

A conflict of opinions Rock carvings in Sweden 2003

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The rock carvings of Sweden continue to suffer through various forms of pollution, although some action has been taken in the past decade. Current approaches to research and to public access pose new problems, and offer new opportunities.

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I thank the editors of *JONAS* for their request to me to set down my observations on the general condition of the Swedish rock carvings and the current threats to them. It may well be felt that I am least well-placed to make such comments, and that there are others who are better able to set out informed opinions on these matters, but I welcome the opportunity to air my personal thoughts. My credentials are few, but here they are. Since the mid-1970s I have been viewing the carved surfaces in Sweden, Norway and Denmark with the hope of gaining some general illumination about the Nordic Bronze Age, and thereby the better to inform my students whose appetite for bronzes and burial mounds has often been limited. In the 1970s and 1980s I visited all of the major rock carving areas of southern Scandinavia – from Trondheim to Bornholm – several times, and certain particular areas – Skåne, Uppland and Bohuslän – many times.

In 1992 I was invited to set down my thoughts about the condition of the rock carving sites that I knew well and had observed over a number of years. My paper, “The Dying Rocks” (Coles 1992), was not the first to bring to attention the concerns about the state of the sites, but it was on an early list (see Strömer 1997 for an overview). From 1992 the number of reports outlining the concerns of various authorities grew year by year. In 2000 there appeared a full report on a Rock Care project which had been established in 1998 to examine and assess the condition of sites in Østfold and Bohuslän. This project brought together a number of specialists whose task was to try to deduce and explain what was happening to sites and why they seemed to be degrading with alarming rapidity. The

report (Kallhovd & Magnusson 2000) is a fair statement of the conditions and provides an opinion about the need for action and proposals for emergency and experimental treatments. As such, it is to be applauded, although to this reviewer it has some of the hallmarks of a committee-driven enterprise which feeds upon itself and in a way perpetuates its existence even if formally concluded. But there are many useful thoughts in the report, about the need for documentation and about the presumptive causes of the decay. A good deal of mechanical and chemical weathering, and biological activity, has been identified as contributing to the minor and more often severe degradation of sites. The factors involved are seen to be complex and interacting – exposure, slope, water, air, salt, temperature, vegetation, agricultural, industrial and touristic activities, and doubtless more.

There have been some protective measures put into place in Bohuslän in particular. Soil cover, breathable textile covers, roofing, diversion of water flows and doubtless others have been applied to a number of sites. It is, of course, far too early to know if any have succeeded in slowing or halting the processes of decay. We need 25 or 50 years to know how successful, or how impotent, the measures have been.

All of this work has been done by a battery of specialists and there exist today many very interesting rock carving sites blocked from view, withdrawn from circulation, closed to both public and academic interests. So be it, and no one can complain that nothing is being done. But this is not what I was asked to comment upon, and a short and critical review of the project appears in the journal *Conservation and Man-*



Figure 1. Häljesta, Västmanland. One of the panels of carvings, recently painted and already obscured by seepage from the farm buildings just above the exposed rock. Photo John Coles 2002.

agement of Archaeological Sites (2003). Instead, a view from the “rockface” is invited, a personal commentary on how I see matters today. Things have moved on since 1992 and a decade of assessment is possible. In 2002–2003 visits were made to Skåne, Östergötland, Uppland, Västergötland, Dalsland and Bohuslän, and to Østfold. The other main regions remain unassessed by my own particular and doubtless idiosyncratic approach. In brief, I noticed a good deal of neglect and abandonment, some over-zealous cleaning of sites prior to painting, some new painting of images for public viewing, some vandalism, and some new signage for educational purposes. Before commenting on these and other general matters, I will summarize what I experienced in a few of the areas visited. These visits had specific aims, in recording sites of special interest, and were not designed to document degradation and its processes – but it was impossible to disregard these things.

The site of Häljesta in Västmanland has suffered over the past 10 years from excessive growth of lichens, irregular painting of the images and noxious farm effluent flowing down parts of the rock (Fig. 1). The

carvings are rather shallow and the rock appears to me to be eroding, the images thereby becoming less evident (Coles 2001). Few visitors come to see the carvings, and those that do must surely be dismayed by what they see.

