

# Rock Carvings of North and West Europe

**Professor John Coles FBA** has been working on Scandinavian rock art since the early 1990s. In April 2004 he convened a conference, jointly sponsored by the British Academy and the Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities, to look at various aspects of the carvings found in north and west Europe.

**T**HE rock carvings of north and west Europe represent a unique corpus of information about the societies of the Bronze Age. Carved into the hardest of rocks – quartzites, granites and other stone – they provide a sequence and a complex of images that must surely have represented an important source of communication and aspiration for the communities of the north and west. From their first appearance on the rocks, in the early second millennium BC in northern Europe, and even earlier in the west, the repertoire of the artists expanded, the images often became more flamboyant and exaggerated, and the number of rock surfaces chosen for carving increased dramatically with time. By the later Bronze Age and earliest Iron Age, there were thousands of sites in existence, in Ireland, north Britain, Norway, Sweden and Denmark; carved sites are now turning up in Wales and more discoveries are being made in most of the known areas.

For over 150 years, antiquarians and archaeologists have struggled to record the hundreds of sites that the pioneers noted, and



Figure 1. Rock carvings at Åby Tossene, Bohuslän, a much-visited site. Photo JMC 2002.

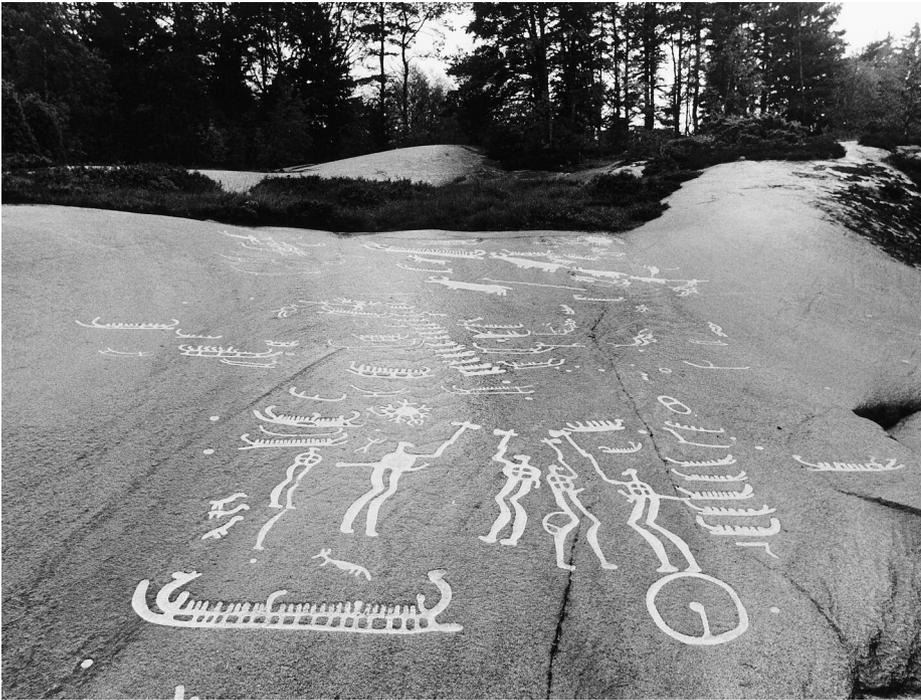


Figure 2. Rock carvings at Aspeberget, Bohuslän, painted. The carving surface is now seriously degraded and textile covers are used to protect it from further acid rain runoff, as well as human traffic (visitors walking on the rock). Photo JMC 1974.

the hundreds more that have emerged from the forests and moorlands in the past decades. The character of the images on the rocks is not uniform throughout the north and west. In Ireland and Britain the ubiquitous cup-and-ring motifs are surprisingly varied in their execution, and they pose difficult questions as to origins, associations and their social meanings. In south Scandinavia, in contrast, the motifs are extraordinarily diverse, and among the most common are images of boats, humans, quadrupeds, discs, foot imprints and cupmarks. While these, or some of them, are instantly identifiable, their precise significance to the Bronze Age communities that created them, maintained and often augmented them over time, is well beyond our capacity at the moment.

