

## Comments on “A conflict of opinions: Rock carvings in Sweden 2003” by J. Coles

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Coles (2004) presents observations on rock carvings in Sweden based on his personal experience as a visitor and researcher over the last 25 years. Having read his paper and the judgments and conclusions that he puts forward, I would like to stress first of all that observations and comments of this kind are very rare but are valuable as an evaluation from outside of some of the research and projects performed in connection with rock art in Sweden since the late 1970s. Here someone may protest and argue that Coles is not an outsider, since he has taken part in and/or personally directed some of this research. Be that as it may, it is obvious from his own writing that Coles still wants to consider himself an outsider. Although this is not a big issue, it might to a certain extent have influenced some of the judgments and conclusions presented in his paper. This influence sometimes makes the statements somewhat biased, although they are probably intended to be objective. This is especially valid for the statements about the archive built up by Einar Kjellen on the Enköping rock art. But let us deal with that specific matter later.

My general impression is that Coles' interventions in Swedish rock art stem from a genuine interest and deep concern about this fragile cultural heritage, and therefore I also feel that many of his observations are important and relevant. Some of them seem to be less relevant, however, and others seem to be based on misunderstandings and/or misconceptions. This naturally calls for comments and sometimes for clarifications.

My personal experience and viewpoints are derived from more than thirty years of involvement in rock art in general and also from my role as initiator of two of the European Union projects that Coles comments

on. The first was the Interreg IIA project *Hällristningar i gränsbygd* and the second was the European Commission project *RockCare – Tanum Laboratory of Cultural Heritage* within the Raphael/Culture 2000 programme. In the first I was a member of the steering committee and in the second I was, and still am, project manager. It thus strikes me as somewhat peculiar that Coles thinks that these two projects are one and the same thing! This fundamental misunderstanding affects his statements and judgments to a certain extent, of course.

Although abundant information has been produced and presented about the two projects in the form of folders, reports, books and web pages, Coles obviously has not grasped the fact that although *Hällristningar i Gränsbygd* and the *RockCare Project* overlapped somewhat in time, their scopes and target areas were rather different (see Bertilsson 2000, 2001, 2004). What they did have in common was that they partly originated from Tanum, but while *Hällristningar i Gränsbygd* was run by the County Administration of Västra Götaland and Östfolds Fylkeskommune and focused on the rock carvings there and in these two provinces, *RockCare* was run by the National Heritage Board in Stockholm and a “joint venture” group of rock art specialists from Tanum, Valcamonica in Italy, Foz Coa in Portugal and Astuvansalmi in Finland. Mont Bego in France also participated in the first stage of the project. Since it seems that, regardless of the information available, Coles is familiar only with the *Hällristningar i Gränsbygd* project, his conclusions on this score must be considered to be of somewhat restricted validity. His comments on this topic also seem rather ambivalent; although he likes the report, he also thinks that

the project "...has some of the hallmarks ...of committee driven enterprise". This is of course true, since the project was designed to meet the requirements of the Interreg steering committee's application programme, but this seems to me to be a fairly normal feature of modern research projects when applying for organized funding. Of course anyone is free, like Coles, to think that such a system may have a negative effect on research projects.

I cannot get away from the suspicion that Coles' complaints in this case stem from the fact that the project was mainly concerned with aspects of conservation and management, and that no "pure or true" research was involved. The latter would then probably refer to research and projects that were conceived and performed by university professors alone. Be that as it may, the hard fact is that, without projects like *Hällristningar i Gränsbygd* or *RockCare*, very little research into rock art would have been performed either outside or inside the walls of our universities and academies. This stems for one thing from the fact that the largest quantities of research money nowadays have been removed from their traditional distributors and beneficiaries and instead are being accumulated within the extensive research programmes of the European Union. Another drawback that I suppose Coles would consider is the fact that the evaluations and decisions on Interreg projects are made mainly by administrators and politicians, without very many university professors being involved, with the danger that this may affect "research values" and related aspects. Regardless of whether one considers this to be a negative or a positive matter, it has to be stated that a large number of qualified researchers, university professors and the like were closely engaged in the actual project activities.

It should perhaps be added that Coles would probably have found the application process for the *RockCare* project more satisfactory in this respect, as it was funded by the European Commission's research programme. Among other things, this meant that the competition for funding and the evaluation of the project were much more severe, involving some of the most renowned specialists in Europe. Still, it is also true to some extent that the Interreg application programme required engagement and action in various fields that are perhaps of more interest to the general public than to researchers. To mention one example, a project such as *Hällristningar i Gränsbygd* had to have a specific focus on the rock art as a resource for regional development. I am not at all convinced that this is a negative matter, however, since among other things it

may enhance contacts between professional researchers and the public. Or to put it a different way – it opens up a new arena for rock art research.

