

# Ontologies of Rock Art

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## Images, Relational Approaches, and Indigenous Knowledges

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## Chapter 14

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### **The faceless men**

Partial bodies and body parts in Scandinavian  
Bronze Age rock art

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# 14 The faceless men

## Partial bodies and body parts in Scandinavian Bronze Age rock art

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### 1 Introduction

In southern Scandinavia, a particular style of Bronze Age rock art appeared during the early 2nd millennium BC. Although it shares some characteristics with the older and more widespread circumpolar hunter rock art, it comprises a distinct stylistic tradition of its own. Bronze Age rock art is mainly found along the former coastlines, with significant clusters in southwest Uppland, eastern Östergötland, Tjust, Scania, Bohuslän/Østfold, Sogn/Fjordane, and Trøndelag (Goldhahn et al. 2010, 4). The figures are pecked into the rocks and are made up of a limited repertoire of motifs (e.g., cup marks, boats, anthropomorphs, zoomorphs, wheel crosses, foot soles, and weapons). There are no ethnographical or historical sources for this period and area, and consequently the social and cosmological contexts are unclear. While Bronze Age societies are generally assumed to be stratified chiefdoms, the areas containing this rock art are not located close to known settlement sites. It is thus an open question whether the figures were associated with an elite, a priesthood, or some other type of subgroup. Some have even argued that some motifs were made by foreign visitors (see different interpretations in Goldhahn and Ling 2013, 274). Because of this, the south Scandinavian rock art is only accessible through formal methods based on the imagery itself and their relations to the local context.

The design of each motif and its frequency varies, and to some degree follow different trajectories. In order to keep the discussion concise, this text focuses on the anthropomorphic figures in particular as a means to understand the functions and purposes of Bronze Age rock art in general. The anthropomorphs normally appear as simple stick figures, occasionally equipped with objects such as lures, spears, swords and shields. In some cases, bodily properties are emphasized, such as the hair, calves, and phallus. A few figures also appear to be hybrid creatures (or masked humans) wearing horns, wings, or beaks. Because of their simple yet varied appearance, the Bronze Age anthropomorphs remain open to almost any interpretation that might fit a particular narrative. Depending on their attributes, size, and relation to other motifs, they have been argued to represent a variety of things, including mythological beings or deities, human warriors, adorants,

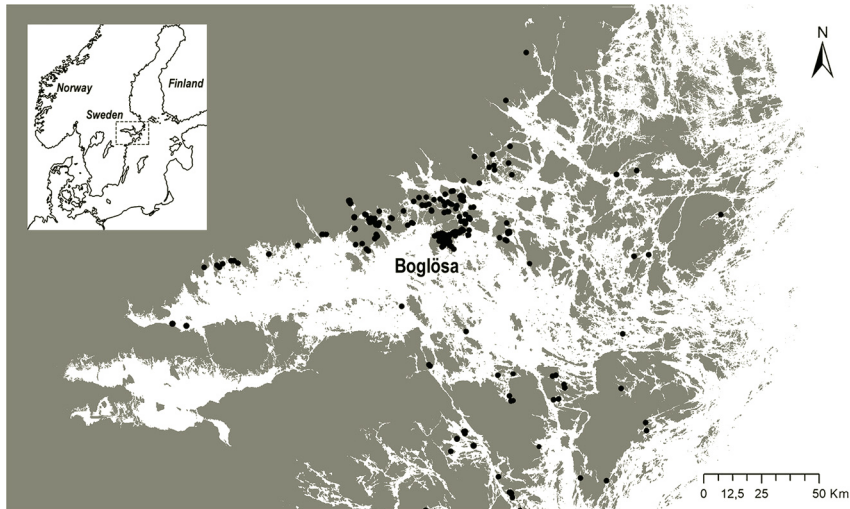
dancers, swimmers, chiefs, or slaves (e.g., Marstrander 1963, 200–230; Malmer 1981, 76–84; Coles 2000, 48–55).

