

MASTERS OF WATER AND STONE

Exploring the social role of rock art carvers in
Nordic Bronze Age societies

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ABSTRACT

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For over two centuries, Nordic Bronze Age rock art (ca. 1700–500 BC) has been central to debates on religion, mythology, ideology, warfare, and economy in prehistoric Scandinavia. While the carvings have undeniably shaped our interpretation of the period, far less attention has been given to the carvers themselves. Consequently, our understanding of how these individuals acquired, performed, and transmitted their social role remains limited. These three questions form the core of this dissertation. Through their examination, the study offers new insights into the relationship between social organization and rock art, emphasizing that carvers cannot be separated from the social context of their time.

The dissertation approaches the topic by integrating social theory with digital technologies. It begins by drawing on role theory and the epistemological framework of behavioral archaeology to conceptualize how roles operate within chiefdom-like societies and how these roles can be inferred from the archaeological record. These theoretical models are then linked to the carvings through a quantitative analysis of four dimensions of variability: formal, spatial, quantitative, and associational. These analyses are supported by high-resolution 3D documentation of panels at Aspeberget (Tanum), legacy data from Bohuslän, and the application of univariate, bivariate, and multivariate statistical methods to identify patterns in the data.

The results suggest that rock art in Bohuslän developed gradually and was deeply conservative because it was rooted in ancestral norms and traditions. These traditions influenced both the type of figures depicted and the placement of carvings in the landscape, typically near water and always on rocks with favorable geological properties. Such locations appear to have served at least two distinct purposes. Small panels spread across the region were likely associated with rituals surrounding the construction and launching of boats. Large and complex panels, in contrast, may have been created during maritime aggregation events that brought together people from different parts of Bohuslän or even wider Scandinavia. These gatherings promoted mobility and interaction among carvers, fostering a consistent regional rock art style. Carvers appear to have gained the knowledge needed to perform in these social settings by taking part in apprenticeship systems under the supervision of experienced peers. While these systems allowed the carvers to develop sophisticated technical skills, they also limited their individual creativity, reinforcing the conservative nature of the tradition.

Taken together, these findings suggest that rock art production in Bohuslän was overseen by master carvers operating within ritual sodalities that formed political networks on a Scandinavian scale. These individuals likely controlled both the technical and ritual knowledge associated with carving and its transmission to future generations. Therefore, in mediating between the secular and ritual spheres of their communities, carvers were not only able to use the figures as a medium for symbolic expression or interaction with the supernatural but also as a tool for exerting political influence within their societies.

Keywords: Rock art, Carvers, Role, Nordic Bronze Age, Aspeberget, Digital Technologies, Political economy, Master, Ritual sodalities