In south-west Uppland I spent some months recording a number of carving sites in preparation for a book (Coles 2000). A large majority of the 300 or so sites visited over the past seven years are now no longer visible, having been abandoned, and are now covered by moss, earth and grasses growing in the cracks. This may well be some sort of solution for the sites, but grass and moss can enlarge cracks. However, there are a few sites that are occasionally painted so that the visitor can see the images better. The best-known of these is Rickeby (Boglösa 138), where the carved images had been heavily scrubbed prior to painting (Fig. 2). In 2002 this paint was already flaking off, and some of it smeared if touched. The effect is not at all pleasing, and the grey patina of the surface is broken by the scrubbed areas. Worse than this is the adjacent Boglösa 141, a fine site with many carvings, just beside a gravel road and an abandoned house. The traffic, by car and



Figure 2. Rickeby, Uppland. Several carvings painted after severe scrubbing of the rock. Photo John Coles 2002.

agricultural vehicle, quite clearly passes occasionally over part of the surface, and gravel is thrown up onto the rock. The carvings have been severely affected. At another site, in Grillby, half of the carved surface is flooded by general runoff waters and the owner was in some quandary about how to protect what he clearly thought was important. The area around Enköping has very well-known sites, like these, and yet there seems to be little or no effort being made to monitor decay, or to present any sites other than a very few, where the efforts to illuminate the carvings have affected the rock surfaces.

Another region in Sweden where I have spent a good deal of time observing and recording rock carvings is north-east Östergötland, where there are many fine sites within a concentrated area (Burenhult 1973). Most of the smaller sites are now obscured by vegetation and farming debris. Of the large sites, Ekenberg has been scrubbed prior to painting, and the red paint has flaked off in larger sheets here and there, and much has faded. There are significantly different growths of lichen on the various panels, which may signify some differential cleaning. The nearby site of Leonardsberg,

on a steeper rock, has retained its paint. Himmelstalund, within the limits of Norrköping itself, is now a mixture of new and old paint, and many panels are unpainted. A public path, of gravel, runs over the great rock, and motorbikes (?illegal) scurry past, throwing gravel over some carvings; it would seem an easy solution to move the path off the rock. These three sites are the jewels in the panoply of rock carvings here, and the other complexes such as Borg, Skälv and Herrebro have suffered hugely through the various bewildering (to me) roadways laid down on and through the rocky ridges to the north-west of the city (Fig. 3). The many separate panels of these sites have been truncated, isolated and violated physically, audibly, visually and emotionally. They are a sad reflection of a once-significant complex of Bronze Age imagery. The local authorities are very much under-staffed for heritage monitoring and protection, and no criticism of the miniscule staff is implied by any of the above.

When we come to Bohuslän we enter a different world, with an enormous number of sites, World Heritage status, a dedicated museum at Vitlycke, and an organisation designed to welcome and instruct the



Figure 3. Herrebro, Östergötland. A ridge of rock with many carvings. The ridge has been truncated by the motorway, and although the carvings survive, their context has been seriously damaged. Photo John Coles 2002.

visitor and to undertake research into rock carvings and their surroundings (Hygen & Bengtsson 2000). The advantages of such an approach and attitude will be noted below. But the exposed sites continue to suffer along the lines noted in 1992, and the purpose of the Rock Care project, noted above, was to assess the problems and devise solutions. A few examples of the continuing problems may be sufficient to expose my concerns.

