



## UPDATING ROCK ART WITH FOCUS ON SHIP ICONOGRAPHY

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### SUMMARY

Scandinavian Bronze Age rock art represents a unique contribution to prehistoric culture, and tenth of thousands localities known in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The most common symbol, except from cup marks, is the ship represented during the whole Bronze Age and Pre Roman Iron Age – which means it was an extremely important symbol. And therefore a central object for research. It probably depict a strong society based on maritime mobility. A new kind of key to understand the Bronze Age culture in a broader context as the traditional: “only” picturing the agriculture’s religious beliefs and ceremonials.

The history of research clearly shows the importance of the ship and several ship chronologies during the last decades are published. (Glob 1969), (Kaul 1998) based on analysis of metal artefacts, razors and (Ling 2008), the first dating method based on scientific investigation methods. But a newly aspect appears when studying different methods of documentation. Ships from early Bronze Age are “updated” to late BA, by changing and supplying new details. The last “trend” so to say – and worth a study.

### RIASSUNTO:

L’arte rupestre scandinava di Età del Bronzo costituisce un contributo unico alla cultura preistorica, e rappresenta un decimo delle migliaia di località conosciute in Svezia, Norvegia e Danimarca. Il simbolo più comune, fatta eccezione per le coppelle, è la nave rappresentata per tutta la età del Bronzo e del Ferro - il che significa che era un simbolo estremamente importante e quindi un oggetto centrale per la ricerca. Queste figure furono prodotte da una società fortemente basata sulla mobilità marittima, il che apre nuove chiavi di lettura per capire la cultura dell’età del Bronzo, la cui arte rupestre viene tradizionalmente ascritta alle pratiche cerimoniali e alle credenze legate ai soli culti agricoli. La storia della ricerca mostra chiaramente l’importanza della nave e recentemente sono stati pubblicati diversi studi sull’evoluzione di questo soggetto come elemento cronologico (Glob 1969), (Kaul 1998) anche sulla base di analisi di artefatti metallici, e rasoi (Ling 2008). Alla luce di nuovi metodi di documentazioni e dell’evoluzione negli studi è possibile un aggiornamento su questo tema.

### SHIPS

The favoured pictorial motif in Scandinavian rock carvings is the ship (Fig. 1). Cup marks excluded, depictions of ships comprise over 25% of the Danish carvings, while the corresponding figures for Sweden and Norway are about 50% and 60% respectively. It shows the paramount interest of the engravers in the ship, something that separates them from contemporaneous carvings in the rest of Europe (Fig. 1).

The Scandinavian ships belongs to the whole Bronze Age, 1800-500 BC and the first period of the early Iron Age and is comprised of tens of thousands of ships carved into solid rock or onto loose stones and hundreds of ships portrayed on bronze artefacts, such as i e razor blades.

### CHRONOLOGICAL RESEARCH

A strong icon repeated again and again during 2000 years is of course a manifestation of the importance of the ship and therefore a motivation and challenge for research.

Already 1969, P.V.Glob writes: “A careful review of the circumstances of the findings seem to be of great importance, since several of the carvings are brought to light in dolmens,

*passage graves, and can therefore be dated within the thousand years of the Bronze Age. In that way the Danish material has a special value - though its littleness - compared to the thousands of Norwegian and Swedish rock carvings, which are almost all cut in the rock, and without connection to datable material. Because the rock carvings cover the entire Bronze Age, from the beginning of the second to the middle of the first millennium B.C., where crucial changes have taken place in the culture of the Bronze Age, it is necessary to arrange the Nordic rock carvings chronological in order to interpret them correctly” (GLOB 1969) (Fig. 2).*

In 1996-97 a complete survey of ships depicted on bronze artefacts from the Danish Bronze Age was made. *Ships on Bronzes* (KAUL 1998) is a published registry of ships on bronze finds. A registry of all Danish ships depicted during the Bronze Age will not be complete before the ships on the rock carvings are included. On account of this, the Research Centre of Marine Archaeology introduced the project *Bronze Age Ships in Rock* in August 2000, in order to provide documentation and registration of all ship images in Danish rock art. This project is not only a prolongation of *Ships on Bronzes*. Rock carvings are primarily earth-bound artefacts in a landscape that includes other finds, and it

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is important to register and study these relationships, their topography and geography.

