

ROCK ART IN DENMARK

Dr. Gerhard Milstreu

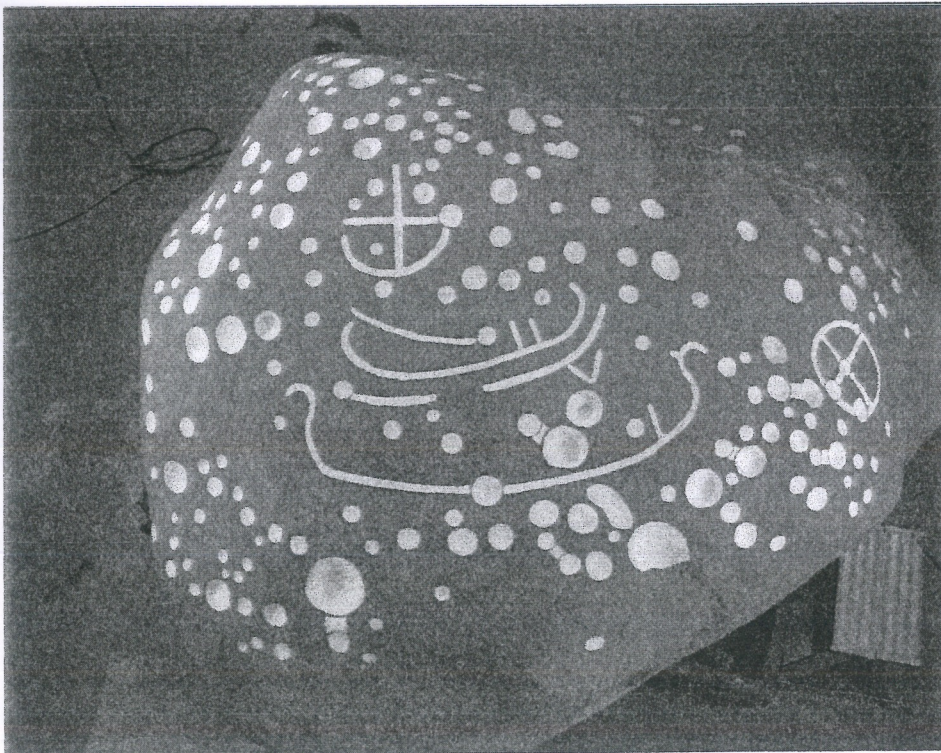
Physical Geography

Denmark is a low-lying country. It rises nowhere more than 200 metres above sea level. For this reason the highest points can be described only as large hills.

All the Danish hills are glacial formations. Most of them are from the last ice age, which ended about 15.000 years ago. It lasted for over 80.000 years and during this period the ice carried southwards among other materials large stones, boulders – but without engravings! They are "Danish Design".

In the middle of the southern Baltic lies the island of Bornholm. It is 150 km east of Sjælland (Denmark), but only 80 km north of Poland and 40 km south of Sweden. Bornholm is the easternmost large island, and the nature is different from that in the rest of Denmark. Bornholm was formed by the tremendous rupture and upheaval of the bedrock over millions of years. Bornholm therefore consists of granite and gneiss cliffs - an "extension" of Sweden so to speak. Bornholm is particularly important to the Danish rock carvings.

In the rest of the country we find engravings only on smaller stones and boulders.



Hyllingebjerg, Sjælland.
One of the biggest boulders
with four ships, cross-in-circles
and about 240 cup-marks.
Photo: Gerhard Milstreu

Images and Signs

The majority of the Danish rock carvings consist of single images or signs. Only a few stones exhibit more than a few different figures and only on the ice-polished rocks of Bornholm you will find larger compositions.

Cup-marks

The most common sign is the cup-mark found in about half the sites, and in company with all other signs except hand-signs. The cup-mark is also found on more than 1000 other Danish boulders and rock outcrops, and on over 250 stones of less than handsized, the so-called "pocket cup-stones".

The many thousand cup-marks are found all over Denmark in varying concentration and dimensions - from 2 to 12 centimetres in diameter and from a few to 100 millimetres deep.

