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Prehistoric material and religion: a personal odyssey

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Prehistoric material and religion: a personal odyssey

Jarl Nordbladh

For me, it all started with a dilemma. How was I to situate myself in a specific field – rock art studies – being personally attracted to prehistoric pictures as a visual, historical phenomenon, but sceptical of instant, un-reflected interpretations couched in terms of a stereotypical history of religion?

Among archaeologists, theories are often received as general, and not as historical products with specific time-bound qualities. Yet theories, of course, are not omnipotent, nor invariably helpful; they are social and have an agenda with claims on how the world is to be studied. My attempt to find some expedient enabling me to avoid simple explanations – hopefully reaching a new understanding in other ways and by other means – is a complicated story.

For me, fortunately, the problem of finding a reasonable platform for discussion was not limited to an internal, archaeological discussion where the full breadth of the academic discipline of religion has never been considered. Criticism of the way archaeologists dealt with religious themes was almost non-existent. Among archaeologists, religion was much easier to handle than for scholars of religion; the reason being, however, that archaeology was simply not keeping up with the discipline of the study of religion. On the other hand, being based primarily on textual sources, this latter discipline was not comfortable working with material remains and structures. This left a gap between the two disciplines, a gap which had to be bridged. A beginning was made with Words and Objects, an undeservedly neglected symposium volume edited by Gro Steinsland in 1986.

Thus, even if grounded in generally available sources of inspiration, my own approach was not timeless: a conjunction of specific circumstances formed my working conditions. The many social changes of the late 1960s and 1970s affected academia: students became more concerned about the functioning of democratic society, seeking clearer relations between the contents and use of archaeological studies and knowledge on one hand, and the problems of contemporary society on the other. There were serious discussions about access to higher education and how an economy could allow this (a sort of repetition of...
the situation at the beginning of the nineteenth century where students for the first time organized themselves as a group, active in social and economic discourse). From today’s perspective it is clear that the often used concept of revolution was misunderstood.

The archaeological revolution was not radical. Yet it inspired new questions and new methods, often based on quantitative methods; above all, the answers did not resemble earlier results. A constant flow of new books and journals presented fresh studies or new subjects and it became impossible to be an archaeologist without a deep and continuous knowledge of the new literature, a knowledge and ability which divided scholars into informed and uninformed, active or passive, intellectual workers. But this is not the whole picture. Inspiration was also sought outside the discipline: culture studies, economics, geography and – above all – social anthropology (Cassel 2008). In Scandinavia new publishing houses were established which published a flood of translations from Italian and French (of, among others, Eco, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault). On the basis of these, it was possible to do informed theoretical archaeological work. This meant that theoretical archaeology in Scandinavia was temporarily ahead of developments in the UK, where translations only appeared much later (if at all) and then in highly abridged form, sometimes without references.

A great deal of my own inspiration came from works beyond the discipline: John Berger (1975); Umberto Eco (1968); Michel Foucault (1972); Henri Lefebvre (1974); Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966); Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) and Adam Schaff (1962), among others. However, the archaeological twist was not only a change in the book and library situation. New international contacts enabled direct access to archaeological work in neighbouring lands, but also in more exotic milieus, such as France, Italy, Spain, and even Canada, Australia and Russia. Both the new material and the foreign ways of conducting research opened new possibilities. The landscape in which stone images were situated seemed to offer explanations which had to be integrated into research strategies – with topography, density and lacunae all involved in the creation and maintenance of special places. Conferences helped maintain a network of colleagues willing to take part in an ongoing discussion on research practices and the future of rock art studies.

Among the most influential sources inspiring me were the studies by Leroi-Gourhan (1965b) on Palaeolithic cave art. These opened up the possibility of escaping from old interpretations of hunting magic and concentrating more closely on the archaeological material and the remarkable topographical characteristics of caves. These studies looked for systematic relations between the images and their locations and denied that the locations of these images were fortuitous. So the qualities of the windings of the caves were seen as a three-dimensional part of the meaning of the pictures.

The aim of finding patterns and systems within this rather wide material convinced me that a similar approach could be tested on Swedish rock art. In my mind, I transformed some valleys of the province of Bohuslän into a model of caves where the ceiling was missing, thus creating a special cave-like structure, where the petroglyphs could be placed and observed. I had hoped to find an information-bearing structure and an ordering system, with, for instance, armed men representing guards protecting the entrances. Sorry to say, these attempts failed. But it was an opening towards seeing the different figures as signs, both as individual ones and as groups and maybe with special preferences and placement, space and even scale (Nordbladh 1991, 1999).