And in 2001 the Research Centre of Marine Archaeology in Roskilde started the research project called *Ship Carvings in Rock* in co-operation with the National Museum in Copenhagen and the Tanum Rock Art Museum, *Underslås*. A considerable part of the work has taken place at Bornholm, the only part of Denmark with carvings on the bedrock. Moreover this island has the largest number of exposed rock-carved ship images in the country (Fig. 3).

In 2008 Johan Ling presented theories of how Bohuslän rock art and landscape may be perceived and understood. This thesis accordingly aims to focus on the process of shore displacement after the ice removed from Scandinavia and its social and cognitive implications for the interpretation of rock art in the prehistoric landscape.

Rock art has drawn much of its inspiration from the present agrarian landscape. The perception of the landscape has not been a major issue. This thesis accordingly aims to shed light on the process of shore displacement and its social and cognitive implications for the interpretation of rock art in the prehistoric landscape.

However, the sparse evidence points instead to a more complex pattern of utilisation and social praxis. The general location and content of the Bronze Age remains indicate a tendency towards the maritime realm, which seems to have included both socio-ritual and socio-economics matters of production and consumption. The thesis emphasises that Bronze Age groups in Scandinavia were highly active and mobile. The numerous configurations of ship images on the rocks could indicate a general transition or drift towards the maritime realm. Marking or manifesting such transitions in some way may have been important and it is tempting to perceive the rock art as traces of such transitions or positions in the landscape. All this points to a maritime understanding of Bronze Age rock art in Scandinavia (LING 2008) (Fig. 4).

In rock art research there is a long tradition and tendency to interpret the images and compositions as a description of agriculturalists performing rituals on the rocks. The rock carvings from this period are frequently known as farmers carvings. The people practicing agriculture became dependant on different powers compared to those in the past, and the dominating theory is that the carvings describe the religion of the Bronze Age with its myths and rituals, inspired by their way of life. The rock carvings were not "art for art's sake", but constituted a practical tool to maintain the religious needs and balance within society. The representations are our largest source for our appreciation of their cosmology. The rock carvings might be seen as the "Bronze Age Bible", a visual language that tells which meaning the spiritual world had for the earthly needs of the society (MILSTREU 2012).

Two approaches to make chronology on ships. One based on typological research. Findings in an archaeological context are mostly datable and well suitable

for creating chronologies, which are the grounding for dating rock art ship images regarding Kaul. Rock art on bronze and on stone are in a certain period in the Bronze Age stylistic similar and significant (Fig. 5a, b). The major part of the iconography of the rock images can be directly related to the objects found in the same periods, and thus the two can mutually supply information - the archaeological object helps decoding the rock image, and gives information about the function of the object. But the interpretation is difficult. The pictures were made in a historical context, and have thus been coded at the moment of creation as a part of a cultural and social reality. Decoding the pictures is not a simple process. The world picture of the past was in no way the same as ours. In spite of this limitation, the images are an important source of knowledge of the past. And one based on natural science methods as shore displacements combined with pollen analyses. The natural landscape has changed dramatically over time. The ice masses of the Ice Age, that covered Scandinavia for tens of thousands of years, withdrew around 12000 B.C. The land was depressed by the ice, and when this 2-3 km thick layer began to melt, the land started to rise.

During the Bronze Age, around 1800-400 B.C., the sea level was between 17 and 11 metres higher than it is today, where the rock carvings are located between 2 and 10 km from the coast i.e. in the county of Bohuslän, Sweden there are clear traces of a coastal landscape with fjords and bays, and in the Bronze Age, this was a maritime region. Along the coast line, the rock carvings were knocked into the smooth rock faces left by the retreating ice.

