Ships at the shore: A Scandinavian-wide review of prehistoric rock art

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Abstract

Scandinavia is home to an immense corpus of rock art images among which the ship motif is prominent. Because of this, the rock art of Scandinavia has often been interpreted in terms of social ritual, cosmology, and religion associated with the maritime sphere. This paper summarises recent work by the author revolving around a Scandinavia-wide GIS database for prehistoric rock art, and related analyses of the ship motif and its relationship to a maritime landscape.

Main text

Scandinavian archaeologists are fortunate to have at their disposal one of the world's largest concentrations of pictorial information. Over 22,000 rock art sites containing over 200,000 individual motifs have been reported in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, which span the Late Mesolithic to the Early Iron Age. Of the many motifs that comprise the lexicon of rock art imagery, the 'ship' has been the most extensively studied. Ship motifs are the second most frequent rock art motif, dominating a wide geographical region from southern Denmark to northern Norway. Because of this, it has often been interpreted as evidence of prehistoric worldviews or cosmologies.

The rock art of Scandinavia presents a unique opportunity to investigate more intangible aspects of ancient life in northern Europe. In the past many scholars have argued that the relationship between land and sea was of particular importance in an ancient cosmology; echoes of these beliefs are still found in Arctic ethnography (e.g. Zvelebil & Jordan 1999). Helskog (1999) has written extensively on the rock art of northern Norway, arguing that a tripartite cosmology could have existed in prehistory. It explains how the land, sea, and sky comprise different but related worlds. They intersect where land meets water, and for that reason the shoreline is very important. Similar ideas have been suggested in other regions like Finland (e.g. Lahelma 2005). Ships and the sea figure prominently in current interpretations of the images found in Bronze Age rock art and also on portable bronzes from Denmark (where rock art is rarer) and southern

Sweden. Kaul (1998) has argued that they must have played a pivotal role in the propagation of cosmological beliefs.

Scholars have shown that images of ships were carved on rocks near the coast in some regions (e.g. Ling 2014[2008]), yet this has never been shown at a pan-Scandinavian level. Even at a local scale drawings of ships are found in inland areas today. This is due to a post-glacial phenomenon called isostacy, which caused the land to rise and the shoreline to retreat. During the Bronze Age this occurred along much of the Scandinavian coast. Recent studies have used new palaeoenvironmental data to situate these rock art sites in their original landscapes (Ling 2012; 2014[2008]). The results suggest a strong relationship between ship imagery and watery locations.

What effects would changes to the coastline have on the purpose, meaning, or efficacy of rock art? In order to respond to such a question there must be a method for looking at both the distribution of rock art and individual motifs across a large geographical area. It is equally important to utilise local evidence of shoreline displacement data.

A Scandinavian database of rock art

Most rock art studies in Scandinavia have focused on relatively small areas. In a recent study conducted by the author a database of Scandinavian rock art was created, which included all the prehistoric rock art from the Late Mesolithic to the Early Iron Age in Denmark, Norway and Sweden contained in each country's national heritage database. This database is currently held by the author, though attempts are being made to make it publicly available. The results of the data analyses conducted are presented in a recent monograph, *Prehistoric Rock Art in Scandinavia* (Nimura 2015). Using a Scandinavian-wide database, one can ask where ship motifs appear in relation to the shoreline, and also study the distributions of other images (Fig. 1).

Key results show that nearly 30% of ship motifs appear within 2 km of the present-day coastline (e.g. Figs 2–3) – a figure which increases to nearly 40% when inland water is considered. Their frequency declines the further they are from water (whether inland or coastal). Other pan-Scandinavian patterns were observed including the distribution of other figurative motifs which are common in 'watery' environments. Feet / foot sole and circular motifs follow similar patterns to ships in that they appear in large concentrations near watery locations such as the coast, but they also diverge from this pattern by appearing further inland. Further analysis shows that circular motifs and

ships often appear together on rock art sites, an observation which has been made in regional studies, for instance in Östergötland (see Hauptman-Wahlgren 2002, 93).

Agency, environmental change and rock art

With this new database it has been possible to better understand the general distribution of motifs and their relationship to watery locations. In many areas these sites would have been affected by isostatic rebound and experienced a 'disappearing' shoreline. How would this have affected the purpose and meaning of rock art?

One proposition is that rock art possessed agency, and that agency involved a complex relationship between humans and objects. The term *agency* describes people's ability to bring about a desired outcome, but archaeologists and anthropologists have applied the same principle to non-human entities such as artefacts and landscapes (e.g. Gell 1998; Gosden 2005). A material agent can be an object, a natural entity or any non-living thing – in this way rock art could have played a part in shaping actions and behaviour. In the Scandinavian Bronze Age, these complex relations would have involved the environment. People created things and things in turn shaped people. Humans acted on the environment but the environment also 'acted' on humans.

