

# Fantastic Beings and Where to Make Them

## Boats as Object-Beings in Bronze Age Rock Art

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### Abstract

The boat motif in Bronze Age rock art is generally assumed to represent real or symbolic boats in some form. In this paper, however, it is argued that Bronze Age rock art motifs are independent material articulations, made to *do* something rather than to represent. From such a perspective, the hybrid character of the boat motif as part animal, part object is conceived as a special type of entity, an object-being that has no original elsewhere. The change of perspective, from representation to articulation, and from object to being, allows for a more coherent view of Bronze Age rock art as primarily enacted imagery integrated with rock and metal as vitalist devices, aimed to affect the world.

*Keywords: petroglyphs, second millennium, ship, vitalist technology, water*

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## Introduction

During the second millennium BCE, a southern tradition of rock art emerges in southern Scandinavia. Besides cup marks, the most common motifs are of boats, anthropomorphs, zoomorphs, foot soles, ring-crosses, and weapons and tools. The boat motif (sometimes labelled as ships) is the most common and makes up more than half of the figurative rock art, in numbers second only to the cup marks (Goldhahn & Ling 2013). In its simplest form it consists of two slightly bent parallel lines joined at each end by short vertical lines connecting the keel and the rail lines, but it can be elaborated in a broad range of ways (figure 1). Similar types of motifs, especially boats and zoomorphs, are also engraved on metal artefacts such as bronze razors (figure 2).

In the history of Bronze Age research, the boat motif is generally assumed to represent real or symbolic marine crafts of some sort (Malmer 1981:106; see Wehlin 2013:53). Ekholm (1915), for example, associated the motif with death boats that carry the dead to another world, while Almgren (1927, 1934:364) related rock art to fertility ceremonies in which the boat motif represents an aniconic god. Others have seen rock art as offerings in general (Malmer 1981), and votive offerings in particular (Hultcrantz 1989:55). Elgström (1925), and Dahlgren (1932) studied the imagery as depictions of real boats in order to understand how craft were built and used (see also Halldin 1952; Bengtsson 2015). In more recent times, Kaul (1998) has proposed that the boat motif represents a central mythological vehicle carrying the sun across the sky while Kristiansen (2010:110) associates the motif

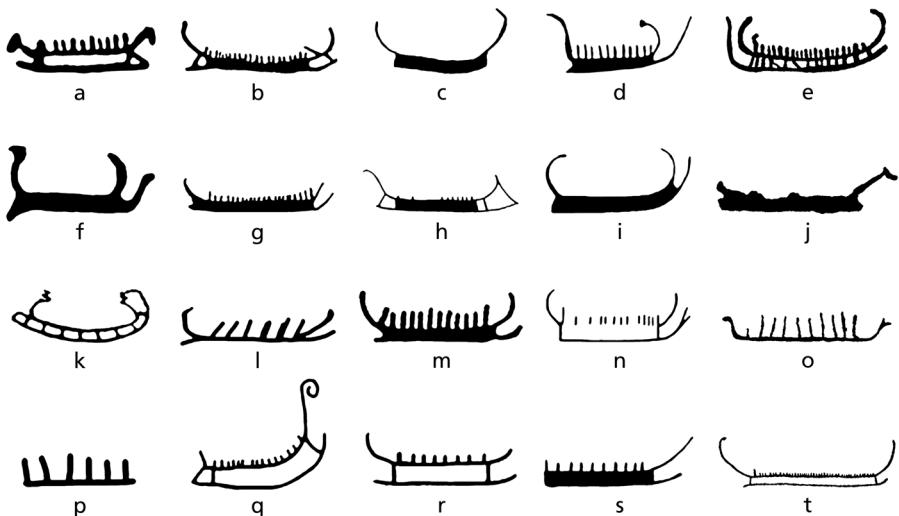


Figure 1. Variations of the common boat motif in Bronze Age rock art (image by the author).

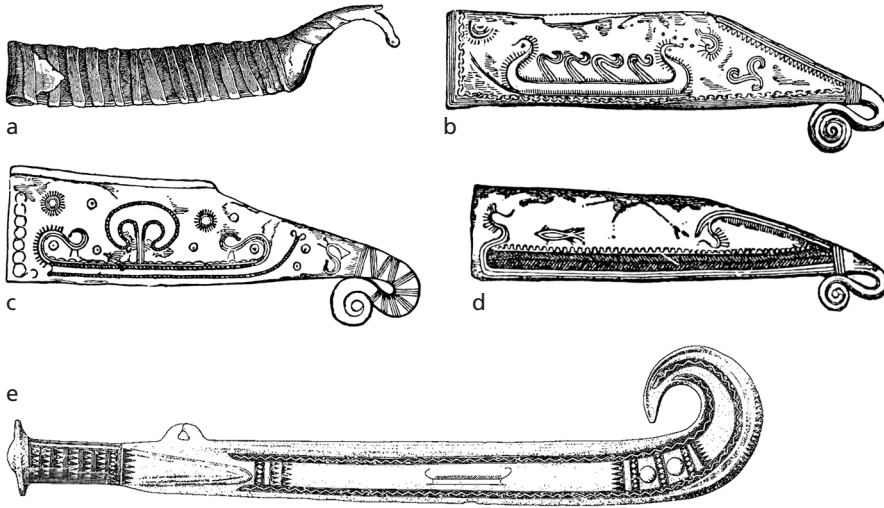


Figure 2. (a) A razor with animal head and (b–d) three razors with boat motifs (Ridpath 1897:109). (e) The Rørby sword with engraved boat motif (modified from Kaul 1995).