And what was the result of the two approaches? They are almost identical.

#### UPDATING

Over 40 years experiences with documentation of rock carvings in the Scandinavian countries, from the north in Alta, Norway to the south, Bornholm, Denmark, clearly shows, that a huge amount of ship carvings are not "untouched" during the prehistoric periods. But "updated", as I have chosen to call it. Supplied with details and changed in shape.

Europe has had economic and political connections over thousands of years. Contacts were established, deals were made and the countless finds are the silent witness of a vivid exchange, not only of goods, but also of ideas and symbols - a time of extensive communication. Based upon the evidence available, it would appear people have migrated and immigrated during all periods, taking culture and traditions with them, and influenced the iconography.

It is well known, that panels have been in use from Mesolithicum, in the whole Bronze Age and the pre-roman Iron Age. And some, probably many, even into Christian time.

In all probability the rock carvings could have kept some of their old holy values?

The place was of great importance and the images, icons too. Therefore picturing new symbols and sup-

plying older symbols had to be a part of the tradition. Or with other words: The rock carvings reflect a continuity of activity and the alterations demonstrate respect for the old carvings and for the place.

Basis of dating ships are selection of certain elements of the ship, which is of chronological typological significance - the stems and keel extensions. A general accepted typological method, which is used as typological relative dating from other objects and findings too. One can also speak of "styles" during certain periods - new impulses and traditions found its way into the image language.

Documentation is a technical and an ethical challenge demanding total objectivity, which can never quite be 100% achieved. The best documentation was left to us by our ancestors on the rock surfaces - today more or less degraded caused by weathering.

When studying the result of different methods of documentation, rubbing and digital documentation, "irregular" lines and shape of stems were clearly seen. A

careful study and comparison with the original image on the rock surface, makes it quite easy to see a difference, i.e. the wide of the stem line on the ship and the addition, in a few cases a different pecking structure, and quite common are the stem line and the added detail not connected. (Fig. 6a, b, c).

That means, that the ship made for the first time in the beginning of the Bronze Age (EBA), were chronological changed to another ship, or to a new ship in Late Bronze Age (LBA).

#### CONCLUSION

The change is interesting in a chronological perspective and it is raising many questions. Why didn't they make a new ship - did the ship change meaning - has the icon been "switched off" (WAHLGREN 2004) in a period and in a later period switched on, re-loaded with a new meaning - is it just a rational method in order to modernize shape and meaning - and, and ...

And worth a more thorough and detailed study.