However, rather than prioritizing what the anthropomorphs might depict or represent, we may instead focus on the manner in which they were produced and the reasons for their production. Recent rock art research has balanced representational perspectives with greater attention to material and ontological aspects (Jones 2017; Fahlander 2018), arguing that images are not necessarily passive depictions of something somewhere else, but are material articulations with generative properties of their own. Representations of bodies, for instance, are not necessarily ontologically different from biotic bodies, meaning that images can be as associated with agency and personhood as any human being. Thus, instead of representing particular beings, anthropomorphic imagery may comprise a viable technology for controlling, affecting, and exploiting the animacies of the world.

Indeed, on closer scrutiny, there is clearly something more to these Bronze Age anthropomorphs than first meets the eye. To begin with, they are not particularly faithful representations of humans at all. Their bodily proportions are frequently skewed, with the legs disproportionately long and the calves exaggerated. Second, a substantial portion of the anthropomorphs lack one or several body parts: some do not have any arms or are missing one or both legs, others lack a torso, a few are headless, and some consist only of a pair of legs. Finally, many of these anthropomorphs are curiously generic, lacking any distinguishing features, and are sometimes even anonymized. Together, these observations provide a strong indication that the anthropomorphic motifs are designed to “present rather than represent” (Nakamura 2005, 22). For example, partial and vague designs may attract, confuse, create ambiguity and stress, as well as promote curiosity, fascination, and fear, and encourage subsequent reactions by humans and other-than-humans (Robb 2015, 172; Gell 1998). The generic and anonymous appearance of the anthropomorphic figures allows them to fulfil different purposes and be easily modified accordingly. Such generative properties resonate well with the perspective of Bronze Age rock art as part of a “vitalist technology” that aims to affect the world (Fahlander 2019a, b). In this text, I will pursue this idea through a case study of the anthropomorphic figures of the Mälaren Bay in eastern-central Sweden (Figure 14.1). The rock art in this area is well-documented and has been the subject of several in-depth studies (Kjellén and Hyenstrand 1977; Coles 2000; Ling 2013; Fahlander 2018).

## **2 The anthropomorphic figures of the Mälaren Bay**

Although similar types of motifs are found in different regions of southern Scandinavia, Bronze Age rock art shows a certain degree of local variability in style and motif frequency, as well as in relation to the rock and the local environment. The rock art found on the shores of the Mälaren Bay is no exception to this diversity and displays a particular stylistic enunciation. The imagery is mainly from the Early Bronze Age (c. 1700–1100 BC), and the motifs are less



*Figure 14.1* Map of the figurative rock art (black dots) in central-eastern Sweden. The water level is adjusted to Early Bronze Age levels.

