

ROCK ART AT THE END OF THE WORLD. ROCK PAINTINGS AND ENGRAVINGS IN NORTHERN SWEDEN. PURE HUNTING MAGIC OR REFLECTIONS OF SHAMANISM?

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Rock Art in Northern Scandinavia is traditionally described as much uniform regarding motifs and cultural setting reflecting the Stone Age hunting cultures of the area dating from the Mesolithic to the Early Iron Age. Gustaf Hallström, who spent almost a lifetime surveying the circumpolar rock art starting in the early years of this century and continuing up till the 60s carried out the pioneer research. Contemporary colleagues like Guttorm Gjessing and in more recent years Evert Baudou, Knut Helskog and Lars Forsberg support the opinion of Hallström. All these researchers argue for the same explanatory model – where the art is the result of hunting magic by the hunters. Their opinion is supported by the numerous depictions of animals such as moose, reindeer and sometimes bear occasionally accompanied by antropomorphs. In general they all apply the diffusionist model to explain the spreading of the habit of making rock art, but turning the direction of diffusion upside-down arguing that it all started in the North spreading southwards. At a first glance there seems to be little reason not to accept all this stuff without discussion, but when you take a closer look you very easily discover that the picture is much more varied and complex. That is, as long as you look at the motifs, or rather the animals represented in paintings and engravings the picture presented seems to hold as long as you look in the areas in the North where you traditionally have found this Rock Art. However, since the overall pattern of distribution has been distorted by new discoveries in the Southwest of Sweden in recent years, it now also encompasses red deer, salmon and boats. The traditional pattern gets even more blurred by the fact that, at least in one instance, moose and red deer is found together in the same painting. Further, since painting and engravings often have parallel distribution, that is in the same area, there is need to rethink old explanations and also to pose the obvious question: “What does that indicate – a difference in technique only, or also a difference in time and cultural background?” I do not claim to have the answer but to me it is obvious that there is a need to take another and deeper look at these interesting paintings and engravings. To me it is also obvious that some important aspects for explaining this Rock Art has been neglected so far, namely its relation to surrounding settlements and its location in the landscape. Both factors might be of vital importance for the explanation. Further, we need to reconsider the motifs, which so far has been described and explained from a very technical standpoint, which seems to present only vague implications for the understanding of this specific type of rock art.

Thus, the purpose of this short overview is to re-examine some of the traditional sites with paintings or engravings of Northern Sweden, compare them with some newly discovered sites in Southwest Sweden and look for some new factors which might indicate a need for a more varied and complex explanation of the rock art of the hunting cultures. Even a quick glance on the data tells us that it is not that uniform as

has been proposed. This is obvious from a number of factors: both paintings and engravings exist in the same areas, although the paintings and engravings are located not very far apart, the mere existence of this two different categories of art must have some implications for their explanation. And further, although the depicted animals might be of the same type, in general moose, some of the paintings like Flatruet – show a wider variety of species and also, like Hästskotjärn, Skärvången, Fångsjön and Tumlehed contains geometric pattern and rather large painted areas forming no pattern at all. Another implication of variation is the fact that although moose depictions are the most common on the engravings, the style and technique may differ a lot even on different panels on the same site like at Ånnsjön and Gärde. The obvious explanation for that would be a chronological variation indicating a difference in dating. Although this subject has been touched upon by some of the scholars mentioned above, their attempt to explain this variation in general ends up in the same way – by trying to push the dating of the engravings made in the technique of a later type, probably of Bronze Age origin, as far back as possible.

Another problem not very frequently dealt with is the fact that some of the newly discovered paintings, of which the majority have not yet been published, might have even more uniform motifs, like the paintings at Sämsjön and Brattforsberget, moose, moose and once again moose. The same is also true of the painting at Trollsjön. This might pose another problem that might require a different explanation based on chronology.

If we leave Norrland and turn our heads to the Southwest, there are now a number of paintings that have been discovered in recent years. In the province of Värmland there are at least five and in Bohuslän at least two. The paintings in Värmland seem to be a mix of the ones in Norrland and in Bohuslän. Regarding the motifs, in one there is one single depiction of a moose, in another one both moose and red deer. We can finally take a look at this painting from Häller – the name of the site referring to the rock of the painting – in Bohuslän where we end up with some boat-depictions, which indicates that like in Norrland there existed some link between the paintings and engravings.

