The Mediality of Rock and Metal
Exploring Formal Analyses of Rock Art through Graffiti

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Abstract
This paper explores a formal method of analysing cumulative visual expressions that do not rely on representation or iconographic mimesis. A study of a tagged roller shutter in central Stockholm revealed a number of non-discursive aspects of the visual culture of the graffiti scene. The ways in which the taggers adapted when the shutter became full stress aspects of visibility and indicate a hierarchy of the available space. That overlapping of tags was avoided suggests that older tags were respected even though the available area was limited. A parallel case study was performed on a Bronze Age rock art panel. The rock art, which is quite different from graffiti in most respects, nevertheless shows similar concerns with hierarchical space, horizontal distribution, and respect for previous images, and an ontological status of being something more than mere images.

Art in archaeology and the mediality of art
The relation between art as concept and practice has a multifaceted history in archaeology (Leroi-Gourhan 1967; Chittock and Valdez 2016; Bailey 2017; Robb 2017; Sjöstrand 2017). Art as concept varies between disciplines and has undergone several proclamations of its death as well as attempts at resurrection over the years. In archaeology, visual expressions are either seen as direct reflections of culture or as symptoms of an overarching ideology or cosmology (Aldhouse-Green 2004). The lion’s share of interpretations of prehistoric art tend to follow the iconological scheme of Panovsky in which the meaning of art is supposed to be understood from its social context. Especially in post-processual archaeologies, the meaning of an artistic expression is to be found ‘behind’ the image. A common theme for culture-historical, processual, and post-processual archaeology alike is the focus on imagery as representative, as pictures of something else. Art may be abstract, but even the most simple visual expressions tend to be translated or decoded as schematic or symbolic representations of more complex features. Art is only rarely allowed to be a material expression in itself. In recent archaeology and anthropology, however, the imagery as materiality has been explored (Gell 1993, 1998; Gosden 2001; Herva 2004; Jones 2006, 2015; Cochrane and Russell 2007; Osborne and Tanner 2007, Tilley 2008, Back Danielsson et al. 2012, Tilghman 2014; Fahlander 2012, 2015; van Eck 2015; Balm 2016; Sapwel 2016). In this research, the mediality¹ of imagery is stressed but does not by any means replace iconographical approaches. It adds a necessary material dimension to the imagery and allows for certain generative abilities. However, despite this renewed interest in art as a process and material articulation, there is little consensus as to how to approach visual expressions as materialities. When it comes to methodology there is a significant lack of useful methods (Cochrane and Russell 2007; Jones and Díaz-Guardamino 2017). Recently Peircean semiotics has been advocated as a tool to mediate between the materialist and the idealist approaches (Creese 2017; see also Sjöstrand 2017). It is, however, unclear in what way semiotic models actually contribute to the interpretation. Besides a number of individual case studies, there are not yet any broader attempts to formulate a more generalised and formal way of approaching art as both image and materiality.

In this text I will explore a fairly straightforward, non-representational way of understanding art in terms of material modes of visual articulation. In particular, I will use horizontal stratographies in order to understand visual expressions of rather different kinds. A vital part of the method consists of establishing how new additions relate both to previous images and to the mediality of the canvas. This enables the possibility to study variations, alterations, additions and displacements over time that provide a basis for a discussion about important aspects of the visual expression. The key point is that this can be achieved without any preconceived ideas of what the imagery is supposed to depict or symbolise. I take inspiration from a special type of visual expression, graffiti, in order to make sense of a much older and different visual mode of expression: Bronze Age rock art. There have been a few suggestions over the years relating rock art to a kind of prehistoric graffiti, but there are very few cases where such an epithet may apply. On the contrary, Bronze Age rock art is quite far from what we normally associate with graffiti. The intentions, mediality, motifs and role of the art in society differ quite greatly between the two. Rock art is a rather time consuming enterprise even for cutting small figures in the bedrock. The imagery is far from being scribbled down, on the contrary, aspects

¹ “Mediality” refers to the material and physical properties of the image, while ‘materiality’, which covers much the same aspects, also includes the potential generative and social aspects of the image as an actant (Belting 2005; Fahlander 2013, 2018).
of size and complexity are crucial because every detail of an image has to be tediously hammered out. Modern-day graffiti can also be time-consuming and is certainly carefully planned and performed, but when it comes to simpler motifs and tags, it only takes a few seconds to spray. However, when discussing visual art as an active and integrated materiality in social relations, the two forms of visual expression may actually be mutually informative. Both can be studied in terms of modes of visual expression, that is, the different ways in which the art relates to their respective material ‘canvas’, available space, and how new additions are adjusted to older ones. Since such modes often are intuitive, unspoken and not particularly formalised, the analysis must be based on the mediality of the art (Belting 2005).