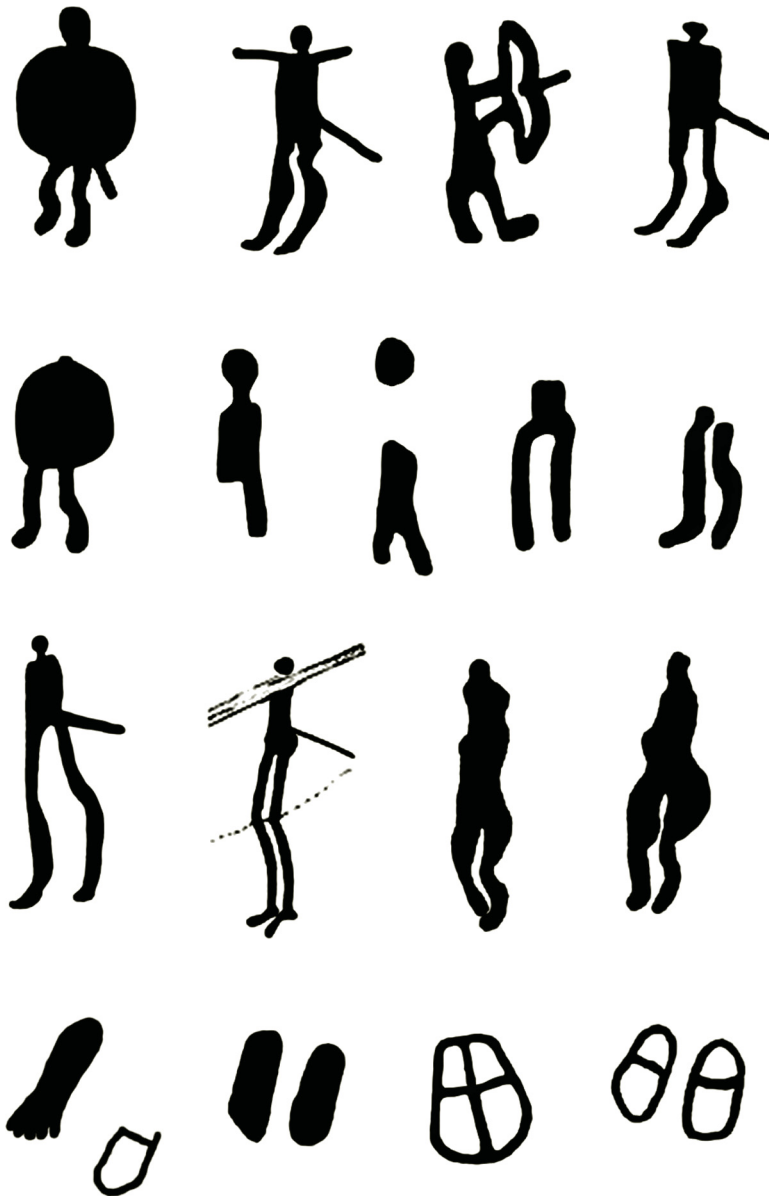
expressive and narrative compared to those found in the other main rock art sites of the Late Bronze Age (c. 1100–500 BC). At present, the Mälaren region has been found to include over 19,000 cup marks and at least 2500 figurative motifs. Boats of different shapes and designs comprise two-thirds of the figurative motifs, while anthropomorphic figures are the second most common motif, followed by a variety of zoomorphs (Fahlander 2018). Although some rocks contain hundreds of motifs, they only rarely show signs of being planned compositions. Instead, individual motifs seem to have been added to the rocks cumulatively over several hundred years. Due to coastal uplift, the rock art is presently situated between 20 and 25 m above sea level in an agricultural landscape. When the rock art was produced during the Bronze Age, however, it was situated close to the water's edge in semi-secluded bays and inlets along the northern shores of the Mälaren Bay (Coles 2000, 124; Fahlander 2018, 61). The positioning of the imagery at the water's edge, often on small, rocky islets, is important: the rock art is clearly directed towards the water-world, and offers little room for people to venerate or even view the figures.

While the common boat motifs are evenly spread along the northern shores of the Mälaren Bay, the anthropomorphic figures are primarily found in a central cluster of rock art at Boglösa, close to the modern city of Enköping (Figure 14.1). Only a small number of these anthropomorphs are equipped with tools, weapons, and other objects (Figure 14.2a). About 10% have a single line running downwards from the back of the figure, indicating a sheathed sword (or a tail), and a dozen figures include disc-shaped objects that possibly indicate shields. There are also three examples of archers, a group with paddles, and a few

anthropomorphs holding sticks as if to herd a group of zoomorphs. Although thought-provoking and evocative, these outfitted anthropomorphs are exceptions; the majority of figures have neither associated gear nor any obvious relation to other motifs.

While the anthropomorphs are apparently simple and less informative from a representationalist perspective, closer examination of how they are designed and their relations to the landscape, the rock surface, and to other motifs reveals greater complexity. For example, the majority of the anthropomorphs lack one or more body parts (Figure 14.2b). This is not due to wear on the rock surface or because these motifs were left unfinished; the zoomorphs, for example, are always complete in the sense that they all have heads and four limbs. This partial mode is mainly restricted to anthropomorphs and boat motifs, and is found to a varying extent at all major Bronze Age rock art sites in southern Scandinavia; in the Mälaren region in particular, approximately 10–15% of the boat motifs and 70% of the anthropomorphs are partial. The most common anthropomorphic types are figures lacking one or both arms, followed by bodies lacking one or both legs; others are headless, and a few have no torso. Intriguingly, several motifs consist only of a pair of legs. In addition to this, many anthropomorphs have hyperbolic characteristics such as elongated legs and exaggerated calves (Figure 14.2c). There are also a small number of extraordinarily large anthropomorphic figures which are up to eight times taller than the normal size of 15–20 cm (including pairs of legs measuring over 50 cm). Significantly, the otherwise simply styled anthropomorphs are frequently depicted with feet (even the pairs of legs normally have feet). This relates the anthropomorphs to the representations of human footprints on the rocks, which are commonly referred to as “foot soles.” Foot soles are life-sized depictions of bare feet (with or without toes), or oval shapes with a horizontal line interpreted as feet clad in footgear with lacing over the foot (Figure 14.2d). Foot soles occur as individual motifs, or in pairs oriented as if facing the shoreline. In a few instances, they are arranged so as to illustrate movement over the rock.

