Dekonstructing elks: cervids in North Scandinavian rock art

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Abstract - The author has analyzed petroglyphs and pictographs rendering cervids from a non-stylistic perspective at a number of Arctic rock art sites in northern parts of Norway and Sweden; the focus is not on how the images in question look like but on how they were drawn. Some results from this work are presented here.
Each image is constructed as a set of line segments that are linked together in a certain sequence. Most artists likely started by drawing the animals' head and from there worked his or her way through to the complete image. Some images were drawn as one continuous line forming the outline of the animal. This is, however, not the case for the majority of images, which are constructed as a sequence of separately drawn body segments (each consisting of a number line segments), which together form the animal. Several different design formulas can be identified, of which some are presented here. Dissimilarities are more apparent than similarities; compared with other sites – from near and far – most sites stand out as different from other sites. Local and regional variations are abundant.
This opens up for new ways of understanding the making of and role of zoomorphic images in Arctic rock art; breaking out of the black box of style, which has dominated the thinking of Scandinavian rock art scholars for a century.

Riassunto - L'autore analizza petroglifi e pittogrammi che rappresentano cervidi secondo una prospettiva non stilistica, presso una serie di siti di arte rupestre nell'Artico e in aree del nord della Svezia e della Norvegia: lo studio non si concentra sull'aspetto delle immagini in questione, ma su come esse siano state disegnate. Alcuni risultati di tale ricerca vengono qui presentati.
Ciascuna immagine viene costruita come una serie di segmenti lineari collegati tra di loro secondo una certa sequenza. La maggior parte degli artisti ha probabilmente iniziato con il disegnare la testa dell'animale, per poi proseguire l'opera fino al completamento dell'immagine. Alcune rappresentazioni sono state realizzate sotto forma di una linea continua che costituisce il contorno dell'animale. Tuttavia, ciò non si applica nella maggior parte delle immagini, che invece sono state costruite come una sequenza di segmenti del corpo disegnati separatamente (ognuno dei quali costituito da un certo numero di segmenti di linee), che vanno a comporre insieme la forma dell'animale. È possibile individuare numerose formule stilistiche di vario tipo, alcune delle quali saranno illustrate nell'intervento. Le differenze sono più vistose delle somiglianze; se messi a confronto con altri siti – vicini e lontani – la maggior parte dei siti presenta caratteristiche distintive. Inoltre, variazioni locali e regionali sono abbondanti.
Tali considerazioni aprono la strada a nuovi modi di comprendere la produzione e la funzione delle immagini zoomorfe nell'arte rupestre dell'Artico, superando i limiti dello studio stilistico, che ha dominato le riflessioni degli studiosi di arte rupestre scandinava per un secolo.

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Introduction

At the Valcamonica symposium in Paris 2007 I presented some of my initial work on how cervids were drawn in the North Scandinavian - or Arctic - rock art, exemplified by the record from central Norway, that is, between c. 62° and 66° 30' Northern latitude (Sognnes 2007). In this record, images rendering elk (*Alces alces*) dominate. In the northernmost regions reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) are frequent, while red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) dominate in western Norway. I then had identified three main geometric shapes that seemed to lie behind the construction of many images, focusing on how the trunk was drawn: rectangles, semi-circles, and half crescents. At the same time I could demonstrate that the artists in many cases - based on unfinished drawings - had started their work by drawing head and neck. The size of the head would set the framework for the size of the animal - if the artist wanted to draw an animal with 'correct' proportions.

I further emphasized the similarities between images found on a number of sites in the region. This was exemplified by tracings of images from some of the larger sites. These tracings were meant to show some of the varieties that occur on these sites chosen. They therefore came to demonstrate as many dissimilarities as similarities. Here I touched upon an important problem in archaeology. Classification systems proposed and used depend upon perception and what each scholar is looking for during this process; similarities or dissimilarities.

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I am not here going to discuss this problem further but will present some of my later work, which was inspired by the reactions I received from my Paris presentation. Parts of this work has been presented elsewhere (Sognnes 2010a, b); here I focus on the analytical part of my work

Segments and sequences

I started with analysing a sample of large drawings of cervids, which according to the style sequences identified for this art (Gjessing 1936; Hallström 1938; Simonsen 1974) are said to be 'naturalistic' and 'contoured' representations of these animals. As will be demonstrated, they are in reality drawn in several different ways.