By analysing the horizontal stratigraphy of art it is possible to establish important information about the meaning and purpose. The first case study concerns an analysis of a tagged roller shutter in central Stockholm, Sweden. When studied in detail, the graffiti revealed a number of key elements that exposed certain non-discursive aspects of the practice, for instance, the ways in which the taggers solved difficulties that emerged when the shutter became filled with tags. Despite an apparent hierarchy of space, overlapping of tags is typically avoided and instead other creative ways to fit new tags within an already full canvas are explored. The study of the shutter spawned ways of thinking about the production of outdoor art that inspired ways of understanding some underlying principles regarding prehistoric rock art. A parallel case study was performed on a Bronze Age rock art panel about 100 km north-west of the modern city of Stockholm. By employing the experiences from the study of the shutter concerning hierarchical space, horizontal stratigraphy and the untouchable status of previous tags on the shutter, a formal way of interpreting rock art emerged that helped to make sense of the seemingly random distribution of individual motifs on the rock.

When fop met BZT: a modern example of cumulative visual culture

In a busy street, Swedenborgsgatan, in the heart of the Swedish capital of Stockholm, a small convenient store uses a roller shutter during the closed hours. As in many other cities, such shutters are favoured by graffiti artists and are rapidly filled with graffiti. In the photo taken in 2012 we see that the shutter is densely filled with combinations of letters in different styles and colours (Figure 1). The acronyms, or ‘tags’, are codified signatures, which normally consist of three to five letters or digits (Jonsson 2016: 3). Since graffiti is an illegal and underground movement we have few clues to their meanings or purposes. The main purpose of tagging is to claim a part of the graffiti ‘scene’. It is however, more that just an emblematic statement, but also involves a wide range of aspects such as ‘respect’ in terms of artistic and stylistic equilibrism (Kimvall 2015; Jonsson 2016).

However, we do not need to know what the tags represent to study how the shutter gradually became filled with graffiti. For example, we can study how different tags relate to each other and the surface, and despite lack of knowledge about graffiti culture, still reach some conclusions about what is important in this specific visual culture. First of all, it seems that the taggers have been keen to stick to the space of the shutter; only one tag is placed outside (BZT.) on the slider holder on the left. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that previous
tags generally are respected. When adding new tags, their shape and size are generally adapted in order to avoid superimposing earlier tags. Because the tags are in different colours, it is easier for us to establish a horizontal stratigraphy, that is, the sequence in which the tags have been added. Even though we cannot grasp the full process in detail it is possible to identify at least three distinctive phases. We can see that it started with the more orange, grey and yellow tags in the central area of the surface. Then, additional tags (red and black) have been added around the previous ones in a second phase, so that in the last phase, only small additional tags could be squeezed into empty spaces between the older ones. A particularly interesting tag is the two pink-coloured ‘Wt’ tags found at the bottom of the right and left corners of the shutter. They probably belong to phase two as they seem to adapt to the tags of the first phase and are superimposed by the aesthetically less expressive black tags (fop). It is interesting that the size of the tags is maximised while still retaining some expressionism in style within the available space between previous tags. Because the ‘Wt’ tags use the same colour they are likely to have been added on the same occasion. The duplication of the tag can be interpreted as a way to compensate for the peripheral location in the low corners of the shutter.

It is interesting to note that one tag (fop), which in terms of style more resembles plain text, in the lower right corner apparently belongs to a category of tags that differ from the others. It is most likely to have been added late during to the last phase. The fact that it flagrantly superimposes earlier tags and is partly sprayed outside the ‘canvas’ gives the impression that it was created by someone who is not part of the same collective as the rest and/or does not share the same stylistic and formal ideal. Without any profound knowledge of the tagging scene it is tempting to view the fop tag as something inspired by the previous ones, but added by someone who did not understand the visual culture of tagging. In that way, being a late addition, it can also be interpreted as a beginning of a breach of tradition where style or respect for previous tags is no longer important.

