

# Swedish rock art depictions of sound producing instruments

## - Potential bow instruments and musical behaviors

### **Abstract**

The Bronze Age lurs have been a central part of research in relation to the use of sound producing instruments and music in the Nordic Bronze Age, this also includes their occurrence at rock art sites. Over the years the focus on the Bronze Age lurs has caused a tendency to overlook other potential sound producing instruments. Therefore, the main goal for this research is to raise awareness of other instruments and musical behaviors. Are there other sound producing instruments depicted on rock art that have not been recognized? Potential bow instruments from Sweden will be presented and discussed. It is argued that there might be other sound producing instruments depicted on rock art, which have not yet been recognized. This might include bow instruments and other instruments. Musical behaviors can provide different aspects and views on the Bronze Age, and should therefore be seen as a highly important field of research.

**Keywords:** music, sound producing instruments, bow instruments, musical behaviors, drums, Sweden

### **Introduction**

Since the findings of the first Bronze Age lures in 1797, they became a central focus which has contributed to great research (Hammerich 1921: 1-2; Sognnes 2017; Leven & Dubey-Pathak 2023). In Denmark the bronze lures were even seen as the beginning of "Danish" music history (Hammerich 1921: 1-2). This tendency has caused the bronze lures to draw attention away from other potential sound producing instrument (Lund 1979: 95; Lund 2011: 181).

Are there other sound producing instruments presented in rock art that has not yet been recognized, or is it something that was reserved for the Bronze Age lures? This research focuses on rock art from Sweden and potential sound producing instruments excluding the bronze lures. Due to difficulties defining music and making a distinction

between music and other sound producing purposes, the term "sound producing instruments" is used instead of musical instruments.

Lack of recognition of sound producing instruments within the music archaeological field, seems to be a general challenge. Not all sound producing instruments might be recognizable for us today. It is possible that only a small amount of the instruments and musical behaviors are known (Morley 2013: 99-100, 319-325). This could also include rock art depictions of potential sound producing instruments. In the following potential sound producing instruments and musical behaviors in rock art depictions will be introduced and discussed.

## Bow instruments

Attempts to interpret musical behavior and instruments in rock art are not seen frequently, and they are usually more general, and typically put in relation to rituals or shamanism (Vogels & Lenssen-Erz 2017). The following will include three rock art depictions from Skjuleröd Hogdal, Slänge Tanum, and Kyrkestigen Svenneby. The three bow depictions have been chosen because of their distinctive morphological representation. These will be analyzed and discussed.

Similarities of bow depictions and their use might help to determine, if the rock art can be categorized as an instrument and musical behavior or not. One approach is to look for morphological and organological characteristics. This includes how the bows are held, if there is a special appearance, and if the bows and archers differ from others (Vogels & Lenssen-Erz 2017: 10-11). Usually, a stick in relation to a bow string is connected with archery (Vogels & Lenssen-Erz 2017: 15). But this should maybe not be an automatic assumption. A typological cat-

egorization of bow depictions and archers in rock art might help to determine if the depictions could be bow instruments.

The Rock art form Hogdal (Fig 1) shows two human figures both holding a bow. One with the bow pointed upwards and the other extended from the body. The panel also includes ships, human figures, an acrobat, and human figures holding objects above their heads. The scene has been interpreted as a ritual performance. The two human figures with bows are described as archers (Coles 2008: 19-20). The panel from Slänge Tanum shows two archers directed against each other (Fig 2). The panel also includes ships, human figures, animal figures, footprints, and cup marks. The depiction from Kyrkestigen Svenneby shows two human figures, including an acrobatic human figure and an archer standing on a ship (Fig 3).

One of the first noticeable features is the archers' body positions and movements. Their body position is not in a typical shoot-

Figure 1: Skjuleröd Hogdal 214:1. (Photo: Högberg, Torsten. (1975). L1969:2990, SHFA, accessed 27 January 2025, <https://shfa.dh.gu.se/image/121979>)





Figure 2: Slänge Tanum 158:1. (Photo: Milstreu, Gerhard. (2015). L1968:7703, SHFA, accessed 27 January 2025, <https://shfa.dh.gu.se/image/1270291>).

Figure 3: Kyrkestigen Svenneby 14:1 (Photo: Högberg, Torsten. (1975). L1967:586, SHFA, 27 January 2025, <https://shfa.dh.gu.se/image/125391>).



ing position. The direction of the way the bow is pointing doesn't seem to be fitting or practical if it were meant for example hunting, especially the bow from Skjuleröd

Hogdal which is pointed upwards. The archers' body positions from Slänge Tanum is almost hunched, especially the one to the right. They appear to differ stylistic from

archers depicted in hunting or fighting scenes especially Skjuleröd Hogdal and Kyrkestigen Svenneby. The arrows also appear without arrowheads. This can be due to weathering and preservation, which have not been possible to examine further. Another notable aspect in relation to the context is the appearance of acrobats at Skjuleröd Hogdal and Kyrkestigen Svenneby, which might add to the interpretation of some kind of potential musical behavior.