I start with an engraving from Berg in Verdal, Norway. This image no longer is complete due to weathering but it seems reasonable to claim that this contoured image was drawn as one continuous line following the outline of the animal. On this line or curve we can identify a number of break points, which separate different parts of the animal, most significantly the legs from the trunk but between different parts of the legs as well. This implies that the contour or outline of this image consists of a set of line segments being drawn in a certain order -as sequence. To help clarifying my presentation I have marked each break point with a dot surrounded by a circle. In this work, which is based on tracings, I depend on the quality of the tracings. I am not aware that any previous scholars have looked for these points; some of which may remain unnoticed, others - identified by me on the tracings -may actually not exist. These uncertainties represent a methodological weakness, which, however, has little bearing for my conclusions. What matters is that each cervid image was drawn as a sequence of line segments.

On figure 1 these *line segments are* marked from **a** to **n**, starting with the segments forming head (**a**) and ears (**b-c**) followed by the neck (**d** and **g**). From then on the drawing could continue in two directions; one towards the back (**e**) and rump (**f**) and then the hind leg (**j**-**m**). The other direction goes from the neck towards the fore leg (**h**-**i**). The final segment likely would be the belly line (**n**). The marking of eye (**o**) is most uncommon in Arctic rock art. I here actually describe the *sequence* according to which this Berg image might have been drawn. This sequence, of course can be reconstructed differently.

Across the border to Sweden some large elk images are known from Gärde in Krokom in the province of Jämtland (Hallström 1960). One of these images is here presented as figure 2. Head, neck, trunk and legs were drawn in the same way as for the Berg image, with a continuous contour line consisting of a sequence of individual line segments. Together these parts form one *body segment*, in which ears and the elk's 'beard' were not included but were added later. The image, thus, was drawn as a *sequence* of three body segments - one large and two small.

In addition to break points on the contour curve, we on the Gärde image find *meeting points,* where lines belonging to different body segments meet. The animal's mouth is marked by a separate line, which shares a meeting point with the head line segments and having an *end point* inside the muzzle. A line crosses the head. Most likely this line today is incomplete and originally crossed the entire neck. This line today joins the body contour segment behind the ears.

A third example is found at Rykkje in Kvam, province of Hordaland, Norway (Bakka 1966, Mandt Larsen 1972). This image too is large and classified as 'naturalistic'. Bakka's tracing is presented as figure 3. Different line segments identified are labelled in the same way as for the Berg image, from **a** to **t**. The identified break points, meeting points and end points identified on this tracing demonstrates that it represent a much more complex drawing than the two presented previously. Further, we find that the legs are drawn as separate body segments, the fore leg consisting of the segments **l** to **t** and hind leg of the segments **g** to **k**, being added to an original body segment consisting of the line segments marked **a** to **c** forming head, neck, and trunk. The ears, marked **d** and **e**, are drawn as single lines, and this engraving too has a line through the neck.

All tree images presented here normally are described as being naturalistic and contoured. This is because we can draw one continuous line encircling the entire animal. In my opinion, however, this is based on a wrong 'reading' of this image. The neck-and-back line (**b**), for instance, ends as a short single line outside the trunk, making the animal's tail; neither tail nor antler, thus, is contoured. The bellow line (**c**) ends in a meeting point with the line labelled **g**, which clearly is part of the separately drawn hind leg. The front leg was drawn separately too but appears to have been drawn by someone who worked more cursory, being distinctly different from the 'naturalism' of the hind leg. This body segment must have been added after the trunk and the hind were drawn. Thus, I claim that this image is not contoured like the Berg image but constructed as an assembled set - a sequence - of three separate body segments. It seems reasonable to suggest the head-neck-trunk segment was drawn first followed by the hind leg and ended with the drawing of the fore leg.

The Rykkje image clearly was conceived differently from the Berg image. This principle of conceiving and drawing cervids is quite common in Norway, in particular at Vingen in Bremanger, province of Sogn og

Fjordane (Lødøen & Mandt 2012), where they, however, were drawn in a more 'stylized' manner. As will be demonstrated later (figure 4) this manner is frequent in central Norway too but here the images appear to be less 'stylized'.

From deconstruction to construction

What I am doing here is actually a kind of deconstruction of images. Starting with the complete images I identify line segments and body segments. I remove each body segment in turn, treating the images in a way that metaphorically may be seen as a kind of archaeological excavation. Starting with the later segment I work backwards into the earlier strata, until what must be the initial body segment is identified.

