

New Discoveries of Rock Carvings and Settlements at Himmelstalund

Introduction

In recent years the National Heritage Board has carried out archaeological investigations in connection with the rock art site at Himmelstalund. These investigations have been undertaken in conjunction with a protection and visualisation project organised by Norrköping Municipality. The aim of the project is not only to protect the carvings but also to emphasise the uniqueness of the place and make it more accessible. Settlement remains dating back to the Pre-Roman and Roman Iron Ages have been excavated and about a hundred new figures were discovered. While the main purpose of this article is to present the results of these archaeological investigations, it also hopes to stimulate discussion about possible connections between the settlements and the rock carvings.

Research outline

One of Scandinavia's densest concentrations of rock carvings is to be found around the now regulated rapids at Fiskeby, to the west of the town of Norrköping. The best known site is Himmelstalund, with some 60 panels featuring more than 1,600 figures (Selinge 1985:110f).

Although the Himmelstalund rock carvings appear to have been discovered during the first half of the 19th century, the first scientific investigation did not take place until 1871, when Carl Fr. Nordenskjöld documented

the carvings (Nordén 1925). The rock carvings have since been documented on several occasions. In 1903 they were documented by Oscar Almgren and the then Crown-Prince Gustav Adolf, and during the 1910-20s by Arthur Nordén. Arthur Nordén's thesis, "Östergötlands bronsålder" [Östergötland's Bronze Age], published in 1925, is still the most comprehensive study of the county's – and especially the Norrköping area's – rock carvings. Only a few new figures were discovered at Himmelstalund at the time of the 1947 National Survey of ancient monuments. The two most recent comprehensive documentations of the Himmelstalund rock were conducted by Göran Burenhult (1973, 1980) and in connection with the ancient monument survey of 1980 (Selinge 1985). A significant number of new figures were discovered on the latter occasion.

The investigations mentioned above have mainly been concerned with documenting familiar panels and searching for new figures. Archaeological investigations with the expressed aim of identifying finds and events that might be associated with the rock carvings have not been carried out at the site (cf. Lødøen 2006:5). Nordén records that some of the carvings were covered by a layer of gravel (fire-cracked stone?) and black sandy soil and that several of the figures had been damaged by fire (Nordén 1925:48f). While this can be interpreted as a sign of some kind of ritual, it