### Comparison with African depictions of bow instruments

Depictions of bow instruments can be found elsewhere including rock art from southern Africa (Fig. 4). These depictions show different ways of playing and can be seen in different contexts in relation to musical performances (Vogels & Lenssen-Erz 2017). It is possible that bows from the Nordic Bronze Age were not mono-functional but had more than one function including hunting, fighting, and being an instrument with a musical purpose. Which is also seen in hunter-gatherer societies in Africa (Vogels & Lenssen-Erz 2017).

One consistent of the bow instruments from Africa is that the bow sting is held away from the body, which makes it impossible to shoot an arrow (Vogels & Lenssen-Erz 2017: 11). The direction of the string seems hard to determine in these cases. The bow from Kyrkestigen Svenneby is twisted in a way which makes it difficult to determine the direction, but the bow string from Skjuleröd Hogdal seems to be pointing away from the body. The depictions from Africa also appear to be holding a type of stick in relation to the bow (Vogels & Lenssen-Erz 2017: 12). This is also the case for these Swedish depictions with the exception of Slänge Tanum, which is unclear and possibly weathered. Another morphological feature which appears in the rock art from Africa in connection to bow instruments and musical movement, are bent arms (Vogels & Lenssen-Erz 2017: 17), which is also the case for Slänge Tanum and Skjuleröd Hogdal. The different positions of the bows could also

Figure 4: Rock art depiction of playing the musical bow. Sesau Gorge, Daureb, Namibia. (Photo: Rudner and Rudner 1970: Fig. 69a; Scherz 1986: Fig. 82).

represent different playing techniques.

There seem to be similarities between the depictions of African bow instruments, and the discussed bow "instruments" from Sweden. However, it should be taken into consideration that these are different cultures, and might therefore not be completely consistent. Typical morphological differences do appear. The



playing techniques, bow typology, and context use might be very different. In relation to the African bows and musical behaviors depicted it is suggested that, musical behaviors require a complex interpretation in relation to social life, rituals, and pleasure/entertainment (Vogels & Lenssen-Erz 2017: 21). This might be the same situation for Swedish rock art and depictions of musical behaviors.

### Dance and drums

The bow instruments might not be the only overlooked aspect of musical activities found depicted in rock art. Music is from a cognitive perspective strongly connected to language and communication, which can influence human behavior (Spitzer 2021: 13, 35-36). The connection between communication and music can function as a tool to transfer messages or for storytelling. Music and musical activities such as dance and song, can also contribute to group identity, rituals, and social relations (Power 2019:

365-367; Langley & Suddendorf 2022: 6). It is possible that we only recognize a small number of musical activities and instrument from especially prehistoric time (Morley 2013: 319-325). It is also possible that there is a considerable difference of the perception of sound and music depending on the culture, place, and needs (Lund 2018: 14-15). Dance, clapping, or song do not leave direct archaeological evidence, and is not something that can be excavated and dug up, because they do not require instruments other than the body. But there are examples of depictions which shows potential dance activities (Vogels & Lenssen-Erz 2017). One example is the Fossum panel from Tanum in Sweden (Fig 5). In the middle part of the panel ritual activities and three dancers appear (Melheim 2022: 208-211). A question that can be asked is: would there be dance without music or at least some

sort of rhythm? What instruments might have been played for the dance? This is of course near impossible to answer with certainty. It might be possible that not all played instrument is shown in depictions of musical behaviors such as dance.

One example which could indicate a rhythmic instrument is the panel from Ryk in Tanum (Fig 6). It shows a boat with lure players and two human figures who might be holding potential drums. This is of course difficult to conclude with certainty. The well known Balkåkra drum from Balkåkra in Sweden is one physical example of a potential drum, which is suggested to have been a part of rituals connected to the sun (Freij 1977). The panel from Ryk could possibly have depictions of similar drums, which in this case are being played together with the lures.

*Figure 5:  
Depiction of dancing. Fossum, Tanum 255:1. (Photo: Milstreu, Gerhard. Underslöös Museum).*





Figure 6: Boats with lur players and protective drums. Ryk, Tanum 330:1. (Photo: Horn, Christian, Ivarsson, Oscar and Meijer, Ellen. (2018). 3D visualization of L1967:2596, SHFA, accessed 27 January 2025, <https://shfa.dh.gu.se/image/132057>)

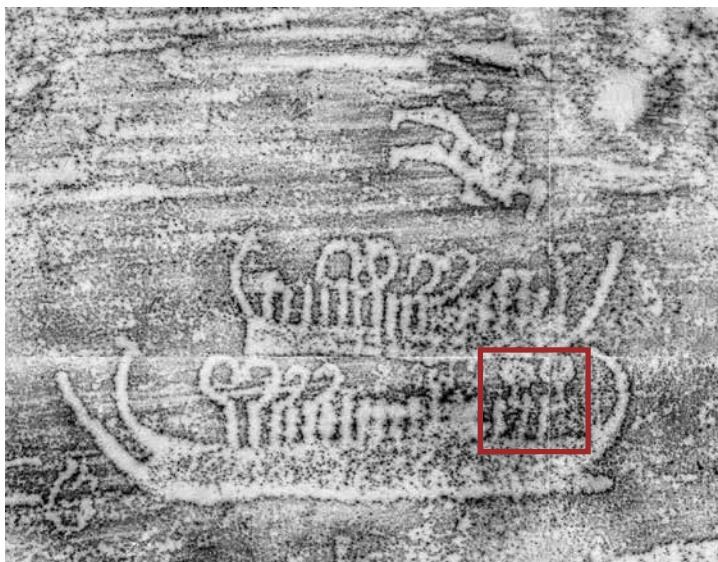


Figure 6b:  
Ryk, Tanum 330:1.  
Rubbing, documented 2008 by  
Underslös Museum.

## Further research

It is possible that the discussed bow depictions can be categorized as a bow instrument and connected to musical behaviors. A more nuanced categorization of bows and archers has to be made.

Rock art depictions of musical behavior and instruments can also contribute to

knowledge about instrument organology, morphology, and playing techniques. It is also possible that there are a variety of social contexts connected to the musical behaviors and that it is not only a ritual context (Bahn 2015; Vogels & Lenssen-Erz 2017). It is important to note that the dis-

cussed musical behaviors and potentially overlooked instruments are hard to conclude for certainty, and should be examined more closely. But it is an aspect and a question which should be considered. There might be other sound producing instruments hidden in the rock art from Sweden, such as the potential bow instrument and drums. If this field is to be examined further in the future, it might give new insight to the soundscape of the Nordic Bronze Age, and the use of sound and music in different activities.

## Conclusion

A wider focus on sound producing instruments on rock art depictions should be considered in the research of rock art. It is likely that instruments and musical behaviors appear more frequently in the Nordic Bronze Age rock art. Potential bow instruments might have been a part of the Soundscape of the Nordic bronze age, and could bring new aspects to the field. Especially features such as bow positions, body movement, and context seem to be the most important indicators to examine. Musical behavior and sound producing instruments depicted in rock art, might not only have been reserved for the Bronze Age lures. The musical behaviors and potential use of bow instruments are hard to conclude with certainty, but it is possible that the presented depictions could be categorized as bow instruments with relations to musical behaviors. A further typological categorization and research are needed, which might provide a wider understanding of the musical practice, organology, and playing techniques in the Nordic Bronze Age. There might be other sound producing instruments depicted on rock art, which have not yet been recognized.

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**Levan Losaberidze**

**Message from the Dead: Megalithic Art from the Middle Bronze Age  
Kurgans in the Southern Caucasus**

**Abstract**

*This paper examines the megalithic art found within the Middle Bronze Age Zurtaketi Kur-gans of the South Caucasus. The kurgans, dating to the Trialeti culture (ca. 2000-1700 BCE), showcase a variety of engraved motifs, including geometric patterns, zoomorphic figures, and depictions of dwellings. Similar carvings found across the South Caucasus likely held symbolic or ritual significance and reflect broader megalithic tradition throughout the region. The analysis of these designs offers insights into the cultural and religious beliefs of the Trialeti communities during the Bronze Age.*

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**Helena Günther**

**An unusual hunter in the rock art of Stone Age Kanozero.**

**Abstract**

*This article revolves around a scene found in the Stone Age rock art of lake Kanozero on the Kola Peninsula, Russia. Three human figures are pictured in close interaction; a pregnant woman, a person next to her with a long fluid line emerging from between the legs holding a spear, and a third person directing an elk headed staff towards them. A row of footprints leading up to the spearcarrier is a significant part of the scene. There is no doubt that the persons are connected and involved in something, but what is going on? In this article, previous understandings of the composition as picturing a man and woman as a married couple are questioned. An alternative interpretation is presented, based on the symbolic bond and antagonism between male big game hunting and female reproductive powers found among hunting communities, and of the inversion of these powers in the liminal world of ritual. The role of metaphorical expression, ethics and practices for grasping and communicating long term accumulated ecological and social knowledge in traditional knowledge systems is discussed along with the need for addressing gender issues and human – animal relations in hunters rock art as intertwined.*

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