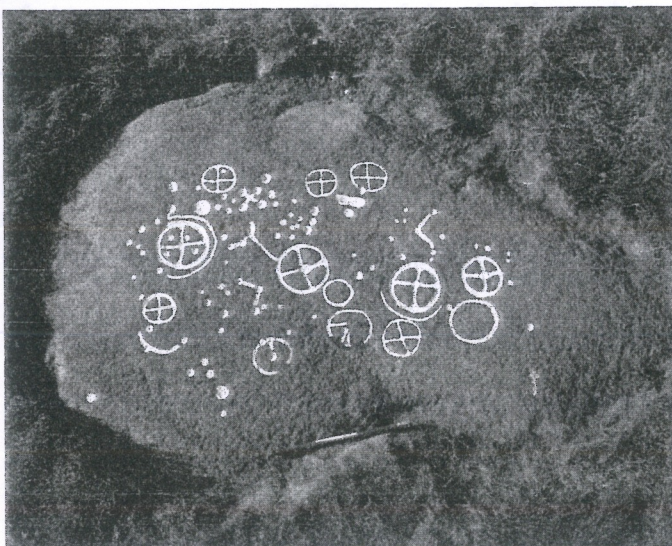


Vester Åby

A very beautiful boulder with footprints and a lot of cupmarks - many of them connected with grooves. Photo: Gerhard Milstreu and Flemming Kaul

Cross-in-Circle and Circle Signs

Apart from the cup-mark and ship, the most common of the Danish rock-carvings is the circle in a variety of forms. About half the carvings fall into this category, when cup-marks are excepted. Usually, these signs are interpreted as sun symbols.



Lille Strandbygård, Bornholm. A very beautiful panel with cross-in-circles in the middle of a field. Its position makes it extremely vulnerable to damage during fertilisation. Photo: Gerhard Milstreu



Miniature sun-disc on a stand. The sun-disc is transparent amber mounted in bronze and a cross-shape can be seen in the amber.

The simplest of the wheel-signs consists of a plain circle. Its special position in relation to other figures seems to indicate a solar symbol. This is most evident on the *Engelstrup* stone, Sjælland, where it is seen between a man and a woman. It may also express sexual attraction.

There are several instances where the cross-in-circle symbol occur in pairs, either single or pairs together, presumably carriage wheels. It is wellknown that the two-wheeled wagon (with or without a team of stallions) has been symbolized by cross-in-wheel signs.

Besides the four-armed cross-in-circles, other wheel-signs with 8 spokes are known.

Foot-marks

A common sign in Scandinavian rock carvings is the foot-mark. The bare foot with all the toes carefully shown as well as those where the toes are not outlined are found, both paired and single.

Foot-marks are known from 20 localities in Denmark.

Brandegård

At Bornholm the bedrock very often 'peeps out' in the fields, and have thus been called "girl-stomachs". It seems that Bronze Age artists preferred that 'canvas' for inscribing their important message. Several footprints and cupmarks can be seen on an extremely weathered surface. Photo: Gerhard Milstreu



Ships

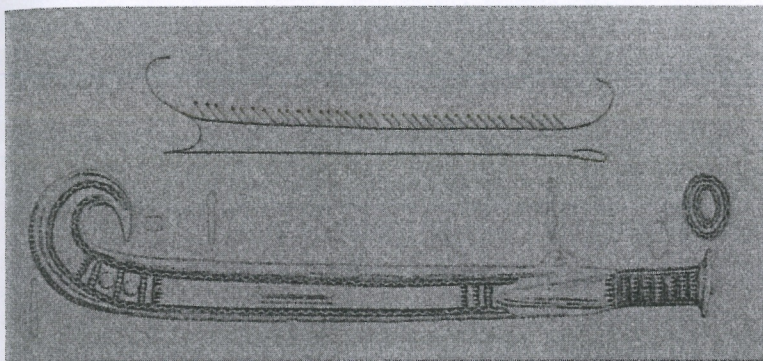
The favoured pictorial motif in the Scandinavian rock carvings is the ship. Cup-marks excluded, depictions of ships comprise over 25% of the danish carvings, while the corresponding figures for Sweden and Norway are about 50% and 60% respectively. It shows the paramount interest of the engravers in the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

The Danish carvings of ships are found in practically the entire Denmark, but are most numerous in northern Sjælland and northern Bornholm.



