

Reflections on Bronze Age travels

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In the above paper, Johan Ling and Zofia Stos-Gale present results from a project comparing isotopes from Bronze Age artefacts with signatures from known Bronze Age mining localities. The results showed that artefacts found in southern Sweden were made from bronze mined in Cyprus. This is in itself interesting, but the discovery of rock art engravings in Sweden that resemble 'oxhide' bronze ingots from Cyprus adds a new dimension to the interpretation of Scandinavian rock art, with its strong focus on boat images. The number of possible oxhide ingots represented in Swedish rock art is low, but if the identification of these images is correct, we have evidence, for the first time, of direct connections between Scandinavia and the eastern Mediterranean, connections that have been supposed, but not evidenced, for more than a century (e.g. Hansen 1909). Here, I focus on some implications this article may have for future Scandinavian Bronze Age studies, with special emphasis on rock art.

If the engravings in question do represent oxhide ingots, these ingots must have been present in Scandinavia and seen by the makers of the engravings. With few exceptions, Bronze Age people in southern Europe did not make rock art. It is therefore most unlikely that travellers from the south made these engravings. This is apposite for the many boat images represented in the Bronze Age rock art of Scandinavia: do these engravings render real boats being used in Scandinavia or were they based on images imported from the south (e.g. Malmer 1981)? The standardisation of boat images from southernmost Scandinavia to the Arctic Circle, however, strongly indicates that they depict real boats being used in Scandinavia. The distribution of these boat images demonstrates that they are, first and foremost, evidence of a Scandinavian maritime culture and of travels and trade within Scandinavia.

The article brings new energy to the question of Bronze Age contact between the Nordic and eastern Mediterranean spheres. It is claimed that these travels may have triggered the making of the many boat images engraved on rocks in Scandinavia, where these images, in their 'classical' form, are found on the Norwegian west coast as far north as the Arctic Circle. The boat motif in these images emphasises the maritime nature of Mediterranean contact.

Journeys between the eastern Mediterranean and Scandinavia can follow different routes: by sailing along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts or by crossing the continent via the main rivers to the west and east of the Alps. Portaging between the Mediterranean and the Bay of Biscay via the Carcassonne Gap may shorten the sea journey. Except for long and tedious sailings around the European Peninsula, all routes between the Mediterranean and Scandinavia demand portaging, involving several changes of transportation: from Cyprus to the mainland by sea-going craft; across the continent by river-going craft; overland by horse or on foot between the rivers and again by sea-going craft across the Baltic and North Seas. Thus, it was most unlikely that eastern Mediterranean ships reached Scandinavian

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waters. This means that the boat images on the rocks of southern Scandinavia probably depict indigenous vessels.

In northern parts of Scandinavia, boat images were engraved on rocks several millennia before the dawn of the Bronze Age; they are present in the Stone Age rock art tradition of northern Scandinavia. Similar boats (drawn in a different style) are then represented in the Bronze Age rock art of western and central Norway. Thus, it seems that a major change in boat-building technology took place in Scandinavia at the beginning of the Bronze Age, and this transformation may have led to increased travel and trade within Scandinavia and with the world beyond. Maritime transport and trade from western Scandinavia would most likely have moved in a south-westerly direction, which would require fewer changes in portaging. Archaeological evidence is scarce for western contact, but imports from the British Isles may have influenced Early Bronze Age, and perhaps even Late Neolithic, rock art in Scandinavia (e.g. Fett & Fett 1979; Burenhult 1980). We may even claim that the Atlantic rock art tradition (cf. Bradley 1997) had its northern border at the end of the Trondheim Fjord at 64° N, but was integrated with the Scandinavian Bronze Age rock art tradition.

In summary, I find the article stimulating; it represents a fresh starting point for further studies of contact between Bronze Age Scandinavia and other parts of Europe. Further emphasis on isotope analyses of copper ores (and other metals) and artefacts in Southern and Western Europe would be welcomed, but it could also extend to Russia and the 'northern' Bronze Age culture of Scandinavia. Furthermore, the north–south long-distance transportation of ores and artefacts should be considered in Bronze Age studies of the areas between the Mediterranean and Scandinavian endpoints of this exchange system.

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