In the early years few archaeologists were aware of the wider possibilities; Leroi-Gourhan (1964, 1965a) remained a rare exception. I was also struck by writers and artists
who kept up with the archaeological literature and criticized archaeologists for being too absorbed in their own written culture and hence neglecting the image world (Broby-Johansen 1967; Jorn 1972).

This is one problem, but there is another. Through description and analysis, archaeologists want to explain and hopefully be able to offer a possibility for understanding – but they have no intention of recreating the object of investigation. History is generally seen as something which is over. In the highly unusual circumstances of the present day with increasing archaeological interest in religion, we face attempts at the revival of prehistoric religious beliefs where the contemporary cult of Norse Paganism is an example of a contemporary social interest in archaeology. The Swedish Asatru Assembly (www.asatrosamfundet.se) claims to be a democratic, non-racist, ecological and peaceful organization based on a prehistoric belief system. The academic study of religion can easily accommodate such movements, but one wonders what effects such developments might have on archaeology as a discipline.

Thus my own story is part of contemporary archaeology, and my image of religion will reflect that.

A BRONZE AGE RELIGION?

Even without this theoretical baggage, a history of “religion in the Scandinavian Bronze Age” or of “Bronze Age religion” is not an easy task, if indeed possible. The theme is circumscribed by claims so abundant and diverse that considering them all is impossible. And we should also enquire if what we might identify as a religion existed at all, at least understood as one system where all actions might conceivably be interpreted as expressions of one single, coherent and logically harmonious entity (at least from the standpoint of adherents).

Why, however, insist on finding religion when thoughts and actions may have had their own agenda, sometimes related to a wider, “spiritual” context, sometimes not? There is a real risk in constructing and explaining something which may exist mainly as a result of archaeological research and academic traditions of organizing knowledge. As archaeology often works within an evolutionistic framework, the study of a Bronze Age religion might be expected to show changes in spiritual and social progress and even a development towards individual powers or gods. As most archaeology is also a national construct, it is difficult to argue for overarching religious phenomena. Even if the term ideology has sometimes been used to replace religion and provide room for more social, economic or even political discussions, the questions surrounding belief systems remain (Nordbladh 1978b).

CAUGHT BY THE DOCUMENTS

One way to get to know the research material was – and still is – not only to observe the rock art on the rocks but also to study the documentation of finds produced over time. In the beginning this started as a check on their accuracy (Nordbladh 1995, 2004). This led to – in the long run rather fruitless – discussions on the objectivity of the documents, which were a part of the positivistic package of the contemporary research mission.
Eventually, however, I realized that in going through the documented Swedish rock art — which went back more than four centuries — it became more interesting to get to know how earlier colleagues argued and how they constructed their documents. This new insight made the documents far more impressive, and recourse to the archived sources facilitated the exploration of useful observations made by others earlier (Kjellén & Hyenstrand 1977; Marstrand 1978; Nordbladh 1980b, 2000, 2004; Helskog & Olsen 1995; Edgren & Taskinen 2000; Helskog 2001); they became the main research material, as basic statements on which arguments could be formed. In a way, the documented and standardized archaeological material — the rock art and its location — was transformed into a new form as documents. In this format, sources could be moved, printed, copied and laid out side by side, facilitating comparison. This latter is very valuable, but impossible in the real landscape, yet for most archaeological objects it is the normal procedure.

“Petroglyphs” is a category created by the archaeological classification of the nineteenth century. But observation and documentation of stone images has a long history and most of the documents can be profitably used to save and carry information for historical studies. The early antiquarians Carl Gustaf Gottfried Hilfeling (1740–1823) and Carl Georg Brunius (1792–1869) made their measurements using grid systems and standardized scales and they also often marked parts of the surveyed bedrock which were affected by weathering (Nordbladh 1997, 2000). More comprehensive studies were Brunius’s work in the parish of his father, in Tanum (Brunius 1868), and that of Axel Emanuel Holmberg (1817–1861), who claimed to grasp the whole of Scandinavia’s rock art (Holmberg 1848). But archaeology was then itself a new discipline and references to similar phenomena were very limited. Mostly these referred to classical texts, but some limited links were also postulated to ethnographic accounts. In the scholarly literature, no connection was made between rock art and religious beliefs until the beginning of the twentieth century. The last 150 years have produced several generations of rock art researchers who seem to have neglected what is concealed in the archives. In this material it could be possible to find research ideas that were abandoned and forgotten — but which could be of interest again.