Another example of a deviation from the norm is the previously mentioned peripheral location of ‘BZT’. A small BZT. tag is also found squeezed in between older tags in the centre of the shutter. Perhaps the tagger was not satisfied with such a modest size and felt the need to make a visually much bigger tag to the right of the shutter. Whether this actually was the case or not is it still interesting that the tag is as big as the sliders would allow. It can be interpreted as a way to compensate for barely getting any space on the central surface, as well as being a strong example that the respect for the older tags actually is so great that you either squeeze a small tag where there is room or put it on the side. This particular instance indicates both the importance of size (visibility?) and a hierarchical division of the space of the main ‘canvas’ (the shutter). Furthermore, it is also notable that a similar surface of similar material and colour was chosen for the larger BZT. tag. It could be seen as an argument for the significance of the mediality of the canvas. Both the ‘fop’ and the ‘BZT.’ tags are indications of a synchronous variability that can be informative about the world in which graffiti is a part. The graffiti of the shutter is obviously not the result of a single event, nor is it a planned composition, but something that emerged over time, created by different groups of individuals sharing the same forms of expression but differing in terms of visual culture.

The horizontal analysis is able to infer several interesting aspects concerning the tagging practice without any concern for or any knowledge of what the characters mean or represent. An informed survey would surely add another layer of information, but the point here is that the tags can be discussed as material articulations without knowledge of their cultural context or meaning. What can be learned from the study is a formal method based on how different visual expressions relate to each other and a surface over time. By creating such a horizontal stratigraphy, we can identify both patterns and differences. Overall, one can assume that the tags have been added in different events, probably over a short period of time (a couple of months). There are clear indications that a tag represents something other than simple vandalism in the way that the older ones are respected when new ones are added (see also Kimvall 2015). We can assume that the available surface is hierarchically divided, with the central zone being the most preferred. The size of the tags is obviously significant since most tags maximise the available space. The materiality of the ‘canvas’ also seems to be significant, as the peripheral BZT. tag shows by its creative solution to a problem of resources (available space). Last but not least, the surface seems to have used by different individuals/groups that do not fully share the same visual culture, as was evident from a number of tags that do not follow suit. In addition to this, we can also reflect on what these visual expressions do to us and how they may affect the environment they are situated in. What tangible social effects do they have and what role do they play in their contemporary milieu? On a more general level, it is undeniable that graffiti have generative properties. Graffiti and tags are not just an artistic expression and a statement; in some cases they are part of gentrification processes and the general decline of an area. It is not necessarily the graffiti that is the source of such a development, but it can certainly be part of such a structuring process that has little to do with the artists’ intentions or with the meaning of the figurative content. In this particular case, the filling of a public area with expressive tags, they seem to have
inspired amateurs who apparently stand outside the graffiti culture to express themselves in a similar way. This is only the first step in what can develop into a new chain of events initiated by the first tags. In most cases the story ends after such a first deviation, but in certain cases such an event may be pivotal. In some contexts, it is not impossible for such discontinuity to be the beginning of a newer tradition of tagging inspired by the previous tradition but not understanding or wanting to include everything from it.

It may be argued that this example of graffiti tagging is about signs or icons rather than about imagery and art, but I would argue that the principle is the same as with images. Without knowing what the tags represent or mean, or what ideals govern the practice of tagging public environments, it is nevertheless possible to understand something about this type of visual expression by formal analysis of how they are organised and designed. In the following, I will apply a similar method and reasoning to a prehistoric Bronze Age rock art panel in order to create a timescale and highlight contrasts and patterns in how new images relate to older ones and their rock. Through such horizontal stratigraphy it is possible to discuss difference and development and it is only when we identify such a sequence of events that we can get closer to the traditions and ideals that surround production of imagery on rock.

The art of making Bronze Age rock art

the practice of pecking images into rock panels has a long tradition in northern Europe from c. 7000 BC (Gjerde 2010: 386). In the transition from the Stone Age and the Bronze Age at the beginning of the second century BC, a modified version of rock art begun to spread also in southern Scandinavia (Malmer 1981). The array of imagery is generally restricted to a limited range of images assumed to depict, boats, weapons and tools, humans, animals, foot soles, sun symbols or wheels (Figure 2).

