Bosco, more than 30 decorated stelae have been discovered so far.

Styles and regions

The second part of the exhibition looks at the human-shaped stelae as a European phenomenon. Sculptures from Italy, France and Germany are contrasted and

compared by way of illustrating this idea. They are grouped according to their respective regions of origin: Aosta, Trentino-Alto Adige, Lunigiana in Tuscany, Occitanie and Provence, Sardinia and Saxony-Anhalt. Each region is characterised by its local idiosyncrasies of style: from the small, seemingly asexual Provençale specimens consisting only of a head, to the stelae from Occitanie with their intricate hairstyles and tattoos, and the stelae from Trentino-Alto Adige to which genders can clearly be assigned, including representations of children. From Sardinia's statue menhirs with their stereotypical symbols, to the sculptures from Aosta, which are so similar to the Sion specimens that it is believed they were created by the same people. All are evidence of the diverse design and style of stelae from the period between the 4th and 3rd millennia BC.

Despite this variety, there are some common features. The body is represented in quite abstract terms, yet with precise rendering of details. Certain types of weapons that appear repeatedly on stelae also point to a far-reaching network of relationships among individual Neolithic communities. A lively exchange took place, and contemporaries understood the sculptures as a demonstration of power by a person or a clan.

Symbols and power

The third part of the exhibition sheds light on the epoch in which the human-shaped sculptures were created. It was a time of upheaval and innovation, shaped by, among other things, the invention of the wheel and the plough and the use of copper to produce status symbols. Archaeological artefacts are juxtaposed against their two-dimensional depiction on the stelae. Representations of a person driving a plough pulled by two oxen can be found on stelae in the Val Camonica (IT) and on petroglyphs there and at Mont Bégou (FR). They provide information about the use of domestic animals, not just as a source of food, but also as draft animals. At the same time, these are the earliest depictions of the hook plough, which simplified the cultivation of the fields and enabled larger groups of people to be fed. Weapons such as hatchets, axes, daggers and bows, sometimes in large numbers, are considered the characteristic feature of male stelae. They identify their carriers as warriors, important members of a community in an age when violent confrontations were increasingly common. This is evidenced by smashed skulls and bones with arrowheads still stuck in them. Meticulous geometric patterns cover the surfaces of the stelae from Sion and Aosta. They adorn tunics, loincloths and belts. It was only with the invention of the loom that such eye-catching articles of clothing could actually be made. Some fragments made of bast, decorated with triangles and

checkerboard patterns, have also been preserved in Switzerland's lakes. Once upon a time, the clothing patterns probably provided information about the status, gender, age or group affiliation of the person depicted.

Religion and tradition

The fourth and final part of the exhibition explores the meaning and purpose of the stelae. The items of clothing carved in stone, the jewellery, the weapons and other adjuncts are part of the mortal world. It therefore seems logical to interpret the stelae as representations of high-ranking people who belonged to the leading elite. This is supported by the exclusivity of the items worn on the body.

These powerful people, in whose honour stelae were erected, were venerated as ancestors after their death, perhaps even as deified beings. The sculptures therefore played an important role in cultic behaviour in particular. Like lines of stone ancestors, some of them were erected near cult sites or graves. Those locations thus served as memorial sites where community celebrations and rituals were regularly conducted. This was how a clan celebrated its continued existence and maintained its power. Particularly in an agrarian society, the ancestor cult legitimised the claim to land and thus also access to resources.

What are so far the oldest known examples of wall paintings north of the Alps come from the interior of a cult building in Ludwigshafen dating from around 3,860 BC. The murals depict rows of female figures with sculpted breasts, alternating with plant motifs. In the exhibition these murals are juxtaposed with a female ancestral representation in stone. Representations of explicitly female figures are related to a kind of fertility cult. Female ancestors, venerated as primal mothers, guarantee the continued existence of the clan and at the same time ensure the fertility of the soil, a rich harvest and well-fed cattle.

Epilogue

Celestial bodies were also the subject of ritual worship. They determined the timing of sowing and harvest, and regulated people's lives. During the 3rd millennium BC, the cult of sun worship in particular became more and more important. From ca. 2,500 BC onwards, depictions of small human figures crowned with a sun-like halo appear – indicating a reference to the divine, perhaps a representation of a priest? In Sion too, a correlation between the head of a figure and the sun can be observed. Stele 1 from Petit-Chasseur was later reworked: where the face once was, sunbeams have been carved into the stone. The image of

the human has been virtually supplanted by the sun – new religious beliefs are likely to have triggered this change in signification. While the cult of worshipping celestial bodies continued into the Bronze Age, in most places the practice of oversized representation of human figures ceased from the 2nd millennium BC, and was only resumed in the Iron Age.

Jacqueline Perifanakis and Luca Tori,
Exhibition Curators