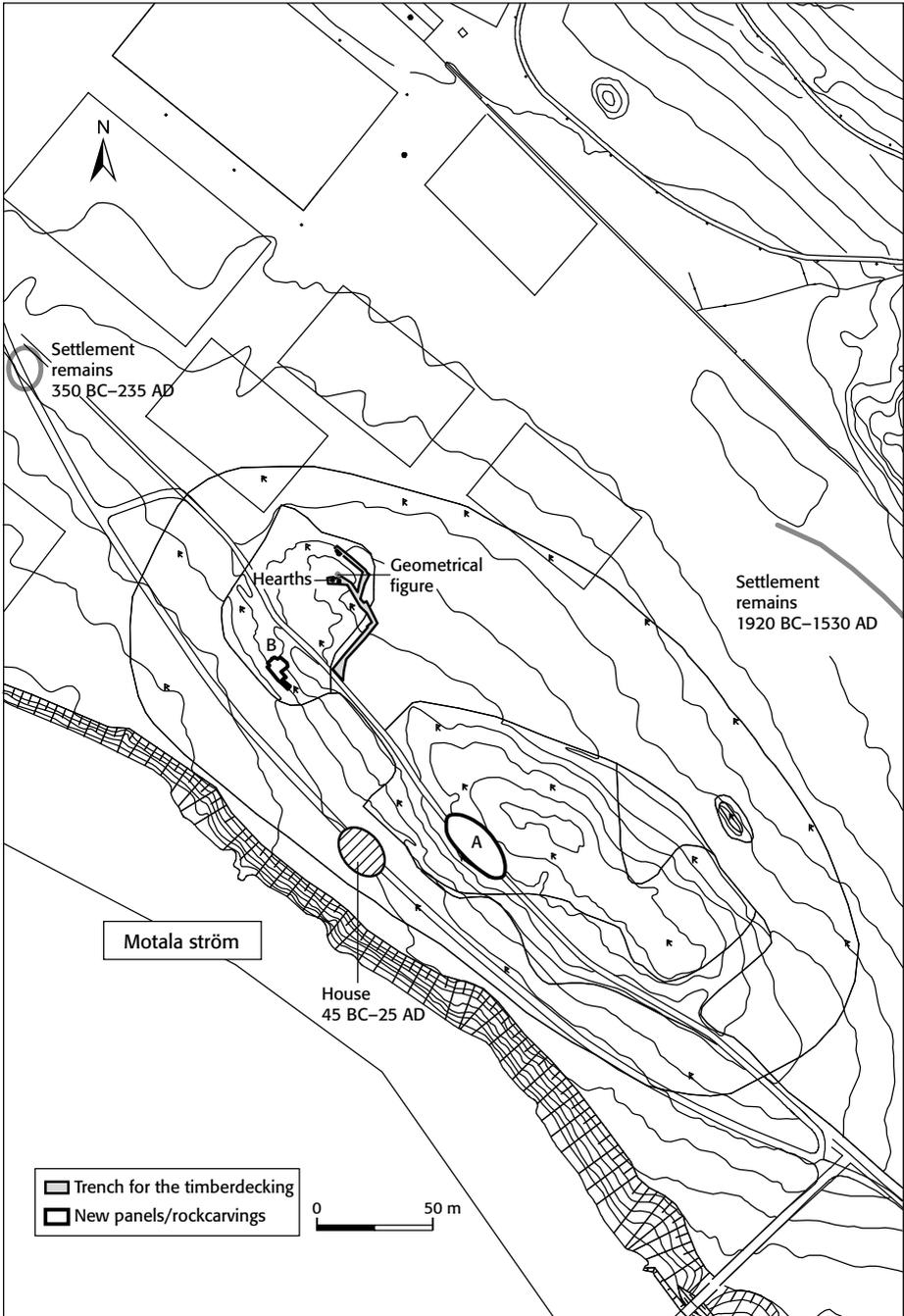


Fig 1. Map over Himmelstalund showing the location of the new rock carvings (A+B), hearths and settlement remains. Photo Per Nilsson.

is difficult to determine whether the deposits and fire-damage can be associated with the actual carvings or whether they belong to a later period. In addition, traces of carvings and possible constructions and finds might have been destroyed during the creation of the medieval hamlet of Himmelsta, which was situated on the rocks. Furthermore, the presence of a glue factory during the 19th century contributed to substantial damage of the carvings (Nordén 1925:44).

Settlement remains have been discovered on several occasions in close proximity to the Himmelstalund carvings. Hearths, post holes and cultural layers were discovered in connection with excavations for an electric cable some 100 metres to the north of the rock (Persson 1998). Two of the features were dated with the aid of 14C-analysis to the transition between the Late-Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age (1920-1740 BC and 1740-1530 BC, Cal 1 sigma). The oldest figures in the Norrköping area, like swords and axes, can probably be dated to the transition between Bronze Age Period I and II, i.e. ca. 1600 BC (Hauptman Wahlgren 2002:178). If this is accurate the settlement could be contemporary with, or perhaps even older than the oldest carvings at Himmelstalund.

Background

Today the Himmelstalund carvings are situated in a parkland and recreation area frequented by Norrköping's inhabitants – especially during the summer. The large number and constant flow of visitors has meant that during the years the rock has been subjected to considerable wear and tear, particularly as it has also been used for barbecues. At one point a rough gravel track crossed the rock, which meant that coarse sand and gravel were deposited on the carved surfaces.

For several years now Ann-Charlotte Hertz, at the Culture and Recreation Office in Norrköping, has been suggesting that the Himmelstalund rock carvings should be an attractive, protected and easily accessible tourist attraction. In 2005 Norrköping Municipality initiated a comprehensive protection and

visualisation project, due to be completed in 2008. The first stage of the project consisted of moving the rough gravel track to the river bank between the rock and Motala ström (the river system that connects Lake Vättern with Bråviken and the Baltic Sea). Prior to the creation of the cycle path the National Heritage Board carried out an archaeological investigation (Ericsson & Nilsson 2007). It became apparent that settlement remains were preserved along the length of the planned route. A ca. 7.5 x 3 metre large three-aisled house was found on a natural ledge between the rock and the river. The house consisted of three pairs of trestles and two pits filled with burnt clay were found along its walls. A row of post holes, which might have signified a confined area between the rock and the river, were found at the western gable-end of the house. A number of post holes were also found near the river bank, although these were not investigated further as they weren't affected by the proposed cycle route. Charcoal from one of the post holes inside the house was dated to 45BC-25AD (Cal 1 sigma). Settlement remains were also found some 100 metres to the west of the rock carvings. Three wells, hearths, hearth pits, pits of different kinds and an oven were found within a 15x10 metre radius. The features also contained a great number of finds – mainly sherds of Early Iron Age pottery. Five 14C-datings indicated that the settlement had been in use between 350BC and 235AD (Cal 1 sigma).

New rock carvings

The second stage of the project involved constructing timber decking along the former rough gravel track on the rock. This was done partly to increase accessibility and partly to facilitate visitor management, thereby protecting the carvings from unnecessary wear and tear. Prior to the installation of the timber decking loose sand and gravel was swept from the rocky areas of the cycle path. A previously undocumented axe figure and several cupmarks were discovered during this cleaning operation (Fig 1, surface A). In order to demarcate the surface with the axe, and also establish whether more carvings were



Fig 2. Recently discovered panel at Himmelstalund (Part of Surface A). Note the axe in the background. Photo Per Nilsson.



