

The Dancing Stone

by Fiona Colbert (Bournemouth University)

During the Bronze Age a number of foot soles (depicting the shape of feet as though they were clad in shoes) were laboriously pecked into the surface of a large bedrock protrusion dubbed the 'Dancing Stone' in Fåglum in Sweden. Why? Scandinavia is of course well known for its prehistoric rock art, and a huge range of academic theories have been suggested to explain this.

Are the panels part of a wider, culturally-specific symbolic system, perhaps recounting narratives and myths? And how do they fit into the wider landscape or orient to elements of the land-, sky-, or sea-scapes around them? Representational art perhaps lends itself to these very 'visual' readings, but it's more difficult to understand those panels of rock art that, like the Dancing Stone, depict solely feet.

Deliberately pecking patterns of foot soles into rock – rather than depicting what people could see or even marking footprints on the surface of the rock in pigment – suggests the makers were more concerned with capturing and communicating some form of bodily movement across time, perhaps between groups and generations. Why? And how were people expected or desired to interact with this panel, or this place, in their future?

You only have to watch *Strictly Come Dancing* to realise that many societies, including our own, orally pass down very detailed information on specific patterns of movements. The very act of (and the time and energy involved in) pecking foot soles into rock suggests that to some extent the panel was intended to 'speak for itself' in eliciting certain movements, activities, interactions, or meanings.

We wondered, then, what would people from today do and think when faced with the pattern of foot soles from the Dancing Stone. Could that help us understand not perhaps what the panel meant but what kinds of actions it was intended to elicit?

To do this, we printed out a life-size plan of the panel, laid it out in a green-screen room at Bournemouth University, and invited people to come



The green-screen room at Bournemouth University was set up ready with the life-size printed-out foot soles; timelapse photos were taken of participants' interactions with them

and interact with it while we filmed and took notes on their reactions. No complex instructions, no additional context, just bodies and feet.

In terms of properly scientific archaeological research there are obviously lots of limitations here – most obviously, these were not Bronze Age people (in fact to date they've been largely university students studying archaeology), and a green-screen room with printed-out foot soles, rather than the feel of worked rock underfoot, is a strikingly artificial environment very different from even the modern-day environment in which the Dancing Stone is found.

That said, we've had lots of fascinating discussions about people's thoughts, as well as their movements, when they interact with the foot soles. Beyond talking about the kinds of movement represented by the soles – e.g. dancing, stepping, standing, watching – people have talked about the genders, ages, and numbers of people represented by the soles; their social relationships; and the landscapes, seasons, and weathers of actual Bronze Age encounters with the real-world Dancing Stone. We've found it an incredibly useful way of generating new ideas and directions.

Our next steps (pun intended!) are to involve more diverse participants in future work, especially trained dancers and choreographers, and to take one step at a time to see where we end up. ■