with the Indo-European twin gods ‘in disguise’. Others, such as Ling and Cornell (2010), relate the images to maritime activities in general, and the control of boat production in particular. The variability of interpretations is vast, but a main dividing line in the history of research can be found between those who consider the boat motifs to be representations of craft in real life and those who understand them as primarily mythical.

However, the question of whether rock art boats represent real or symbolic boats may be misleading. Rock art figures are not necessarily representations of something somewhere else but are also independent material articulations in their own right. Rock art is by tradition discussed as visual expressions, that is, as images, icons or symbols, which focus on the representational aspects of the motifs. This tends, however, to mask important aspects of mediality, materiality, and modes of production that are inseparable qualities of an image (Cox et al. 2015). Indeed, to peck an image into the rock is not greatly different from making an artefact with a specific function and a purpose – they are both enactments with materials and materialities. Viewed as material articulations, rather than visual expressions, individual rock art motifs can thus be associated with agency and personhood as any human, animal or artefact (Freedberg 1989; Gell 1998; Fahlander 2015; Jones & Cochrane 2018). Such a perspective is pursued here by an analysis of how the figurative designs of the boat motif relate to its mediality (rock and metal), and the potential of such imagery as vitalist tools with the aim to affect the world and the beings that dwell therein.

## Boats and other vessels in the Scandinavian Bronze Age

There are four general categories of boats in the south Scandinavian Bronze Age: images pecked into the rock and carved on metal; boat-shaped stone monuments (ship settings); miniature objects; and marine vessels. In the rock art, more than half of the figurative motifs consist of boats in different layouts, sizes, and forms (Goldhahn & Ling 2013). The variability of this simple form is rich and extends far beyond regional and chronological variability (figure 1). The gunwale can be single lined, fully hammered out, or contour cut with or without decoration. The keel and prow lines are often prolonged and tend to become S-shaped over time. The prows are sometimes adorned with ‘animal heads’, and above the gunwale there can be so-called ‘crew strokes’ (vertical lines understood as simplified representations of a crew). As a general rule, the level of elaboration and detail increases from the early part of the period to the latter (Kaul 1998:88, 2006:166; Ling 2008:105). For example, in the later part of the Bronze Age the crew strokes are increasingly replaced by more detailed representations of anthropomorphs holding lures, paddles, weapons etc. The dimensions of the motifs also vary. The most common size is between 20 and 60cm in length (Burenhult 1980:59) but ranges from a mere 15cm to over 5m (Fahlander 2018:72). Although many motifs are carefully pecked and designed, a number of them are left incomplete in various ways. Most common are the ‘half boats’, showing only the aft or the fore of a boat (figure 1n & 1s, see Fahlander 2018:80). Bronze Age rock art is generally pecked on rocks in semi-secluded bays close to the water’s edge, but is also found on slabs in burial contexts (Goldhahn & Ling 2013:284), as well as on a few portable stones (Kjellén & Hyenstrand 1977:99).

The boat motif also occurs on metal objects such as hanging bowls, tweezers, razors, and necklaces (Kaul 1995; Wehlin 2013). In the early part of the period boat motifs are found engraved on the German Wismar horn, and on one of the bronze scimitars from Rørby in Denmark. In the Late Bronze Age, engraved motifs become more common, primarily on bronze razors that are found in hoards and in cremation graves (Kaul 1998:117). The engraved motifs have the similar basic outline as those in the rock art, although they are usually more symmetrical and ‘complete’ in comparison (figure 2). The two different types of material articulation may seem quite disparate but there are aspects that relate the two. Kaul (1995) points out how the shape of razors resembles the shape a half boat motif – especially the ones with animal heads as shafts (figure 2a). Indeed, the decorative boards of the engraved Rørby sword also outlines a ‘half boat’ (figure 2e) as do some engravings on bronze tweezers (Wehlin 2013:141). Whether the

similarities in shape between the engravings and the partial rock art motifs are coincidental or not, the animal heads and spiral form of the handles nonetheless link the two otherwise different material articulations.

There are also objects and features in the shape of boats. At Nors, on the Danish island of Thy, a hoard of about 100 miniature boat models was found buried in a clay pot (Jensen 2006:286–288). The oval-shaped boats are between 10 and 17cm long and made of gold foil with thin bronze stripes apparently accentuating the frame of a small canoe (figure 3a). The miniatures thus have few attributes in common with the rock art boats. The boat shape is also accentuated in larger, potentially life-sized, stone constructions. From the Late Bronze Age, a number of large oval-shaped stone lined features (ship-settings) mimic the outline of boats (Wehlin 2013, figure 3b). Some of these monuments are used for burials while others are empty. On the Swedish mainland, the ship-settings share the similar type of locations



Figure 3. (a) A sample of the gold-foil miniature boats from Nors (Photo by the author). (b) The Gannarve ship-setting on Gotland (Photo by the author).

