

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL LIFE OF THINGS – BORNHOLM



Hosts, ghosts, visitors

For some years I have been making archaeological visits to Bornholm, the Danish island south of Sweden. Rock art, unique prehistoric sites and monuments, medieval settlement, churches and castles, rune stones, fishing industry, cold war relics, an arts community since the nineteenth century, contemporary heritage and tourism. The mingling remains of many times, the palimpsests, the pasts-in-the-present, the archaeological potential of the island is considerable. My ongoing project focused on a northern border in Britain [\[Link\]](#) is expanding to take in the archaeology of the archipelago of northern Europe.

I heard last year at the tribute to Chris Tilley held at University College London [\[Link\]](#) that he was planning one of his phenomenological expeditions to Bornholm when he died. The archaeology is well-documented and extraordinary new finds are

constantly emerging. Yet the research potential remains largely undeveloped, analytically thin, mostly trapped in nineteenth century thought. Tilley was good at spotting opportunities for reframing and reworking well-prepared source material.

Last week I revisited Madsebakke, a rock outcrop in the north of the island with a unique series of ship and circle motifs from the Bronze Age. In the last ten years many more carved outcrops have been found nearby around Hammersholm. Tilley's ghost was with me – this is the kind of landscape he relished [Link] [Link]. What kind of pattern might be found in the locations, the motifs of ships and sun wheels and cups? What insights might be gained into prehistoric experiences of *genius loci*?

I have always been focused on the *actuality* of the past – its presence-to-us-now. What struck me at Madsebakke was that the carvings had been recently cleaned and painted.





In cold light after rain.



Madsebakke – clear in this image is how the granite has been cleaned of lichen and the weathered grey-green surface bleached back to pink before the carvings were (re) painted.

This is what one of the ships looked like a few years ago – old paint wearing off, leaving the weathered surface.



In late afternoon sunshine. Becoming stone. From the series Oceans of Time 2021.

There's no evidence that the carvings would have been painted originally, and the practice of painting is questioned now on grounds of conservation/preservation. The state web sites explicitly say that carvings are not now painted; but here they are. (Mogens Jensen has posted a photo of the painting on his web site – link below). There's now a hiking trail one can follow from Madsebakke through the fields to Hammersholm connecting the many carved outcrops known in the vicinity ([Link] [Link] [Link] and below). I presume that this is the reason for the painting of the carvings – an interpretive purpose that visitors might actually see the much-worn motifs.

(There's a fine web site detailing this and other sites on Bornholm from local historian/archaeologist Mogens Jensen – [Link]).

Rather than conservation and interpretation, let's take up the matter of the *experience* of the carvings.

Figure and ground – living stone

The red paint focuses attention on the motif, separating it from a background surface. To paint a motif in this way is to assert the primary significance of the relationship between figure and ground. What matters is the ship, the motif, the figure – this is why it is painted. So one knows what one is looking at. The assumption is that the rock carvers of old were carving *ships* (or whatever) on and into a surface.

What of the (back)ground? The qualities of the stone, the scorings made by ice sheets, the rolling surface, and the mosses, grasses, lichens, are treated as secondary at best, or irrelevant. So the conservator of the image destroys the living surface to see where to paint the motif, the ship.

This is an example, a manifestation of what one can call a **fallacy of representation** – that when one experiences a phenomenon such as this rock outcrop, one is experiencing *representations* of ships.

Of course this is also associated with an iconographic and iconological impulse, a neurosis even, that one should strive to identify the representation and make sense of it. Is this a magical ship carrying the sun across the sky? A reductive and forensic impulse too – solving the riddle of the stones, finding the answer, their meaning.

But there would be no ship without the rolling living stone upon which, into which, the ship is set. The rock is an integral component of the representation. This *relationship* of figure and ground is particularly significant when one considers not the representation per se, but the *process* of carving, *attending* to tool applied to stone, the *performance* of connecting ship, circle, wheel, cup, granite, lichen, moss, grass, rain, sunshine, wind, in lifeworld allegories of ocean and heavens, movement and mobility, organic and inorganic.

Cleansing, bleaching, painting sterilizes such a living past. All the dynamic energy of assemblage and allegory, of making sense in stone is reduced to a sketchy stylized red boat with a circle floating above it.

I recall a wonderful conversation in Göteborg with Johan Ling back in 2012, presented as a lecture dialogue. A leading expert on Scandinavian rock art, Johan

is interested in expanding the scope of rock art studies. We talked of how site-specific performance might be a way of thinking about rock art. *Performance design* – I would connect this concept too with some of Tilley’s later work – treating as staging, dramaturgy, choreography these material/immaterial assemblages of motifs, actions performed with stone, sitings in the land, events and atmospheres, growth and weathering, concepts and stories.





Living stone in the early morning.

UT PICTVRA POESIS (Horace) – as imagery, (so too) poetics

Connie (Svabo) commented that the painting of the motifs is without poetry. Inept, uni-dimensional, kitsch. Evidencing an unthinking, though steady, hand at best. The rich, complex, living experiences of engaging-in-the-now with these remains and their milieu, the affordances they offer to various ends and purposes, including making sense and speculation, are attenuated, atrophied.

A poetry of imagery is, in contrast, a *poetics* of connection, association, elaboration – processes and performances.

There's no way back – time and metamorphosis

The rock carvings on the way to Hammersholm are recently discovered. Many more likely lie concealed or have become unrecognizable (Mogens Jensen mentions more ships discovered only recently when he slipped on the wet surface and caught sight of them in an unusually oblique view). As one approaches Madsebakke from Allinge one passes a great cavity in the granite. This was once two carved surfaces, again with many ships. They were removed with explosives in 1884 and 1893 by the landowner.

Actually visiting the sites makes it clear that the possibility of a phenomenological engagement with these sites-in-the-land, with “what was” in prehistory is both minimal and wrong-headed. Too much is simply lost and transformed. And what remains is metamorphic – changing with weather, erosion, entropy, as well as innumerable cycles of growth of leaves of grass, of the slow-growing lichens in the grain of the granite. So one might not come up with a story of the prehistoric past. Instead one might describe the details of a repertoire of scenarios that one might still appreciate today. It is the life of things that endures and remains with us now as an invitation to such a poetics.



Becoming ocean.





Here were once many more carvings in the granite – blown up, quarried away, shipped out.

Postscript August 11

But one may well ask – Enough of this talk about the way we encounter these fascinating remnants of a lost Bronze Age world – what are the carvings actually about? Ships carrying the sun across the sky in a long lost mythography of a Bronze Age religion?

Tilley's phenomenological engagement with remains such as these carvings on Bornholm involved, for me, a tension between the necessary contemporaneity of our experiences of remains and their somehow belonging to a distant prehistoric past that we seek to know [Link]. Tilley's bridge between past and present was embodied experience that the contemporary archaeologist shares with people in the past, but the past remained separate from the present, even as an exotic other land. As

mentioned, the fascination with sites such as Madsebakke is often premised upon a will to know, to document traces such that they might be seen and known, such that the representations may be identified, the past-as-puzzle forensically solved (the crossed wheel devices as sun symbols, for example). My emphasis upon the poetics of archaeological engagement aims to bypass this tension in an argument that the past per se has no definitive meaning or indeed existence that we might seek to know, but that doesn't mean people haven't acted as if it does. A archaeological poetics does not entail a focus upon contemporary "reception" at the expense of the "past-in-itself". It means that the archaeological project is not to tell stories **of** the past, but to work **with** remains, to make connections – to tell stories with and not of the past [[Link to recent discussion about Lew Binford](#)].