Fig 3. The crew-lines on one of the ships were connected to each other – maybe stools or thwarts? Photo Per Nilsson.

hidden beneath the rough gravel path, an inventory and documentation was compiled in April 2007. Another panel with previously undiscovered rock carvings was also found in the same year in connection with the planned timber decking (Fig 1, Surface B). The inventory and documentation of both surfaces was conducted and compiled by Sven-Gunnar Broström and Kenneth Ihrestam from BOTARK. In all, more than 120 new carvings were registered consisting of 34 ships/boats, 13 animal figures, 4 circular, or ring figures, 5 carved surfaces, a human figure, an axe, about 50 cupmarks and a number of fragments and indefinable figures (Broström 2007, Nilsson 2008).

Surface A, April 2007

It became apparent that the axe carving was part of a larger panel that continued beyond the planned route. In addition to the axe, 4 ships, 2 animal figures, 1 dagger, 10 cupmarks and a number of fragments were registered on this surface. New figures were also discovered on adjacent surfaces, mainly within and in connection with Nordén's surface no.38 (Nordén 1925:51). A total of 23 figures were registered in connection with the ancient monuments' survey and documentation of surface no.38; an increase in the number of figures recorded by Nordén. The number of figures on this surface has now increased by about 20 – 6 ships, 3 animal figures, 2 carved surfaces, 2 ring figures, 1 indefinable figure, 5 cupmarks and a number of fragments. A

further 3 ships, 1 ring figure, 6 cupmarks and a number of fragments were discovered about two metres to the north-east of Nordén's surface no.38. On one of the ships the crew-lines were connected to each other. This can perhaps be interpreted as stools or thwarts (Fig 3). The axe, like several of the cupmarks, showed signs of severe wear. It is likely that more carvings had existed along the rough gravel path, of which only the odd fragment now remained.

Surface B, July 2007

During a visit to the site in summer 2007 Sven-Gunnar Broström discovered a number of previously undocumented rock carvings in connection with the planned timber decking (Fig 4). The rock panel in question was swept and the cracks and crevices checked for finds that could be associated with the rock carvings. Only one small piece of burnt clay was found during the cleaning process and it has not been possible to determine whether this has any association with the carvings or not. Finding burnt clay fragments in connection with rock carvings is not unusual, though (e.g. Bengtsson 2004:113f, Goldhahn 2006:91f). The new finds include 19 ships, 11 animals, 8 human footprints, 1 human figure, 3 ring figures, 3 carved surfaces, 4 indefinable figures, 5 fragments and 13 cupmarks. The human figure is holding a circular shield. Six of the animal figures are pigs; two of which are clearly a pair (Fig 5). A (human?) figure is linked with one of the pigs in some kind



Fig 4. Surface B, with some of the new figures filled with red paint. Photo Per Nilsson.

of hunting or perhaps bestial scene. There is a natural ledge just below the newly discovered rock carvings, on which the timber decking is to be placed. Along this part of the route a couple of cupmarks and a few present-day carvings of the initials "T E S", "G.A.P." and "E R" were discovered.

Discussion

The newly discovered rock carvings mainly consist of motifs that correspond with previous finds in the area, although some are less familiar. One of these is the so-called "stool-ship" where the crew-lines are connected to something that looks like stools or thwarts (Fig 3).

A similar motif can be found on a nearby rock – something that Nordén referred to as an "arch above the gunwales" (*båge över relingslinjen*) (RAÄ 1:40, Nordén 1925:47, 190, H38). The pair of pigs is unique to the Himmelstalund site, however.

The nearby and well-known "pig-panel" (*Svinhällen*) illustrates a large number of animals and is thought to represent a herd of swine rather than animals in pairs. The pairing, or antithetical motif can be found on several other surfaces at Himmelstalund, e.g. in the form of horses (Nordén 1925:H49, Fredell 2003:97), goats/deer (Nordén 1925:H29, Kristianssen & Larsson 2005:348) and axes (Nordén 1925:279, H33, Hauptman Wahlgren 2002:193). Two – a pair – is a common motif on both rocks and bronze objects, and the same theme recurs in other contexts, e.g. the offerings of pairs of sacrificial objects in marsh or wetlands. This recurring duality is regarded by some researchers as a reflection of Bronze Age cosmology – a cosmology based on the conception of twin gods (Kristianssen & Larsson 2005:258). According to this theory Bronze Age society leadership was also based on two institutions – one worldly/political and the other religious/ritual – as represented in, for example, the



Fig 5. A pair of anti-thetically arranged pigs connected with a (human?) figure. Photo Per Nilsson.

spatial division of the very large longhouse from Bruatorp (2005:279).