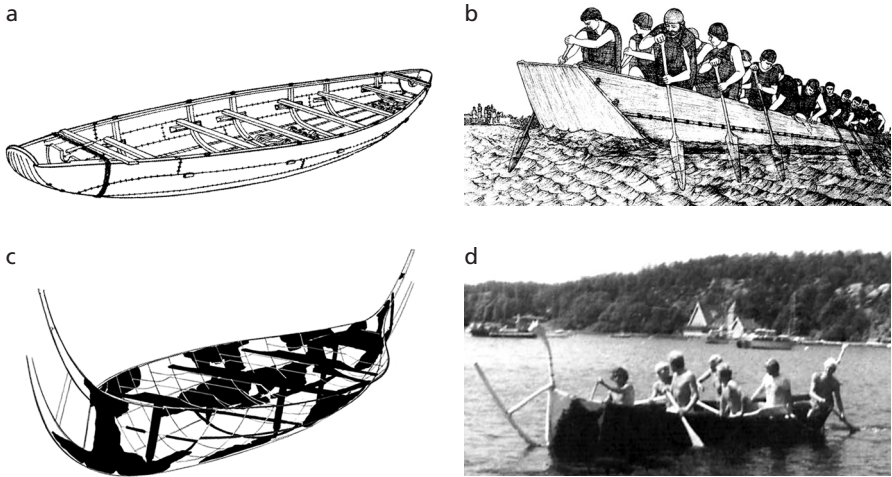


Figure 4. (a) One of the Ferriby boats (modified from Wright 1990:86). (b) An illustration of the Dover boat (modified from Clark 2004:315). (c) The Iron Age Hjortspring boat, the remains in black attached on a frame (modified from natmus.dk). (d) The experimental skin boat built by Marstrand (Johnstone 1972:278).

as rock art in semi-secluded bays, but are situated on higher ground and the two types of material articulation rarely coincide.

Finally, there are the actual sea vessels that were used for trade, war, hunting, and fishing (figure 4). Besides finds of smaller dugouts, no preserved Bronze Age remains of built crafts have been found in southern Scandinavia. The earliest known plank-built crafts consist of fragmented remains from Haugvik in Norway and Hjortspring in Denmark, dated to the Pre-Roman Iron Age (Crumlin-Pedersen & Trakadas 2003; Sylvester 2009). The British Isles, however, have produced remains of at least ten Bronze Age sewn-plank boats in Ferriby, Dover, Caldicot, Kilnsea, Testwood Lakes, Goldcliff and Brigg (Noort, v.d. 2009). Based on these finds, most researchers assume that the Scandinavian Bronze Age boats were also mainly plank-built crafts (Bengtsson 2015:42, and references). Be that as it may, dugout log boats also continued to be used during the period, as in earlier and later times (Ulfhjelms 2007; Wehlin 2013:136, 150; Kastholm 2016). The finds from southern Scandinavia are rather modest in size, but log boats from Britain can be quite impressive vessels with a capacity to carry at least 30 crew (Dahlgren 1932:10; Wright 1990:122). It is also to be expected that hide or bark vessels were employed as indicated by the gold foil miniatures from Nors (Coles 1993; Kaul 1995:59; Wehlin 2013:150). Remains of such crafts are, however, not likely to survive the passage of time, even under favourable circumstances (but see Arbin, v. & Lindberg 2017).



The lack of remains of actual Bronze Age plank-built boats in southern Scandinavia has encouraged extensive inferences from rock art. For instance, Coles (1993:29) has suggested that the single lined boat motifs represent dugouts. The Hjortspring find with its prolonged keel and prows is also frequently employed as a model for Late Bronze Age crafts (even though the keel and prows are quite fragmented, as visible in figure 4). It is nonetheless compelling that the pecked and carved boat motifs with their large numbers of crew-strokes, extended prows and keels do not particularly resemble either the contemporary excavated British wooden crafts, the gold foil miniatures, or the ship settings. Whether they also differ from the vessels actually employed in Bronze Age Scandinavia is difficult to establish without comparable material. This does not necessarily suggest that the boat motifs are unrelated to real boats, but indicates that they are something more than mere depictions or symbols of marine vessels somewhere else.

