



## DIVINE FOOTPRINTS. TRACES OF COSMOLOGICAL ARCHETYPES AND PREHISTORIC RELIGION ON THE ROCK FACES

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**ABSTRACT** - According to our knowledge, carved footprints appear in a variety of prehistoric cultures and rock art sites during a period of 3,000–4,000 years. This indicates that the carved footprint represents a phenomenon that contains condensed symbolic information of an unusual significance, strength and life span. In that respect the footprint might, just like the cup mark, be seen as a pictogram and an archetypical symbol. It has been interpreted in different ways: as a sign of an invisible deity that could not be depicted but announced its presence by its footprint, as a sign of adoration or as representing a deceased person. However, this does not necessarily mean that all engraved footprints have the same design or the same meaning. Quite the opposite! This is also clearly testified by the dispersed appearance of this symbol in the prehistoric record. And although this has its expression in the petroglyphs, it can also be said to represent an artistic perspective with a broad application. Illustrative examples from different contexts from Scandinavia, Italy and Israel from the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Ages are presented and analyzed.

**RIASSUNTO** - Stando alle attuali conoscenze, le orme incise fanno la loro comparsa in diverse culture preistoriche e siti di arte rupestre nel corso di un periodo da 3000 a 4000 anni fa. Ciò indica che l'orma incisa rappresenta un fenomeno che condensa in sé informazioni simboliche di significato, forza e durata non comuni. In relazione a tale considerazione, l'orma potrebbe, allo stesso modo della coppella, essere considerata un pittogramma e un simbolo archetipo. È stata interpretata in modi diversi: come il segno di una divinità invisibile che non può essere rappresentata ma che annuncia la sua presenza attraverso le sue orme, come segno di adorazione o come rappresentazione di una persona deceduta. Tuttavia, ciò non implica necessariamente che tutte le orme incise debbano avere lo stesso stile o lo stesso significato, al contrario! Tale considerazione è anche chiaramente comprovata dalla distribuzione irregolare di questo simbolo nei dati preistorici. E sebbene esso abbia la sua espressione per eccellenza nei petroglifi, potrebbe anche essere considerato come rappresentazione di una prospettiva artistica di larga applicazione. Nell'intervento saranno presentati e analizzati esempi esplicativi da diversi contesti in Scandinavia, Italia e Israele, di epoca neolitica, delle Età del Bronzo e del Ferro.

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### INTRODUCTION

Rock art is one of the most widespread cultural legacies of humankind. It is found in all continents except for the Arctic and Antarctic. It is known from more than 2,000,000 sites estimated to contain approximately 20,000,000 engraved or painted images. The oldest examples of rock art yet known were discovered in the Blombos Cave outside Cape Town in South Africa. It consists of two small pieces of ochre with geometric patterns that were engraved about 75,000 year ago (Henshilwood 2006:82p). The masterpieces on the walls of the Chauvet cave in France were painted some 30,000 years ago (Clottes 2002:44p), and the oldest engravings with similar motifs were made in Foz Coa in Portugal about 10,000 years later (de Carvahlo, Zilhao & Aubry 1996:17 and 51; Zilhao 1997:434). In Scandinavia, the oldest engravings are of similar type but are estimated to be less than half as old (Gjerde 2010:196, fig. 99).

One peculiar trait often observed in rock art is the resemblance of images and motifs through time and space. A striking such example is the cup mark that appears in the Australian Palaeolithic, European Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age as well as in the slash-and-burn Finnish culture in historical times century (Bladh 1999). This probably makes the cup-mark the most ubiquitous symbol carved into stone. Another intriguing rock art symbol is the footprint, which occurs less frequently, but is still widespread in its distribution. Carved footprints appear in a variety of prehistoric cultures and rock art sites during a period of at least 5,000 years. This signals that it represents a phenomenon that contains symbolic information of unusual significance, strength and life. In that respect the footprint may, like the cup mark, be seen as a pictogram and/or an archetypical symbol – an engraved sign that would be understood by everyone like a universal symbol. It has been interpreted in different ways: as a sign of an invisible deity that could not be depicted but only announces its presence by its footprint (Almgren 1962), as a sign of adoration or as representing a deceased person (Anati

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1994:166; Gavaldo 2009:301pp). However, does this mean that all engraved footprints have the same design or the same meaning? And further, if so, is this testified by the dispersed appearance of this symbol in the prehistoric record?