To reflect on what had happened at the observation places and sites, I also made a study called “Observing the Observers” (Nordbladh 2004), which made it clear that a study — in the archive and the library — had to open up a new engagement with the pictures in their natural and cultural setting. In this way, conditions were created for new analytical entities. This shows that even source materials have an existence and growth of their own as new relations are perceived.

A MULTITUDE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIALS

My first more serious contact with any archaeological material was rock art, which I experienced as very multiplex: abundant and present in different topographies and settings, with varied forms or styles, format, and so on. Aside from that, different states of physical preservation also posed a problem (Nordbladh 1980a).

Gradually I understood that there were plenty of other archaeological materials which could be connected to, or contrasted with, the petroglyphs. An outstanding category was provided by objects cast in shining bronze, most of them belonging to a sphere closely
related to the human body, such as ornaments and weapons, but also to horses. Thanks to the surviving bronze metal, today we are able to see that with the Bronze Age there seems to have been an appreciation of new sounds in the form of the clatter of thin bronze plates attached to riding and draught animals, to musical instruments, and even on costumes. As these objects were often found in graves and bogs, they were well preserved and may have become the most sought-after antiquities on the market for nineteenth-century collectors. As it was the very objects which were in focus, the circumstances of the discovery were usually neglected; subsequent efforts at contextual interpretation were difficult or impossible.

A special group of objects consists of small miniatures of humans, animals and vehicles, which might have been used in some kind of drama, where grouping, movement and timing could have been played out to illustrate and explain events or predict future situations. This miniature world may have created an occasional theatre for small groups of people (see Fig. 3.1).

Large mobile constructions such as boats, ships and wagons could have stressed speed, range and carrying capacities, which could be part of planning work, communication preferences and mythical narratives. Such myths are not necessarily part of a religious sphere, but may have integrated references to many practices and beliefs.

In the past twenty years, our knowledge of the archaeological remains of houses and farm constructions has expanded significantly. These once large and impressive buildings

Figure 3.1 Museum arrangement of idols from the late Swedish Bronze Age (700–500 BCE), illustrating possible scenic and theatre-like manipulations for social purposes (Knape 1996: cover). The Museum of National Antiquities, Stockholm. Photo: Christer Åhlin 1996. © Christer Åhlin/Statens historiska museum, reproduced with permission.
can be used for an understanding of how landscapes were created and maintained, and human life organized. Stone architecture seems to have been reserved for burials.

Exacting technologies were necessary for the advanced handling of textiles, gold, bronze and iron, and possibly these works were surrounded by secrets, rules, security and protection. It should be mentioned that bronze objects were more numerous in the Bronze Age than the preserved archaeological finds might lead us to expect. Many objects were – perhaps for reasons other than wear and damage – melted down and given new forms and functions. Also too few of the tools have been preserved for archaeological analysis, probably melted down as scrap-metal. Casting bronze is dangerous work, involving high temperatures and poisonous fumes, so to protect bronze-smiths there may have been rituals to prevent injury and sickness.

From the enumeration of phenomena above, it is quite obvious that there is a multitude of archaeological remains to be used for further interpretation. Rock art is hardly the only way to reflect on phenomena which could have a bearing for the history of religion.

**APPROACHING THE PETROGLYPHS**

The petroglyphs were, however, the principal interest in my studies, and the starting point was that the images represented a language-like or information structure, which could be analysed in terms of signs, proximities, quantities, densities and the way the different signs were combined on the bedrock. This meant that the signs were not treated according to form or style but grouped together on the basis of representation. Of course, many figures and marks were impossible to categorize according to the classification system chosen (Nordbladh 1978a, 1980a).