## Boats and boat-ness

Considering the extensive use of boat-like imagery and features in different contexts, the idea of the boat, or what the boat stood for, must have been significant in the Scandinavian Bronze Age. However, this does not necessarily mean that daily life, or religion, were centred around maritime practices. Boats are certainly crucial to societies that live off the sea and spend much time in boats, but rituals associated with marine activities are generally centred on the boat itself, not on representations (e.g. Jochelson 1905:78; Lipset 2014b; McNiven 2018, see also Malinowski 1922:407). Moreover, with the exception of the Wismar horn, the boat motif is mainly found in southern Scandinavia, without further parallels on the continent – although boats would have been extensively used there, too (see Vogt 2012:249). This raises a question about the ontological status of the boat motif. If they are not symbolic representations of actual boats, what are they? It is significant that the boat motif already appears as fully developed at the beginning of the Bronze Age (Hedengran 1991:120; Kaul 1995:61). The closest parallel to the engraved and pecked images are thus the boat motifs of the Stone Age hunter tradition of rock art. The motif differs in style and quantity between the two traditions but also shares many features, such as crew strokes and animal heads on the prows (Fahlander 2018:113). In the northern tradition, these motifs are understood as vehicles for the shamans or as animal-object hybrids (Lahelma 2007). The elk and boat motifs are sometimes jumbled; elks can be transformed into boats and vice versa (Bolin 2000:162; Sjöstrand 2011:120; Fahlander 2013:315). The hybrid character of the motif is also illustrated by single lined boat motifs at

Alta, Nämforsen or Lake Onega, which appear as swimming elks with crew strokes. This hybrid animal-object aspect is also articulated in the material configuration of the hunting canoes. Lahelma (2007:182) argues that the construction of hides stretched over the ‘ribs’ of a wooden frame would certainly have ‘strengthened the conceptual links between elk and boat’ (see also Bolin 2000:162; Gjerde 2010:146). Indeed, if the hides were left with the fur intact, as in Marstrander’s Bronze Age prototype, the boats may actually have appeared as, and been experienced similarly to, swimming animals – especially if they were also equipped with elk heads in the front as indicated in the rock art. This hybrid character of boat and animal indicates an ontology where objects (canoes) and animals (elks) can merge into a special type of object-being. In the following, I will seek to demonstrate that such an ontology may not only be a feature of the northern hunters but also applicable to the Bronze Age – although differently articulated.

## Boats as crafts and animate object-beings

Even though we do not know the precise nature of the boats in the Bronze Age, there are some general aspects of boats and boating that may substantiate the idea of boats as object-beings. Travel by boat is special in the way the crew is confined within a limited object surrounded by water, which affects the ways in which they interact (Eriksson 2015). This particular context has spawned a range of metaphors in modern society, such as ‘the ship of state’, ‘welcome aboard’, to ‘anchor’ an opinion, and ‘being in the same boat’ to name but a few (Lipset 2014a:3–4). These metaphors are not just figures of speech but ultimately derive from the onto-reality of maritime human and other-than-human intra-action. Vehicles such as boats are rarely neutral vehicles of transportation. They are composite material ‘assemblages’ with particular properties that will not simply bend to the will of the crew. Anyone who has ever handled boats, small or large, realizes that they behave and respond in different ways. Some of these individual qualities are directly related to design and the materiality of the craft. A light, flat-bottomed vessel tends to swirl easily and is difficult to keep on a steady and straight course. A heavy and deep-going vehicle may travel steadily but is more difficult to turn or slow down. The placement of the boards affects how the vessel can be propelled and steered. Although crafts are generally built with a specific purpose in mind, there are small details that work for better or worse and which give every boat a distinct individuality. Thus, despite similar design, two boats rarely behave the same; their particular quirks and twists develop into individual qualities over time as they are used and worn (see Malinowski 1922:105). Although boats have



no mind or agency of their own, these active properties can make them appear as semi-sentient. These special circumstances are as tangible as the material and building technique of the boat, and comprise what a boat really *is* in an ontological sense.

In Old English texts and the Old Norse corpus, ships are sometimes referred to as ‘wave-rider’, ‘snake’, ‘sea-steed’, and ‘sea-sleipner’ (e.g. Lindow 2002:67). The association between boats and animals illustrates a type of reciprocal relationship that tends to emerge when humans and other-than-humans intra-act. For example, Gala Argent (2010) has argued that certain horses among the Scythian nomads were considered non-human persons. Because temperament and experiences vary between individual horses, Argent argues that they develop a distinct personality that the rider needs to know and adjust to. This special relationship is reflected in the kurgan burials where horses are buried with individual outfits that reflect their personality and experiences. The close bonds between humans and horses are further emphasized in the way they both share the same exclusive type of imagery (fantastic beings) on tattoos, saddlebags, and bridles (Fahlander 2015). As indicated above, a similar relation also tends to emerge in relations between humans and non-living vehicles such as marine crafts. Boats are not necessarily seen as alternative persons, but in some societies, this semi-sentient aspect is emphasized in the way boats are designed and decorated. In parts of Melanesia, for example, the *kula* canoes are equipped with head, eyes, mouth, body/stomach, hands, and tail (Lipset 2014b:32; McNiven 2018:178). This embellishment is an effect and perhaps a reinforcement of the semi-sentient agencies of the canoes, which are considered object-beings and social actors (McNiven 2018:183). Materiality is essential here in ways other than through material properties. In relational ontologies, origins are often significant qualities that continue to be part of the elaborated artefact or construction. For example, Marilyn Strathern (1991:65) pointed out that, in Melanesian ontology, a dugout canoe is not just a vehicle for seafaring, it is still considered a living tree that embraces the crew.