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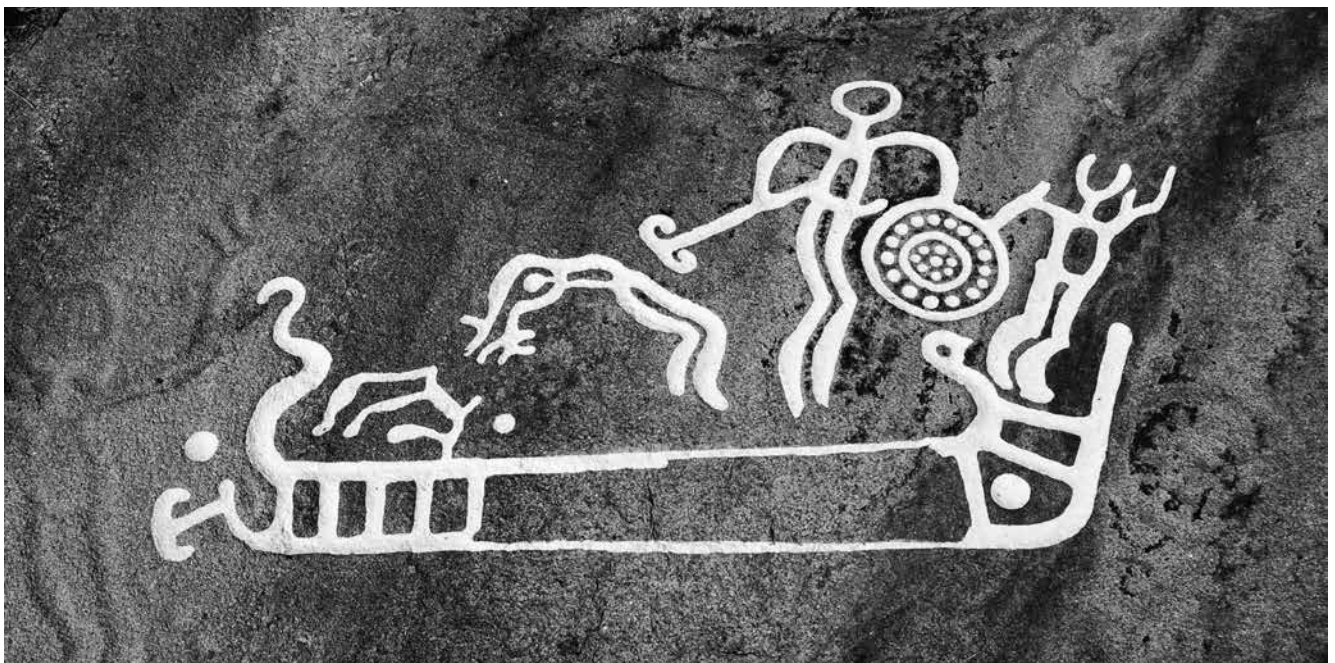


Fig. 1 - One-among thousands of ship images in Scandinavia. Hede, Sweden. Photo: G. Milstreu, F. Kaul.

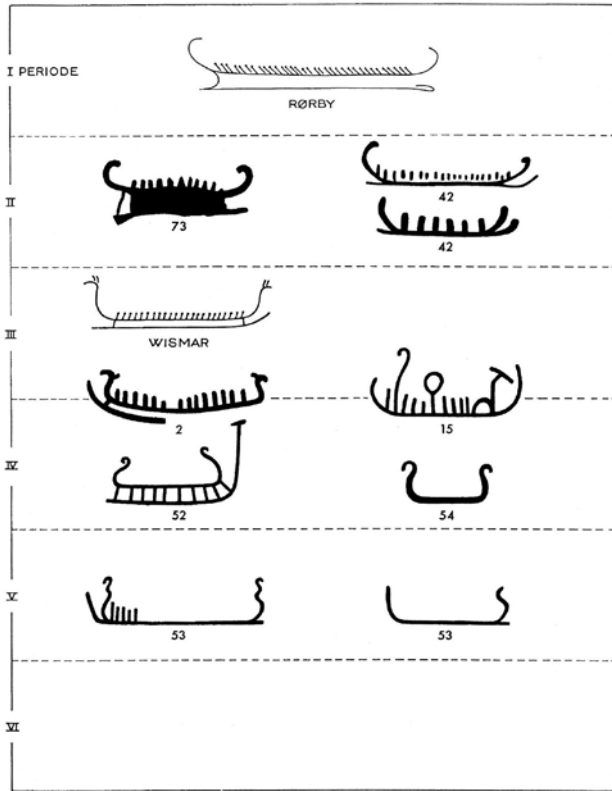


Fig. 2 - The chronological diagram for the Bronze Age ship renderings (After Glob 1969)