Another common trait among the Mälaren anthropomorphs is their generic and anonymous character. They have no hands, and their heads are rounded blobs without hair, a nose, or other distinguishing characteristics. They are virtually faceless and of no particular gender or age. This generic layout is not simply a consequence of the small format or the coarse medium of the rock. Indeed, the way the large-scale anthropomorphs are designed shows that the anonymization is deliberate, since although they are up to eight times taller than normal size, they are more or less enlarged copies and lack any added detail. Compare, for example, the 1.1-m disc-shaped figure with a normal-sized counterpart (Figure 14.3a). The only addition to the larger motif is the parallel lines outlining the body, indicating that the round object is carried on the figure’s back. The head, legs, sword, and shield of the large anthropomorph show no additional individual characteristics (note that both figures are presented without arms). Another example is the 4.2-m Brandskog boat, carrying six large anthropomorphic paddlers and a seventh under the stern (Figure 14.3b). In this



*Figure 14.2* (a) Examples of anthropomorphs with objects (swords and shields); (b) A variety of partial anthropomorphs lacking body parts; (c) Anthropomorphs with hyperbolic attributes, elongated legs, and exaggerated calves; (d) Different versions of feet/footprints.



Figure 14.3 Left: A small and a large anthropomorph with circular bodies and swords (Boglösa 128:2 and 298). The lines in the upper-right part of the image are a superimposed boat motif. Right: The 4.2-m boat motif at Brandskog (Boglösa 109). Note the incomplete faces of the anthropomorphs.

Source: Photos Einar Kjellén, Enköpings Museum.

case as well, little extra visual information has been added to this huge motif. Although the simple crew strokes of the smaller boat motifs are more elaborated in this image, the anthropomorphs are nonetheless as generic as the normal-sized ones. In fact, the outlines of their heads are broken, and they have apparently been deliberately made faceless.

### 3 The allure of the partial and generic

The generic and partial character of Bronze Age anthropomorphs has not been subjected to systematic analysis as a specific visual mode (however, see Fahlander 2018, 78–82, 2020). In the history of rock art research, partial motifs have generally been interpreted as either unfinished or simplifications that nevertheless convey the essence of a particular motif. Marstrander, for instance (Marstrander 1963, 21) argued that the leg-pairs are *pars pro toto* representations; in other words, synecdoches or partial images of the body as a whole (see Nochlin 2001, 39). The partial anthropomorphs have also been interpreted as realistic depictions. Arthur Nordén, for example, described them as ‘mutilated bodies’ (Nordén 1926, 46; see also Lødøen 2015), while Bertil Almgren (1960, 52) argued that the armless anthropomorphs represented people whose arms were concealed by cloaks, and John Coles (2003, 219) suggested that some of them were captives whose arms were tied behind their backs (see also Bevan 2015, 25). The figures with disproportionate body parts have generally been discussed from a similarly representational perspective. The exaggerated calves have been interpreted as portraying shin greaves (Vogt 2006, 79), and the elongated legs as a representation of how human shadows are cast in oblique light (Meyering 2018). Hyperbolic extremities, in general, have also been understood as attributes

signifying spirits or other supernatural entities (Marstrander 1963, 217; see Schaafsma 2018, 412; Solomon 2008, 70), and anthropomorphs with distorted proportions have been interpreted as illustrating a changed state of consciousness or shamans during a transgressive state (Hampson 2016, 217; Tilley 2008, 169). As previously mentioned, foot sole motifs are generally interpreted as realistic representations of human feet. The variation in size has even been argued to represent humans of different ages and sexes moving over the rocks during initiation rites (Sognnes 2011). Others have interpreted the motif in symbolic terms: Almgren (1976, 24) suggested they denoted the path of an invisible deity that cannot be envisioned; Marstrander (1963, 230) saw them as apotropaic signs in general; and to Skoglund et al. (2017), foot soles symbolized the movement of the sun. In North American ethnography, images of footprints are argued to represent symbols of prayers or “paths taken” (Diaz-Granados and Duncan 2002, 215). Just as the anthropomorphs may not represent beings somewhere else, however, the foot soles need not necessarily be reduced to symbolic representations. In the following discussion, I argue that the partial and generic character of the *Boglösa* anthropomorphs makes more sense when they are interpreted as material articulations produced to affect the world.

