

Johan Ling, *Elevated Rock Art: Towards a Maritime Understanding of Rock Art in Northern Bohuslän, Sweden* (GOTARC Serie B. Gothenburg Archaeological Thesis 49, 2008, 271 pp., illustrations, 3 appendices, CD, ISBN 978-91-85245-34-8)

This book deals with the rock art of Bohuslän, a region in southwestern Sweden in which Johan Ling demonstrates that rock art was closely linked to the sea, geographically and iconographically, during the Bronze Age. This connection, apparently found throughout Scandinavia (p. 44), has been acknowledged at some points during the history of research, and neglected most of the time by what Ling calls the terrestrial paradigm (see the clever Chapter 4 where he explains every twist and turn of the perceptions of rock art in relation to land and sea). Now Ling, with his PhD dissertation, has simply solved the question. But he also puts forward really relevant matters in archaeological research. I will therefore briefly deal with formal

questions in order to move on to those important matters.

The book is more than perfectly edited in English, with an abstract, a clearly structured text, an exhaustive summary, beautiful pictures, and well-worked illustrations. Some minor problems, such as typos (more than the errata list acknowledges, but nothing really bothering), a somewhat difficult to read figure (p. 64, figure 7.4 – no red dots are visible), and minor English slips, do not blur this perfection. More of a problem is what I will take as a formal fault with my best good will: the use of ‘man’ (p. 29, p. 231 – twice) instead of ‘human’; the author actually seems to assume that ‘sea-going men’ (p. 255) are the main actors in his

dissertation (although sometimes he seems to doubt, p. 236, 'men [women?]'). This stance should have been justified or avoided, specially since this work is theoretically sophisticated, as Ling has a critical and informed position.

He recounts clearly his influences and the theoretical possibilities at our reach (Chapters 3 and 9) when dealing with rock art. And it is not very often that Marx and Marxism are brought into the picture in rock art research; in effect, Ling has a consistent materialistic approach and he emphasizes it by linking ideology and rock art in a problematized way ('rock art was mainly a social articulation, but not a direct description of social matters, values and relations; it's rather a twisted and distorted depiction of a social world'; 'Some producers may have created alternative or contrary ideas about the structural elements of society', p. 178; rock art 'does not seem to depict any fixed and perfect cosmological order; it displays more innovative and active actions and contradictory normative elements', p. 168), rebelling against passive notions of (Bronze Age) people (p. 220). Most importantly, Ling rejects the very simplistic notion that rock art is a product of religious activities, which is really refreshing, as 'new' trends in rock art research are trying to strengthen this connection (Jones 2003; Whitley 2001; Whitley and Keyser 2003; cf. Cruz Berrocal 2011).

Ling also insists on the 'pragmatic perception' of the landscape that Bronze Age people would have had, as opposed to what has become mainstream 'symbolic' and 'cognitive' visions. I would probably have preferred a straight 'economic and social perception', but I like Ling's use of the 'pragmatic perception' because it allows him to skip 'economic or mythological models or generalisations' (p. 246). And, in fact, his is a good materialistic approach: he does not try to create an all-

fitting big scheme; rather, he thoroughly works his material in a locally-oriented research, using 'archaeological, geological or botanical facts' (p. 246), building up from the local to the regional scale, and warning against extrapolation. He deals with real landscapes and how those landscapes were built, using rock art among other strategies. He works with specific panels and specific rates of shore displacement. The book makes clear that rock art is a major source of information about *this* landscape, which is an excellent methodological accomplishment. Even if its scale and location make rock art a first-rate parameter in order to understand social territories (Cruz Berrocal and Vicent García 2007), it is generally neglected. Moreover, the treatment of rock art within archaeology is a reflection of the treatment of archaeological remains in the understanding of the history of a landscape in the wider scientific scenario. Ling regrets that archaeologists are grappling with textual and philosophical problems (p. 11) while archaeology as a discipline is missing the opportunity to contribute to this topic. I agree with him; European continental archaeology has not developed as strong a tradition of approaches in this sense as American archaeology (environmental archaeology, cultural ecology, human ecology, historical ecology, human ecodynamics, archaeology of socionatural systems, etc.) and in my opinion there is a lack of awareness of the potential of archaeology, that should be on equal terms with disciplines such as geography or geology because it is uniquely situated to study socioecosystems.

Ling discusses the variations in sea level and the processes of sedimentation due to agricultural activity (Chapter 6) that totally changed the landscape as Bronze Age people knew it. And his work clearly delineates an 'alternative

"archaeological" shoreline, based on rock art sites but also on radiocarbon dates from archaeological sites dated from the [Bronze Age] to the Iron Age' (p. 51). In his reasoning, rock art works as independent evidence, first because of its distribution and second because of the relative chronology provided by the correspondence between certain ship depictions and their altitudes. One can almost trace back the shoreline mentally. Since chronology (or lack thereof) is a central issue in rock art research, it is nice to encounter a study of how a comparative chronology (in this case, ships) relates to shoreline dating (p. 84), with warnings against the creation of spurious generalizing chronologies, neat premises, and synthetic exposition of the evidence (pp. 102–103).

Occasionally Ling is difficult to follow, as when he refers to his study areas (Bohuslän and Tanum; the first useful map where Bohuslän appears is on p. 35; figuring out Tanum in a reasonable time requires a Google Earth search), zooming in and out, and sometimes using them interchangeably. When he works through his data on Tanum, he states that,

'a majority of the rock art in northern Bohuslän seems to have been sited close to the contemporary [Bronze Age] shore. About 70 per cent of the rock art sites in the World Heritage area of Tanum have low locations near to what in the BA were shallow bays, estuaries and inlets. However, this statement needs to be further developed. As it was not possible to make a detailed map of each and every site or locality in question, I have sampled some of those that are most relevant for the present purpose' (p. 107).

Maybe a random sampling within an East-West transect (based for instance on figure 8.3, p. 110) would have made his criteria clearer – an issue that appears again

as Ling deals with the location of rock art on higher ground, at natural vantage points or close to passages and old roads (p. 236). The reader is not able to evaluate the significance of these relations, or the contrast between the rock art at higher ground and rock art by the shore. Patterns, a fundamental topic in rock art studies and in this book, become difficult to *visualize*; a systematic device to show them would have made things easier.

These and other possible observations do not diminish the value of this book. It deals with a number of important topics (understanding landscape variability; opening alternative paradigms of sea-oriented human habitability; social inequality, elites and 'commoners'; social continuity versus rupture; public versus private use; social geography; symbolism; or even technical information that can be extracted from rock art). There is little speculative guessing or proposing, it reaches a very concrete and palpable conclusion, and it recreates a past landscape in our minds. We definitely need more work along these lines, to 'elevate' the status of rock art in the ranking of archaeological evidence. And, since I could not find an explanation for the motto 'Elevated rock art' in the book (at first sight a contradictory statement in a book that shows that approximately 70 per cent of the rock art sites in the area are at low locations), I will offer my own: it is a sign of the structural ambiguity underlying the book – the rock art is in low places but vertically high over the (former) sea; not only that, but the rock art is located on the transition between different altitudes and environments, fixing places in the landscape while at the same time pointing to movement routes.

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