A number of well-known sites are now covered, including most of the panels at Kalleby, several Tegneby sites, Björneröd and most of the panels at Aspeberget (Fig. 4), and as several of these covered sites are on everybody's lists of places to visit, guidebooks are out-of-date and disappointingly so. Lichen now covers and masks some sites, at Finntorp and Stora Hoghem, for example, and this factor cannot be other than a natural process reflecting atmospheric conditions, hence mostly outwitting our local abilities to counter it. Scratches on the rock surface at Finntorp are probably due to careless operation of machinery, rather than vandalism. More serious scratching at Hjälmsberg on a panel engulfed by commercial development is inde-

fensible (Fig. 5). Some surfaces appear to me to have deteriorated in the past decade, such as those at the Rished sites in Askum. The most serious degradation I have ever seen is at Trättelanda, where a near-vertical rock face has a number of fine, large carvings. Part of one carving has been scrubbed clean of moss, and crumbs and flakes of stone from it and the still moss-clad remainder are falling from the surface. Consolidation is urgently needed. The authorities should insist to all that no surface on any site may be brushed hard, and only leaves, twigs and ants may be removed, not moss and certainly not lichen. We have moved a considerable distance from the recommended practice of exposing a rock surface by the application of caustic soda and other noxious chemicals, to kill all vegetation and doubtless animal life in the soils. The effects of such action, carried out, I believe, as late as the mid-1970s, are still all-too-apparent on certain sites. Perhaps some more positive recognition and listing of sites where damage was thereby incurred could be provided for the archive of sites.

At present, there is a good deal of interest in rock carvings as repositories of information about the past,



Figure 4. Asperberget, Bohuslän. View of the great panel of carvings, covered over in recent years but exposed in 2003. The previous flow of water over the carved boats and other images has been diverted. Photo John Coles 2003.

as much for social and political enquiries as for symbolism and simple imagery. If we seek to extract the most delicate and fragile evidence from the carved surfaces, it would seem logical to protect them from modern intrusions. A number of sites in Bohuslän, Östergötland, Dalsland and Uppland are regularly enhanced for the public by painting the carvings, formerly with a hard-wearing and penetrating resin-based red, now mostly a more ephemeral and less invasive water-based red (Fig. 6). The latter requires renewal more often, however. Both block the carved surfaces from detailed examination, both distort or destroy the chances of dating or performing any other analysis on the actual surfaces exposed by the act of carving. Both tend to obscure the clarity, often available, of overlapping images, and thus a relative chronology. There is little that is more illuminating than carved images made more dramatic by rain or heavy dew or natural water flows over the rocks, and painting diminishes the impact. I accept that a few, a very few, sites may need to be enhanced in some way to allow the public to see the images, but most people, I expect, would accept a full plan of most sites to be displayed beside the rock

surfaces, and then try to decipher the images that interest them in particular. At the moment the painted images have the appearance of being uniformly carved and rather flat.

In Bohuslän, but I think not elsewhere, there is a concerted effort being made to discover every rock carving in selected parishes – Askum and Tossene being the most recently surveyed. This involves the clearing and cleaning of potential rock carving surfaces, using experienced local knowledge of the terrain and Bronze Age proclivities. Once discovered, the sites are fully cleaned, inspected under oblique lighting, sometimes by rubbing, and then chalked with rain-resistant material, traced at 1/1 and archived in the Vitlycke Museum. There are, in my opinion, two difficulties with this. The first is whether all possible sites should be exposed to 21st century conditions of air, rain and temperature, even if only for a week or so, as some contamination must occur. The possibility of dating, or environmental analysis, of carved surfaces as compared with uncarved surfaces, must surely be affected by chalking and the other methods of exposure and recording. On a wider perspective, would we accept the



Figure 5. Hjälmberg, Bohuslän. An extension of a shopping complex just south of the Norwegian border has destroyed the Bronze Age landscape features. Bo Gräslund stands by the rock carving site which has been scratched by machine blades. The site lies, or lay, at the extreme end of the proposed complex and could have been protected and preserved without damage. Photo John Coles 2003.

exploration of every burial mound or flat grave in a region by full or partial excavation, followed by covering it up again? Is this not, in effect, the equivalent of the rock carving surveys and exposures? It may well not be considered a valid comparison, but it does make the point that some things that have survived under the ground for 3000 years may well survive another century or so if left alone (before the world comes to an end, as it seems to be doing). Should we expose every possible site, in order to make as full a record as possible of the phenomenon of rock carvings? Perhaps, but in selected areas only, and not in a wholesale manner. This is doubtless a debatable issue.