I have here deconstructed three rock engravings based on tracings made by experienced scholars. They all have been stylistically classified as contoured, 'naturalistic' images. For the Gärde and Rykkje images I question whether these images are fully contoured. For this study, however, the Rykkje image is of greater interest, since it was constructed as three body segments drawn separately. It is less 'naturalistic' than the two other images but is - at the same time -the most complex of these drawings, which is illustrated by the many encircled dots. In reality, this image represents the vast majority of North Scandinavian zoomorphic rock engravings; they were drawn as a sequence of body and line segments. For most images head and neck are parts of the initial bodysegment.

Based on similar deconstructions we can - with various degrees of certainty - reconstruct the drawing sequence according to which a specific image was drawn. I have done this for images from many sites (Soggnes 2010) and present a small sample of this work here. For the Berg image the initial body segment is identical with the complete image, while the Glösa image had its ear and beard were drawn separately. These parts may have been added at any time during the drawing process. This frequently holds true for antlers too. For the Rykkje image, the initial body segment shows a remarkable similarity with a special type of slate knives that are common at the northern coasts of Norway and Sweden. In this case a short part of the knife's 'edge' only is missing - between the front line of the hind leg and the tale. Head and neck form the shaft part of this 'knife'. Further, if we turn these knives upside down, we find that the contour resembles the contour of a whale, which is a frequent motif in the Arctic rock art, especially in central Norway (Sognnes 2008).

Two major classes of initial body segments have been identified in central Norway. The images were either drawn with contoured head and neck combined with the back line. Frequently the belly line is included in this body segment too. The second class consists of images with one-lined trunk, neck, and head. Here I focus on the first class. Figure 4 shows five deconstructed images from sites at Evenhus in Frosta (A-B), Bogge in Nesset (C-D), and Hammer in Steinkjer (E), were, in principle, the same procedure was used for drawing many of the images known. The comparisons between these images are made easier by letting them all face the same direction. The drawing sequences are presented as five steps, of which all are not always present.

Step 1 represents the initial body segments, step 2 antler and/or ears. Figure 4A has contoured ears; the others have ears drawn with single lines. This figure indicates, too, that the hind leg was the first leg to be drawn; therefore the drawing of the hind leg is identified as stage 3 and, the front leg as stage 4. For all five images the front leg appears to have been drawn as a separate body segment superimposed on the initial segment. Stage 5 is represented by lines inside the body, which is represented on figure 4B. Most initial body segments contain back, neck, head and belly lines. For figure 4D, however, the belly line meets with the back line at the rump. This image has scooped out head and upper part of the front leg. Scooped out animals and, parts of animals, are most uncommon in this part of Norway.

The initial segment of figure 4B is designed very much like the initial Rykkje segment, resembling an (incomplete) whale-shaped slate knife with animal head in the shaft end. The initial segment of figure 4D may be seen as a more complete, but less distinct, version of the same. For images 4C and 4D, the two parallel lines of the hind leg are placed behind the trunk. This trait is rare in central Norway but dominates at the large Vingen site in western Norway (cf. Lødøen and Mandt 2012).

Going south

Some rock engravings aparently looking similar to many North Scandinvaian ones are found in Valcamonica at Luine near Darfo-Boario Terme. I have looked closer at one of these engravings (figure 5) based on tracings published by Anati (e.g. 1974, 1976). This image is quite large (140 cm long). It is classified as sub-naturalistic, representing a proto-camunian phase, which is dated to the epi-Palaeolithic (Anati 1974, 71) or Mesolithic, which is the term used in northern Europe. This image is more difficult to deconstruct than its North Scandinavian counterparts because the lines are discontinuous, and, arguably, some attempts to adjust parts of the image can be identified, for instance for the rump. Yet, at a first glance we find that it resembles the

large 'sub-naturalistic' images of the north but not with the supposed earlier phase as has been suggested (Anati 1974, 72-73). It even has a vertical line going through the neck, which occurs in the north too (cf. figures 2 and 3). This line may, however, be a later addition (Anati 1976, 55).

