

Here, there and everywhere?

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Ling and Stos-Gale (above) present some hitherto little-known rock art motifs from various locations in Sweden, and offer an intriguing interpretation for them that ties in with the recent realisation that some of the copper used in the earlier Bronze Age of southern Scandinavia may have originated from Cyprus.

For the purpose of these comments their identification of at least some of the motifs in question as representations of Mediterranean oxhide ingots is tentatively accepted, although such a reading may not be equally convincing for all of the relevant depictions in the same measure. In any case, the authors' interpretation of these images as oxhide ingots raises a number of questions. These concern, first of all, the protagonists in the movement of raw material, as well as ideas, that is implied; the routes along which both may have travelled; and last but not least, the significance of these images.

As far as the identity of the protagonists is concerned, the authors take it for granted that they were sailors from Scandinavia who travelled to the Mediterranean rather than *vice versa*. While it is certainly true that, so far, no vessels of Mediterranean type have been identified in Scandinavian rock art, down-the-line contacts involving overland routes crossing Continental Europe perhaps remain the most likely alternative. If anything, the distribution of amber finds—which the authors regard as the main commodity to have been exchanged for Cypriot copper—would support such a notion. This, however, leaves open the question of what would have been exchanged for copper from Iberia, where little Bronze Age amber is known, but whence, according to the authors' own work, a significantly larger proportion of the copper used in the Nordic Bronze Age would have originated.

In order to develop a better understanding of the mechanisms of long-distance acquisition of raw materials, in this, as well as in other cases, a much broader section of the archaeological record will have to be interrogated. In particular, a meaningful answer to the question of which routes Cypriot copper might have used to travel to the far North will more than likely remain elusive as long as the distribution of other Cypriot objects of similar date in Central and Western Europe is not taken into account (cf. Brandherm 2000).

The most important question that still remains unanswered, however, relates to the significance of this particular motif in Scandinavian rock art. What role does it play in this specific context? Presumably we are dealing with neither a Bronze Age traveller's mundane sketchbook, nor—judging by the other elements depicted in the relevant panels—some kind of Bronze Age cargo cult.

Moreover, do these motifs consistently depict the genuine article, or has the oxhide shape here acquired the role of a cultural icon? The latter was clearly the case in the Final Bronze Age and Early Iron Age of Iberia; there, the sole warrior stele depicting an object resembling an oxhide ingot, of the same type as that apparently represented at Kville, probably post-dates

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the currency of oxhide ingots in the Mediterranean (Murillo Redondo *et al.* 2005: fig. 2). Furthermore, in Iberia the oxhide shape, as a symbolic element with religious connotations, clearly survives well into the first millennium (e.g. gold ornaments in the El Carambolo treasure, altar bases in Málaga and Tavira).

While credit must certainly go to the authors for drawing attention to these motifs and for giving us food for thought, we are left with some way to go before we can hope to make sense of their appearance in the context of Scandinavian rock art. In the introduction to their paper, Ling and Stos-Gale announce that they will “argue that the production of Bronze Age rock art in Scandinavia was a response to changes in metal trade routes and networks” (p. 192). No such argument is then put forward, however, leaving the reader wondering if this might be because the authors themselves recognise that the evidence currently at hand offers little support for such a sweeping claim.

References

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