Bronze Age rock art research is by tradition focused on representation. The rock art imagery has consistently been understood as illustrations or reflections of cosmology, ideology, or everyday practice. This iconographical viewpoint has encouraged simplified one-to-one interpretations in which a pecked boat motif is taken as evidence for seafaring, and dense sites with many motifs automatically stand for either greater importance or the aggregation of many people. From such a perspective, rock art as visual expression thus becomes static, silent signs of a lost world. Due to a lack of a more elaborate ‘art perspective’, a boat motif becomes an image of a generalised ‘boat category’ lumped together with other images of the same category without regard to its size, level of detail, aesthetics and relations to other motifs (Figure 3).

An iconographical approach like this has been questioned in recent research in visual culture studies (O’Sullivan 2005; Khalip and Mitchell 2011; Rose and Tolia-Kelly 2012; Barrett and Bolt 2013). They underscore the key insight that imagery may have meaning and impact in other ways than as symbols or representations (Mitchell 1996, 2004). Indeed, a pecked rock art motif is also a material expression with particular properties that cannot be reduced to a representation based on the apparent pictorial content only. A vital aspect of the rock art lies in its physical form – its mediality. The rock has several important affordances and material properties (e.g. hard and resilient, static and immovable,Figure 2: Typical Bronze Age rock art from southern Scandinavia (Boglösa 73: 1). The motifs, ships, cup-marks, humans, animals, wheel crosses, and foot soles etc, are painted red for visibility. Photo by the author.

Figure 3: ‘This is not a ship’ (made by the author after ‘The Treachery of Images’ by René Magritte, 1929).
smooth and textured etc.), which are essential aspects of the image (Tilley 2008; Fahlander 2012). A material perspective on imagery is thus needed to emphasise the particular qualities that affect the way it is produced and appropriated. From such a perspective, images, mediality and practice are intertwined instead of being separate aspects. Visual expressions such as rock art can hence be considered ‘material articulations’ – something between materiality and practice.

**Rock art at Hemsta (Boglösa 131)**

Bronze Age rock art is a quite different visual mode of expression and different mediality from graffiti. The tags are made quickly but a single rock art motif can take hours to produce (Lødøen 2015). There are also significant differences between tags in the form of stylised acronyms and the more figurative rock art motifs. However, in terms of horizontal stratigraphy we need not be too concerned about such differences. Graffiti play with the style of letters, but they are still identifiable. The same goes for the Bronze Age boat motifs that also vary in style, but still are easily recognised as variations of the ‘same’ motif. When it comes to representation, both are allusive and unknown in terms of meaning. It is hardly possible to understand either of the two visual modes of expression only from decoding. A more problematic difference lies in the way we look at shutters and at the rock. The shutter is a symmetrical, flat surface, which causes only minor distortion when transformed to a digital photograph. The far from flat, slightly elevated rock face, however, is much more difficult to capture. There is no obvious angle from which to properly view rock art. In the following study I use both photographs from different angles (Figures 4 and 5) and a flat, two-dimensional tracing (Figure 7). The photographs show different aspects of the rock in terms of colours, cracks and

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**Figure 4:** The uppermost part of the Hemsta impediment. Photo by Einar Kjellén (Enköping county museum id: 131.1QqCBekHemsta)

**Figure 5:** Another view of the same panel. Photo by Einar Kjellén (Enköping county museum id: 131.1LlCBshHemsta)
grooves. The motifs themselves are filled with paint in order to show up and are thus in many ways a matter of interpretation. Some of these aspects are also captured in the two-dimensional documentation. It does not register all the cracks and grooves of the rock visible in the photos, but illustrates variations in the pecking depth of the motifs (three grades of grey), which is an important parameter together with style and size.

