Out to sea
the ship in Scandinavian rock art from the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age / Early Iron Age

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Out to sea
the data
This project will require collating both extant research from textual sources and data from Scandinavian databases such as Fund og Fortidsminder (DK) and Riksantikvarieaemnet (SE). Data of relevant archaeological phenomena can then be imported into a Geographical Information System (GIS); rock art sites (motifs), cairns, burials / graves, bronze / portable art and ship settings. The GIS will permit spatial analyses and statistical analyses of motif frequencies, and enable broader comparisons of rock art from inland and coastal sites, or of rock art sites and surrounding archaeology.

Including environmental data such as sea-level changes in the GIS will allow inquiries into rock art motifs and their frequencies in regions in which there was environmental change.

Research directions
The use of Scandinavian-wide comparisons will take the research in new directions, but will also give the opportunity to review existing interpretations of rock art. From the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age, environmental fluctuations resulting from the melting Fennoscandian glacier took numerous forms, which we are now capable of reconstructing: climate change sparked floral and faunal changes, sea-level fluctuations flooded masses of land, whilst ancient coastlines are now some distance inland (Images 5-6). These contemporary data have sparked a new interest in the past landscape.

The environmental changes that occurred in this post-glacial period would have had a dramatic effect on how the inhabitants perceived their surroundings (Larsson 2003/4). They would have influenced their religious, mythological and cosmological beliefs, their social practices and rituals, and, of course, their rock art. The ship seems to have played an important role in all these cultural arenas, as it is found not just in the intricate rock carvings and monumental ship settings, but also on bronze artefacts that tell of a religion that emphasised the roles of the sun and water (see Bradley 2009) (Images 7-8).

The empirical elements of this study will lay the foundation for an interdisciplinary and theoretical approach to the interpretation of rock art in Scandinavia.

The project
a brief overview
Small-scale regional studies have dominated rock art research in Scandinavia, consisting of very few countrywide and virtually no Scandinavian-wide surveys. These regional studies provide extensive information for limited geographical areas but largely omit their more ‘global’ contexts. This project aims to remedy this omission. This thesis will draw an inclusive picture of rock art dated from the Mesolithic to the Bronze Age / Early Iron Age from Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Image 1). Specifically, this study focuses on the repeated image of the ship in rock carvings and stone settings from this maritime region.

Out to sea
Ships and maritime motifs dominate the coastal rock art sites and appear on bronzes and in the form of stone geoglyphs or ‘ship settings’ (Images 2-4). By incorporating an extensive geographical area over a lengthy chronological period, we can consider when the ship was used, where it appears or is absent, and what other archaeological features are (or are not) found with it. These patterns (or the lack thereof), may offer new insights on the ship’s cultural importance, functions and meanings.

References

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