Before turning to the presentation of some possibly indicative examples of this situation, it seems appropriate to elaborate a little further on the concepts of pictogram and archetype. Pictogram is a concept that has been in use for a long time in the study of symbols, images and art. It is here used with reference to its general meaning: 'a sign that could be commonly recognized not requiring preunderstanding'. Emmanuel Anati, in his study of rock art being the primordial language, ascribes a more specific meaning to this concept: '*Pictograms* (and mythograms): Are figures in which we may recognize identifiable forms of real or imaginary objects, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures' (Anati 1994:39p). The concept of archetype is also used here with reference to a general meaning, not necessarily fully accurate when being compared to the one used in psychotherapy. Seemingly without any detailed definition of this concept Anati is convinced of its existence and expression in prehistoric rock art: 'Thus the existence of logical archetypes may be postulated' (Anati 1994:52).

In this study we will try to illuminate this state of affairs by presenting some examples of footprints carved into rocks in prehistoric times. The compositions and contexts, in the widest sense of these concepts, present a varied picture.

#### CASE STUDIES

##### *Har Karkom, Negev Desert in Israel*

The first example I want to present derives from the Sinai Mountain in the Negev Desert in Israel. The Italian Archaeological Expedition to Israel has studied it intensively since 1980 (Anati 2001). The site has been inhabited for at least 40,000 years as witnessed by the extensive archaeological record of finds and structures from settlements, burials and rock art. Among the numerous engraved images on rocks and boulders are some representations of footprints (Figs. 2-4)

The footprint in Fig. 2, like the two depicted on Fig. 3, are of the type with a contoured outer line but without a heel line normally considered to indicate a sandal. On the other hand no toes indicating a naked foot have been engraved. One reason might be that the footprint here should be seen as a general symbol commonly designed without any intention to depict a naked human foot. The anthropomorphic figure inside it is also designed in a stylized manner that expresses no naturalistic intention to resemble any specific human. Actually there is a certain resemblance to some bronze figurines with the inward curved arms indicating a classical 'hips attached' position (Fredell 2003: 192pp, fig. 5.16). A winding snake is carved connected to the outer part of the footprint. Having no information about Anati's interpretation of this composition at Har Karkom, we want to point to the fact that snakes and footprints appear in a similar composition to the rock engraving at Järrestad in Scania in the south-east of Sweden ([www.shfa.se/Bildsök/1349:Järrestad\\_13\\_fotspirall\\_2002\\_CB](http://www.shfa.se/Bildsök/1349:Järrestad_13_fotspirall_2002_CB)).

Our second example from Har Karkom (Figs. 3-4) is a composition with an ibex placed above two contoured and paired feet. Anati (2001) suggests a dating to the Chalcolithic or Early Bronze Age, which in this case means the third millennium BC. He also suggests that the footprints are a sign of adoration of the ibex. If we accept this general meaning of the sign foot print, Anati's interpretation seems plausible.

We will now put down our feet just south of the Alps in Valcamonica in northern Italy. In that valley, located some 40 kilometres north of the town of Bergamo, we find one of the largest concentrations of rock art in Europe and in the world. In total more than 200,000 images have been carved into the hard rocks of the valley slopes, starting in the Mesolithic and continuing until Medieval times (Anati 1976; Gastaldi 2009 a and b; Fossati 2010 and b).

##### *Zurla, Valcamonica in Italy*

Among the engraved images in Valcamonica there are many carvings that depict footprints, although they are not the most frequent type of figure. At Campanine there are several panels with mostly contoured footprints, either single ones or paired. Many of those have interior decorations or patterns and on one occasion the footprints are connected with, superimposed on or encompass other engravings (Gavaldo 2009: 299-304). Sometimes they consist of human figures like the ones from Zurla (Fig. 5) with rectangular trunks and raised arms carrying spears. In both cases the spears seem to penetrate the outer contour line of the foot. It looks doubtful whether this is an engraving consisting of originally paired feet. The reason is simple: the foot engraved to the right looks like a left foot and vice versa. Inside the foot to the left there is also a figure consisting of only a head on top of two raised arms, of which the left holds an axe. A similar composition with footprints also appears on another panel at Zurla (Anati 1994:65, fig.52). Anati therefore dates these footprints to the Early Iron Age, approximately 850-700 BC.

