

Richard Bradley



Visions and revisions–

Northern influence in South Scandinavian rock art?

Gro Mandt has worked in a region where it is possible to study two different styles of rock art, and has divided her attention between them. The contents of these traditions are easy to characterise and so are their distributions, but their relationship to one another poses problems.

It is revealing how the names of these two styles have changed. Today they are usually described as Northern and Southern Scandinavian art respectively, but in the past they have been characterised as Hunters' Art and Farmers' Art (Hagen 1990). Not only does that suggest that each group of images was associated with people who practised a different economy, it also implies that one was developed by an indigenous population whilst the other might have been associated with ideas and methods of food production that were introduced to Scandinavia from outside.

That emphasis on non-local sources of inspiration has played a prominent part in recent work on the Nordic Bronze Age. Kristian Kristiansen and Thomas Larsson (2005) have followed earlier writers in emphasising the role of long distance trade, for it is clear that metal was imported from Central Europe just as Baltic amber was used in areas far to the south. Following the work of the anthropologist Mary Helms (1988), they emphasise the social significance of such transactions. Travel to remote areas and knowledge of unfamiliar beliefs often provide a source of political power (Kristiansen 2004).

Their discussion draws on South Scandinavian rock art, for they suggest that some of the images provide evidence for contacts with regions as far away as the Mediterranean. These places may have offered a source of inspiration for metalwork which features some of the same designs. Kristiansen and Larsson are by no means the first authors to postulate such links (Randsborg 1993; Malmer 1999), but they are unusually explicit in suggesting how these might have contributed to developments in Scandinavia. Among the images they consider are clothing, weapons, axes and ships. Just as the concept of Farmers' Art evoked connections with far off areas, individual motifs among the rock carvings might have had a distant source of inspiration.

Northern Scandinavia plays a role in this scheme, for Kristiansen has long argued that it was a source of furs which were traded to communities in the south. This is a reasonable hypothesis and would certainly suggest a commodity that could have been exchanged for bronze, but

at present the best argument for such connections is provided by the distribution of Bronze Age cairns along the coast. As he says, they may even have acted as seamarks for sailors in northern waters (Kristiansen 1987). But his model suffers from a certain imbalance, as the links between Central or Southern Europe and South Scandinavia are clearly documented (Randsborg 1993: part 3; Larsson 1997; Kristiansen & Larsson 2005), whilst those with the north are largely circumstantial.

Rock art poses special problems as it is difficult to date. Northern Scandinavian carvings obviously developed before their counterparts in the south but it is uncertain whether, or how far, their histories overlapped (Malmer 1981; Jansen *et al.* 1989; Mandt & Lødøen 2005). Two observations are most important here. There are not many cases in which pictures in both these styles are found in the same regions, and for the most part their distributions are mutually exclusive. Even when they do occur close together, they usually occupy different kinds of sites (Sognnes 1989; Gjerde 2002). On the other hand, occasional paintings survive which are linked to the Northern tradition (Nordbladh 1989; Mandt & Lødøen 2005: 22-4, 83-95 and 256-7; Nordqvist 2003). Although they are comparatively rare, their distribution extends considerably further to the south than the carvings in the same style, raising the possibility that painted designs may once have occurred more widely. It is unlikely that the problem can be resolved today because such images are easily destroyed.

The model put forward by Kristiansen (1987) is based on the idea that Scandinavia was a periphery of Central Europe, and the north a periphery of the south. But is that the only way of viewing those relationships? His view has been challenged in two recent monographs (Nordenborg Myhre 2004; Skoglund 2005), but both those studies were concerned with areas within the Southern tradition of rock art. It may be possible to take the argument further. Perhaps the Northern Scandinavian petroglyphs include some elements that were important across a more extensive area.

Comparing the two styles

My case depends on a simple premise. There are indications that the rock art of the north contains some of the elements that are documented in recent ethnography. This has been proposed by Knut Helskog (1999) and also by Marek Zvelebil and Peter Jordan (Zvelebil & Jordan 1999; Zvelebil 2003; Jordan 2003). On that basis it is possible to interpret at least some of the images found in this tradition. Although the *contents* of the two styles differ from one another, some of the same *ideas* may have been expressed in South Scandinavian art.