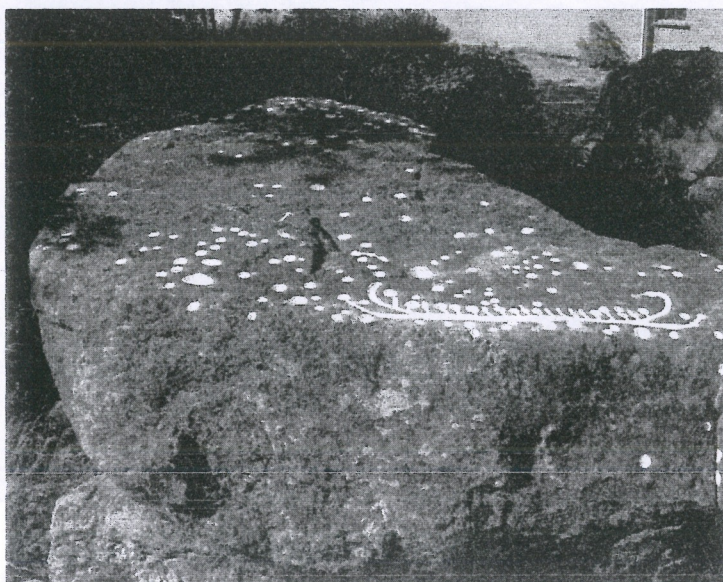
Lensgård, Bornholm. This panel was excavated in 1999. The farmer is very proud of the carving and takes care of it. Photo: Gerhard Milstreu and Flemming Kaul

As early as in the beginning of the early Bronze Age, the ship appears engraved on the blade of a curved sword from Rørby, Sjælland, and it is possible that this type with incurved stem and stern is already found on rock carvings of the early Bronze Age, period I and II.



Drawing of the 60,7 cm long curved sword from Rørby (ca. 1600 BC) and the 6,7 cm-long ship-representation on the sword. This forms a fixed chronological basis for the dating of ships in rock carvings. After Aner & Kersten 1976.

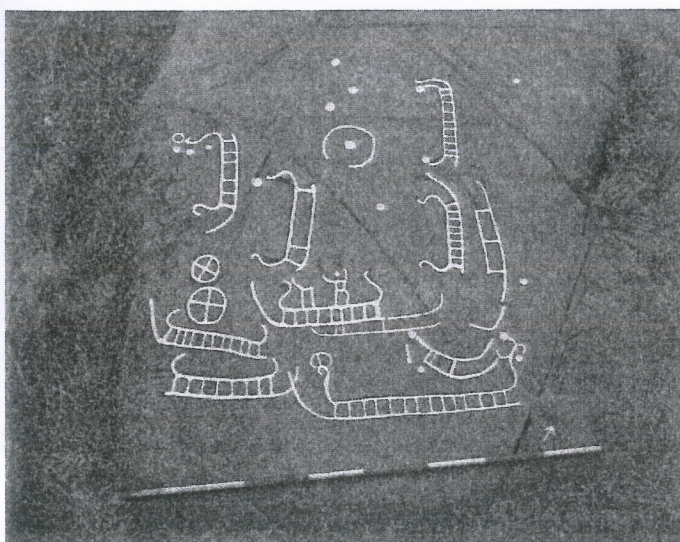
A cairn with a Rørby-type ship. Kirke Stillinge, Sjælland. Photo: Gerhard Milstreu and Flemming Kaul



Other types, where the stem and stern are provided with "heads" first seem to appear in the course of period III-IV.

The largest fields of rock-carvings on Bornholm is situated at *Madsebakke*, on a furrowed rock surface. 18 ships of very different types can be seen here, together with foot-marks, cross-in-circle symbols as well as circles, parallel curved lines and numerous cup-marks.

It would seem that the Danish ships, excluding those from Bornholm, belong to the early Bronze Age and the first period of the late Bronze Age, while the Bornholm ships continue into period VI and some are from the Celtic period, Hjortspring-type.



Blåholt, Bornholm. A wonderful composition with boats, circle and cup marks. Photo: Gerhard Milstreu and Flemming Kaul



Photo: Gerhard Milstreu and Flemming Kaul

The site Madsebakke on the island Bornholm is the biggest panel in Denmark with 17 ships, cross-in-circles, footprints and cup-marks. Photo: Gerhard Milstreu and Flemming Kaul

Hand-signs

One of the most peculiar motives of the Scandinavian rock carvings is the hand with open fingers and parts of the arm, pointing to four short parallel strokes. In contrast to other motives this one is - with two exceptions - always found alone on smaller, usually split stones, several of which have been found in or near graves from Bronze Age period IV.

This little group consist of 23 Danish stones, of which 18 are found on Sjælland. In addition two are known from Østfold, Norway and two from Bohuslän, Sweden.

Men and Animals

Animals and men comprise below 5% of all the Danish rock carvings. The very schematic crew-strokes in boats are not included in these figures.