#### **4 Discussion: Anthropomorphic figures as vitalist devices**

The above interpretations based on representational aspects of partial and anonymous Bronze Age anthropomorphic figures lack neither ingenuity nor merit. As previously mentioned, however, the figurative element is but one facet of imagery. On a general level, the simple and generic designs make the anthropomorphs less likely to represent individual deities or special categories of individuals. Instead of viewing these figures as representations of something particular, it is rewarding to discuss the partial and generic as a specific type of material articulation, created with a specific purpose in mind. To begin with, making something partial and incomplete adds certain qualities to an object or image. One interesting property of generic and partial imagery is its ability to draw attention (Nochlin 2001). In modern marketing, for example, company logos are commonly designed as partial and incomplete in order to catch the eye and convey a sense of creativity (Hagtvedt 2011). From a cognitive point of view, a missing attribute or lack of detail can also emphasize what is actually present. This technique has been employed by several modern artists, such as Cézanne in his many paintings of Mountain Saint-Victoire (Morvan 2006, 164). Other artists, such as Kandinsky and Klee, worked with abstraction and reduction in order to expose “what really is” (or should be), rather than how something appears (Ingold 2010, 91). There are, of course, differences between company logos, modern art, and rock art, but there are nonetheless concrete instances of partial rock art motifs that have attracted attention and provoked responses. One example concerns a partial zoomorphic motif that consists only of a pair of legs, a tail, a head, and a neck, and lacks a body. With the aid of detailed laser scanning,



it was established that someone at a later point in time scratched the area where the body should have been (Fahlander 2012, 103). Another case concerns a panel at Himmelstalund, outside the modern city of Norrköping, where a half-boat motif has been “supplemented” with a row of Iron Age runes (Nilsson 2012, 87).

Anthropomorphic representations can also be designed incomplete for other reasons. Douglass Bailey, for instance, has suggested that certain Neolithic anthropomorphic figurines were deliberately made partial in order for the viewer to see different things while mentally completing the object (Bailey 2007, 119). He encourages us to realize that the figurines are representations *for* and not representations *of* someone or something (Bailey 2013, 245). Harris and Robb (2013, 218) reason in a similar manner about ancient Greek anthropomorphic sculpture, which they argue works “much like the shop mannequins and models in catalogues nowadays: they present carefully generic individuals whose role is to provide a focus for the viewer to project himself or herself into the picture.” In the case of Bronze Age rock art, however, it is important to recognize that the imagery was not necessarily made to be viewed only by humans. Indeed, the relatively low visibility of the petroglyphs, situated as they were at the water’s edge, indicates that they were not primarily made to convey meaning. This resonates well with other ethnographic examples where certain figurative expressions and stylistic embellishments are primarily directed toward animals and other-than-humans (Keithahn 1940, 131; Gell 1998, 68; Lemonnier 2012, 51). In some ontologies, rock art is even believed to be the work of spirits (Hultkrantz 1986, 54; Gell 1998, 98; Rozwadowski 2017). In such instances, individual petroglyphs work more like magic “devices” than representational images. The primary function of such imagery is often to lure, attract, and evoke other-than-human beings. In ancient Egypt, for example, certain statues were produced to evoke and house specific deities (Meskell 2004, 89–90), and in Marquesan ontology, the tattooing of an anthropomorphic image of the godling Etua is a ritual performance intended to bring the entity into being. Gell stressed that such a tattoo is not a representation of something somewhere else, but *is* the being itself (Gell 1998, 191). Similar conceptions of anthropomorphic rock art motifs as “rock people” and entities with agency are not uncommon in ethnographic accounts (Wallis 2009). This type of imagery need not be a symbol of powerful deities or spirits but can, just as spoken spells and acts, have power in its own right, without a need for mediation by any other agency of spirits or gods (see Malinowski 1922, 427). It should be emphasized here that in general, ritual enactments in small-scale societies are rarely addressed to beneficial gods, as in the dominant world religions, but are rather directed at maintaining good relations with a variety of unpredictable powers, such as godlings, ancestors, and spirits (Boyer 2001, 147). Because these entities are believed to be inconsistent and unpredictable, such enactments entail a need to control and limit some powers while encouraging others.