It is not my intention here to analyze or present a new and completely different model of explanation for this kind of rock art. That would require for a long time of research. However, since the location of these paintings in the landscape and engravings have been taken into consideration to a very small extent it might be important to look at that factor. A second factor which is closely related to the first one is that, which we might call the micro-topography. If we first look at the engravings, the majority is located close to rapids in streams or rivers. Someone might say that this further confirms the explanation as being representations of hunting-magic since the moose would visit these places when drinking water. But since it would be dangerous and inconvenient for this big animal, we have to think of with a different explanation. Before we present our solution of that problem we need to take a look also on the engraved panels, which except for this rather extreme position, provide us with the same information as the "normal" engraving. They are all placed on rather normal bedrock panels.

If we make the same kind of analysis of the rock paintings, it becomes obvious that all the paintings are located to bedrocks, which are all sloping inwards. With only two exceptions, the paintings at Flatruet and Sämsjön, all these bedrock panels were sloping directly into the water. At Sämsjön similar conditions might have prevailed when that painting was made. The depth of the water at almost all of the paintings would prevent the animals from drinking there. That indicates that the often argued

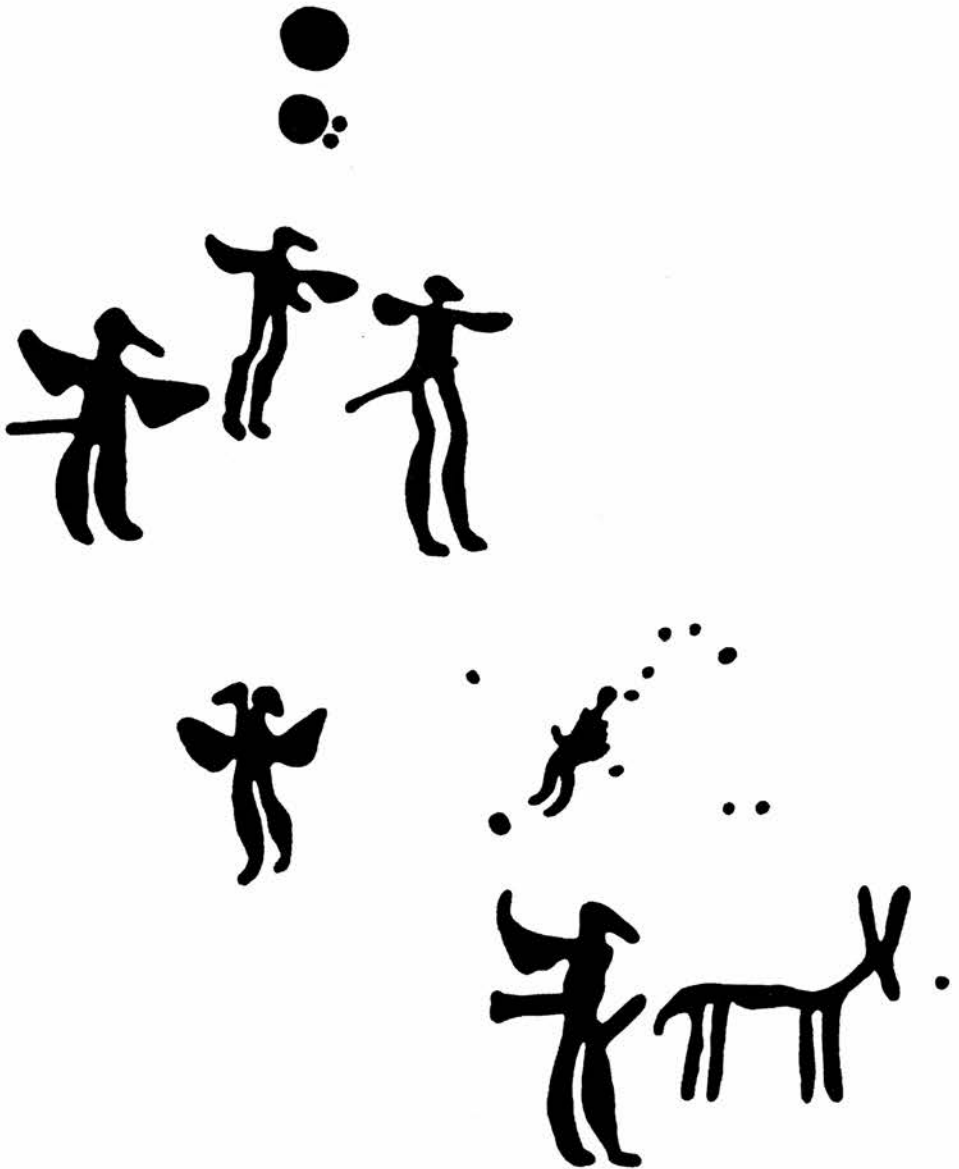


Fig. 36. Kallsängen, Bohuslän, Sweden. Rock engravings of anthropomorphic figures. The figure in the centre of the composition has two heads. The figure below seems to be going to have a sexual intercourse with an animal. (Rilievo di Fredjö da J. Coles, 1990; Archivio WARA W06762).

direct connection with hunting-magic might be weak. And that we ought to look for a different explanation. To me an obvious explanation would be that all these sites have something in common. Something which we have not paid enough attention to so far. That "something" could be the rock and the water. If we also allow us to include the sky we have the three basic elements constituting a micro-cosmos. So the conclusion would be that all the paintings and engravings that we have discussed could be explained by their location. This explanation would in turn indicate that the element of hunting-magic is very small and thus not valid for explanation. Instead the location of the paintings and engravings indicate the need for a different kind of communication between man and nature. A communication that took place in hidden, dangerous and/or sacred places literally located at the end of the World. Recently discovered paintings, with depictions of the same kind of interaction between a man and a moose, as on this engraving from Alta in Northern Norway, further imply a connection with shamanism.