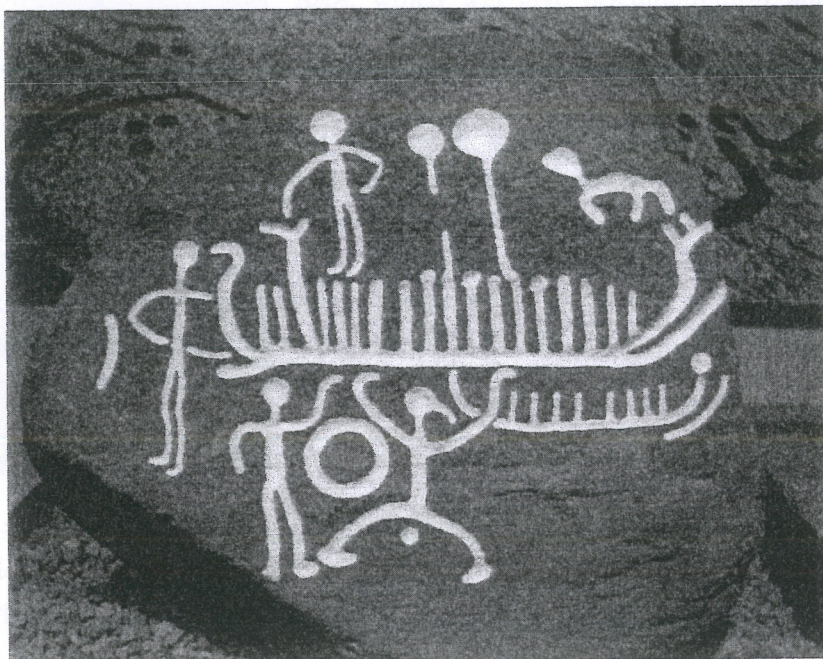
Wellknown examples are:

On the large *Herrestrup* stone, a man with outstretched arms and open fingers is seen facing an animal, possibly a horse. Above his hip is an oblique stroke, which makes him strongly phallic. He is armed with a sword.

A phallic man is seen with a woman on a circular, flat stone disc from *Maltegård*, Sjælland. Undoubtedly we see in this unique piece a depiction of the "sacred wedding". The same scene is shown on other Scandinavian rock carvings.

A man and a woman are depicted on the *Engelstrup* stone, standing beneath the ships on each side of a circle, probably the sun. Another man turns his back to this couple but probably belongs to the same scene. To the left, above the larger ship is a third male figure, apparently phallic. Above the ship at the very right is an animal, possibly a horse.

Women are relatively seldom seen on the rock art of the Scandinavian Bronze Age. It is therefore noteworthy that women comprise about one third of all human representations in Denmark, while they are almost unknown in other areas.



Engelstrup.

Apart from Bornholm there is no bedrock in Denmark. But there are many small stones and boulders bearing almost all types of engravings. During the ice period the ice carried southwards among other materials large stones, boulders – but without engravings! They are "Danish Design". The Engelstrup stone is one of the relative few carvings with human beings and a sun-disc placed on a pole in the boat.

Photo: Gerhard Milstreu and Flemming Kaul

A new research project – ship carvings in rock

In 2001 a research project called *Ship Carvings in Rock* was started by the Research Centre of Marine Archaeology in Roskilde in cooperation with the National Museum in Copenhagen and the Tanum Rock Art Museum, *Underslås*.

If we exclude cup marks the ship is the most common object depicted in this religious visual art. The Scandinavian research material is comprised of tens of thousands of ships carved into solid rock or onto loose stones, and also of hundreds of ships portrayed on bronze artifacts, such as razor blades.

In 1996-'97 a complete survey of ships depicted on bronze artifacts from the Danish bronze age came true, thanks to the Research Centre in Roskilde.

Ships on Bronzes is a "Ship Registry" of ships on the bronzes.

A registry of all Danish ships depicted during the Bronze Age would not be complete before the ships on the rock carvings are included.



On account of this the Research Centre of Marine Archaeology now August 2000 introduces the project *Bronze Age Ships in Rock*, which will give documentation and registration of all ship pictures in Danish rock art. The project were incorporated in the RANE project, which is now successfully closed. (to see pictures - visit www.RockArtScandinavia.se).

Kirke Såby, Sjælland.

It was quite common to re-use the old sacred stones in the first churches. A ship and several cup-marks. Photo: Gerhard Milstreu

This project is not only a prolongation of Ships on Bronzes. Rock carvings are primarily earth-bound artefacts in a landscape which includes other finds, and it seems important to register and study these relationships, not forgetting their topography and geography.