The conference on *Rock Carvings of North and West Europe* set out to address particular issues – ‘Discovery and Documentation’, ‘Sites in Landscapes’, and ‘Presentation with Protection’. For many years, archaeologists have grappled with individual subjects, single images such as cup-and-ring, or boat, and have pondered their particular symbolic importance. Such an approach can hardly do more than signify existence and style. Where

such images are recorded well, in a precise association with other images, and in a landscape recreated, on paper or in computer, that approximates to that of the Bronze Age, then we can begin to see, or at least to consider with justification, how such imagery may have played a part in the workings of Bronze Age societies. An important part of such considerations is the continuing analysis of geological and geographical data,

with a view to setting the carvings and their contemporary sites in landscapes of the north emerging from the grip of the ice, literally rising from the post-glacial seas.

For too long, archaeologists have selected those sets of images that seemed to support one hypothesis or other, and we have ignored the contexts and places in the land. The new work, being carried out in all the areas of rock carvings of the north and west, provides argumentative material, dismissive here and there of former ideas, and supportive of or encouraging new ideas and concepts, to be tried and adjusted as data accumulates. All of this, however, depends on the compilation of good records of sites and images, and on the detail afforded by landscape assessments, and, finally, on the survival of the evidence for future scholars. In all of this, the public's involvement and interest is essential, to encourage, to criticise, and to insist on the maintenance of the sites as part of the nations' heritage. The three conference themes tried to address all these issues, and it was particularly satisfying the two Academies could combine in a shared commitment to the subject; both Academies have supported



Figure 3. Rock carving of a Late Bronze Age boat with warrior images amidships, Vitlycke, Bohuslän, within the World Heritage area. Photo JMC 2002.

extensive research on the rock carvings, and thus it was appropriate that both should share and collaborate in the debates. The speakers in the main sessions were drawn from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, and a capacity audience listened to and debated, vigorously at times, a wide variety of approaches to the principal themes.

The session on the 'Discovery and Recording' of rock carvings exposed a wide divergence of opinion about the ethics of uncovering hitherto unknown sites, in order to record them prior to reburial. There can be no argument against the modern recording of well-known sites, or of those discovered in past decades but now rarely visited; all these sites are, in part or in total, exposed to the elements and it is crucial that adequate, undisputed, records should be made of them. But the deliberate search for, and uncovering, of hitherto unknown sites poses different questions, and this matter was not fully debated although there was considerable discussion about the ethics of such work during the informal gatherings of Day One. The physical acts of recording, by oblique light, rubbing, tracing and laser scanning, could all contribute to a trustworthy archive, although the varieties of documentation and planning of the carved images seemed as wide and divergent as ever. With over 5000

known rock carving sites in Bohuslän alone, some measure of speed in recording is essential; at the current rate of work in this area, an estimated 80 years will be needed to complete the record of the known sites, and meanwhile, sites in the hundreds are being added to the total each season. Laser scanning, demonstrated at the conference, is currently 10–20 times more slow in operation than more conventional methods, and well over 10 times as costly. Nonetheless, the various reports from Sweden and Norway in particular showed the enormous efforts being made to compile an accurate record for future research, and representatives from other regions could take some encouragement from the work being done.

The session on 'Sites and Landscapes' was extraordinarily varied, from site specific excavations in Bohuslän, and magnetometer-based surveys around sites in Ireland, to broader looks at the landscapes surrounding the carved sites. A concerted effort to explore the soils at the base of certain rock carving sites is now underway in western Sweden, and results are beginning to add a new dimension to our studies; quite clearly, a suite of activities took place immediately in front of some carved rocks, involving stone structures, fires, deposition of debris and placed artifacts. The examination of selected sites is obviously a one-off operation,

incapable of being repeated, and the debate regarding the extent of exploration and the analytical possibilities will doubtless continue and lead to more comprehensive approaches than are currently being applied.

Wider viewpoints were presented from various regions of Norway and Sweden and Denmark, some of them of a technical nature (isostatic recovery of the land, proximity to landmarks and wetlands, distances between carved complexes), but the presentations confirming the place and significance of rock carving sites within the cultural landscapes of the Bronze Age were a measure of the recognition that the carvings, once studied in isolation, had to be seen in their legitimate wider settings. Such varied approaches, building landscapes around the documented site records, have already offered insights into the role of rock carvings, in questions of centre and periphery, in land and water routes, in landmarks and in the passage of souls, both alive and dead. Some of this is undisputed, some is mere but important conjecture.