Leaving the footprints of Valcamonica, we may conclude that there are some similarities to those at Har Karkom in Israel. This is most valid for the other form and to some extent also for the composition with additional engravings in the interior space. However, the design of these engravings differs, as does the dating, the former belonging to the third millennium BC and the later to the first millennium BC. One obvious reason behind that would be that the use of the footprint as an engraved symbol did appear independently and without direct contact between these two areas, regardless of the similarities of the basic shape. This actually seems to speak in favour of our hypothesis that footprints could be considered as a pictogram or an archetypical symbol.

Fredell criticizes a trend to explain rock art symbols using the help of meta-contextual and psychological interpretations as has been strongly advocated by Anati and others. According to her, the big deficiency is the lack of intention to put the assumed archetypes in an historical or social context (Fredell 2003:11). This seems like a simplification or misinterpretation. When studying the research that has been conducted on rock art at Har Karkom and in Valcamonica, it seems rather obvious that the source material from both sites has been put into its local archaeological context.

We will now turn our attention to a rock art site situated approximately 3,000 kilometres to the north of Valcamonica, namely Nämforsen in Sweden.

#### *Nämforsen, Ångermanland in Sweden*

At Nämforsen, one of the largest and most intriguing rock art sites in Scandinavia is situated in an originally highly dramatic setting at a large rapid close to the estuary of the Ångerman river into a long fjord of the Baltic sea penetrating today's inland of this area. On the rocks in the then furiously raging river were around 2,000 images engraved during the late Stone Age and the Bronze Age (Baudou 1975:75pp). The area was dominated by hunting cultures at least until the birth of Christ (Baudou 1975:148). This has also resulted in the designation hunting carvings, which is strongly supported by the local and regional archaeological record consisting of numerous dwelling sites, trapping pits and stone artefacts. The oldest engravings seem to date back more than 6,000 years (Gjerde 2010: 381; Sjöstrand 2010:140).

In addition, the engraved figures, consisting of numerous depictions of elks in combination with humans carrying elk head staffs, boats with elk-headed prows and salmon, seem to testify to this dating. However, there are some interesting features that may indicate a connection with the rock art producing cultures in southern Sweden, traditionally bearing the etiquette agriculture carvings. This concerns among other things the composition of the engravings with many accumulated small figures and superimpositions on some of the rocks, but also the presence of specific images such as circle crosses and footprints. These images are 'normally' considered to be part of the corpus of southern rock art imagery (Bertilsson 1995:51pp and references).

Today this hypothesis has become more or less accepted in wide research circles (Gjerde 2010 with references). The depictions of some of the central panels at the site presented below illustrate the cumulative nature of the engravings. The first one is dominated by a large elk carved in a naturalistic manner being surrounded by smaller elks engraved in a more schematic and less authentic style. In the middle and upper right parts there are also three paired footprints. They are all contoured with a heel line and, except for the middle pair, appear symmetrical. At least this pair looks like it was deliberately placed close to the big elk.

This type of footprint would generally be considered to be later than the naked foot. By 'later', a dating to the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age is meant (see the discussion about the rock carving at Järrestad in Scania below). Since the habit of carving images into the rocks at Nämforsen has previously been suggested to end in the Middle Bronze Age around 1000 B C (Gjerde 2010:381), we may have run into a new chronological issue here, indicating that the carvings were made for a longer period of time than hitherto understood. The alternative explanation would be that the footprints of this type at Nämforsen were several hundred years older than those at Järrestad. This is an interesting hypothesis that, due to space limitations, will not be pursued any further here.

The second panel from Nämforsen is composed in a different way. All figures, weather elk, salmon, humans or boats are of a smaller, schematic type. This also includes two paired and one single footprint as well as one circle-cross. One of the paired footprints appears to be superimposed on an elk and a fragmentary boat, which indicates that it was engraved sometime later. There are also many other superimpositions on this panel most probably meaning that new images have been added during a certain period of time of unknown length.

From Nämforsen we are going to move across the Scandinavian mountain ridge to the west to Norway and the magnificent rock art site at Bardal, in Trøndelag.

#### *Bardal, Trøndelag, Norway*

This panel is, if not unique, one of the few in Scandinavia where the two major rock art traditions, that of the northern hunters and that of the southern farmers, are both abundantly represented. The older stratum consists

of big contoured animals like elk, reindeer, whale and goose, all designed in a truly naturalistic fashion. Some of the elk are represented only by parts of their body like hind legs (Mandt & Lødøen 2004:105-106; Sjöstrand 2010:142p and 2011: 138-141.). This style is the oldest in Scandinavia (Gjerde 2010: 196p). It has obvious similarities with the Late Palaeolithic engravings in Portugal but not necessarily with any chronological or cultural contact.