The second problem is less widespread but more important in the longer term, I think. For some years now there have been sporadic efforts to explore particular sites in greater detail, by excavating the soils at the base of the sloping rocks. Some of the work has been small-scale and rather uninformative, but other work has been more ambitious and thereby has made a more assured contribution. It has for long been suspected that various events may have taken place at the

foot of the carvings, whether ceremonial or more practical. Stone paving, traces of burning and deposits of broken stone or pottery suggest performances of some kind, perhaps seasonal or particular to one event only. It will be obvious that excavating for such traces is a one-off event, a never-to-be-repeated exercise. Carved images can be recorded again and again, but the fragile deposits at the base of the rock are uniquely available to us, only the once. These deposits require the most particular and delicate care. Contamination must be avoided, yet for years on some explored sites, and almost without exception at least once on newly-found sites, the deposits have been infiltrated by the downwash of paint and the downwash of chalk, precisely those elements that every other excavating archaeologist at any site would want to prevent from getting into the deposits to be analysed. I do not know how the chemistry of the thin, fragile deposits will be affected by such intrusions, but no good can come of it.

Whether we work in Bohuslän or Uppland, or almost anywhere else for that matter, it will be apparent that the landscapes have changed dramatically in the



Figure 6. Åby, Tossene. A large and well-visited site, newly-painted. Photo John Coles 2002.

past decades. Woodland now grasps vast areas of rocky land that were clear of trees when the rock carvings were made (we think) and when the sites were discovered in the years 1935–1965. A glance at the photos taken by Åke Fredsjö in Bohuslän (Fredsjö 1970) shows the open country that once existed when farming was more actively and widely in operation. Viewpoints have been lost and sites obscured in the past 10 years or so, and many are now, I think, no longer easily found, and certainly no longer easily visible once located. This may be no bad thing, and nature can take its course of blanketing the rocks, and protecting the sites.

Before summing up my observations and concerns, it may perhaps be worth adding a comment on the sharing of information. The existence of a freedom of information tradition in Sweden makes the task of research much easier than in other countries, where tangled webs constrict and confine the student. In the two main areas where I have recently worked, Bohuslän and Uppland, there has been a contrast in both the public and private sharing of documentation. In each area, the work of discovery was carried out by a dedi-

cated amateur. In Bohuslän, the written archive was supplemented with accurate plans and other information. This was made available to the Vitlycke Museum both before and after the death of the person. It is an invaluable resource. In Uppland the written archive had photographs to amplify the record but no plans, I think. As far as I am aware, none of this was made available to research workers, who thereafter had to locate and plan sites without guidance. I do not know if this particular archive of photographs is now available, the originator being now deceased. As I benefited from the one and was handicapped by the other, I am doubtless biased in these comments, and there is of course a difference between public and private information and its availability to third parties.

In early 2003, as I write this, we seem to be faced with a variety of choices. Should we attempt to discover all the rock carving sites, and then cover them up again? Should we continue to paint selected sites, time and again, for the public to see them better and understand them less well? Should we continue to scrub the images prior to painting, and cleanse them of

all natural growth? Should we bury many sites with soil or textiles (after recording them), with possible assessment in 2050? What kinds of information should the public be given, or indeed, do we think we are in a position to give anyone any information? Should we continue to excavate at the base of sites, seeking for new data, and if so, should we avoid all possible sources of contamination? To this last question I would say an emphatic yes, to both aspects. We have laboured long with a rather limited and limiting array of evidence, the carvings and their wider landscapes. The opportunity to come to grips with the immediate environs of the sites, and to seek the other practices and activities that went on, upon and beside the images, is a major advance in the study of the societies concerned.

There are other questions that could be presented here, but what has already been said will, I hope, ex-

plain the title of this paper – a conflict of opinions. In 1992 my essay was called “The Dying Rocks”; a subtitle now, in 2003, might well have been “Still Dying, but not Dead”.

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