This perception of boats as object-beings is not simply due to culture-specific ideas of objects as generally being alive, but is partly a result of the real agencies of the crafts. As humans, we are prone to detect agency in the world whether it is sentient or not (Guthrie 1993:74). Because boats tend to develop individual properties and ‘act’ in ways that are not always predictable, it is not surprising that they are comprehended as something more than mere vehicles. In some ontologies, this agency is referred to in terms of personhood, an invisible life force, or the actions of spirits or deities, but to think about boats in this way need not necessarily involve an animist ontology. The world includes plenty of animacies prior to human understanding, and there is really no need to assume ‘an infusion of spirit

into substance' (Ingold 2006:10). The point is rather that assemblages of humans and other-than-humans (animals and vehicles) need to relate to each other to function, which over time can lead to deeper commitments and entanglements. This relation can be understood in terms of 'boat-ness' based on the ontological status of boats and their physical constitution that is not always articulated in discourse. It goes without saying that the way that the boats are experienced and used is likely to affect ideas about what a boat is, both in reality and myth. It is hence logical to assume that some of the ontological aspects of boat-ness are, in one way or another, also inherent in the pecked boat motifs.

## Boat motifs as fantastic object-beings

Although the boat motif in Bronze Age rock art is emblematic and easily recognized, the variability in how it is articulated is significant, both within and between different rock art regions (Goldhahn & Ling 2013). Although some of them can appear to engage with cracks and fissures in the rock and other motifs, the pecked boats mainly occur as stand-alone additions on the rocks that over time become jumbled with other motifs, such as anthropomorphs and zoomorphs (figure 5). In a few instances the boat motifs are more or less copies, 'stamped' above each other on the rocks in vertical rows (Fahlander 2018:87). The Bronze Age petroglyphs thus appear as stylized iconic signs that are mainly individually added to certain rocks on separate occasions. However, in contrast to semiotic signs, they need not be symbols of something elsewhere. That motifs are continuously added to the rocks seems less to do with certain reoccurring rituals. It is rather an effect of the land lift process, where new motifs are added further down on the rocks to follow the retracting water. Moreover, the visibility of the petroglyphs is generally short-lived. They tend to become obscure in just a few years, and the painted panels of today present a totality that was never visible in the past (Goldhahn 2014). Pecked low on the rocks by the water's edge, occasionally submerged or splashed over by waves, the main object of the rock art is less likely to be about visual communication. Painted signs, placed higher up on the rocks, would have been more effective for that. There is thus little that suggests that these images primarily communicate meanings. It is also significant that the boats share certain aspects of articulation with the other motifs, such as the zoomorphs and anthropomorphs. For instance, they can all occur as hyperboles measured in metres, and they are sometimes deliberately made partial (Fahlander 2018:72). Boats, anthropomorphs, and zoomorphs also occur mixed together at the same levels on the rocks (figure 5). Together, this suggests that



Figure 5. A typical example of a rock art panel (Boglösa 94:1) showing individual and groups of boats, anthropomorphs, and zoomorphs (Broström & Ihrestam 2017).

boats, anthropomorphs and zoomorphs are different variations of material articulation that have more in common than appearances suggest (compare with the previously mentioned hybrid relation between the boat and elk motifs in the northern tradition).

One particularly interesting feature that the Bronze Age boat motifs have in common with Stone Age rock art are the animal heads on the prows (Fahlander 2018:113). In the Bronze Age tradition, however, the prow extensions are generally considered representations of horse heads or sea-birds rather than elks (Kaul 1995:66, 1998:242). But just as rock art boats do not necessarily depict real boats, the animal heads need not to be related any real animal (compare the dragon heads on the Viking ships). In Bronze Age

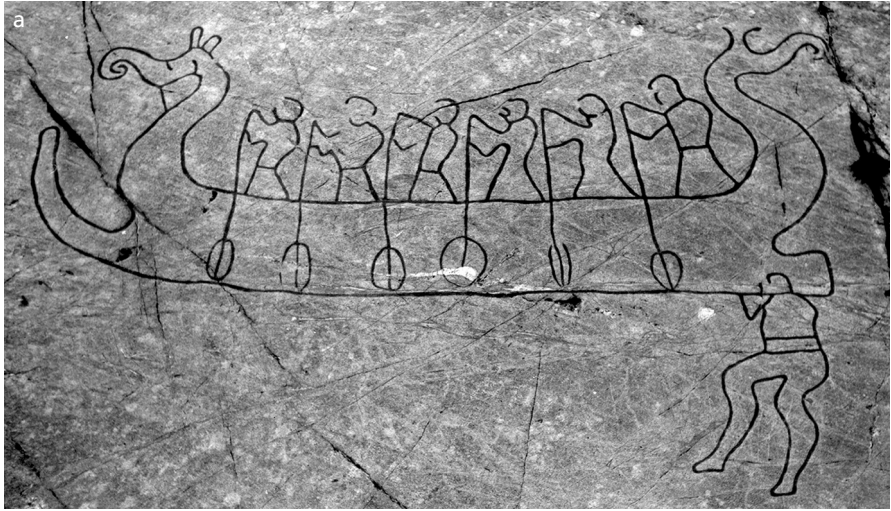


Figure 6. (a) The Brandskog petroglyph (Photo by Einar Kjellen, Enköpings museum), and (b) an illustration made for a TV documentary (*Sagan of Sverige*, © SVT 1985).

rock art, the ‘heads’ are normally a short downward pointing extension of the prow, occasionally with one or two additional short upward-pointing ‘ears’ (figure 1a, f, h, j & o). The engraved motifs on metals and a few more elaborated pecked motifs provide a little more detail but seldom enough to determine the species (figure 2 & 7a–c).