If the anthropomorphs of Boglösa were made to bring an entity into being, the play between hyperbolic attributes on the one hand, and the lack of limbs on the other, could work to manipulate their agency. The question is thus not what kind

of creature has only one leg or no head, but instead what such an entity can or cannot do. Because spirits can be unpredictable, the powers of rock art need to be regulated, which can be achieved by adding or reducing details or attributes (see McGranaghan and Challis 2016). In such a scenario, partial anthropomorphs could be designed to restrict the agency of an entity by omitting an arm or a leg. Similarly, the enlarged attributes of some anthropomorphs or the addition of a weapon could be intended to evoke particular strengths of the entity in question (see Wyman 1983, 552; Schaafsma 2018, 411). For example, an anthropomorph with a phallus or a sword is not necessarily a virile man, and a horned anthropomorph may not represent a human with a mask or a hybrid creature: the main point of the attributes is that they are more likely to enhance and add powers or abilities to the entity in question.

The ambiguous and partial design might also catch the attention and curiosity of wandering spirits, enticing them to enter a statue, figurine, or anthropomorphic image. Just as labyrinths and abstract or complex figures are employed as apotropaic devices to confuse malevolent spirits and stop them from entering a body or place, the allure of the partial can also work as a cognitive trap to attract and capture different kinds of entities (Gell 1998, 68–69; Willerslev 2007, 102; Lemonnier 2012, 51). Instead of evoking a particular entity, the generic *Boglösa* anthropomorphs provide a material “body” for immaterial entities to occupy. The play between the distorted proportions and missing limbs of the anthropomorphs, although comprising a human morphology, could indeed evoke a similar sense of “awe” in other-than-humans as well as humans (Schaafsma 2018, 412). Thus, the partial anthropomorphs could, in a similar way to elaborated imagery, work as a kind of “fly paper” that certain entities cannot resist “occupying” (see Schaafsma and Tsosie 2009, 25). In such a scenario, the faceless and anonymous anthropomorphs attract interest and curiosity in general, while “complete” motifs are directed towards specific entities. For instance, the foot soles of different sizes and designs could be directed towards particular entities, and even lead them to certain spots. The pairs of legs, on the other hand, are fundamentally generic, allowing any entity to enter them and as a result become trapped in the rock, where it can be monitored and controlled (see Astor-Aguilera 2010, 171).

## **5 Rock, art, and water: The foundations of a vitalist technology**

If the main function of the anthropomorphs is to work as lures to trap other-than-human beings, the question remains: why was this applied in certain semi-secluded bays along the coast of southern Scandinavia? In general, imagery intended to lure or control often shares attributes with what it aims to affect (i.e., sympathetic magic), although this need not always be the case (see McNiven and Brady 2012, 71). To understand the purpose of Bronze Age anthropomorphs, however, we cannot rely on the figurative content and design of the petroglyphs alone, but must also consider their mediality and the anthropomorphs’ relation

to the environment. Several researchers have emphasized the importance of the rock itself as an integrated part of rock art (e.g., Hauptman-Wahlgren 1998, 91; Jones 2006; Bradley 2009; Gjerde 2010). Indeed, the mediality of the imagery, the smooth rock faces, are by no means passive “canvases.” The rock face itself already has certain visual qualities due to the ores, ridges, cracks, and fissures that pattern it. The rock outcrops at the shoreline also express several biotic “behaviors” and animacy. Coastal uplift, for instance, regularly causes new islets to “grow” from the waters, and these are quickly filled with rock art. The smooth rocks store both heat from the sun in the daytime and the cold from the night air. Water emerges or disappears into cracks and fissures in the rock as if the rock were “drinking.” The rocks thus express certain agentic properties that may have inspired beliefs that they were biotic and thus susceptible to manipulation (see Worliczek 2017). Because these animacies existed prior to human understanding, this relation between the rock art and the movements of the earth is not necessarily animistic in the traditional sense (Ingold 2006; Porr and Bell 2012, 187; see also Deleuze 1995, 143). The zone where the land meets the sea is *lively*, but not necessarily *living*.