In a recent paper Christina Fredengren (2011) investigated deposits of artefacts and other items in the Mälaren valley, Sweden. She proposed that water could be a material agent, making it an active part of the human–environment relationship (Fredengren 2011, 126). She observed changes in depositional patterns when the landscape was affected by shoreline displacement in the Late Bronze Age, and suggested that these depositional practices were altered as a result of the water withdrawing (Fredengren 2011, 126).

In the Bronze Age, the fact that so much rock art was created near the sea suggests a system of belief that involved its maritime setting. With a Scandinavian-wide database we can begin to look at where motifs are located and how they relate to coastlines that either shifted or remained relatively static in the face of isostatic rebound. In Bohuslän, Sweden, sites with ships were continually carved close to the shoreline, even when it was disappearing (Ling 2014[2008]). In other regions such as in Uppland, Norway, the tradition of carving ships close to the coastline began to wane after the shoreline had retreated (Ling 2012). There are many areas where shoreline displacement was minimal, or is difficult to determine, yet in those regions where we know that environmental

change occurred it is likely that communities had to re-evaluate the purpose and meaning of these sites.

There is another possibility – rock art sites continued to be created near water but with a novel purpose: to prevent the sea from 'disappearing'. It is possible that the erection of monuments and the deposition of artefacts and human remains were attempts to forestall natural phenomena such as rising waters and dangerous seas (e.g. Larsson 2003/4; Vieira 2010). The same applies to the making of rock art. The images themselves possessed agency and might have been intended to alter the settings in which they were situated. At the very least, we cannot deny that the shifting shorelines would have required some renegotiation of the original meanings of rock art on the coast. As John Coles (2005, 101) convincingly argued:

> 'Sea-water had an important role but one that changed over time; a landscape studded with rock carvings linked to the existing sea-level would be altered and probably lose much of its contemporary purpose as the waters withdrew … '

These environmental changes would also have influenced the intentions of those who made and used rock art. Hopefully the combination of broad geographical patterns and local palaeoenvironmental data can help us to better understand this enigmatic material.

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Figure 1. The distribution of ship images in rock art with different size circles representing the different quantities of ship motifs at each site (Nimura 2015, 51, fig. 4.2).