Hearths beneath the rock

Along much of the route the timber decking was placed directly on the rock, although in one 75 metre-long stretch the topsoil overburden had to be removed in order to anchor the decking in a bed of gravel (Fig 1). In connection with this work two hearths were discovered a metre or so away from one of Himmelstalund's best known rock carvings; a geometrical figure associated with a human figure carrying a spear (Fig 6) (Nilsson 2008). Charcoal from the hearths has been dated to the Pre-Roman and/or Early Roman Iron Ages, or to be more precise, 90BC-20AD and 135-230 AD (Cal 1 sigma). One question that arises relates to the connection of the two hearths with the adjacent rock carvings. Are they connected in any way, or had the rock carvings been forgotten and/or lacked significance when the fires near the rock at Himmelstalund were lit? The time interval between the two hearths is too great for them to be contemporary with each other, although it is conceivable that the earliest of them could have been used at a time when

the rock carvings still had significance. Most of the rock carvings in the Norrköping area have been dated to the Bronze Age, with a possible continuation into the Pre-Roman Iron Age (Hauptman Wahlgren 2002:179). In other areas, such as Tanum in Bohuslän, Bornholm and Trøndelag, examples of ship figures can without doubt be dated to the Pre-Roman Iron Age (Kaul 2004:394f). Another example is from Askum in Bohuslän, where figures on horseback carrying rectangular shields can be dated to the same period (2007:394). If the rock carvings were still significant during the Early Iron Age it is conceivable that certain motifs could have been re-carved and revived— even if very few or no new figures were made. An interesting detail is that the more recent of the two hearths contained a considerable number of large splintered stones. The rock with the geometrical figure, some metres away from the hearths, shows signs of having been touched up or reworked in some way, and it is possible that the stone splinters in the hearth originate from the adjoining rock. An interesting question is whether rock carvings were also broken away or damaged in connection with this stone breaking, and if so, why and in which context?



Fig 6. Two hearths were found directly beneath one of the panels. Note the geometrical figure and the spear-carrier in the foreground, the so called "pizza-maker". Photo Per Nilsson.

There was no sign of any figures on the stone fragments found in the hearth, though. The splinters had been significantly damaged by fire, which means that all such traces would have been erased.

An example of early approaches to and relations with the rock carvings at Himmelstalund is the line of runic inscriptions carved on the same rock as the geometrical figure, some metres to the northwest of the hearths (Nordén 1925). This line of runes consists of 5-6 characters of the older futhark and can be interpreted in several different ways. According to runologist Svante Lagman, the most likely interpretation is *Braido* or *Brajdo*, which could refer to a woman's name meaning "the wide" (e-mail, 26/07/07). Another alternative is *Buajdo*, i.e. "I did" (Patrik Larsson, Runverket, e-mail 15/01/08). The authenticity of the runes has been discussed, but if genuine they could have been carved as early

as 200-300 AD – although a later dating to 400-500 AD is also reasonable. The recently investigated settlement remains to the south and west of the rock have been dated to ca. 350 BC-235AD (Cal 1 sigma). It is therefore likely that the remains are older than the runes, although as only small surface areas have so far been investigated it is quite likely that remains that are contemporary with the runes also exist near the rock. As the two hearths are both contemporary with the settlement remains it is reasonable to suggest that they can be associated with activities carried out in connection with these settlements, regardless of whether or not the activities were of a ritual or more everyday nature. A further alternative is that both hearths ought to be regarded as remains of shepherds grazing their animals – something that Maria Petersson has recently suggested as an explanation for the large number of isolated hearths dating back to the Late



Fig 7. The timber decking under construction. Photo Per Nilsson.

Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in Östergötland (Petersson 2006:169).

Future investigations?

These new discoveries of rock carvings at Himmelstalund indicate that it is also possible to make significant new finds in already well-known places. The question is what a new documentation of the entire site might yield? It is likely that many new figures would be discovered; something that could lead to reinterpretations of individual motifs as well as the rock art site as a whole.

The earlier mentioned excavation north of the rock revealed traces of a settlement dating to the period immediately before, or contemporary with, the period when the rock carving tradition began. The recently discovered remains indicate the presence of settlements that may be contemporary with, but more likely later than the end of the tradition. The question is thus whether remains exist that can be proved to be contemporary with the more intensive period of the rock carving tradition (e.g. per III-VI)? As yet only very small areas around the Himmelstalund carvings have been investigated archaeologically and it is therefore conceiv-

able that a contemporary settlement does exist. Another alternative is that the area around the rock carvings was regarded as a sacred place, where ordinary everyday activities were not allowed (cf. Widholm 1998). Future investigations will hopefully help us to answer the question.

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