Riassunto

Gustav Hallström e altri ricercatori ritengono che l'arte rupestre della Scandinavia settentrionale sia il risultato della magia della caccia ad opera dei cacciatori e che si sia diffusa da nord verso sud. Tuttavia, le nuove scoperte fatte a sud ovest della Svezia hanno indotto a riconsiderare le teorie precedenti. Si verifica il bisogno di esaminare con molta attenzione alcuni aspetti dell'arte rupestre che finora sono stati trascurati, come la relazione con l'ambiente circostante e la posizione nel paesaggio. Alcuni siti tradizionali della Scandinavia settentrionale con pitture ed incisioni sono stati riesaminati e confrontati con alcuni scoperti a sudovest. La posizione delle pitture e delle incisioni è ritenuta molto importante, in quanto sarebbe indice di un nuovo modo di comunicare tra l'uomo e la natura.

Summary

Gustav Hallström and other researchers think that rock art of Northern Scandinavia is the result of hunting magic made by the hunters and that it has spread from the North to the South. Nevertheless, new discoveries in the Southwest of Sweden have lead to think about and reconsider the old explanations. There is a need to look more deeply at some aspects of the Rock Art which have been neglected so far, such as its relation to surrounding settlements and its location in the landscape. Some of the traditional sites with paintings and engravings of Northern Sweden have been re-examined and compared with some discovered in the Southwest. Much attention is paid to the location of the paintings and engravings, considered important as it would indicate a different kind of communication between man and nature.

Resumé

Gustav Hallström et d'autres chercheurs pensent que l'art rupestre de la Scandinavie du Nord est le resultat de la magie de la chasse et qu'il s'est diffusé à partir du Nord vers le Sud. Mais les nouvelles découvertes dans la Suède du Sud ont conduit à considerer de nouveau les théories précédentes. On a besoin d'examiner avec beaucoup d'attention des aspects de l'art rupestre qui ont été négligés jusqu'à maintenant, comme la relation avec le milieu et la location dans le paysage. Plusieurs sites traditionels de la Scandinavie avec des peintures et des gravures ont été examinés de nouveau et comparés avec ceux découverts au sud-ouest. La position des peintures et des gravures est considerée très importante, puisqu'elle indique une nouvelle façon de communiquer entre l'homme et la nature.