The more recent stratum at Bardal obviously belongs to the Bronze Age as testified by the beautiful boats and spirals that can be seen in Fig. 8. The big boats are of Period 1 or 2 type, like some of the smaller ones. There are also some footprints in pairs or even tripled, all contoured and missing their heel lines. The former seem to be placed in contact with one of the elk and one pair is under the tail of a whale but also in line with a Bronze Age boat. This may indicate an early and possible multi-period dating, but it should not be excluded that they just as well might belong to later phases like the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age (see also Sognnes 2011:187-189). This is due to the fact that the manner and size in which they are executed correspond seemingly well to some of the humans with square trunks and swords. On the lower central and right part of the panel there are even some boats that belong to the Early Iron Age according to the schedule established by Kaul and later refined by Ling (Kaul 1998 & Ling 2008:60 and 105). This leaves us with a rather wide spectrum of possibilities about the dating of the footprints: they could have been made in the Stone Age or the Early Bronze Age, or in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. Anyhow, they look very different from the ones engraved at Nämforsen. To us, this indicates that the footprint has characteristics, which may be attributed to an archetypical symbol. In our opinion, this fact is further strengthened by its appearance in the two different archaeological contexts. But before concluding this study we are going to look at yet some other examples from the extraordinarily rich rock carving at Järrestad in Österlen in Scania, located approximately = 1,000 kilometres south of Nämforsen.

#### *Järrestad, Scania in Sweden*

This panel is situated in the centre of one of Europe's richest archaeological landscapes originally full of Neolithic megaliths, Bronze Age and Iron Age tumuli. Although, the share of these monuments being preserved until today has been estimated to correspond to only 10-20% of the original numbers (Lena Alebo and Björn Nilsson, pers. comm. in September 2012), the rest being destroyed by farming, those remaining still give a strong impression of an ancient cultural landscape. The rock carving at Järrestad - one of the most extensive in all Scandinavia - further strengthens this impression with more than 1,000 images having been engraved into the panel. Out of these are approximately 100 footprints, which are naturally the focus of our interest in this study.

Among these footprints the two basic types - the naked foot with toes and the foot dressed with sandals, engraved as a contoured foot with heel line, are both well represented. There are also some hybrids, like contoured feet with toes and some possible bear paws carved into this rock.

The paired feet that could possibly represent the paws of a bear instead of the human foot are the ones displayed in Fig. 9. This interpretation stems from the design of the foot and especially the relation between the length and the width that are different from the majority of the other feet carved here. Even the form of the toes is different making it possible that they are intended to be claws. A supporting argument is also the fact that predators paws appear on big rock carvings in other places in Sweden, like at Himmelstalund in Norrköping and at Åby in Tossene.

However, a difference between those bear paws and the possible ones at Järrestad is that the former are designed in a much more stylized and schematic manner than the ones at Järrestad, which appear more naturalistic. Consequently, the 'bear paws'-hypothesis needs more thorough analysing and testing before it is completely confirmed. In any case, it is placed in the central part of the panel close to the systematically arranged three axes from the Early Bronze Age indicating a similar date. To the left - here on Fig. 9 - there are two paired and naked feet of human type superimposed by a boat, which were discovered to originally have been composed of two shafted axes during recent documentation work. Close to the bear paws there are also three very distinct cup-marks of which the middle superimposes one of the paws and the other is located very close to the heel of the second paw making it obvious that this is all part of a deliberate composition including the axes and the 'axe-boat'.

The feet displayed in Fig. 10 are of the later type that can be dated to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age based on its design in combination with the imagery context with the horsemen. This is further strengthened by the archaeological context with excavated tumuli at the site with burials from the same era (Söderberg & Hellerström 2003:50-52) This short presentation and analyses of the footprints at Järrestad shows that they have been a central symbol that has been engraved on the Järrestad panel for more than a millennium. The design and manner in which the symbol has been executed varies and could have changed because of different

reasons. One obvious reason is the introduction of shoes, as witnessed by the, sometimes distinct, heel lines. However, that could not have been the main reason, instead that ought to have been related to changes in the society and its organization and ideology. But regardless of those changes, the footprints remained a central symbol continuously and repeatedly engraved on the Järrestad panel. And the lack of engravings from the middle of the Bronze Age that can be observed may be the result of a long period of repeated use of the naked feet from the Early Bronze Age. A use that was interrupted and changed by the introduction of the feet dressed with shoes in the Late Bronze Age.