By looking at the sign combinations in use, it was possible to identify patterns in the extensive material of thousands of signs from two Swedish areas, the county of Kville in the province of Bohuslän, and (as a control) material from the province of Uppland. It is probably important to state that despite the numerous petroglyph sites, no identical images are to be found. Variation is the normal state. Thus the fact that the infinite variety of signs could be reduced to very few actual sign types was a surprise. By concentrating on combinations and variety, six sign types were observed: cup marks, ships, humans, animals, footprints and crossed circles. Full combinations were rare and it could be observed that some theoretically possible combinations were never in use. These patterns were roughly the same for the two areas, despite being separated by a distance of more than six hundred kilometres and lying in topographically different areas.

Cup marks were identified as the most common sign, possibly a sign which already had a history and use and which was connected to the imaginary world of the more developed rock art. Archaeologists use the term “cup mark” to identify one or several circular marks with a half-rounded bottom, pecked into stone. With their abstract design, cup marks are used in isolation or as part of other figures and motifs. Cup marks have a chronological span from the Stone Age and possibly lasting into historical times; consequently any possible meaning would hardly have been constant. Seen as a sign of its own, their special distribution was far greater than that of the other signs, offering the message that this very sign was capable of existing on its own, without the necessary support of other figurative signs.
THE LANDSCAPE

What rock art represents is not clear, and to see the images just as illustrations of daily life or special events is problematic. There has been a tradition of observing the images isolated from their possible contexts, often as a kind of art. In Bohuslän, the landscape is characterized by an archipelago, long valleys, open areas and rather impressive mountains. By connecting the petroglyph sites to the landscape, I saw that the sites lay close to each other, each preferably within sight of another. In that respect they were quite social and dense at the edges of open, flat areas and narrow water passages. Recently Johan Ling has recalculated the contemporary sea level, which brings the sites much closer to the water and what might have been the most important social space in these Bronze Age communities: the beach (Ling 2008). Unfortunately such places, with their expected arrangements for breaking waves, landing, fishing constructions, ship-building, boat shelters for bad weather and winter, and so on, have not yet been found or identified. In such geographical situations the beach is the natural place for lookout posts, but also the place for receiving members of society and their guests and friends, and it is from the beach that they will take their leave. At the same time, however, the beach could be the landing place for enemies, who could arrive silently in hostile numbers.

The monuments and location of objects are possible to relate to places which together create a landscape, understandable and explainable in human terms. For us it is possible to see a division of the landscape into several more horizontal zones, with ships on the water and daily life on land, above which the petroglyph sites display comments on what is held to be important. Higher up, on the ridges of the hills and mountains is the zone dedicated to the memory of the dead, with extensive burial constructions in stone for a small, chosen, portion of the population.

Figure 3.2 In connection with an EU-based project called “The Emergence of European Communities: Household, Settlement and Territory in the late Prehistory” at the University of Gothenburg, rock art sites were discovered very close to a settlement excavation. This gave the opportunity to analyse the rock art practice more closely, with different chronological, spatial and ritual forms of expressions and relations. The site Torp 1:3 in Tossene parish, Bohuslän county, offered occupational layers with hearths, ceramics, post-holes, and hundreds of small clay marbles, stone pavements, and a small stone hammer in the direct vicinity of the rock art images. It was evident that the production time of the stone figures was rather limited, but the place was in use both during the Bronze and Early Iron Ages. One of the figures, a nestled-up figure, maybe an acrobat, was identified as a master design (Ling & Ragnesten 2009: front fly-leaf). © Stiftelsen för dokumentation av Bohuslåns hällristningar, reproduced with permission.
In recent years, archaeologists have learnt that prehistoric sites are far from restricted to a single datable period. Instead, many of these sites are themselves phenomena with an internal, long but not necessarily connected history: they are ongoing performance sites, graves or building spaces, where the places in themselves seem to recurrently attract other activities. It is up to us to decide what is most important about a certain site: even if it is the rock art that attracted us, all earlier and later uses should be noted, not to forget the total destruction at the end which is often performed by the archaeological excavation.

For rock art, this means that some images are more a confirmation of an already established place with its own history; for others the images are the innovative thing, the creators of a new place. Obviously, someone made the first carvings – but it was the presence of the carvings (rather than the carvers) that attracted additional work. Thus by their very existence the petroglyphs took on a life of their own.

Fortunately, in the minds of archaeologists today, rock art is intimately linked to its location and whatever else is observed nearby. Contemporary studies try to integrate the use of rock art with landscape and the establishment and keeping of places, which may go hand in hand with other social activities. Despite the rather monotonous repetition of the well-known rock art motifs and locations, it must be said that sometimes quite new discoveries are made, in image content, style or placing. These are surprising moments in rock art studies and a challenge to continue surveying the landscape (Fig. 3.2).