The session on the 'Presentation' of rock carving sites to the public, allied to adequate 'Protection' of the sites, proved to be the most controversial. At the outset, all are aware of the degrading effects of air pollution (principally acid rain), erosion, forestry, agriculture, motorways, industries and tourism, and doubtless other agencies, upon the rock carving sites. To many in the audience, this session was both satisfying and disturbing. Satisfying it was because it became clear that those responsible for the display of rock carvings to the public were all intensely aware of the problems and were working to devise new ways to attract a wider audience while at the same time protecting the integrity of the sites. Disturbing it was because the threats exposed by the speakers and in the long discussion that followed were seen to be many, varied and intensifying year by year. World Heritage status of the rock carvings in northern Bohuslän does not in itself help much in the physical protection of sites, although the publicity engendered by the designation is rewarding. The practical



Figure 4. Rock carvings at Grillby, Uppland, well-preserved in a farmyard.  
Photo JMC 1976.



Figure 5. *Debate on a rock carving site at Fränmarp, Scania, with John Coles, Lars Larsson and Bo Gräslund – the principal organisers of the Academy Conference. Photo S.C.Minmitt 2001.*

measures adopted in Sweden and Norway, insistent on the protection of sites yet catering for public demand wherever possible, were in a way a model for others to at least consider and to adapt to their own circumstances. The debate in essence is over the values placed on the monuments as repositories of crucial and irreplaceable information about the past, in contrast to, and potential conflict with, the public's perception of its ownership and its right of access; how to reconcile the demands of both was and will continue to be a crucial balancing act on the part of cultural heritage managers.

In the final session we were presented with two statements from Scotland and England about the values placed on ancient rock carvings as part of the national heritage in both countries. The point was well made that sites recognised as of national importance and thereby listed as such were perhaps not those we would now choose to designate; new discoveries might well be more representative and significant, but the historical choices were hard to dislodge. Examples both bad and good were set out, and perhaps the current debates about the way forward in both countries, and hopefully in Wales and Northern Ireland too, will build on the priorities and policies for action exposed by our Scandinavian colleagues. 'Why need we in the UK invent the wheel' was one comment from the audience – with all the examples already tested in Sweden and

Norway, and measures shown to work, and others discarded, did we need a debate about the theoretical principles that might guide us in considering what to do in the UK? The intentions were there, of course, and were well advanced in both England and Scotland as new initiatives.

The session continued with discussion of the current state of operations in both Denmark and Ireland, the former with a limited number of sites and a restricted rocky landscape, the latter with an untold number of carvings spread over wide areas and where local work continued to augment the record. The results in both countries are particularly important for the development of greater public appreciation, and also for the emergence of significant new data about landscape and rock art relationships.

The conference was concluded by the author of this report with an overview of the current procedures and positions in Sweden and Norway, gained by regular visits funded by the British Academy; comment was made that the high tech manoeuvres now available would be unlikely to supplant the basic fieldwork practices of individual archaeo-logists in discoveries and recording. Further-more, it seemed unlikely that anything unduly sophisticated would or could supplant the landscape element of rock carving research, in placing sites within their original prehistoric settings, and in assessing the possible roles of

rock carvings in the societies of the time. Where the new technologies and practices would change perceptions was in the greater reliability of the records, both of images/sites and of the landscapes of the past with their ever-changing environmental conditions. More pointed comment was made about the deterioration of rock carving sites in all areas, and the inadequate measures often taken to delay the losses. It is easier to document the bad practices than to identify and applaud the successes, but there have been both, in all of the countries represented at the conference.

The overall impression gathered from the meeting of minds was that the rock carvings of the north and west have much to tell us, not so much from the simplest of images carved into the granites and other hard rocks, but through the complexity of panels or assemblages of carvings, set as narrative or conceptual notification for the contemporary society. Furthermore, we have to explore the place of rock carvings within a landscape and social establishment that had, by virtue of its position and development, to demand an imagery of the rituals and commemorations important to perpetuate and encourage the society. Of the artists who executed the works we still know little, although we can now begin to identify the hands of certain individuals – the masters of their craft – who worked within the social arenas. Of the selection of the rock surfaces, and the choice and imposition of particular patterns of images, we can now make some informed guesses, some more precise than others. And of the ultimate thrust behind this huge amount of activity that lasted well over 1500 years in the north and west, we can engage in conjecture and propose various models of behaviour, and determine that the dedication shown by our ancestors should not be allowed to diminish and disappear from the landscapes that we have inherited.

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*John Coles' book [Shadows of a Northern Past. Rock Carvings of Bohuslän and Østfold \(Oxbow, 2005\)](#) has now appeared.*

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