

Fredrik Fahlander

Ecologies of Bronze Age Rock Art: Organisation, Design and Articulation of Petroglyphs in Eastern-central Sweden

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Review by Peter Skoglund 

Fahlander's book on rock art in Eastern-central Sweden sets out to explore one of the most prominent rock art clusters in Scandinavia. We are presented with an overview of the rock art surrounding Lake Mälaren in Sweden covering the counties of Västmanland, Stockholm and Södermanland. However, the most important contribution is not the material presented, but the theoretical approach, where the author systematically applies the perspective of material articulation which implies that rock art motifs acted as tools and devices to *do* something. Fahlander and other colleagues have written about these matters previously, but for the first time in Scandinavian rock art research, this perspective is now applied systematically to a larger study area. Thus, the book is a must-read for anyone with an interest in how theory is a precondition for novel and interesting interpretations of rock art imagery.

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The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1 sets the scene and introduces the main theoretical concepts and outlines the book. Chapter 2 presents the study area and provides a spatial overview of the rock art distribution. A generalized chronology is presented which builds on, but simplifies, established chronologies presented by Kaul (1998) and Ling (2014). Chapter 3 focuses on the articulation of the motifs and the relationships between different motifs. The connection between motifs and features in the panels such as cracks and fissures are also investigated. The distribution of different types of motifs is presented and discussed.

Chapter 4 is a key section in the book since it deals extensively with the core theme of the book namely the articulation of the motifs. In this chapter Fahlander explores topics like partial and incomplete motifs, reworking and enactments of motifs, large-scale and hyperbolic motifs and finally the relationship between the motifs and the rock canvas. Throughout this chapter theory works implicitly to guide the author to identify interesting patterns in the material. Chapter 5 builds on the observations made in Chapter 4 and now Fahlander broadens the scope and elaborates upon the interpretations by including ethnographic perspectives in the discussion. In this chapter Fahlander explores the motifs as devices with a potential for both visual and material agency. According to Fahlander the rock art motifs had different aims which were altered and adjusted with the help of mediality, design and articulation. These concepts are explored through an analysis of the size of the images and how images are related to each other and also how they are positioned in relation to characteristic features in the rock surface. Chapter 6 places the Mälaren rock art in a wider geographical perspective with comparisons to other Scandinavian regions and beyond. Chapter 7 is a summary of the main conclusions drawn in this study of the Mälaren rock art.

The seven chapters making up the book are all well-written with a lot of high-quality illustrations and maps. The author addresses complicated matters in a straightforward way which invites the reader to take part in the discussion.

Moreover, *Ecologies of Bronze Age Rock Art: Organisation, Design and Articulation of Petroglyphs in Eastern-central Sweden* introduces a novel perspective on rock art challenging the idea of rock art as a passive reflection of ideology and cosmology. Instead, the author emphasizes its generative potential with properties and agencies of its own. The theoretical perspective is combined with a deeply rooted notion of the importance of empirical data. The rock art motifs are quantified and presented in tables and maps providing an excellent overview of rock art in this part of Scandinavia. In my judgement the application of theory onto data in general works very well and makes this book stand out as a model for other researchers.

This is especially true for Chapter 4 where Fahlander's perspective enables him to identify several interesting features in rock art motifs and their landscape context which add new understandings compared to more classical mimetic approaches. I am especially intrigued by how the author identifies hyperbolic motifs, i.e. very large images, as a subgroup with a limited chronology restricted to the very beginning and the end of the Mälaren rock art tradition. In these periods, when the rock art format was adjusting to new circumstances, size was used to increase visibility and to maximize the image's effect on people.

However, Chapter 5, where Fahlander presents more precise interpretations involving also ethnography, I find more challenging to read. I get the impression that the author is sometimes overinterpreting the material and presents explanations that are to a lesser extent anchored in the theoretical discussion and the empirical data. Examples could include the notion of podomorphs as representing living standing entities and anthropomorphs as representing dead lying down humans, or that certain cupmark localities were designed to encapsulate water and stir the flow of running water in certain directions.

These examples point to a general problem with rock art studies that goes beyond Fahlander's book, namely the tendency to think of individual motifs and panels to represent visual and material remains of distinct importance. Given that the material remains of other activities potentially taking place at rock art sites such as gatherings, feasts, rituals and storytelling are gone, or have always been nonexistent, we are forced to study what is left namely the images. These visual and material remains may well be of secondary importance and a kind of extemporary outcome compared to other activities that took place at the site. This view on rock art is influenced by my own ethnographic fieldwork studying the ongoing rock art tradition among the Samburu in northern Kenya. In this tradition, the main activity in the rock art shelters is the feast where meat is consumed, and rock art production sometimes evolves out of this activity as a rather spontaneous, unrehearsed and informal activity (Goldhahn et al. 2021).

Despite these differences in opinion regarding the significance of rock art in general and certain specific interpretations, I must emphasize that Fahlander's book sets the stage for a new theoretical understanding of Scandinavian rock art. The book presents a theoretical approach that complements and challenges other well-established notions such as the idea of rock art representing visual narratives or rock art as a outcome of maritime rituals and activities. Instead, we are presented by a variety of examples and interpretations on how images by their design and position interfere with their environment and creates new material relationships that acts and impose something on people, making this book an interesting example of

how to approach the ecology of rock art. The way the author deals with both larger datasets and sophisticated theory represent great professional scholarship, and that is why this book will serve as inspiration for anyone with an interest in how to use theory in rock art studies.

References

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