The large, so-called Brandskog boat (Boglösa 109) on the Swedish east coast, constitute an especially illustrative example. The petroglyph is c. 4.2m long with a large animal head on the prow (figure 6a). As can be

seen in figure 6a, it carries six anthropomorphic paddlers and a seventh anthropomorph situated under the aft who seems to carry, push, or lift the whole vessel. The Brandskog boat is atypical because of its large size and some stylistic attributes, but there are plenty of similar normal-sized scenes of boats with ‘ship-lifters’ and anthropomorphic paddlers found on other Late Bronze Age panels (Kaul 2006:163; Ling 2013:67), as well as on bronze razors (Nordén 1925:382; Kaul 1998).

Despite the large size and the increased level of detail of the Brandskog boat, it is still not feasible to determine the species of the animal head. It has two small ears and a spiral trunk that may vaguely resemble the snouts of elks or wild boars, but not quite. This suggests that it is no ordinary being, but a special object-being, perhaps only found in rock art and engraved on certain metal objects. At a closer look, the shape of the vessel and how it is not only paddled but also carried, held, or pushed, does not resemble a realistic scene at all (figure 6b). Furthermore, the heads of the paddlers on the boat are all incomplete and are, apparently, deliberately made generic and faceless. Similar fantastic animal-boat hybrids are also found at

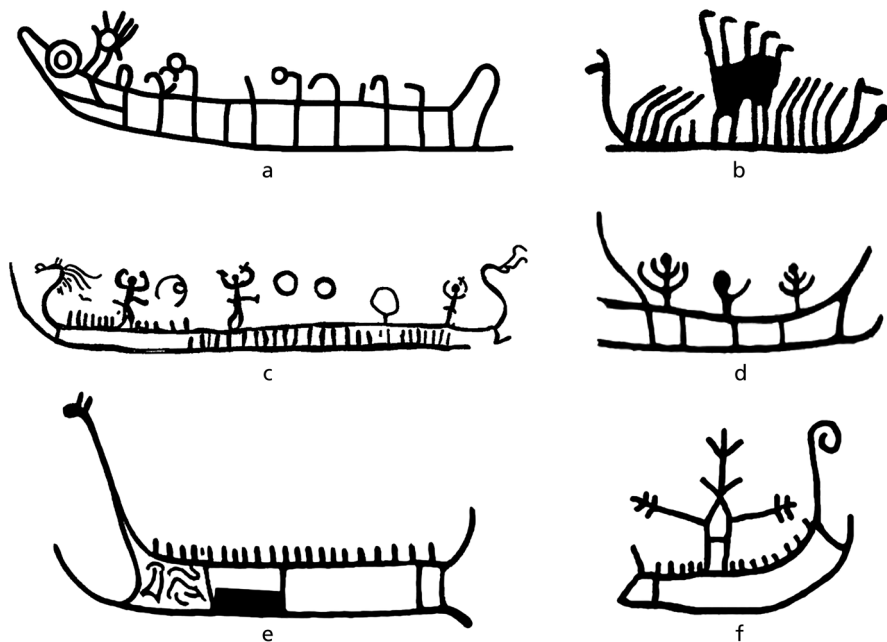


Figure 7. Examples of hybrid boat motifs: (a) Skepplanda 22:1, Bohuslän (drawing by the author from sketch in the National Heritage Board’s database for archaeological sites and monuments (fmis)). (b) Askum 75:1, Bohuslän (Bengtsson et al. 2003). (c) Backehaugen, Østfold (Coles 1993:24). (d) Östra Eneby 1, Östergötland (after Hertz 1999:13). (e) Östra Eneby 23, Östergötland (after Hertz 1999:17). (f) Litslena 230, Uppland (modified from original documentation by Einar Kjellén, Museum of Enköping).

the other main rock art regions, as well as on the engravings on the Late Bronze Age razors (figure 2 & 7). One example is the 3m-long boat-being at Stugåberget in Bohuslän, whose prow has fish-like attributes (figure 7a). At Backehaugen in Norwegian Østfold is a boat-being with an animal head with a mane on the prow and a tail in the aft (figure 7c), and at Ekenberg, Östergötland the long neck of a boat-being is integrated to the hull, not only a head on the prow extension (figure 7e). A closer look at the apparently basic motifs in figure 1 (f, j & k) also reveals examples of designs and attributes that comprise rare ways of representing sea crafts. This hybridity is further augmented by the ‘behaviour’ of the ‘crew’ and other associated motifs. Only a very few of the motifs carry paddlers like the Brandskog boat. On the contrary, most other figures on the boats do not perform marine activities at all. When anthropomorphs over time become more elaborated and express activity, they instead blow lures or hold axes. In other instances the ‘crew’ on the boats do not resemble humanoids at all, and there are sometimes trees growing out of the boats (figure 7b & f). The ontological opacity of the boat motif is thus clearly not only a feature of the rock art of the Stone Age hunter tradition.