Looking closer, we find that this Valcamonica image is drawn as a sequence of three body segments: one comprising head, neck and trunk, the two others respresenting the hind and fore leg respectively. The number of line segments included in the larger body segment is difficult to decide. Break points may be foud on the back of the head, at the transition from neck to breats and at the lower part of the rump. A meeting point may be dientified at the root of the tail. To this head-neck-trunk segment the 'naturalistic' legs were added.

Compared with the Norwegian examples presented above, we thus may divide the drawing process for the Valcamonica image into three stages. We find that the drawing of this image to a large extent follows the same rule that was followed in the north; the animal being drawn as a sequence of separately drawn body segments. Along the Norwegian coast images drawn like this appear to have been made during the Neolithic.

Conclusions

The North Scandinavian rock art mostly has been classified and studied from a stylistic-chronological perspective. This is only one out of many perspectives from which this art can - and should be - studied. A major problem with the style sequence created by Gjessing (1936), Hallström (1938), Shetelig (1922), and Simonsen (1974), is that their styles are vague and imprecise descriptions, built on general impressions of a record that was much smaller than the record known today. Little notion was taken of the many variations that actually do exist. Few in-depth studies have been conducted. The style sequence has been treated as a black box, the re-opening of which, with some exceptions (e.g. Helskog 1989, Mikkelsen 1977), has been ignored by later generations of scholars.

My recent work is an attempt to open this black box; I cannot yet tell what will pop out of it, but I know something - a small part of which is presented here. I have identified some classes of images, which do not correspond with the acclaimed styles. Figure 4 shows the deconstruction of some images from one of these classes only. This class seems to be the most wide-spread one, but some distinct regional variations exist. Further, variations can be identified even at site and panel level. Similarities claimed to exist, for instance, between Glösa in Sweden and the two Norwegian sites at Evenhus and Bogge (Hallström 1960, 76) I found not to exist (with a few exceptions only).

I have found it difficult to study the North Scandinavian or Arctic rock art based on styles as classificatory and analytical entities; too many regional and local varieties exist. My investigations have revealed far more dissimilarities than similarities. At the same time I have found that these variations are not due to temporal variations. Most of this rock art is located in the coastal zone that were strongly influenced by the still ingoing Holocene land upheaval, which provides *maximum* dates for rock art sites located within this zone. These dates indicate that the rock-art making (at least in my study area) may have started in the Late Mesolithic, but the majority most likely was made during the Neolithic. Thus, a short rather than a long chronology seems more relevant for this rock art; I find it difficult to further see this rock art as expressing a temporal stylistic development. Debating types, style, and chronology like we have done so far, to me seems futile. Our perspective should be synchronic rather than diachronic.

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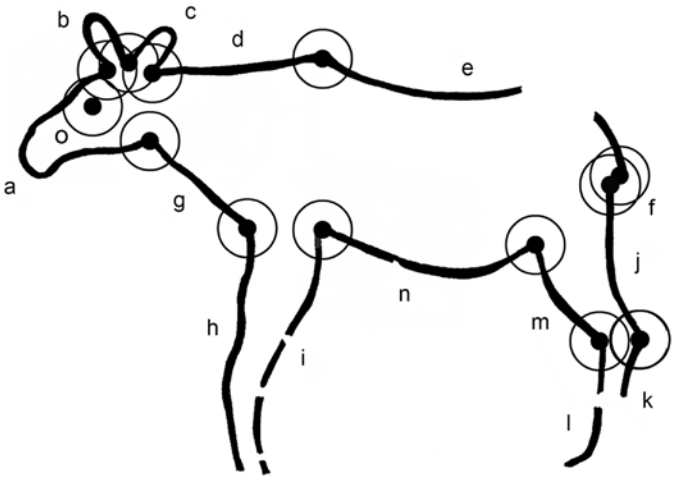

Figure 1. Tracing of elk image from Berg in Verdal, Nord-Trøndelag, Norway. Original by E. Bakka.