Interestingly, several the anthropomorphic figures in the Mälaren area relate to, and are possibly inspired by, these properties of the rocks. For instance, two out of the three archer motifs are juxtaposed with other motifs that are separated from them by vertical cracks in the rock (Figure 14.4a). The crack between the archer and the game effectively complicates the otherwise intuitive reading of the two figures as representing a hunting scene. Other anthropomorphs relate more directly to properties of the rock. In one instance at Boglösa, the outline of an anthropomorph is based on a natural fissure in the rock (Figure 14.4b). Directly to the left of it is an example of how cracks have sometimes been widened by repeated hammering. The ways in which such motifs partly derive from cavities in the rock has been argued to represent a means of “reaching” something from inside the rock (e.g., Lahelma 2012, 24; Tilley 2008, 177). It is an open question whether these actions are intended to ‘take’ something out or “put” something in the rock (or both). In this particular case, however, the anthropomorph is turned towards the crack rather than emerging from inside it. Other anthropomorphs are more ambiguous in terms of their relation to the rock. One intriguing category of anthropomorphs is pecked across horizontal cracks that separate the legs below the knees from the rest of the body (Figure 14.5). These examples are hardly accidental, since there is often plenty of room to make images between the cracks, and no obvious direction is emphasized in the composition. But just as the previously mentioned anthropomorph partly based on the outline of a crack in the rock (Figure 14.4), none of these figures arguably emerge from inside the rock. Be that as it may, this design also resonates well with the general emphasis on legs and feet in Bronze Age rock art.

The above examples show that the relation between the cracks and fissures of the rock and the anthropomorphs need not necessarily be understood in visual terms. The way the pecked lines and the cracks and fissures of the rock interact suggest, rather, that the main objective was to integrate certain qualities of the



*Figure 14.4* Top: An archer separated from game by a vertical crack in the rock. Bottom: An anthropomorph based partly on a natural cavity in the rock. Note the enlarged crack in the middle of the photo.

*Source:* Photos Einar Kjellén, Enköpings Museum.

rocks with the function of the petroglyphs. It would be too simple to suggest that the cavities in the rock are gateways to an “Otherworld,” as often discussed in the northern Stone Age tradition of rock art (Lahelma 2012, 24). Although this is a viable possibility, there is nothing in the properties and animacies of the rock to substantiate such a hypothesis. To better understand the intricate relations between the animacies and visual aspects of the rock, an analogy with ritual tattooing is informative. Besides the fact that both technologies apply figurative



Figure 14.5 Examples of anthropomorphs pecked across cracks in the rock.  
 Source: Photos Einar Kjellén, Enköpings Museum.

patterns using repeated penetration, there are also ontological similarities between the skin and the rock face. Just as the skin emits and absorbs fluids, so too the cracks and fissures of the rock emit and absorb water. In tattooing, this membranous nature of the skin is sometimes utilized as a way to reach into the body and affect the psyche and organs, as well as to allow for the inside to transgress the body's physical boundaries (Gell 1993, 39). Tattooed imagery can thus be understood as a means to facilitate “portals” through which the outside can be affected, or vice versa (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990; Benson 2000, 249). A similar function may also apply to the foot soles and the anthropomorphic motifs: for example, the foot soles are well designed to be utilized as a “vault” or “anchor” by both the humans and other-than-humans who might stand in them. Similarly, the anthropomorphs pecked across cracks in the rocks would constitute a more explicit way of exploiting the biotic animacies of the rocks to enact or spirit away trapped other-than-human beings in the petroglyphs.