The panels in question are situated on the Hemsta rock outcrop (Boglösa 131:1) in the parish of Boglösa about 100 km west of the modern capital of Stockholm in central-eastern Sweden. Hemsta is a 45 × 30 m large rock outcrop that due to land-lift rose out of the sea around 2500 BC as a result of the general land-lift process. It soon became filled with rock art during the second millennium BC, which comprises most of the common Bronze Age imagery. Of the roughly 670 individual motifs on the rock, 200 are classified as ‘ships’, 88 as ‘animals’, and 32 as ‘humans’ together with a few ‘foot soles’, ‘circles’, and about 240 cupmarks (Broström and Ihrestam 2016). The images on this outcrop were accumulated over a period up to a thousand years, which makes it necessary to study each panel individually. In this text I will consider a panel with mainly boat motifs located at the higher parts of the outcrop (Figures 4 and 5).

If we look more closely at the photograph (Figure 4) we can see that the imagery actually is arranged in three panels delimited by the natural cracks and grooves in the rock. A long horizontal crack limits a lower part from an upper. The latter is further divided into two panels by two vertical cracks. It is these two panels I will analyse in this text. Bronze Age rock art tends to be adjusted to the cracks and grooves of the natural rock and in this case we can also note that the available area has been filled quite efficiently. For example, the column of boat motifs to the right becomes successively larger following the outline of the crack. This close relation to the microtopography of the rock is typical for Bronze Age rock art and constitutes an important aspect of the imagery. In the uppermost area we find a group of extra deep and large cupmarks and in Figure 4 it is easy to see how the boat images are situated as high up as possible on the outcrop. In the left column, they are placed close to the ridge and a dark groove in the rock. The elevation is not likely to be a matter of visibility since the rock face only is slightly curved. It seems, however, that the orientation of the rock art was significant as there are no images on the other side of the ridge.

Already at this point we have some interesting clues to what is important about the rock art, but before we continue to distinguish different phases in which individual motifs were added, we need to identify a relevant number of different types of boats that roughly correspond to the different tags in the graffiti example. (Figures 6a and 6b) First there are the large symmetrically designed boats sharing the same alignment and arranged in two columns (A). Their prows are slightly turned inward and the hull is hammered out. The boat at the top of the right column is similar in type to the others, but is contour-cut instead of being hammered out. In all other respects this is nonetheless of similar type to the other type A motifs. Below the two columns are a few similar types of motif but these are smaller and have a much thinner hull, almost single-lined (B). Their prows are also extended but more as straight lines that sometimes are turned outwards. The boat between the two columns is a special case that falls between the types. The hull is almost single-lined, but with its prows clearly turned inwards. I will come back to this particular motif later. Finally there are also the two delicately pecked boats with hatched hulls (C). These are clearly different from the other types and in fact a rare sight in Bronze Age rock art. To these motifs we can also add a group of six zoomorphs (D) and the cluster of cupmarks (E).

There have been many efforts to sequence Bronze Age rock art motifs in relation to stylistic elements. Especially the common boat motif has been subject to several attempts to create a typology. Some are based on similar carved motifs on datable bronze objects (Kaul 1998) while others proceed from the altitude of typical styles in relation to the shoreline displacement (Sognnes 2003; S dicedsonen 2005; Ling 2008). In general, prows that are turned inward are considered an early feature while prows turned outward are later. This is not an exact science, however; there are lots of hybrid forms that comprise both early and late features. There
are also indications that some prow and keel extensions may in some cases be later additions or modifications of older motifs (Milstreu 2017). The cup marks are known from the Mesolithic to the present day and cannot be dated otherwise than by shore displacement. In this particular case, the cupmarks are situated on the highest point of the outcrop and cannot be older than c. 2500 BC when the rock surfaced out of the sea for the first time. There are no typologies at hand for the simple zoornorphs of the southern tradition, which can be from either the Stone Age or any period of the Bronze Age. In this particular area the type A boat motif has been typologically dated to Montelius period I and the type B to period II (Ling 2013: 48, 85). Type C is something quite different from the normal Bronze Age style of a boat. It is symptomatic that one of them actually stretches across the vertical crack and that the other one is merged with one of the zoornorphs. A fluid relation between the boat and animal motifs is a common phenomenon in Stone Age rock art (Sjöstrand 2011). Since they are superimposed by both type A and B motifs of the Early Bronze Age, it is likely that these are among the oldest motifs on the rock, perhaps even Neolithic.