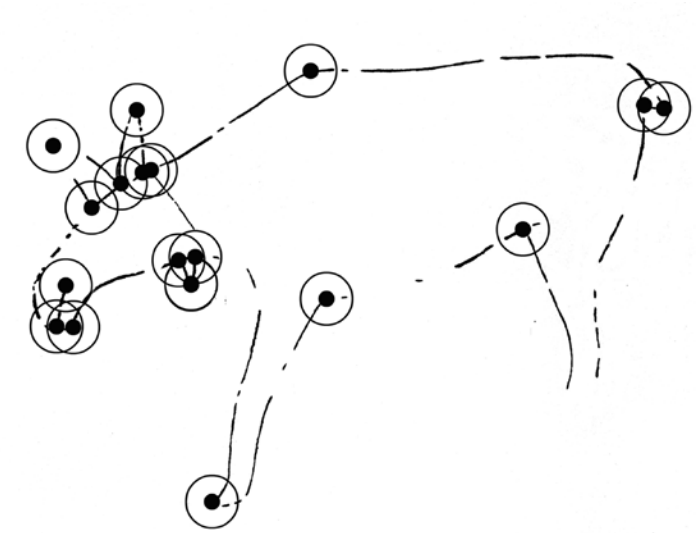

Figure 2. Tracing of elk image from Gärde in Krokom, Jämtland, Sweden. Original after Hallström 1960.

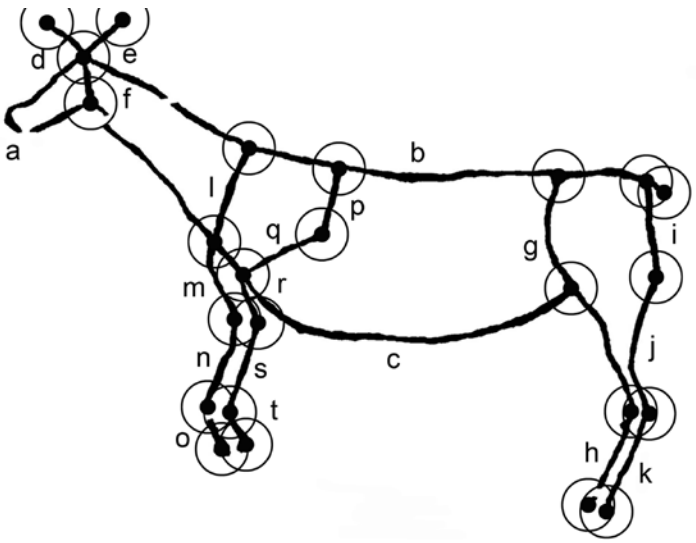

Figure 3. Tracing of deer image from Rykkje in Kvam, Hordaland, Norway. Original after Bakka 1966.