Coles then turns to comments, mostly complaints, about the observations he has made regarding the covering, cleaning and re-painting of various panels in Uppland, Västmanland, Östergötland and Bohuslän. Many of his complaints are fully justifiable, such as his negative judgment on the regular re-painting of panels, which in turn calls for intensified cleaning and may have negative effects in the future. He also deals with the ethical aspects of the "complete recording" project carried out by the Vitlycke Museum in Askum and Tossene in Bohuslän. Here again his opinion is negative, and I am tempted to say that he presents some good arguments for this. These arguments have much in common with the discussion that was presented in the final report of the Interreg project (Bertilsson & Magnusson 2000). In short, one of the strongest counter-arguments to "complete recording" projects of this kind is that although "the first duty of a rock art researcher" should perhaps be to record rock art panels, one effect may be just what Coles fears, that the change in the hitherto rather stable conditions, e.g. long-term natural covering and overgrowth, may hasten deterioration and damage and as a side effect may lead to a mountain of new panels to care for (in Swedish *ett nytt värdberg*) without any matching funding. On the other hand, it would seem rather odd not to allow rock art research of this kind. It is also in accordance with a long tradition in Bohuslän, starting with Brunius in the early 19th century. Valuable new data have also been accumulated in this way. A tempting idea, however, would be to propose a five-year moratorium on new discoveries and complete recording activities and instead let all the researchers concentrate on issues of analysing, conserving, interpreting and presenting already recorded panels.

Coles considers a large number of panels to have been "abandoned". The truth is that most of them have probably always been in that state - not cared for and thus in a more or less normal state of conservation. It is certainly not true that they were buried for almost 3000 years. On the contrary, they were lying there openly most of the time, as they are today. But it is true that they will generally prosper from a situation in which they are being grown over and reburied by soil and vegetation.

Coles is also greatly upset about the fact that most of the Uppland material has been assembled into a private archive. His description of the actual process and situation is incorrect, however. The fact is that Einar

Kjellén discovered and surveyed most of the rock carvings in the Enköping area and elsewhere during his long lifetime taking photos and making drawings and plans of the numerous engravings. This extensive material was already being generously presented and shared with professional antiquarians and researchers in the 1970s (Kjellén 1976), in contrast to Coles' description of the situation. This archive has now been donated to Enköpings Museum, where it has been scanned and computerized for the use and benefit of researchers and others interested. In this sense it is in fact one of the most readily available archives of rock art in Sweden, although originally a private one. Coles' comparison with the archives of Vitlycke Museum is similarly not entirely adequate. It is a positive fact that parts of this archive are being published by Lasse Bengtsson and his team, but it has to be remembered that the basic material there was assembled by Torsten Högberg, who also built up the archive when he was employed and paid for this work by Riksantikvarieämbetet and/or Bohusläns Museum. To compare his situation with that of Einar Kjellén, who spent most of his free time and his own money on surveying the rock art of Enköping is not fair, and to judge Kjellén's long-lasting contributions to rock art studies in such a negative way is even less so!

After having studied Coles' own magnum opus on the Uppland engravings (Coles 2000) one might also raise some questions and doubts about the accuracy of his recording techniques and documentation standards. I have already drawn some attention to this rather delicate matter (Bertilsson 2004:107ff) and questioned the capacity of the technique he uses to present his depictions in print to reveal all the important details of the images, including something that I call "added artistic value". It is obvious to me that many of his descriptions are not detailed enough to catch all this information that is crucially important for the interpretation and understanding of rock art (Coles 2000).

For me the answers to most of the questions at the end of Coles' paper are not as ambiguous as they seem to be to Coles himself. As a general standpoint, I think it is important to argue for an attitude of care and respect for rock art. It was originally made as a part of the common heritage and landscape. Due to its relatively long preservation, it has then gradually been transformed into a common cultural heritage of today that should be treated with the same care and respect as when it was created. It seems that Coles in a general sense shares this attitude, or at least has an ambition to do this. Judging from many of the photos in his

Uppland work, however, it is not always easy to meet such requirements with respect to either the ethics or the accuracy of the recording work (Coles 2000, e.g. plate 10, back cover and others).

My concluding remark is that although it is obvious that Coles has made important contributions to rock art research in Sweden, his attitudes regarding such activities and projects are somewhat problematic. It seems from his numerous comments that he considers himself to a great extent to be an objective observer and thus free to comment on or judge the activities that are taking place. However, since he has been involved in many of these activities himself for a rather long time, it is not obvious from his report that he is actually objective. It could instead be argued that his judgment has been affected to a certain extent and has become biased. This is especially obvious as regards his negative assessment of the accessibility of Einar Kjellén's archive, which seems to be highly partial. Yet another illuminating example is his criticism of the artificial coverings. Although the result clearly indicates that the rate of erosion at panels like Asperberget in Tanum has slowed down considerably thanks to the artificial cover, which evens out the temperature of the rock surface throughout the year, Coles seems to be upset by the fact that he cannot visit or study the panel any longer. However, due to the improvements achieved, it has now become possible to remove the covering during the summer season, a custom that started three years ago. This opinion of his also stands in strange contrast to his praise for the expected positive effect of the ongoing natural overgrowth of many panels.

It has also been interesting to note that although Coles has obviously had the chance to keep himself well informed about some of the rock art research projects that have taken place in Sweden since the late 1980s, he has never to my knowledge shown any interest in becoming officially involved in these activities. In this way he has manoeuvred himself into a rather convenient position, one might argue, a position that allows him to be concerned and critical but not involved and responsible. This is a pity in a way, because a researcher with Coles' extensive knowledge and experience of rock art in Sweden could have contributed much to any of the projects that form the focus of his review. For the sake of clarity, however, it must be said that it appears from the title that Coles that seems to be fully aware of this contradiction. If so, this is another merit of his paper.

*English language revision by Malcolm Hicks.*

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