**INTERPRETATIONS**

Eventually, I understood that neither structuralism nor semiotics could produce explanations related to or comparable to what was already available in the historical workshop. Instead it was possible to assemble a study collection and to get to know properties which had not been exploited earlier. To view petroglyphs – as well as other symbolic actions and their materials used in the Bronze Age – as information was rewarding on the basis of an understanding that the images were intended to communicate between humans, and not that they were intended to convey messages between individual humans and higher powers.

From this, it followed that the panels were remnants from other activities and may have been primarily fragments, brief quotes, or arrows pointing to apprehensions and conceptions which were expressed mainly in a narrative form. The myths evoked existed only as praxis. They were lived, intertwined with daily life.

When “myth” is presented as a whole, it is a construction of the archaeologists. In the best of cases it is a reconstruction of what was actually there in the past, but it is important to be aware of the fact that in the archaeological material “the myth as such” never appears. When speaking about “myth” in prehistory, it is a way of forming a “whole” that can function as an object of study. Thus, any presumed prehistoric “myth” is a construction, following our rules of composition. Like other monumental sites in prehistoric times, the petroglyph sites were places where imagery and constructions were discussed, criticized, changed and explained again and again, until some sort of agreement was achieved – a process far from our own shaping of the mythical issue.

I also tried other ways for the interpretation of some of the rock art figures, such as the warriors and what they meant for society. This was done in a research situation when
these fighters were appreciated as a clear and important part of society. I tried an approach more in line with civilization critique, highlighting the problem of having this strong force at the core of society, and what the consequences might have been (Clastres 1977; Nordbladh 1989).

As gender became a research issue in the general debate, I tried to deepen my knowledge, but this problem area presented new properties, which had not yet been recognized. What I had previously assumed was that culture was a kind of superstructure over nature. Instead it turned out that biology was not at all a stable base, but rather extremely varied and influenced by culture. Thus, in our society at that time (i.e. in the 1970s) our outlook on sex and gender was limited to the dual terms of masculine and feminine. It became clear to me that science had its own culture and was locked into a situation where the choice was twofold: male or female. The problem is that there is not really any clear basis for viewing the sexes as only a duality. The widespread concept of a man–woman pair lacks foundations, and it is gradually being realized that incorrect assumptions in the natural sciences have contributed to forming our understanding of cultural norms. Entering the section classified as “abnormal” at the biomedical university library, I discovered that you could be a person without sex, or with several sexes, and you could be both a biological father and a biological mother in one person. Eventually it became obvious to me that there are – on biological grounds – at least eight human sexes, which societies may or may not accept or transform into other groups. These cases were, of course, rare, but they existed and still exist. Sex and gender, as they were generally defined, were not useful categories to me (Nordbladh & Yates 1990).

CONCLUSIONS

Based upon my work with rock art, it seems quite questionable to argue that we can find a coherent Bronze Age religion. There may have been some sort of religious or “spiritual” praxis. But we cannot identify any one part of society with which to work and through which such activities could have been homogenized. Linking rock art with some group connected to the protection or wishes of the community at large would be tenuous indeed.

To my mind, any phenomena that might be construed – following our modern categories – as being of a religious character were probably restricted to a mixture of small and conspicuous events, which were not always coordinated. These events were integrated in other actions in such a way that they are difficult to identify – at least for us. A separation between daily life and religious behaviour was neither evident nor desired in prehistoric society. Distinguishing between them is a later ambition, of archaeologists and historians of religion (Nordbladh 1978b, 1986). It may be possible to find archaeological contexts, locally, which may have been coordinated, but to integrate all similar material traces and observations into one connected religious system for Europe is a dubious project. It is true that many of the phenomena observed are superficially similar, but they are probably part of quite different circumstances, even if the archaeological material suggests connections.

I hope that what is written above will persuade younger researchers to enter the field of archaeology and look for further levels of interpretations which are not obvious to traditionally trained archaeologists. Some support for this being a possible and productive direction lies in the fact that what I did with the rock art was very close to what
Christopher Tilley (1991) did with the site of Nämforsen, but the reference works used were totally different, which means that there is more than one way available to reach a similar goal.

**SUGGESTED READING**