## Discussion: boats, elephants, fish, and other fantastic beings

But why peck and engrave images of fantastic object-beings into certain rocks and metal objects? Previous interpretations of the boat motifs as animal-boat hybrids have emphasised the symbolism in combining two different entities (Hedengran 1995:79; Hauptman-Wahlgren 2002:203). However, from an ontological point of view, such a fantastic being need not be a symbolic amalgamation of boat and animal, but an independent entity with powers of its own. Instead of being images of boats with animal features, the boat motifs can thus be understood as object-beings with special abilities and agencies. Such a perspective resonates well with recent research in visual studies, where the potential generative effects of imagery are emphasised (Cochrane & Russell 2007; Fahlander 2013; Harman 2015). Especially influential is Alfred Gell’s (1998:9) claim that art is made to affect the world as a ‘technology of enchantment’ (see also Freedberg 1989). Indeed, images often present as much as they represent, and the making of imagery does affect the worlds of which it is part (Gormley 2004). Althin (1945) even proposed that the main point was to make rock art, and that the resulting images were of less value (see Hedengran 1991:119; Fahlander 2018). Although a bit categorical, Althin’s (1945) suggestion nonetheless echoes other examples of ritualized image-making. For example, Gell (1998:191)



points out that making a tattoo of a special Etua motif in Marquise ontology is a ritual to bring an entity into being (see similar archaeological examples in Meskell 2004:89–90; Bailey 2007; Jones 2017:171). In the Marquise example, the tattoo is not a representation of an Etua somewhere else; it *is* Etua. The motif is tattooed into the skin to tie the spirit to the bearer. As previously argued, such imagery need not gain its powers from spirits or other supreme beings elsewhere to have an effect on the world. Just as words and deeds can have power in their own right, so can imagery be powerful in itself, depending on its particular origins, mediality, context, and configuration (Freedberg 1989; see Malinowski 1922:427; Gell 1998:199). Such imagery may have a wide range of generative potentials. For example, it can be apotropaic and ward off anything unwanted, but also attract attention and incite action from whoever confronts it (humans, animals or other-than-humans). As ‘eye-catchers’, particular imagery in certain designs can work as lures to evoke curiosity, confusion, fear, and even trap humans and other-than-humans (see Robb 2015:172; Sinclair-Thomson 2019). This ability of ‘enchantment’ can be amplified by making the motif larger, partial, or especially elaborated (Fahlander 2018:152).

As material articulations, powerful imagery does not need to rely on mimesis to work although shapes and forms are rarely arbitrary (e.g. Zawadzka 2019:82). Just to pick a few examples, consider the Ganesha motif in Hindu ontology, which portrays a man with four arms and an elephant’s head (figure 8a). The hybrid character of Ganesha is explained by myth as an instance of chance: an elephant was the first animal encountered by Shiva that could replace the head of his decapitated son (one of many creation myths). The ‘abilities’ of the Ganesha image vary according to context, but its main power is as ‘remover of obstacles’ (Brown 1991). The hybrid man-elephant motif is thus not directly related to the physical properties or behaviour



Figure 8. (a) A *Nāga*, from an eighteenth-century Cambodian magical manuscript (modified from Yahya 2016:137), and (b) a Southeast Alaskan petroglyph of a ‘Fish monster’ (Keithahn 1940:131).

of real elephants but to what elephants are able to do – remove obstacles. This capacity of large and strong elephants is elaborated in Ganesha as to work on both physical and immaterial obstacles. Another fantastic Hindu creature, the *Nāga* (figure 8a), also found in Buddhism and Jainism, is a serpent-like semi-divinity with a human head that lives in streams and the ocean (Vogel 1926; Yahya 2016:180). They sometimes aid in problems concerning water, such as when Buddha crossed a river on a ‘bridge’ made of the hoods of *Nāgas* (Vogel 1926:116–117; Yahya 2016:180). In Bali, carved *Nāgas* are often found as stair railings in bridges, alluding to this particular ability to move as freely on land as in (above) water.

Similar hybrid beings are also found in rock art (e.g. Dahlgren 1932:25; Gjerde 2010:115; Challis 2019). One especially interesting example is the petroglyphs of ‘fish monsters’ in south-eastern Alaska. These figures have certain fish-like attributes, such as a tail and fins, but do not resemble any type of fish in particular (figure 8b). According to ethnographical accounts, the petroglyphs were pecked into the bedrock by the sea to evoke and manage the ‘fish-people’. The fish were believed to be organised in the same way as humans in tribes with individual chiefs, and the rock art was made to establish relations with them in a way they could understand (Keithahn 1940:131). The fish monster motifs are equipped with fins and tails to have the abilities of fish in general but are also made big and grim (like a powerful chief) to conjure submission. In this particular case, the fish-monster petroglyphs are pecked at certain locations by the water, with the purpose to increase the possibility of catching fish lured by the powerful fish monsters.

