



Book Reviews

ELEVATED ROCK ART: TOWARDS A MARITIME UNDERSTANDING OF ROCK ART IN NORTHERN BOHUSLÄN BY J LING

Oxbow Books. 2014. 271 pp, 140 illus, ISBN 978-1-78297-762-9, pb £40. eBook (PDF) ISBN 978-1-78297-765-0, £20

Scandinavia boasts one of the largest concentrations of prehistoric rock art in the world: thousands of motifs such as ships, animals and humans can be found on the rock outcrops that dot the landscape. There are two World Heritage Sites (WHS) devoted to the visually diverse rock art in this region: one at Alta, in northern Norway, and the other at Tanum, in central Sweden: the latter WHS is covered by Johan Ling's recent publication *Elevated rock art*. The book, based on the author's PhD research, was originally published by the University of Gothenburg in 2008, and was quickly regarded as one of the most important analyses of Bronze Age Scandinavian rock art in the last decade.

It would be difficult to write this review without a brief introduction to the main content of Ling's book. In Scandinavia during the last Ice Age the Fennoscandian glacier covered Denmark, Norway and Sweden (from c 70,000 BC – 11,000 BC). As the glacier melted the land began to rise as it was freed from the great weight of the glacier, an action called glacio-isostatic rebound. During the Bronze Age (1700 BC–500 BC) in certain regions of Denmark, Norway and Sweden the rate of rebound outpaced sea level changes causing shoreline displacement. Though Ling's book is valuable on many levels, the real gem is his detailed analysis of shoreline displacement in northern Bohuslän, which contains an extraordinary wealth of rock art in a maritime landscape.

There are two main reasons why this study is so significant. The first is that Ling demonstrates that detailed shoreline displacement studies have the potential to provide maximum dates for rock art, which is notoriously difficult to date. This is possible as the rock art is fixed in the landscape on large rock outcrops whose location can be compared to palaeoshoreline models. Rock art in Scandinavia for the past century has predominantly been dated by detailed typological studies of representations of ships, but they have often been subjective. One of the key aims of Ling's research is to re-evaluate some of the popular ship motif typologies in relation to shoreline displacement data in order to create a more refined chronology. His methodology is to use geological data and measured terrain maps to model and determine where the sea would have been at various stages of the Scandinavian Bronze Age, and compare these to the altitudes of known rock art sites. In many cases he is able to provide maximum dates for rock art by showing when certain rock panels would have been covered by water, or at least when these same panels were exposed and could therefore have been carved.

The second reason for this study's significance is that shoreline displacement analysis can resituate rock art sites into the landscapes in which they were originally created. Ling argues that because of shoreline displacement, many rock art sites that would have originally been near the coast or a watercourse but are today decidedly landlocked: this has been a major factor for the misinterpretation of rock art sites in the past, or what Ling refers to as the 'terrestrial paradigm'. By placing rock art back into its original landscape, rock art sites can be evaluated in their original settings; they can be compared not only to the surrounding archaeology but also to the

environments in which they were created. By doing so Ling focuses on the original maritime contexts of many of these sites.

Elevated Rock Art is divided into 12 heavily illustrated chapters with a useful Appendix that serves as a gazetteer of rock art sites in Bohuslän. It is accessible for the reader new to rock art research as well as the seasoned rock art scholar. The introductory chapters in Part I (Chapters 1–3) provide a very brief review of Bronze Age archaeology in this area of Sweden. Chapter 1 places the rock art in coastal Bohuslän in a chronological context, and introduces the reader to some key themes for interpretation such as: socio-ritual initiations, soci-political positions; religious declarations; semiotic approaches; ‘landscape, rituals and cosmology’. Chapter 2 then places the rock art into a wider archaeological scene: painting a picture of the Bronze Age environment, and concisely summarising related settlement patterns, burial practices and introducing other cultural material from the region.

Part II (Chapters 4–8) begins with Chapter 4, which provides a constructive literature review of rock art research in this area, and introduces the concept of the ‘terrestrial paradigm’ mentioned above. Ling’s approach to the traditional literature review is compelling, for he analyses the genealogy of intellectual thought within and outside rock art research, looking at some of the social and political discourses that influenced the interpretation of the rock art in this region beginning with 19th century antiquarians. In Chapter 5 Ling makes detailed comparisons with rock art-rich areas in other parts of Scandinavia: Sogn and Fjordane county in central Norway; Rogaland county and within it Stavanger, in southern Norway; Tisselskog in Dalsland, central Sweden; and Simris in Scania, southern Sweden. This is important and necessary as it prevents his study from being too insular.

The latter half of Part II (Chapters 6–8) deals primarily with examining the evidence for shoreline displacement, chronology and palaeo-landscape data, and are by far the most interesting and novel chapters. In Chapter 6 Ling intelligibly explains shoreline displacement, presents the baseline data that he uses in combination with his new altitude data, as well as elucidating the effects that tides would have had on sites near the shoreline. In Chapter 7 he deals with the tricky issue of chronology, testing typological (motif) studies against shoreline data at certain sites (primarily assessing Flemming Kaul’s ship typology from his seminal 1998 publication). Chapter 8 describes the fieldwork undertaken in this study, where altitudes of rock art and the surrounding terrain were measured using GPS (Global Positioning System) and total station and then combined with shoreline displacement curves to create new models of ‘seascapes’ in the Tanum area of Bohuslän.

The final Part III (Chapters 9–12) covers interpretation. Here Ling creates a theoretical framework of various social theories within which to interpret the rock art imagery. Ling proposes a number of different interpretations that all revolve around the social dimensions of rock art sites, which he divides into ‘social environments and actions’, ‘social positions’ and ‘iconic’ features or ‘elements’. Some are decidedly more compelling than others, such as his proposal that rock art might depict specific maritime and shoreline actions, which could have been performed at certain events such as the launching of a boat. By showing how rock art was involved in social and economic action he challenges established theories that these sites were primarily made and used by social elites (eg, Kristiansen and Larsson 2005; Vogt 2006).

There is much in this book that is new, illuminative and innovative in rock art research and Ling’s handsome volume is a major contribution which will no doubt influence future researchers.

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