The renewed documentation work on Danish rock carvings consists of several phases, developed by Tanums Hällristningsmuseum, *Underlös*. Gerhard Milstreu is responsible for the documentation work.

A considerable part of the work took place at Bornholm, the only part of Denmark with carvings on the bedrock. Moreover this island shows up the largest number of rock carving ships in the country. Around selected carving sites there will be comprehensive archaeological investigations that may reveal activities related to the carvings.

Madsebakke
excavations

During the last three years excavations in front of five panels has been carried out with great results.

Analyses and dating has not been finally finished. The picture shows the excavation at

Madsebakke on

Bornholm. 14 holes

at intervals of 3

metres from big

poles on a row

following the shape

of the basic of the

rock. A palisade

surrounding the

sacred rock ? On the

top of the rock

poleholes from a

house (ca. 300 AD)

was found.

Photo: Gerhard

Milstreu



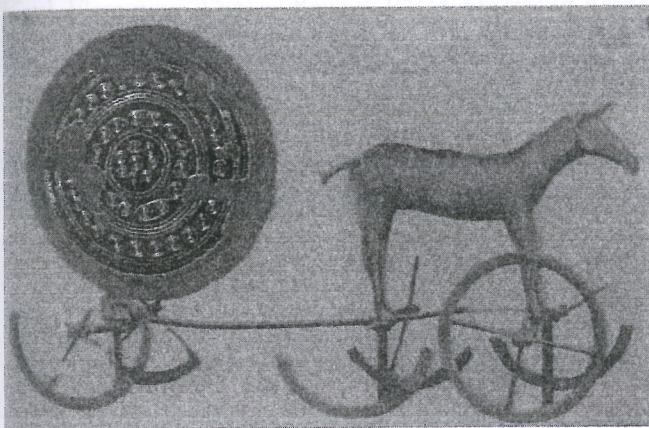
One has to consider whether particular details in the landscape, as well as the time and place of sunset and sunrise during the year, may have had influence on the position and direction of the carvings.

The picture as a Source of Archaeological Information

The use of the rock carvings as a source of archaeological information seems to have been – with a few exceptions – marginal throughout the history of research.

The approach to rock art has been mainly aesthetical, and its information value has been underestimated. Serious research is scanty.

In the recent 10-15 years there has been growing interest and understanding in rock art as a message. The carvings gain importance as a source, equally important with other sources.



Trundholm

The 60 cm-long Chariot of the Sun from Trundholm, Denmark (ca. 1600 BC) is well known. We know about 30 rock carvings all over Scandinavia with this motif.

But even on several razors from the bronze age the motif can be seen. One example from the razor from Neder Hvolris in Jutland.



Our archaeological history becomes *visible*.

The starting point of this change is electronic. The digital revolution is of great importance in the history of research.

It is now possible to gather and file copies of this ancient world of pictures in great quantities, which makes a survey and understanding of this visual material more solid and comprehensive, along with other archaeological information.

We still do not completely grasp the full consequences of this.

Pictorial mass communication became a pivotal source of information in the 20th Century. This influences the traditional views of the specialists, who gradually start acknowledging the picture as a source of archaeological information and interpretation, not less valid than other sources.

This enhances the demand for developing suitable methods and techniques in research work as well as for those teaching. People often claim or believe that anyone may understand a picture, but this is hardly true.

The information value of rock art is extensive. Their simple or simplified shape gives a clear interpretation of the underlying message. Part of the iconography may immediately be related to the other finds from the same period. This mutual light on carvings and finds increases the supply of information on the contents of the pictures and the meaning of the finds, or the other way round.

It remains, however, difficult to interpret rock art. The carvings were created in a social and historical setting and the moment of their creation was unique. The experiences of people today do not coincide with those of the rock carving artists.

So there are limits to their use as a source. They are, however, greatly improving our knowledge.

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ABSTRACT:

Denmark's tradition in archaeology is its pride. The field of rock carvings may be called small, but it is of great importance.

During the last ten years several European countries within different rock art projects part financed by the European Union have conducted comprehensive work in protecting prehistoric art, including documentation tasks and presentation to the public.

In the last three years the RANE project was running. One of the important contributions to the Rane project was to create a total survey of all ships in Denmark - documentation and registration work comprising ship iconography in metal and rock. And excavations in front of rock art panels.