The point here is not to make analogies with Hindu religion or North American rock art, but to illustrate that the material and figurative representation of powerful imagery need not to be directly related to similar beings elsewhere (e.g. boats, elephants, or fish). They do not require the presence of supernatural beings or forces to have effect; it is generally enough to have the correct typical form and be situated at the right place. As material articulations, the powers of the motifs allude to the *abilities*, *agencies*, and *relations* of what is portrayed rather than what it is or may symbolize. As previously discussed, the animal part of the boat motifs all resemble creatures that fare well in waters (e.g. serpents, water fowl, elks, and perhaps also wild boars). By merging animal aspects with a boat, the motif is thus less about the species in question (if at all identifiable), or the boats as vessels, tools, and objects, but instead about the *animacies* of such an object-being. Those aspects would most likely be related to boats and boating. To understand why these figures were pecked on the rocks we thus need to look beyond both traditional symbolism and modern conceptions of boats, and instead focus on what they actually *do*. As previously argued, boats are not passive tools for travel. They have a wide range of abilities with a

certain amount of individual agency. Just to mention a few: they float on water and can lend qualities from the parts of which they are made (wood and/or hides etc); they have the ability to bridge open waters at the same time as they comprise a confined space that simultaneously includes some people while excluding others. Among the crew, the particular practice of boating demands cooperation and a ‘chain of command’ that encourages team spirit, as well as a hierarchical social structure (Eriksson 2015).

It is no straightforward task to determine either the reasons for making rock art in general, or the choice of the object-beings in particular, but the aspects of mediality, production, and location of the rock art can help narrow down the range of possible interpretations. For example, although single motifs can occasionally be found here and there, the great majority of Bronze Age rock art is unevenly distributed and concentrated at certain secluded bays in southern Scandinavia (Goldhahn & Ling 2013; Fahlander 2018:107). The great numbers, the individual stylistic variability, and the varying level of embellishment do not sit well with organised ritualized performances. This, together with the low visibility of the rock art placed by the water’s edge in secluded bays, tend to rule out the theory that the boat-beings are expressions of a religious cosmology. Such issues are generally the business for a few specialists while people in general are more occupied with local animacies, spirits, and godlings (Boyer 2001). The same arguments also indicate that this type of imagery is not artwork in the sense that it is made to be experienced by others. That boat-beings are the most common figurative motif, and many motifs are oriented towards and pecked to follow the retracting water, rather indicate that the imagery was primarily meant to affect local bodies of water and/or beings that dwelled therein (Fahlander 2019). The water world is an extremely elusive hyperobject in terms of a wide range of animacies, real, tangible materialities, and animal life and, most probably, also more-than-human entities (such as boat-beings). Alas, the material and general cultural background do not allow us to be precise about the exact abilities and purpose of the boat-beings on the rocks. They could be directed to the animacies of the sea (wind, waves, tides etc), beings dwelling in the water (fish, crustaceans) or on the surface (waterfowl, game, and humans), but also to immaterial spirits and entities related to the water world. However, judging from the low visibility, designs, and setting of the rock art, the boat-beings seem to be more about *controlling* and *utilizing* aspects of animacies and beings of the water world rather than articulating apotropaic or sympathetic magic (Fahlander 2018:149–150).

Although it is difficult to precisely define what the fantastic boat-beings were supposed to do, the argument developed here is nonetheless helpful for understanding Bronze Age rock art in general. Viewed from an ontological point of view, the most common motifs on the rocks (boats, zoo-

morphs, anthropomorphs, and foot soles) appear as articulations of different *beings*. The change of perspective of the boat motif thus allows for a common frame of reference for Bronze Age rock art that makes the mixed appearances of the main types of motifs on the rocks more understandable. They are all corporeal beings produced by the water's edge to affect certain aspects related to the water world.

## Conclusion

The boat motif in its many configurations is an elusive figure in Scandinavian Bronze Age rock art. The hybrid design of some boat motifs, the lack of resemblance to known real crafts, and the way that they mix with the other motifs on the rocks suggest that they are something other than mere representations of marine crafts. The design of the rock art boats with animal heads on the prows as well as the alliteration to animal attributes in the shapes of metal objects with engraved boat motifs, rather indicate that they are types of object-beings made to affect their local milieu. The potential abilities of such imagery are many but the design, manner of production, and placement of the motifs on rocks by the water's edge suggest that Bronze Age rock art in general is not primarily communicative. The frequencies, context, and distribution of the boat motif also imply that the rock art is not an expression of religious cosmology. The way that the motifs are integrated into certain rocks and metals by means of pecking and carving fit better a type of 'vitalist technology' where special imagery works as tools to affect the world. For example, to peck a boat motif on particular rocks by the water would constitute a ritual performance to make an entity, a 'boat-being', come to life in order to affect water in general or the animacies and beings (including humans) of the water world.

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