This actually signals that the ideology that ruled the rituals being expressed and depicted in the rock engravings at Järrestad might have been relatively stable and constant during its millennium of use.

#### FINAL

The case studies of rock art footprints presented here clearly show that it was a widespread sign and/or symbol in prehistoric rock art. With no claim to be comprehensive, our case studies from Har Karkom, Negev Desert in Israel, Zurla, Valcamonica in Italy, Nämforsen, Ångermanland in Sweden, Bardal, Trøndelag in Norway and finally Järrestad, Scania in Sweden have a wide distribution in space and time. And although there is a possibility of direct contact or overlapping and sharing of archaeological contexts, this may not be the main reason for the choice and use of the footprint as a major cosmological symbol at the respective rock art sites. When we consider this in connection with the dating issue there might actually exist something that we could call ‘the common denominator’. And that could be the Bronze Age, if we accept an application of this concept in its widest, most open and indistinct sense as one of those ‘historical’ constructions archaeologists rely on to build prehistory.

Actually, this definition might make some sense if we look at the different rock carvings in our case studies. We have already seen that Anati (2001) dates the footprints at Har Karkom to that period. However, the engraved footprints at Zurla in Valcamonica seem to fall outside this dating, belonging to the Early Iron Age (Anati 1999). At first sight it seems that Nämforsen is just as problematic a case with many of the engravings having been made before the Bronze Age (Gjerde 2010). But if we accept the hypothesis that the ‘foreign’ symbols there, like the circle cross and the footprints, were introduced by contacts with southern agriculturalists in the Bronze Age, it strengthens our case. Actually, in his work from 1975, Baudou proposed that the majority of the engravings at Nämforsen were made after 1500 BC (Baudou 1975:147). This becomes even more possible when we consider the Bardal case where the later stratum of carved images obviously belongs to the Nordic Bronze Age. So even if we have pointed to some difficulties for dating the footprints there more accurately, this also leaves open the possibility that they were actually made in that period. There are also examples from Sporanaset in Norway where it seems that the local hunting society adapted the footprint symbol in their rock art (Mandt & Lödöen 2007:254p).

A recent joint Nordic project ‘Northern Worlds’ aims to describe and analyse the dispersal and influence of the southern farming Bronze Age culture along the northern coast of Norway (Kaul 2011: 72pp). In that connection, Bardal is certainly a key site. Turning to our final site, Järrestad, the concept of the Bronze Age is definitely accurate and unproblematic. Many elements and circumstances make this rock carving unique, elements and circumstances that could help to clarify the key issues we have tried to elucidate in this study of footprints. We are then thinking about the long use of this symbol at this site that could be seen as a good illustration of the *longue durée* of the cosmology of the Nordic Bronze Age (Kristiansen & Larsson 2005:319). It may also be seen as an illustration to the ‘three conservative blocs’ as suggested and described by Fredell (2003:277).

Oscar Almgren in his first study of the rock carvings in Tanum discussed the explanation of the foot soles as symbols of divine beings with evidence in the legends attached to them. According to him they are called in India, Buddha’s footprints, on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, Christ’s feet. Similar stones that can be found in Catholic churches are linked to the saints who have been standing on them during their sermons. He thought that all these cases are illustrations of modernizations of pagan beliefs also detected in primitive people. Almgren also believed that the religious element is very strong on the rock carvings and that the religion on the stage of the Nordic Bronze Age represents was practically oriented. It was performed in order to influence the gods positively by promoting the crops, “*It is this*” magic “*that so strongly come to meet us in the contemporary nature people’s religions and in the European people’s superstitions*” (Almgren 1912:569, translated here).

This may actually further confirm our hypothesis that the use and re-use over 5,000 years of the footprint as one of the major cosmological symbols and pictograms in the Bronze Age and in later times makes it qualify as an archetype.