Three relative phases

From these general observations is it possible to establish a rough sequence of events and the order in which the different motifs have been added to the rock. It is not possible to make a stratigraphy of the same detail as is the case with the graffiti tags, but not far from it. In all there are at least three identifiable phases of activity on the panel. In the first phase (I) we have the superimposed boats with hatched hulls (C). Because one of them is merged with one of the zoornorphs (D) it is likely that these belong to the same phase. The extra long and inward-turned prow extensions are also an indication that they represent an early type of boat motifs. Since the highest part of the outcrop seems to be the most prominent space, it would not be far-fetched to argue that the cupmarks also are among the first additions to the outcrop. A few of them are extra large and deep-cut and may have been refurbished several times while the less deep cupmarks may have been added over time.

The next phase (II) of motifs consists of the deep-cut boat motifs (A) that are strictly arranged in two columns separated by a crack in the rock. The distinct design, alignment, and depth constitute a great contrast to the previous delicately pecked boats with hatched hulls (C). The dominant style of the superimposition indicates that it was very much intentional and perhaps even an example of an iconoclash: a statement of power and domination (Latour 2002).

The last phase (III) concerns the type B boats. One of these is also superimposed on one of the hatched boats and is thus later than those. What is evident is that type A and B motifs seem to avoid superimposing each other. The tricky question is to determine how they relate to the type A boats. In the two-dimensional documentation (Figure 7), a fifth boat of type B is identified in the middle of the right column. Note how its prow seems to be adjusted in order not to interfere

Figure 7: A two-dimensional documentation of the panel from Hemsta (Boglösa 131) that also captures variations in cutting depth. Note the additional fifth boat motif in the middle of right column. Modified from original documentation by Broström and Ihrestam (2016).
with the previous motifs. It gives the impression of being inserted between two type A motifs rather than vice versa. This suggests that the type B is indeed later than type A – although probably added fairly close in time.

The order of the three suggested phases fit reasonably well with the general typology of the boat motif in the area. However, two questions remain: one concerning the aberrant boat motif between the two stacks and whether the columns of motifs grew from the bottom up or vice versa; and if one stack was produced before the other or they were made in parallel to each other. In previous texts (Fahlander 2012, 2013), I have suggested that the boat motifs of the two columns were added from the bottom up. However, considering the seeming importance of the highest point of the rock outcrop, it is perhaps more likely that the columns expanded from the top down. It is interesting that the two columns are not fully symmetrical but also comprise a certain level of stylistic variability. In the left column there is one motif with considerably thinner hull and in the right there is the contour-cut motif on top. The apparent similarity in design of the prows thus supports the general conclusion that the motifs of the stacks are fairly contemporary (from months to a couple of years), but not produced in a single event (Fahlander 2018). A similar kind of reasoning may also apply to the odd boat between the two stacks. Stylistically, because of the inward-turned prows, it would be of an earlier date than type A and B, but later than type C since it superimposes the prow of one of the type C boats. If we take the alignment and its divergent direction into account (the same as the two type C boats), it actually may belong to the earliest phase. This is also supported by the fact that the prow of the top boat of the left column actually seems to have been adjusted in order not to superimpose the keel of the boat in question (see enhancement in Figure 5).

The three rough phases can certainly be divided further into several sub-phases, but that would mean extending the data further than what it really can account for. In this context, a distinction between an early, middle, and a later phase is sufficient to say something about the practice of making rock art.

The ontological status of rock art as image and materiality

So what can be learned from this succession of events? The Hemsta sequence reveals, as in the case of the tagged shutter, a few clues of what elements were considered important in Bronze Age rock art. I have already mentioned a similar hierarchy of space as in the case of the roller shutter. In this case, however, it is the highest part of the outcrop that is most prominent – and more specifically: the panel facing south-west. The photos show how the boat motifs are crowded in this area even though there is plenty of space further down the rock. The type B motif inserted in the right column is an example of this spatial emphasis. Note also that there is no rock art on the northern side of the ridge. The direction is apparently of importance here.

During the Early Bronze Age, the Hemsta outcrop was a small islet in the outer part of a shallow bay, which may indicate why this direction towards the open sea was important. After all, being an island, the only way to reach Hemsta during the Early Bronze Age was by boat (Fahlander 2013).