If there is a significant relationship between the contents of Northern rock art and the beliefs recorded by ethnographers, it follows that certain themes retained their significance for a long period of time. In that case it is less important to establish the chronological alignment of the two styles. Either their histories overlapped, in which case there might have been direct contacts between the people who made them, or they were created in different phases but could have drawn on a similar body of ideas. Even if the latter were true, it is clear that Northern Scandinavian rock art was the first of these traditions to develop; the concepts that it expressed might have influenced the people who developed the South Scandinavian style. Having said this, I must stress that I do not reject the long distance connections postulated by Kristiansen and Larsson (2005). Rather, I wish to make two rather different points. Some of the imagery that they discuss may well have originated in other areas, but in order for it to

have been meaningful *it needed to be understood in terms of local experience and beliefs*. At the same time, a few of those images had already been set down in the rock art of the north.

There are two main elements that are shared between these styles, although they occur on some of the northern sites and not on others (Hallström 1960). A minor component is the footprint or footsole, but it is thought that this motif belongs to a late phase in the development of the designs. Its adoption may have been influenced by the Southern style. The same argument is often applied to carvings of boats, some of which resemble images that are recorded in South Scandinavia, but in this case there is a problem.



Figure 1. Boat from Alta, Finnmark, Northern Norway. Photo: T. Lødøen.

According to the chronology proposed by Knut Helskog (1998), drawings of boats are already found among the oldest rock art at Alta. They may have originated between 4200 and 3300 BC, which is much earlier than the Bronze Age carvings of ships. Moreover, drawings of boats are widely distributed among the petroglyphs of the Circumpolar region and can even be found in Canada where they occur together with pictures of the sun (Coles 1991:136-46). They cannot have been inspired, however indirectly, by prototypes in the Mediterranean. The styles of the Bronze Age drawings may have features in common with the decorated metalwork of Denmark, North Germany and Southern Sweden (Kaul 1998), but the symbolic significance of the ship was established at an earlier date.

A further element that is shared between the two styles is the notion of bodily transformation (Lahelma 2005). This is often associated with the activities of shamans (Price 2001), but in practice it can take many different forms. It is certainly commoner in the north than it is in South Scandinavia. Nevertheless both traditions of rock art feature scenes in which human beings take on some of the physical attributes of animals or birds (Coles 2005:31-61); in the north, the same process may extend to drawings of fish (Helskog 1998). In both styles, animals also merge with boats. In the north, that applies mainly to elks (Bolin 2000), and, in the south, to horses (Coles 2005:18-30).

The siting of the rock art is even more important, for many of the largest groups of carvings *in both traditions* are associated with the coast (Helskog 1999; Bengtsson 2004). Indeed, there are cases in which it seems likely that they had been located on the water's edge and could even have been viewed from the sea. It is because of this association that chronologies based on shoreline displacement have been so informative (Ling 2004). Of course, other petroglyphs do occur in inland areas, but in the north major concentrations are associated with cataracts (Goldhahn 2002).



Figure 2. Rock art in close association with running water at Valle, Ballangen, Northern Norway.
Photo: T. Lødøen.

Again the link is not peculiar to that region, and one of the largest concentrations of images in the south occurs in a similar situation at Himmelstadlund (Hauptman Wahlgren 2002). Here the carvings are located beside another series of rapids and, like many of those at Nämforsen, some may have been located on an island.

Why were these places so important? According to Helskog (1999), whose research combines archaeological observations with ethnographic evidence, the shoreline is important in northern cosmology because it is where the three layers of the cosmos come together: it is the only place where the land is in direct contact with both the sky and the sea, and for that reason it provides an ideal point of transition. Rapids have similar characteristics, for again they allow contact between the different levels of the universe. In each case the most important feature is that they mark the interface between the worlds of the living and the dead (Zvelebil & Jordan 1999; Zvelebil 2003; Jordan 2003).

It seems possible that South Scandinavian rock art was also organised in relation to a three-tier cosmology, although in this case the argument can only be based on archaeological evidence (Bradley 2006). Many of the rock carvings are composed in relation to two distinct axes, one of them horizontal and the other vertical. The horizontal axis is commonly defined by carvings of ships, whilst the vertical axis is defined by files of footprints which run up and



Figure 3. Footprints at the shore of the lake Totak, Telemark, Southern Norway. Photo: T. Lødøen.

down the rock. It is also characterised by wheeled vehicles which frequently run at right angles to the drawings of boats. On some sites, the top of the outcrop is embellished with cup marks that face into the sky. Kristiansen and Larsson describe a rather similar scheme based on the decorated metalwork of Denmark (2005:355, fig. 167). This evidence has been analysed by Flemming Kaul (1998) who emphasises the movement of the sun across the sky during the day and its passage through the sea at night. The main point of transition is where the sky meets the water.