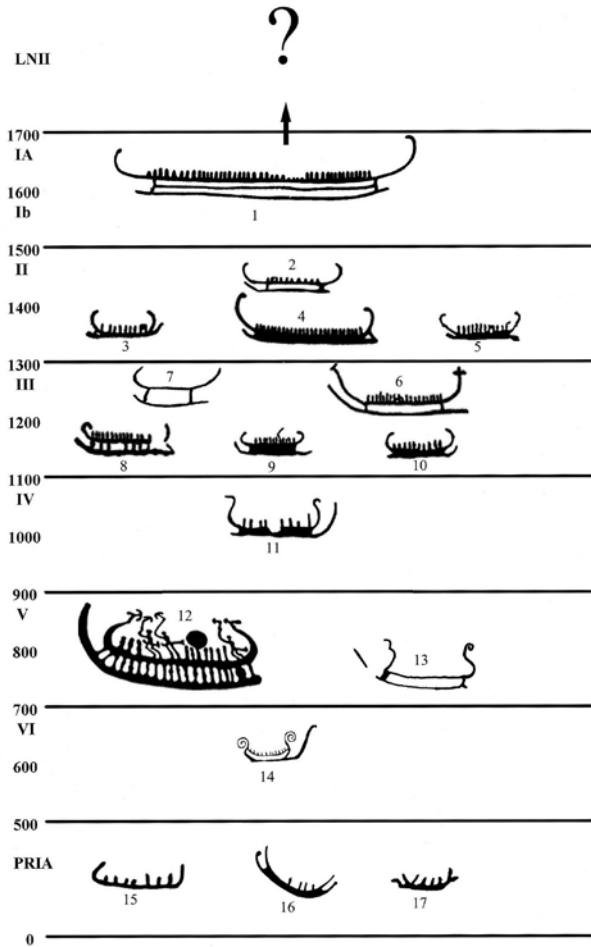


Fig. 4 - Measured ship depictions in relation to shore displacements (After Ling 2008)

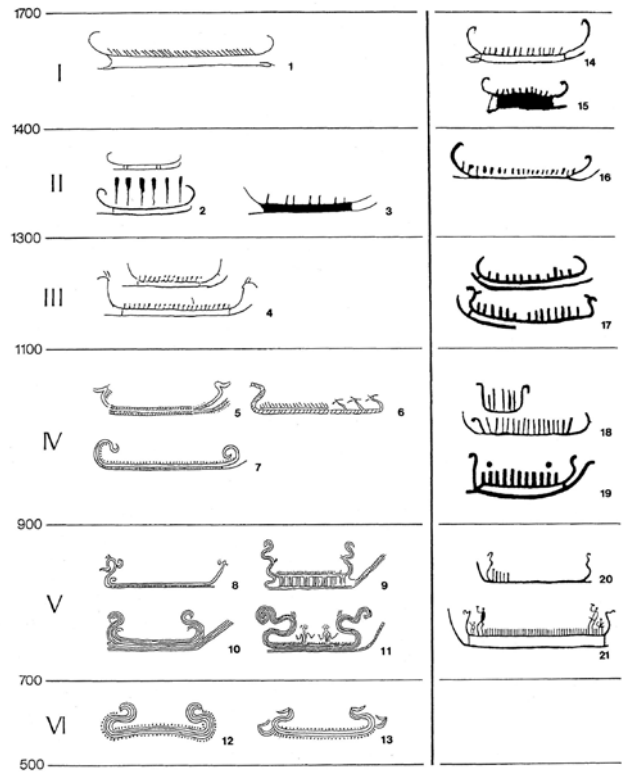


Fig. 3 - Diagram showing the chronological-typological development of Nordic-Bronze-Age renderings. Left column, datable ships. Wright column ships on the rocks which can be dated by analogy with the ships on bronzes, left (After Kaul 1998)

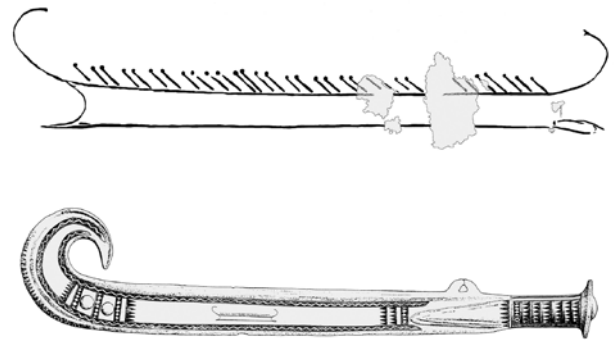


Fig. 5a - Drawing of the bronze sword with a ship engraving from Rørby, Denmark dated to Period I of the Early Bronze Age, 1600 BC Period 1. It forms a chronological basis for typological dating (after Aner & Kersten)