Another typical topic is that all motifs, besides the first type C boats, respect both earlier images and the cracks in the rock. In the case of the graffiti tags this was interpreted as respect for the other groups on the ‘scene’. It is not likely, however, that the rock art boat motifs represent different groups of people. The differences in style are really too insignificant to work as totem insignia or emblematic signs. It is, however, simultaneously apparent that the rock art was not a product of one group sharing the same culture, ideology or cosmology. There is a certain level of competition here over the most prominent part of the Hemsta rock. There are also certain differences in design, alignment and relation to the microtopography of the canvas, the rock, between the first and the two latter phases. The fact that the motifs of the two main phases (I and II) generally respected earlier motif and natural cracks in the rock suggests that they may be more than just imagery. Considering the mediality and the time-consuming practice of making the motifs and their apparent durability, we may rather suspect that they were produced this way, using this medium, in order to last. In this respect they differ from the earliest, possibly Neolithic type C boats. This could indicate a change in the ontological status of the boat motif.

It is also interesting, and probably significant, that the relatively long prows of the boat motifs apparently were considered especially important. It would otherwise have been much simpler just to make them shorter in order to fit the available space between cracks and earlier motifs. Instead they are bent in different ways to fit. This is one small indication that the motifs were not depictions of real boats per se, but rather a special kind of feature of which extended keels and prows were significant elements. We have no means to know whether such objects actually existed in reality or in myth since there is no comparable material (the known Bronze Age vessels are either dug-out canoes or rather flat and square-shaped boats without pronounced prows or keels). Whether or not the rock art motifs are to be considered ‘art’ is a matter of definition, but what becomes clear from the study is that they are as much objects as they are images.
Summary: the art of metal and rock

It has been argued that the study of prehistoric art needs to consider issues of mediality to a higher degree. In order to study visual expressions as more-than-representative, a formal method of horizontal stratigraphy has been applied inspired by modern-day graffiti. By studying how new elements relate to older ones and the mediality of the ‘canvas’, it is possible to identify interesting information about the motifs themselves, but also about the social circumstances in which the imagery was produced and used.

In contrast to the short-term accumulation of tags on the shutter, the Bronze Age rock art of the Hemsta panels comprises a considerably longer time frame. However, the accumulative character of both graffiti and rock art link the two visual expressions in a way that goes beyond their meaning, purpose and representation. The graffiti tags consist of a series of letters and characters that may or may not constitute acronyms or simply chosen to look ‘cool’. In that way they are as much images as a rock art boat motif. They are nonetheless easier to categorise, ‘BZT.’ Is the same whether it is spelled horizontally or vertically, in capitals or in lowercase. It is not obvious, however, that all boat motifs should be treated as ‘the same’. We need to carefully consider details such as the style of the keels and prows, the manner of the hull as well as other details such as size, symmetry and other elements such as ‘crew strokes’ and keel extensions etc. If graffiti tags are emblematic signs of groups on the graffiti ‘scene’, the rock art motifs are clearly something different. They show no indications of being emblematic, but are probably a quite different type of material articulation. Given the mediality of the rock and what that implies in terms of permanence, immobility and time-consuming production, the rock art is perhaps more related to e.g. magical purposes, for instance, a kind of votive offerings, than part of a type of socio-material communication in a similar way to the graffiti tags (Fahlander 2018).

A vital part of the horizontal method consists of reconstructing how new elements relate both to previous images and to the mediality of the ‘canvas’. This is a kind of microarchaeological approach that instead of seeking parallels or analogies it digs deeper in detail (Fahlander 2003). Horizontal stratigraphies also enable a time depth and the possibility to study variations, alterations, additions and displacements over time on a smaller timescale than typological chronologies allow. They can also be employed in order to explore the potential agency of the imagery, that is, how it can inspire to action, for example, by a particular design or placement. An example of this is found both in the graffiti example and in the rock art case. Apparently the first tags inspired others to follow, which in the end also evoked responses from individuals outside the ‘scene’ (the fop tag). A similar scenario is also found on the Hemsta rock, where the early, atypical type C boat motifs were intentionally superimposed by large and deep-cut images in a different style. In this case too the first motifs (C) can be argued to have encouraged the production of new images (A) which also at a later point were followed by others (B) with apparently less understanding of both the visual format of stacking and the hierarchy of space.

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