An attempt to summarize would look as follows: in order to decipher and understand rock art it is our con-





viction that we have to study and analyse the specific cultural and material context in which it was created. When doing that, we will discover that similar signs, symbols and images have been created in geographically, environmentally and archaeologically much varied and distant contexts. This could be explained either as a result of complex processes involving societal and ideological elements and forces or as the result of the creative capacity of the human brain in interaction with its physical environment. In both cases, it seems that the resulting prehistoric imagery contains repeated elements that may be described as pictograms and/or archetypes like those we have presented here.

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Fig. 1 Map of the rock art sites with footprints considered in this study.



Fig. 2 Engraved boulders from Har Karkom. To the middle left is an engraved footprint enclosing an anthropomorphic figure. Dating to Chalcolithic/Bronze Age. Photo: Emmanuel Anati97 B2-II-21; WARA W05999



Figs. 3 and 4: Tracing and photo of engraving of an ibex and two paired feet at Har Karkom. (Anati 2001:142 with references). A peculiar trait of this composition is that the left foot seems to be placed to the right. The left foot could then have been expected to represent the right one, but this is not so obvious from its design, looking like a hybrid.



Fig. 5 Unpublished tracing by Umberto Sansoni of rock engravings depicting warriors, animals and footprints on the panel Zurla 1, Ceto, Valcamonica, Italy. The blue (light grey) coloured images represent a separate layer of engravings sometimes superimposed on and sometimes superimposed by the layer with the black coloured images. The red (thin) lines represent cracks in the surface of the rock. The tracing will be published in Sansoni's paper in the proceedings from the symposium 'Picturing the Bronze Age' arranged by SHEA at Gothenburg University in Tanum in October 2012. The book will be published in the 'Rock Art Series' by Oxbow.

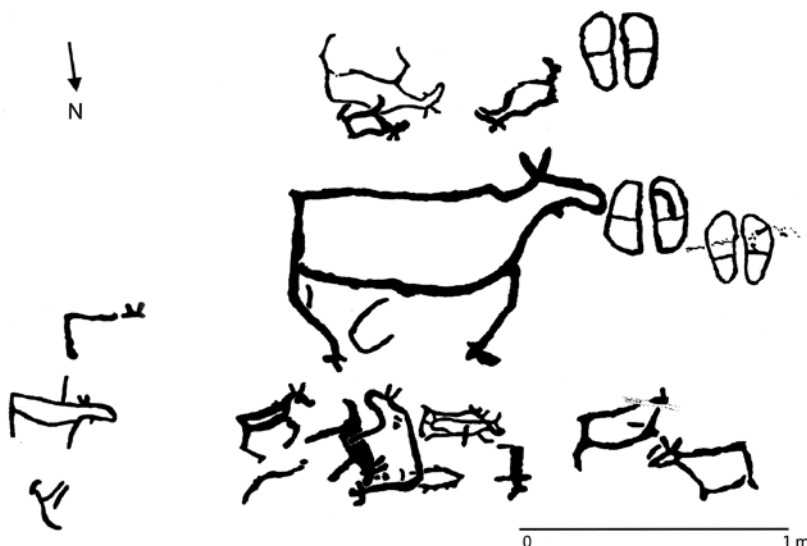


Fig. 6 Panel E 2-3 of the main group on Brådön from the report on new documentation accomplished between 2001-2003 originally recorded by Gustaf Hallström (Larsson & Broström 2011:96).



Fig. 7 Panel E: 4-6 of the main group on Brådön from the report on new documentation accomplished between 2001-2003 originally recorded by Gustaf Hallström (Larsson & Broström 2011:97).



Fig. 8 The magnificent engraving at Bardal, Trøndelag, in Norway (Hagen 1990:77).





Fig. 9 Footprints of the naked foot from the central part of the engraving at Järrestad in Scania. This type of footprint with a marked arch and toes is generally considered to be an older type dating to the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age. Note especially that there are at least two different types, one which has a marked arch and another one which is straighter. Both types have form elements that relate to early copper or bronze axes. Rubbing by Catarina Bertilsson, SHFA.



Fig. 10: Central part of the Järrestad panel with depictions of two completely carved, naked and paired feet with toes but without marked arch. The two pairs look somewhat different and the lower pair might actually be a depiction of bear paws, while the upper pair is definitely of human type. Photo: Catarina Bertilsson, SHFA.

