



## Book Reviews

### **PREHISTORIC ROCK ART IN SCANDINAVIA: AGENCY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE BY COURTNEY NIMURA**

*Oxbow Books. 2015. 160 pages, 65 figures (including many maps and coloured photographs), 19 tables. ISBN 978-1-78570-119-1 (pb) £25.00*

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This review by Dr Courtney Nimura of the location and interpretation of prehistoric Scandinavian rock art is Volume 4 of the Swedish Rock Art Series and is based on her PhD thesis. Its scope covers most of Scandinavia from the middle Mesolithic through to the Early Iron Age, while focusing particularly on the Nordic Bronze Age c.1700-500 BC when much of the surviving rock art was created.

The major motif of Scandinavian rock art of those times was the ship, although many other images are shown – humans, animals (including horses, elk, red deer, reindeer, eels/snakes, and dogs, as well as water animals and birds), weapons, wheeled vehicles and so on – in fact, some three dozen different motifs are mentioned in the text.

The ship is shown in several forms and styles, not only carved or painted on rocks but also on portable bronzes (especially, bronze razors – often found in burial contexts), swords and stone monuments in the shape of ships (the so-called ‘ship settings’). Isotope analysis of some of the bronze objects indicate that the metal was not sourced from local native copper ores but was imported from foreign locations and therefore, as Richard Bradley says (quoted by Nimura, p 8) “...it is not surprising that the ship was such an important symbol”.

Nimura displays many distribution maps of the occurrence of the ship and other images throughout the range, indicating the altitudes and relative propinquity to the coast of the find sites, and detailed tables give the frequency of the various images in her five selected study areas.

It is well established that the level of the sea has changed over time and, as far as possible, the shoreline displacement is examined here in relation to the positioning of the rock art sites. This changing relationship of the ship motifs (and others like circles and foot motifs) to coastal, lacustrine and riverine locations of the rock art has been much discussed in recent studies and Nimura uses data from her study areas to assess the resulting findings. As may be expected, “The distribution maps showed on a very broad scale that most figurative rock art sites are located close to water...”; while the non-figurative sites ‘...tended to spread out over larger geographical areas...’ (p 107).

Nimura addresses the problem of how environmental change affected the meaning of rock art within the Bronze Age context, and to this end attempts to make use of ideas and terminology of anthropologists and other social scientists such as Alfred Gell and Bruno Latour among others to inform the discussions, but this does not always seem to achieve any greater clarification. In her summary, she writes, “Rock art and the sea are intertwined; they are two elements of a cosmological system very focused on elements of the environment. In the areas where this

cosmology was threatened by the disappearing sea, we find the most extravagant rock art, and the largest concentrations of rock art.”(p 129)

This book is richly endowed with maps and tables, but has too few illustrations of the art under discussion; while to some extent the reference list offers a solution to this, more illustrations of the rock art together with some pictures of the portable art and the monumental ship settings would have been appreciated and would have made this study even more useful.

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*The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor*