

Encultured Rocks

Encounter with a Ritual World of the Bronze Age

Katherine Hauptman Wahlgren

There is an intriguing rock-carving place at Flyhov in the province of Västergötland, southern Sweden. The carved images appear on a series of flat rocks in connection to a number of pointed oval hollows, that are linked to each other in rows suggestive of boats joined together stem by stem. It is argued that the hollowed-out boats in the rock made this a significant place for rock-carvings. Certain phenomena of nature were ritually important during the Bronze Age, and some elements like rock and water may have had a transformative character. Metaphoric understanding of images is used to inspire interpretations of the meaning of the Bronze Age rock-carvings.

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ENCOUNTER WITH A THOUGHT-PROVOKING PLACE

The province of Västergötland is a beautiful landscape that is well known for its magnificent ancient remains, from megalithic tombs to places of significance for the formation of the Swedish State. The parish of Husaby is the core area for traditions surrounding the process that formed Sweden. According to legend, Olof Skötkonung was baptised in Saint Sigfrid's spring near Husaby Church. He was the first Christian king and became responsible for the Christianization of Sweden. This alone is an exciting story, but the same landscape is also filled with other and older histories.

If you stand in front of Saint Sigfrid's spring you are facing the southern slope of the mountain Kinnekulle. If you continue on the road to the north-east, the landscape opens up as you walk, and after about one and a half kilometres you see pastureland on the right hand side. At this time you may have a presentiment of the special place you are about to meet, although you still can not see what is hidden in the vegetation. Walk down on the

slabs of sandstone rock and let yourself experience the encounter with a ritual world of the Bronze Age.

I have visited the rock-carvings at Flyhov only twice, the first time on a hot summer day a few years ago, and the second time with the Stockholm University archaeological seminar on a sunny afternoon in September 1996. Both times the place insisted upon interpretation, both times the hollows in the rocks were filled with water despite the lovely weather.

The carved images resemble ones we know from other areas that are richer in carvings. There are ships, circle-crosses, cupmarks, animals and humans. They mix well with the conspicuous rock hollows, and at first sight the different elements seem to make up an inseparable whole. It becomes impossible to rethink the images without repeatedly sliding in thought to the distinct hollows and their boatlike shape.

The form of the boat has inspired the Swedish artist Bertil Vallien. Through some of his glass sculptures he mediates his own interpretation of the concept of the boat. Perhaps



Fig. 1. Is this an encultured rock? A rich world of carved images is almost concealed in the landscape and mediates the sense of a secret hiding place. The number of water-filled hollows supports this feeling as you walk over the rocks. How many slabs are there? You search for additional carvings, but can not discover them until you are so close that you almost trample on them. The images as well as the place are hidden in the rocks. Photo: Pehr Hasselrot.

the feeling expressed in these works of art can bring something new to our comprehension of what the boat-shape as idea can contain and symbolise. Bertil Vallien from his different stance, can contribute meaningful associations to archaeological interpretations as well, since he is inspired by the prehistoric world of form. His works have often been interpreted and described in terms of embracing past meanings. Among others, Dr. Helmuth Ricke, Deputy Director of the Düsseldorf Museum of

Art, has written expressively about Vallien's boats. He ends the analytical journey through time and symbolic significance with the simple statement: "I am interested in the tracks that human beings leave behind when they cease to exist. Bertil Vallien's boat seems to be connected to this theme" (Lindqvist 1994: 127). A key question is whether someone with the intention of creating art can capture essences of a phenomenon that mediate understanding in a different way from that of archaeologists.

FROM TEXT TO THING

The view that material culture can be interpreted through textual metaphors has been frequently emphasised (e.g. in *Reading the Past*, Hodder 1986; *Reading Material Culture*, Ed. Tilley 1990; *Material Culture and Text*, Tilley 1991; and a number of articles). The same idea has also been called into question and discussed through different angles. Of course, the advocates of the view use linguistics as a theoretical tool and are aware that material culture is in fact not text. But nevertheless, sometimes the metaphor tends to take over and absorb the prospects of the studied phenomenon. This is why it is important to note that, while we are aware of the possibilities offered by the textual framework, we should also discuss the distinctive character of things created by people. In fact one can say that some of the linguistic analysis in rock art research, during the 1960s and '70s as well as during the revival in the '90s, have had constraining consequences. The risk is that too much attention is given to the presumed syntax at the expense of the relation to the rock face (Lewis-Williams 1995:74f), and that a significant context is lost.

Material culture is different from words or text on a crucial point: it can express what is not comprehensible in spoken or written language. This applies also to other humanities

and art forms. Some of its meaning may depend on the non-verbal manifestation that must be experienced rather than described (Molander 1995:8f). As text is the main tool for scholarly explanation in our society, we are likely to lose or distort some significance in the interpretation of past times. In archaeological texts the explanation is given in words; pictures are often used only as illustrations to what has already been expressed textually. In line with J. Hillis Miller (1992) it is important to stress the relation between words and pictures and the additional meanings that may be produced through the active use of images (also Shanks & Hodder 1995:26f).

Images do not only serve as illustrations, but also convey arguments that have impact on the textual account and the rendered representation of the past. The use of illustrations, for example reconstructions and models, is crucial to the apprehension of the past and therefore influences new ideas and furthers the production of knowledge (Moser & Gamble 1997:185f). The prejudice that is mediated through pictures is often less questioned than arguments in a text, and is more difficult to escape. When illustrations are used unconsciously they may continue to reproduce old biases about problems of which there is little archaeological knowledge (Moser & Gamble 1997:188f; Stoczkowski 1997:249ff) or cre-

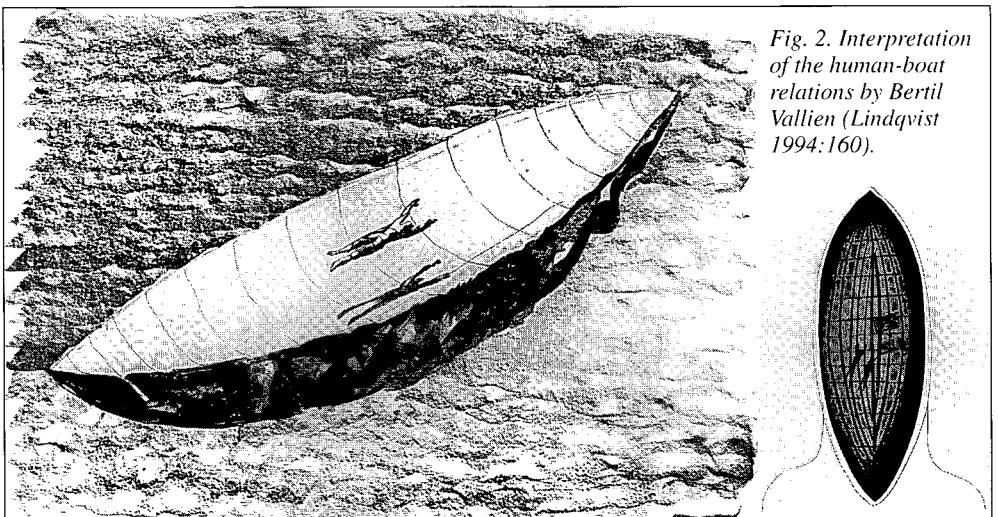


Fig. 2. Interpretation of the human-boat relations by Bertil Vallien (Lindqvist 1994:160).

ate contexts which we know, for example, are chronologically or geographically untrue (Champion 1997:213ff). To avoid these problems it is necessary to pay as much attention to the images as to the arguments in the text, and use illustrations as explanatory tools for thoughts that are consciously developed, instead of as unconscious representations.

Some groups of illustrations are in general treated with greater cognition than others. Maps or plan-drawings in bird's-eye view are commonly used and considered to add to our understanding of the landscape, the design of a monument, or perhaps the distance between different ancient remains. Other examples are of course graphic models, which facilitate the comprehension of certain chosen relations and are meant to contain additional information beyond the textual explanations. It is often easier to grasp these kinds of relations in the form of pictures than in pure description. This is probably self-evident to most of us. But sometimes other kinds of illustrations or models can mediate understanding in a more successful way than the seemingly scientific measured plan-drawings.

In the essay "Photography and archaeology" (1997), Michael Shanks discusses the potential of photowork beyond the recording, documenting and illustrative functions. Earlier he made some attempts to actively use the explanatory possibilities of pictures in *Experiencing the Past* (1992), where the photographs and photo-collages are designed to add meaning beyond the text. The photowork is not, in the first hand, considered to be realistic, but to convey illustrative discourse and create connections that help to achieve new insights (1997:84).

Can images that give a metaphoric understanding of a problem be considered as valuable in the archaeological discourse? Although not everyone may agree, some of the striving for scientificness of the past can in fact have transported us further and further from the expression of the rock-carvings. Form is good to think with and is often underestimated in archaeological texts.

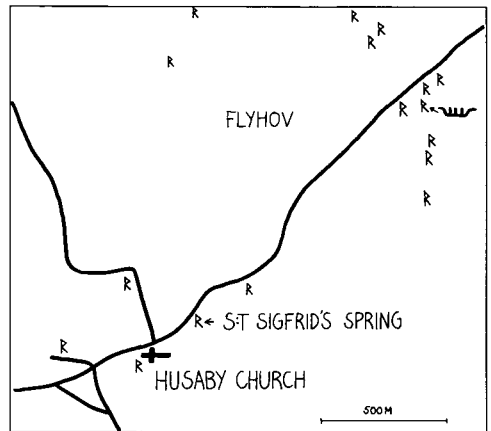


Fig. 3. The Flyhov ancient monument area. The map includes Husaby Church and Saint Sigfrid's spring, where according to legend the first Christian king, Olof Skötkonung, was baptised. Drawing by Mats Wahlgren, based on the Economic map.

"When Bertil Vallien says 'Glass eats light' he means that the light is bound within his glass sculptures – and it is true that they bear an inner, mystical light that has a hidden source. The light seldom emits from the interior but is ever-present and indefinable. At times one is reminded of the glass-mountain of the old trollking (in Scandinavian fairy-tale) and we sense glittering treasure, fantastic colour, delicate captive princesses – within the rough-cast surfaces of the sculptures... He often speaks of communication – which is essentially a mode of interior communication and the soul's enigma" (Lindqvist 1994:111ff).

Bertil Vallien's view of his own work seems familiar. When he describes the process at the moment of casting the glass, he uses a linguistic metaphor: *"I choose the words, but do not consciously choose their arrangement; the sentences which materialize have certainly no counterpart in my mind; they occur quite by chance"* (Lindqvist 1994:129). What is interesting is that Bertil Vallien forms in fact a significant context from these isolated words and creates a whole. The act of creating art involves the formation and construction of meaning from separate, perhaps surprising, components. The result is dependent on the

original idea, but also on the creative process, whereby it can be difficult to control the final expression. This perspective takes into account that those who made the prehistoric monuments might not have been primarily interested in the completed result once and for all. The monuments were parts of life and changed together with other events in society. The rock-carving sites, as we see them today, often include images that have accumulated over hundreds or even thousands of years. When the carving tradition started and was lively, the rocks looked different from the way they do today; perhaps the people during the Bronze Age did not see the unstructured jumble of images that we are trying to interpret. They joined a creative process, but they could not be in control of what we experience as a whole. We need to allow some scope for the discrepancy between intention and consequence and the grain of arbitrariness this involves, or in other words, the effect that the process of creation has on the original purpose.

To sum up, there are relations that are more suited to be expressed in pictures or other material forms than in analytical texts or measured drawings. Therefore it should also be possible to use other kinds of media to add to our understanding of past meanings. Photos, paintings, sculptures or even music can open

up other dimensions of understanding, and can open doors to what is linguistically elusive. For example, art that is made in a completely different context and for other reasons can inspire and link thoughts on new lines also for the archaeologist, and if the mind is open to such stimulation it may enrich the interpretive process. Of course, this applies also to verbal expressions such as theatre, film and poetry, or whatever may provoke the imagination and give food for unexpected thought.

HOLLOWED-OUT BOATS

The place chosen for these rock-carvings is special and differs from other known carving sites. The images are mainly located near a number of pointed oval hollows that are attached to each other in rows running north by north-east – west by south-west. In my view the hollows are shaped as boats joined together stem by stem.

There are only a few scholarly studies of the rock-carvings at Flyhov. The archaeologists that have devoted some attention to the site have disagreed as to whether the hollows were formed by nature during the glacial period or if they were created by man. Emil Ekhoﬀ and Peter Jankavs argue that they are natural formations (Ekhoﬀ 1892:8; Jankavs 1996:225), while S. A. Hallbäck, Birgitta Hjolman and Gerhard Flink seem to believe that they are

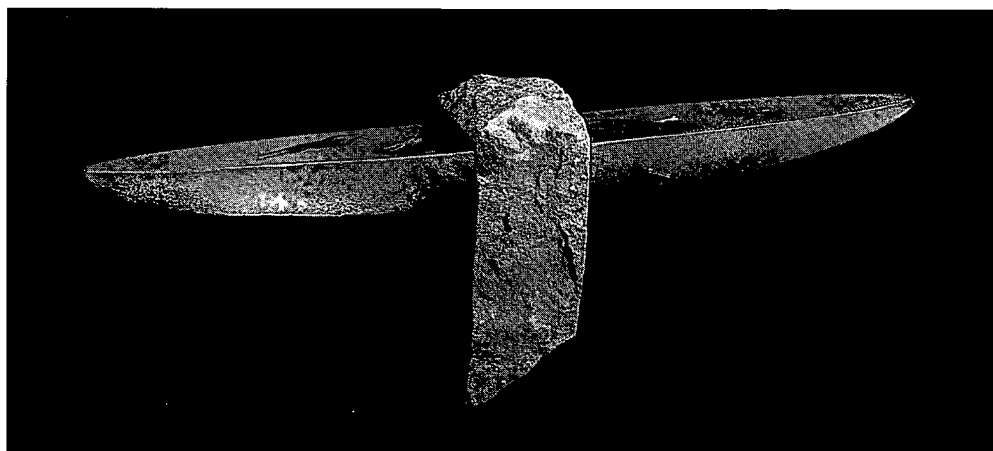


Fig. 4. Bertil Vallien's "Breaker", a glass boat enclosed in stone from 1987. The boat conveys the idea of humanity and offers links to the ancient past. Photo: Anders Qvarnström.

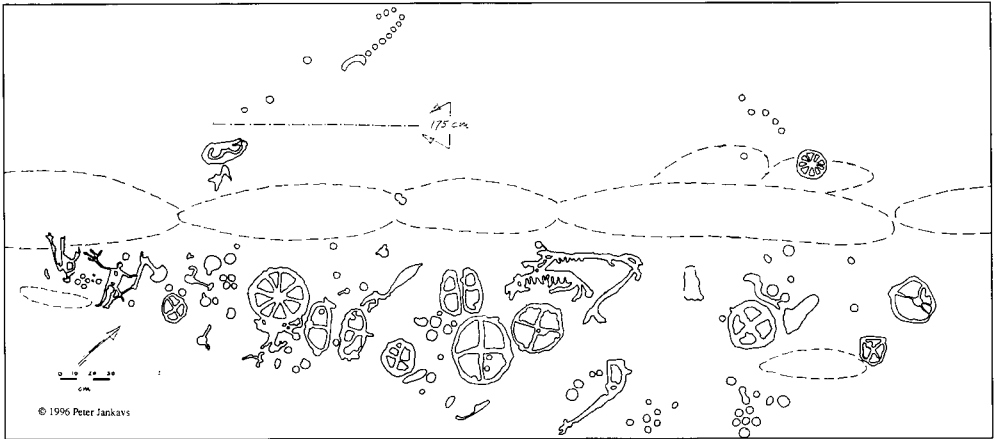


Fig. 5. Rock images including hollowed-out boats at Flyhov. The documentation was made in 1996 by Peter Jankavs, Falbygdens Museum (Jankavs 1996:225).

man-made (Hallbäck & Hjolman 1976:29; Hallbäck 1970; Flink 1989:138ff). In other studies the archaeologists do not take a stand or even mention the hollows (Janson, B. & Janson, S. 1983; Selinge 1989:142; Oden-crants 1932; Fredsjö, Janson, S. & Moberg 1956:129f; Flink 1986:78ff). Perhaps these scholars chose to overlook the rock hollows out of uncertainty as to what they represent, what to write about them, or perhaps they doubted that the hollows had any significance in the rock-carving context.

If you believe that the hollows were ground by man, it is important to consider whether they are connected with the rock-carvings or chronologically separated from the Bronze Age. Strangely enough there has not been much discussion on this, except for brief mention that the hollows must be older than the rock-carvings because there are examples of

carvings superimposed on them (Hallbäck & Hjolman 1976:26ff; Hallbäck 1970; Flink 1989:140). It is also rather striking that some of the scholars have described the rock-carvings without regard for the hollows. Until recently that was true even for the attempts to document the site (Ekhoff 1892; Burenhult 1973:88ff; Janson, B. & Janson, S. 1983).

In the latest contribution to the discussion about Flyhov, Peter Jankavs argues that the hollows are naturally shaped by the inland ice, water and sand, and states that the earlier interpretations as grinding grooves are incorrect (Jankavs 1996:225). He bases his opinion on a recent geological survey of the rock, which shows that there are traces of glacial striations not only on the rock surface but also in the boat-shaped hollows (Nordell 1994:9f).

Regardless whether the hollows were constructed by man or by nature, it is important to

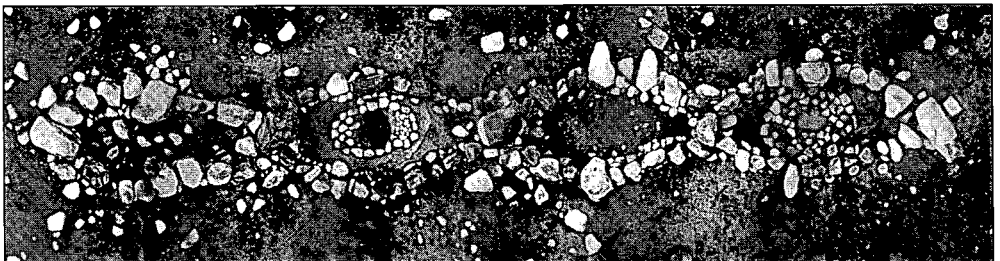


Fig. 6. Boats stem by stem. Ship-formed graves from Rannarve, Klinte parish, on the island of Gotland, in bird's-eye view (Grimlund-Manneke 1979:47).

consider how they were interpreted and used by people, and whether the hollowed-out boats in the rock made this a special place suitable for the Bronze Age ritual life. After all, is it not more exciting that people interpret, attribute meaning to and develop traditions around what has been created through other powers?

Representations in nature merge with culture and are filled with meaning. The hollows in the natural rock at Flyhov can be transformed into cultural boats, and they participate in the network of links that constitutes the meaning of the boat-concept. The statement that the boat or ship was of some ritual and social importance during the Bronze Age is probably not very controversial, but what is it that made this an important symbol?

The boat-symbolism is often put forward as being crucial to the Scandinavian Bronze Age society, although for different reasons. The arguments cover a wide range of interpretations, from symbols of power and wealth to symbols with religious or archetypal meaning. That discussion is not the subject of this

paper however, and I will rest by saying that the boat symbolism is expressed in different manners and perhaps for different purposes or in separate traditions. The interpretations of the ship symbol must be differentiated with respect to the appearance and material instead of drawing heavily on one perspective. The rendered message is dependent on the purpose and the needs in a specific context; it is not fundamentally inherent in a material and form. What seems to be a point is that the religious and profane spheres can not be separated, that one does not precede the other, and that they constantly merge in different constellations to reproduce old contexts or create new ones.

Now to another point: namely what is the consequence of carving images – boats or other designs – in the rock?

THE SIGNIFICANT ROCK

It is obvious that certain phenomena of nature were considered to be ritually important during the Bronze Age. Perhaps some elements had a transformative character and were used to



Fig. 7. Circle-cross in boat-shaped rock hollow at Flyhov. Photo: Sven Axel Hallböck, ATA.

enter different spheres of the world or stages in life.

It is not a coincidence that pictures are carved on rocks and slabs, and usually not on, for example pots or other objects. Designs occur on bronze razors, brooches, weapons and small stones in southern Scandinavia, but those objects represent a different context from the images that were carved in the rock. Still, the object-designs may allude to the same symbolical meaning as the *image-in-rock*, the meaning that is produced through the rock-carvings.

The landscape is constantly interpreted by those living in it, and is consequently encultured through the conceptions of people. The elements of the landscape are the base for other architectural representations and fundamental for the identification and experience of the world (Richards 1996:313). Perhaps the places for rock-carvings were chosen because they already had significance. The rock and certain formations in the rock had prerequisites for the creation of a special place during the Bronze Age. A rock could have notable formations, natural hollows, glacial striations or polished surfaces that called for attention and interpretation. The frequency of polished cavities and surfaces adjacent to rock-carvings has recently been noted by Örjan Hermodsson (e.g. 1995:378ff). Though it is not possible to know with certainty how old the polished surfaces are, the connection to rock-carvings is interesting.

One possibility is that the stone material or the rock during the Bronze Age was considered to be of special significance and have inherent powers. In that case the rock surface could be conceived of as a veil between the living world and the spirit world that is captured in the rock: "*by placing the images on that 'veil' the artists were relating them to what lay behind the rock, that is, to spiritual entities and realms that were invisible to ordinary people (and to us) but which they could see in their shamanistic visions*" (Lewis-Williams 1995:75). The quotation refers to South African rock paintings, but it has figurative relevance

to the Scandinavian rock-carvings as well. I will develop a related metaphor further along in the *carving-in-rock* context.

Cairns built by a great number of stones to embrace the dead are another significant context. The cairns became monuments in the landscape, just as the ancient megalithic tombs already were. Christopher Tilley has interpreted the megaliths in Västergötland as representations of the landscape in miniature. He stresses the relation between the monuments and the setting, and how the marking of the landscape makes the natural scenery more conspicuous (Tilley 1993:76ff). The cairns as well as the megaliths could be looked upon as artificial rocks, created by people to enclose the dead and make them part of the spirit world in the natural rock. When the ancestors merged with nature the surroundings became animate, a bearer of their souls, and the ancestors got access to the powers in the rock that were beyond the command of the living.

THE POWER OF WATER

Water uses the rock to flow or accumulate on, it has the power to grind the rock surface. Slowly the water transforms the rock silhouette and gives it a more rounded shape. Water runs down the rock in formations and stays in natural hollows and grooves, or in created cupmarks, furrows, and in the contours of carved images. Water has the power of life, growth and reproduction. It is the basis of all existence. Perhaps the confrontation between the rock and the water created new transformative dimensions. It is notable that cupmarks are frequently located so that they can be filled with water or guide rills of water down the rock. Flowing water is also directed by glacial striations, and carvings are often concentrated to these water-flow areas (Malmer 1989:14f). The *water-in-rock* context seems to have been of considerable consequence for the creation of ritual places during the Bronze Age.

In folkloristic beliefs involving rock-carvings, it is mainly cupmarks that have mythical connotation. For some reason other



Fig. 8. When passing through a stained glass church window, the light is transformed and becomes holy. The French abbot Suger meant that in this place (the church) one is immersed in light and 'resurrected' from one's 'former submersion' (Crosby 1987:238). Photo from the gothic cathedral of Rivolta d'Adda in Spain (Branner 1961).

images seldom occur in oral tradition and records. Most numerous are the legends about the healing energy of the cupmarks, or "fairy-grinders" (Sw. *älvkvarnar*) as they were called in the area around the lake Mälaren in Sweden (Käck 1996). Some of the beliefs include the importance of the water that gathers in cupmarks, grooves, and natural hollows in the rock. For instance the water in cupmarks or natural cavities could have a healing power if a corpse was carried over the spot. Therefore cupmarks sometimes were carved on the steps to the church entrance, on the walls around the churchyard, or adjacent to the cemetery (Lidén 1938:92f; Ragnesten 1990:110ff).

There are other examples of myths connected with natural cavities. Magical rituals, sacrifices, and legends about their creation in an indeterminable past are connected with the natural hollows just as they are with the cupmarks (Lidén 1938:33, 45, 153). The signification was intimately tied to a scene in which the phenomenon fitted well with some aspects of the world-view. The remarkable rocks and

rock formations were used and incorporated in everyday as well as spiritual life.

The elements of rock and water in combination create yet another dimension, and together they may have stronger powers than they do alone.

CARVING-IN-ROCK

It can be rewarding to discuss the rock as containing powers and the rock face as a veil between the living and the spirit world. In my view, the veil is sacred because it has a transformative function that permits the spirit to ooze out in the ritual space to spiritualise life.

These thoughts may be illustrated metaphorically by the symbolism of light which is refracted through stained glass windows and which fills the church room with a mystical atmosphere. Right from the beginning the stained glass windows were used with this intention. The idea was introduced by the French abbot Suger who is considered to have "created" the Gothic style in architecture by a grand rebuilding of the Royal Abbey of Saint-

Denis, north of Paris, in the first half of the 12th century AD. The most important elements in the building were, according to Suger himself, the geometric plan and the overflowing light. The large figural, stained glass windows in the choir created a “*crown of light*” when seen from the altar (Crosby 1987:237f), and the light was transformed by the stained glass and became holy, carrying the spirit of God. Suger describes the symbolic significance of the windows in these words: “*The ‘miraculous’ light that floods the choir through the ‘most sacred’ windows becomes the Light Divine, a mystic revelation of the spirit of God*” (Janson, H. W. 1995:332).

What was painted on the glass was of course significant, since the light was accorded divinity when passing through it. In a similar way it must have been of consequence which images were carved in the rock and in which context the carving was performed. In this sense, carving in the veil makes the spirit transpire in a controlled manner. The carver chooses an image and thereby the contours to carve. Newly carved outlines are white-coloured for some time after the action, and the stone powder is spread by the wind. One can almost see that the interior of the rock is separate from the veil. The sound of stone rapping on the rock helps to create a suggestive atmosphere and guides the experience during the ritual. Perhaps it is a kind of communication with the spirit in the rock.

Eventually the veil is healed; the image appears only as a delicate scar on the surface. If it becomes necessary to revitalise a particular image, the contour must be recarved to liberate the spirit again. This may explain why the images, even on one and the same rock, often have different carving depth. In some contexts it was more suitable to recarve than to create a new image. This might imply that people during the Bronze Age did not view the rock-carving surfaces the way we do today. They had the possibility to control which image was due to emerge at every single occasion, and thereby strove for supervision of the spirit in the rock.

INTERPRETING NATURE, CREATING CULTURE

The rocks at Flyhov with the hollowed-out boats had the prerequisites to become a major place for rock-carvings. The naturally shaped rocks were transformed by the images and the representations linked to carving in the rock veil. This can be interpreted as the interaction of the enculturing of the rock and the forces of nature that set the framework and had influence over what people created.

Depending on the season and the amount of rain, the flat rocks are often overflowing with water. One can say that the water activates the entire rock-carving surface, every image becoming visible on the wet rock. At once the uncontrolled figural world reappears, without the possibility to choose which picture to highlight and what composition to show. This expresses the powers of the rock and the water, beyond the control of living people.

The hollowed-out boats at Flyhov have the same capacity. Most often they are water-filled, even when the surrounding landscape is dry and it has not rained for some time. The almost incessant water gives rise to a rust-coloured deposit in the hollows. This process can be interpreted as the spirit’s influence on the rock veil.

Consider that these events are linked to a place hidden from unauthorised visitors. It is in no way a monumental site that was built to be seen from a distance and make an impression. The flat rocks are concealed in the grass and there is no possibility of discerning the rock-carvings unless you have knowledge of the place or accidentally stumble upon them. It gives the impression of a ritual place used by a group of people initiated in the collective secrets. Some of their identity and social roles could be created through bonds and relations to those who lived before. These earlier generations were inscribed in the rock and thereby continued to exist in spirit. Through the ceremonies the past influenced the future, legitimised the social and cultural life, or empowered pregnant changes.



Fig. 9. One of the surfaces with rock-carvings at Flyhov. The photo was taken at night and the images appear distinctly in the sweep of light. A similar effect is attained on a wet rock. Photo: Pehr Hasselrot.



Fig. 10. Rock-carving consisting exclusively of footprints at Godegård, Fåglum parish, Västergötland. Photo: Bror Schnittger 1911, ATA.

SLOWLY WE WALK AWAY...

With this, it is time to turn away from Flyhov and slowly walk towards new experiences, or perhaps rest a while at the spot, gather impressions and contemplate the next journey.

If you leave Husaby behind, continue to the south-west and enter the parish of Fågglum, you will find another intriguing place. At Godegård there is a rock-carving site consisting exclusively of footprints on a flat rock (fig. 10.).

The footprints radiate the presence of the individuals who made this a notable place. They are not purposefully on their way towards fixed goals; apparently they are standing in a pensive or searching manner, perhaps

according to an inner outline that gives substance to the experience.

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