Such an interpretation is further substantiated if water is included in the mix. Like the rocks, water is not a passive materiality, but expresses a wide range of animacies. It can change form into ice, snow, mist, and hail, and then return to liquid form. Rain accumulates in puddles which increase and decrease in size depending on the flow of water and evaporation. Seawater changes color, makes waves, and withdraws or rises with the tides. The sea itself contains a plethora of life above and beneath the surface that is only temporarily visible. Driftwood, carcasses, and other items continuously land on the shores, while other objects are washed out to sea. The list goes on, but the point here is that water in different forms constitutes an important element in Bronze Age rock art (e.g., Bradley 2009, 141; Fahlander 2019a). To begin with, rock art in the Mälaren region is generally made close to the water's edge. This is illustrated by the way the same motifs in newer styles are found below older images as they follow the retreating waterline caused by coastal uplift (Fahlander 2018, 58). It has been argued that the placement of the motifs close to the waterline was intentional and

intended to allow water from waves to regularly splash over them (Helskog 1999; see Hauptman-Wahlgren 1998, 92). This phenomenon is still visible in areas with little or no coastal uplift (e.g., Nordén 1926, Figure 86). That water was important to the rock art is further supported by the fact that many figures are concentrated in areas that are regularly soaked by running water from a slump above the rock face, while adjacent surfaces are more or less left empty of petroglyphs (Malmer 1989, 14; Bradley 2009, 136). It has been suggested that this arrangement was deliberate because water, just as the light from fires, would visually animate the images and make them seem alive. Judging from how the anthropomorphs and cracks interact, however, the main function of water was not primarily visual, but rather the vitalist aspects of moving water were used to affect the petroglyphs or what was being trapped in them. Because the rock art was regularly washed by water, a stronger connection between the petroglyphs and the rock was established by using water as a medium to reach into the rock more effectively. Either way, the intentional use of water is reflected in the way rock art was made by pecking incisions in the rock. Painted imagery is bound to be washed away, while the incised figures withstand millennia of flowing water from waves and rain.

## **6 Conclusion**

Southern Scandinavian Bronze Age rock art comprises a complex and varied type of material articulation, and we can only expect to grasp certain elements of its ontological connotations. Although this rock art is figurative to some extent, it is not likely to primarily depict or represent elements of myth and cosmology. By instead viewing petroglyphs as material articulations, the dilemma of representation can be partially bypassed, allowing for a change of perspective from viewing images as primary vehicles of meaning and symbolism to understanding what imagery can do in wider human and other-than-human sets of relations. The case study presented here focuses on the anthropomorphic figures of the Mälaren region in particular in order to investigate the functions of Bronze Age rock art in general. Although the majority of the anthropomorphs are simple stick figures, they are not passive and indifferent signs, but rather are carefully designed. Only a very few are equipped with weapons and gear, while the majority are partial and generic. It has been argued here that their partial and anonymous designs allow them to evoke, attract, lure, and control both humans and other-than-humans. In particular, legs and feet seem to occupy a special role in the function of the anthropomorphic figures. The legs are often exaggerated in length, with emphasized calves, even occurring as single pairs lacking a body. Although three-quarters of the anthropomorphs are partial, most of them have visible feet (even the pairs of legs). Feet also occur as single or paired foot soles. Moreover, a small number of anthropomorphs are also pecked across natural cracks in the rock, separating the legs from the rest of the body above the knees.

The anthropomorphic designs and their relations to the microtopography of the rock and water are a strong indication that they are as much “devices” as

they are images, pecked alongside the water in order to *do* something. Their generally low visibility and position close to the water's edge suggest that the rock art is probably not primarily directed towards other humans but rather is intended to evoke or trap other-than-human beings of the water-world. It is argued here that the partial and generic designs of the anthropomorphic figures aimed to catch the attention of and provide a means to control and hamper the powers of trapped entities. The water from rain, waves, or springs that repeatedly flows over the petroglyphs is a crucial element of such a vitalist technology; it is suggested that it either vitalized the figures or acted as a medium to relate the function of the petroglyphs to the animacies of the rocks and the sea.

Although this discussion focuses on Bronze Age anthropomorphic motifs in particular, this manner of approaching rock art as material articulations, and emphasizing ontological aspects in the design and their intricate relation to other materialities (rock and water) constitutes a formal method that may also prove viable for interpreting rock art from other periods and regions.

## Note

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