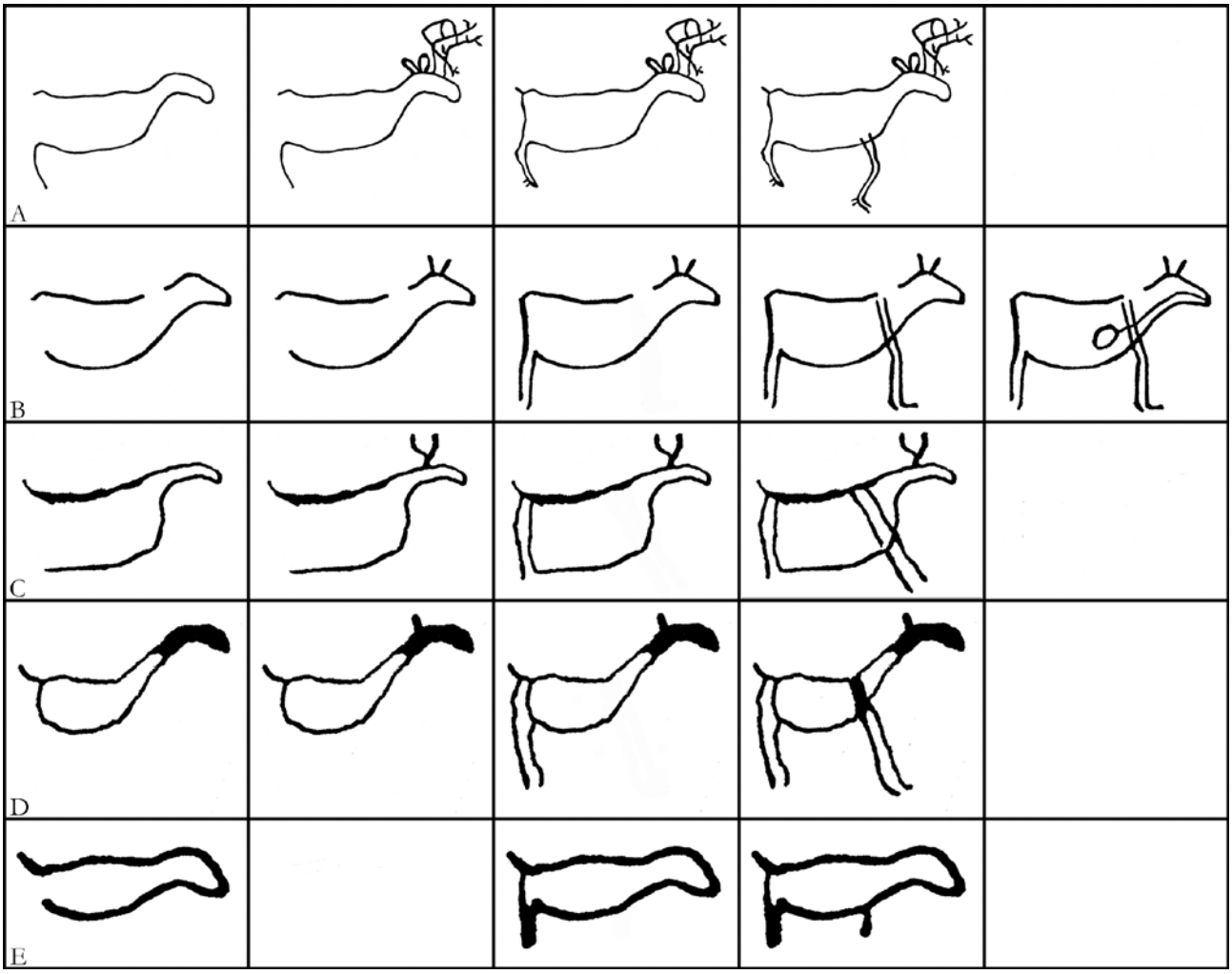

Fig 4. Deconstructed elk images from Bogge, Nesset, Møre og Romsdal, Evenhus in Frosta and Hammer in Steinkjer, both Nord-Trøndelag. Originals from Gjessing 1936 and Bakka 1988.

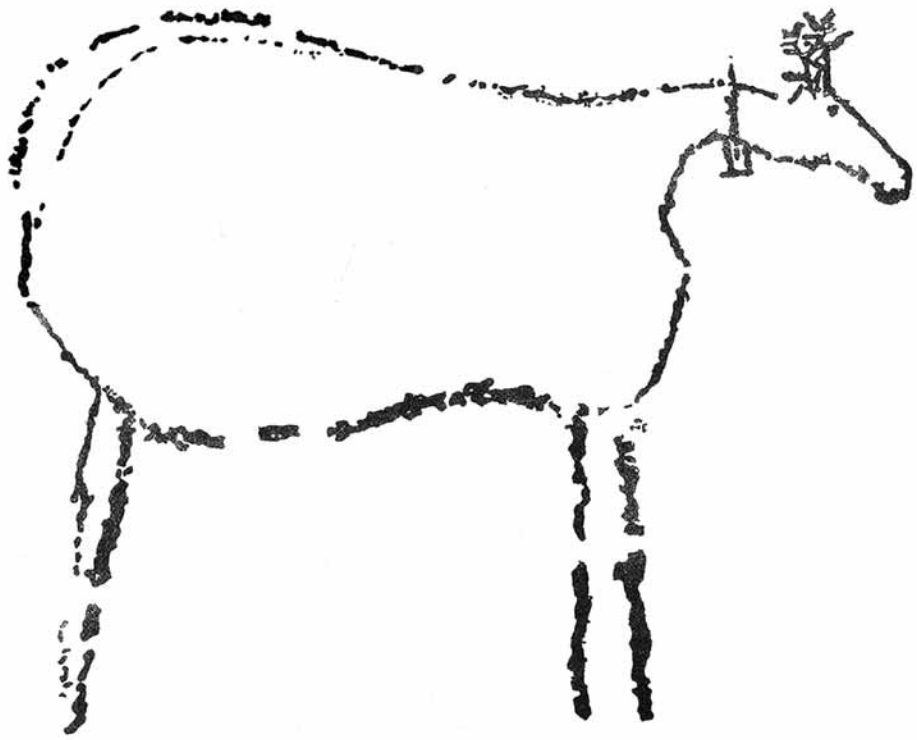

Figure 5. Tracing of elk image from Luine near Boario-Terme, Brescia, Italy. Original after Anati 1982.