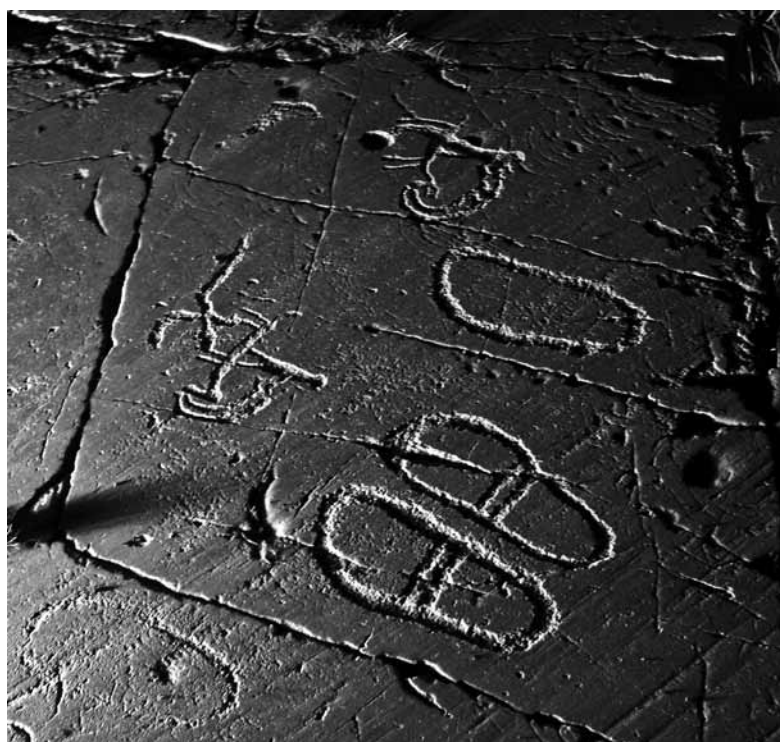
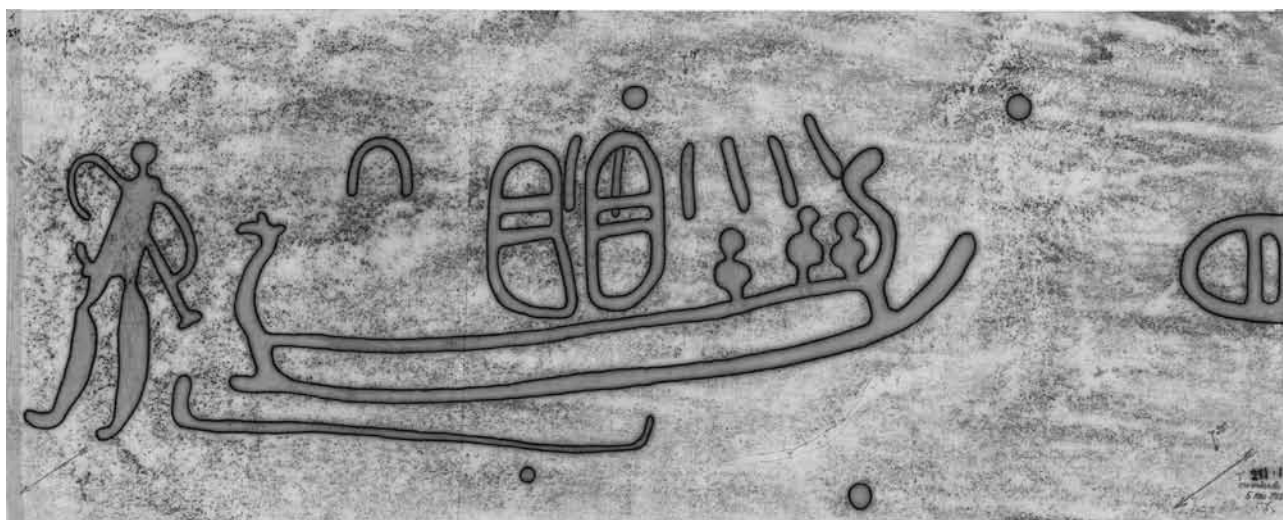


Fig. 11: Part of the Järrestad panel with engravings of paired contoured feet with a double heel line, two single contoured feet of which one is not completed, two riders standing on horseback and two cup marks. Photo: Catarina Bertilsson, SHFA.



*Fig. 12.: Paired, countered footprints superimposed on a Bronze Age ship on rock carving at Underslös in Tanum. Rubbing: Torsten-Högberg. Source: SHFA.*