Fig. 5b - Ship image Period I. Simrishamn, Sweden (Photo G. Milstreu, F. Kaul)

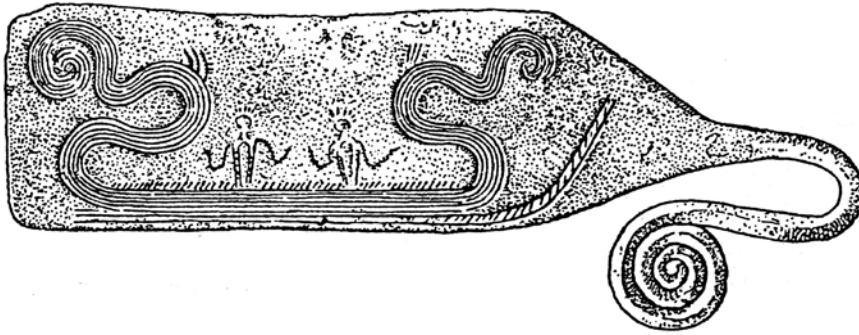


Fig. 6a - Ship with s-shaped prows, representing stylized horse heads. Razor from Denmark, dated to Period V, 900-700 BC (after Sprockhoff)



Fig. 6b - Ship image created in Period I, 1700-1400 BC, updated with s-shaped stem during Period V, 900-700 BC. Balken, Sweden (Photo G. Milstreu)

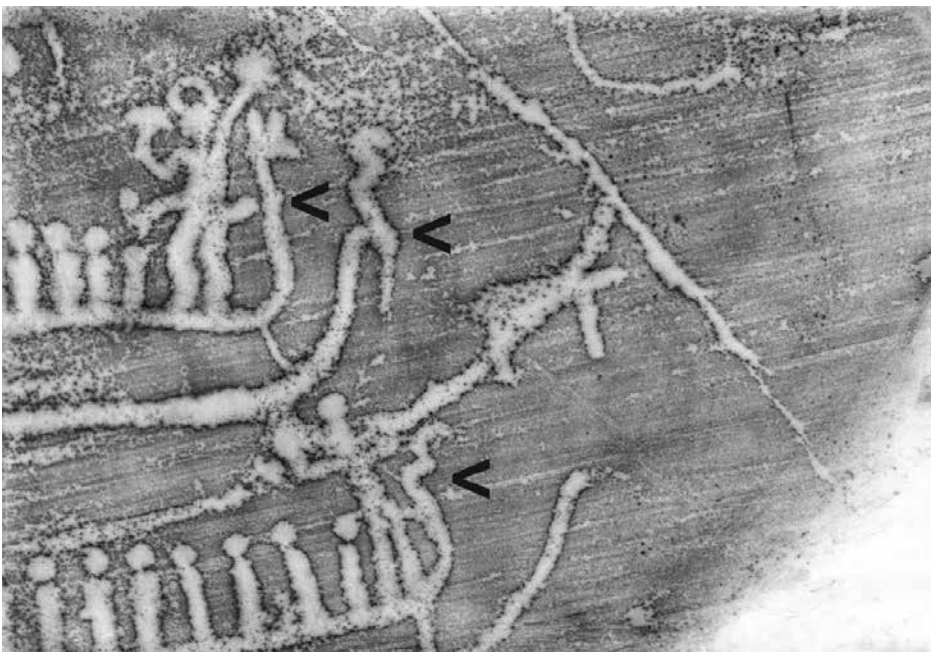


Fig. 6c - Ship image Period III, 1300-1100 supplied with S-shaped stem, Period V, 900-700 BC. Sotetorp, Sweden. Rubbing: Tanum Rock Art Museum, Underslös.