Of course, it may be a coincidence that rather similar reconstructions have been proposed on the basis of these different media. On the other hand, there are further links between the north and south, which seem to be reflected in the character of prehistoric rock art. Again, these have been discussed by Marek Zvelebil and Peter Jordan (1999). They emphasise two particular aspects of the association between death and water. Not only does the seashore mark the boundary between the living and the dead, burials were located on islands. This is clearly shown by the archaeology and ethnography of the Circumpolar region, but it has a particular significance in relation to the visual images considered in this paper. The dead were separated from the living, but for the funerals to have taken place corpses must have been carried across the water to the cemeteries. That emphasises the special significance of the boat. At the same time, Zvelebil (2003) observes that these vessels were without paddles. That is because they were not intended for the living.

The same ideas may be expressed in the rock carvings and field monuments of South Scandinavia. As mentioned earlier, the coastline is marked by a series of Bronze Age cairns, many of which are located on offshore islands which would not have been large enough to sustain a resident population. Again there seems to have been an association between these places and the commemoration of the dead who must have been carried across the water to their graves. Zvelebil also refers to the significance of drifting boats in northern systems of belief, and this



Figure 4. Ships from Krabbestia, Husevågøy, Sogn og Fjordane, Western Norway. Photo: T. Lødøen.

is another motif that is commonly found in the southern style of rock art (Zvelebil 2003: table 2). Although many of the carved boats were equipped with crews, very few vessels have rudders, paddles or sails. Again it seems possible that some of them were carrying the dead. It is likely that this association had been present since the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods as there is evidence that human bodies had occasionally been buried in boats (Skaarup 1995).

Summary

These comparisons are summarised in two tables. Table 1 considers the points of similarity between the Northern and Southern traditions of rock art. It extends from factual issues like the composition and siting of the panels in both these styles to more contentious questions concerning their interpretation. It also emphasises the differences between archaeological and ethnographic evidence and identifies those cases in which they can be used in combination.

Table 2 is a hypothetical model setting out the possible relationships between these styles of rock art. It is based on the simple premise that some of the beliefs recorded in northern ethnography are of considerable antiquity and that they may originally have been shared over a considerable area. That would have included South Scandinavia where a few (undated) paintings in the Northern style still survive. It was the latter region that was mainly exposed to outside influences during the Bronze Age, but some of the visual images associated with that period may have been adopted because they could be interpreted in the light of local beliefs. In the north, similar beliefs had an extended history and lasted long enough to feature in ethnographic sources, but further to the south, any such link was lost. Here it is necessary to work with purely archaeological evidence.

If these suggestions are to be taken any further, it will be necessary to pay special attention to the areas where petroglyphs in both these styles are found. Gro Mandt has led the way in conducting this kind of research, and that is one of the reasons why her work is so important.

NORTHERN STYLE	SOUTHERN STYLE
(? earlier)	(? later)
<i>Design elements:</i>	
BOATS (present)	BOATS (common)
FEET (uncommon)	FEET (common)
BODILY TRANSFORMATION (present)	BODILY TRANSFORMATION (uncommon)
<i>Siting:</i>	
SHORELINE (common)	SHORELINE (common)
CATARACTS (common)	CATARACTS (rare)
<i>Wider interpretations:</i>	
THREE-TIER COSMOLOGY (ethnography)	THREE-TIER COSMOLOGY (archaeology)
BOATS AND THE DEAD (ethnography and archaeology)	BOATS AND THE DEAD (archaeology)
BURIALS ON ISLANDS (ethnography and archaeology)	BURIALS ON ISLANDS (archaeology)

Table 1. Contrasts and possible connections between Northern and Southern Scandinavia, with special reference to the rock carvings of both areas.

	NORTHERN SCANDINAVIA	SOUTHERN SCANDINAVIA
<i>Initial phase</i>		
	Rock carvings and paintings	Paintings?
<i>Subsequent phases</i>		
	Paintings and carvings end	Rock carvings begin
	Limited influence from outside	Considerable influence from the south
	Significant continuity of beliefs	Diminishing continuity of beliefs
<i>Final phase</i>		
	Ethnographic record	No ethnographic record

Table 2. Similarities and differences between developments in Northern and Southern Scandinavia from the first appearance of rock art to the ethnographic present.

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