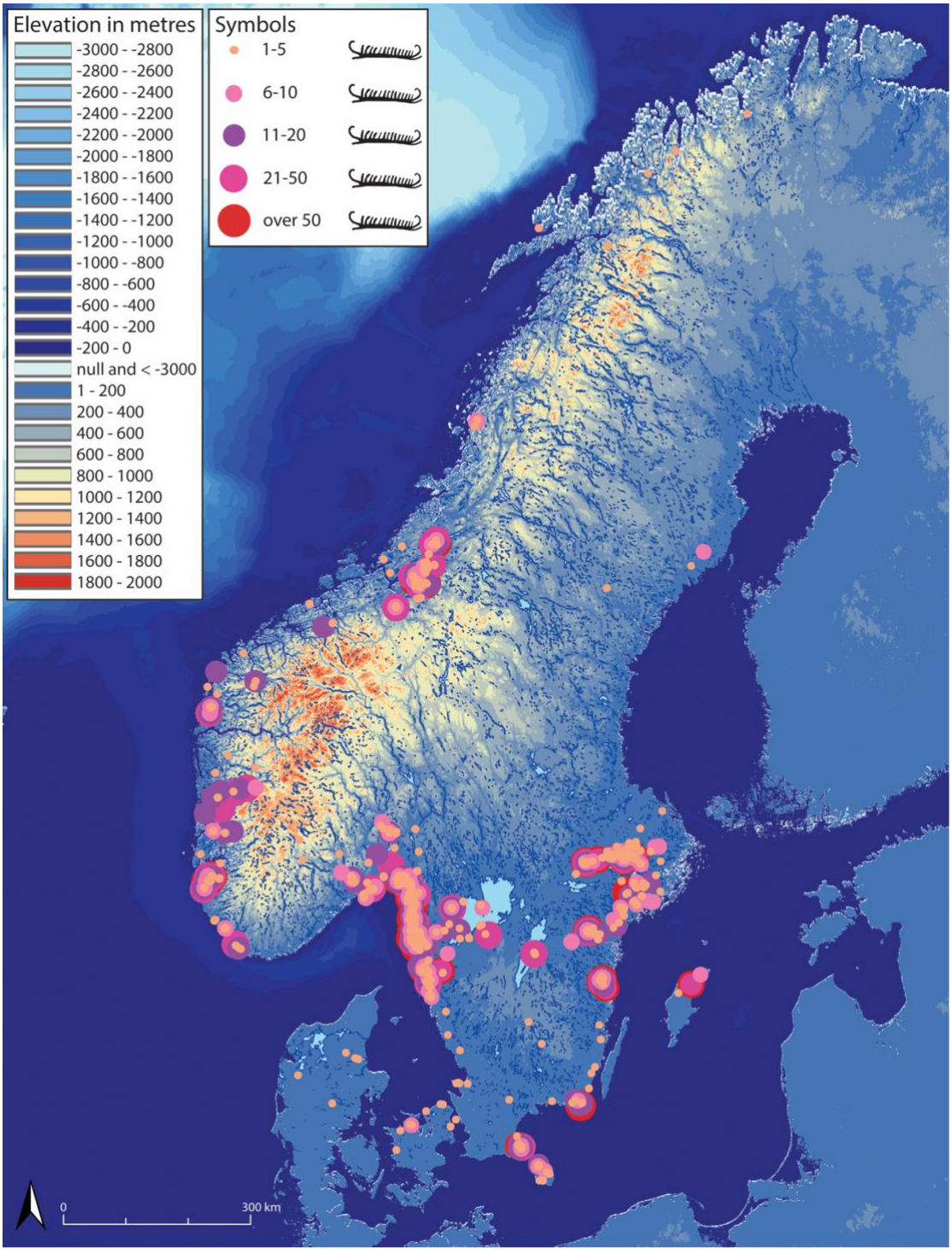

Figure 2. The distribution of ship motifs on rock art sites in Uppland on a palaeolandscape reconstruction map from the Early Bronze Age showing ship motifs clustered on the edges of water. The map represents the Uppland landscape at *c.* 3500 cal yr BP (*c.* 1550 BC). The green represents land in *c.* 1550 BC and the grey represents land in present day (palaeolandscape map from Sund 2010).

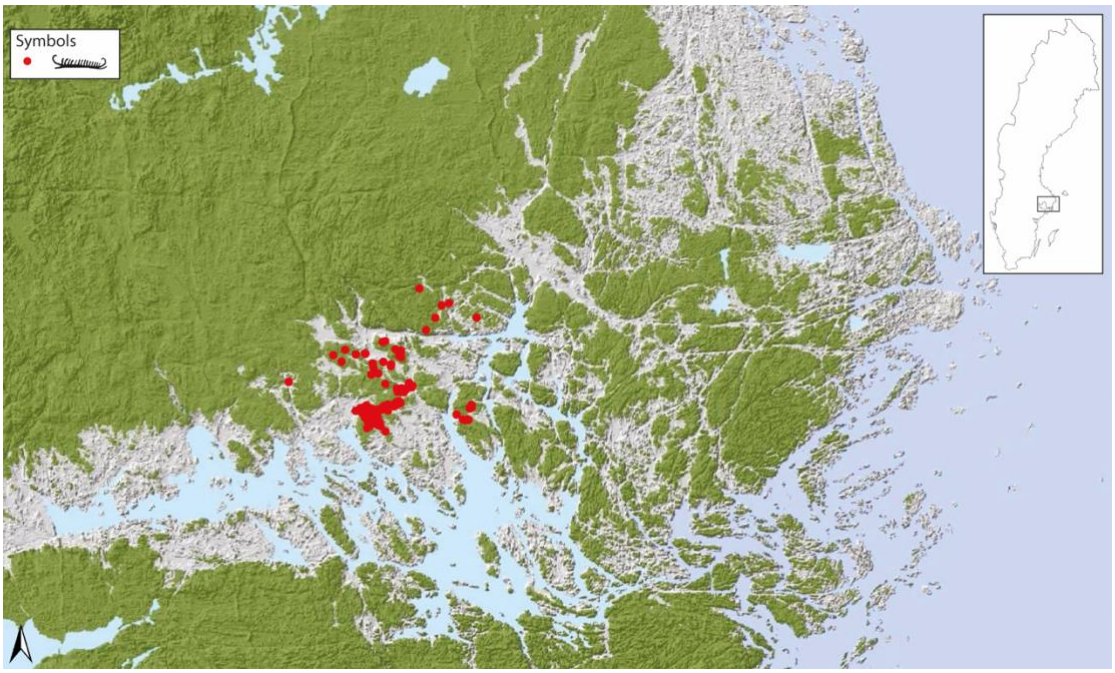

Figure 3. The distribution of ship motifs on rock art sites in Uppland on a palaeolandscape reconstruction map from the Late Bronze Age showing fewer ship motifs clustered on the edges of water. The map represents the Uppland landscape at 2500 cal yr BP (*c.* 550 BC). The green represents land in *c.* 550 BC and the grey represents land in present day (palaeolandscape map from Sund 2010).