

Across Bronze Age Sweden, carved footprints point to a ritual for turning social ties into stone

May 18 2026, by Sanjukta Mondal



Examples of podomorphs interacting with the microtopography of the rock.
Credit: *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* (2026). DOI: 10.1111/ojoa.7002

Etched into the ancient rocky outcrops of southern Scandinavia and large boulders left behind by retreating glaciers are footprints, also called podomorphic petroglyphs. Some are barefoot with every toe visible, while others carry the imprint of strapped sandals.

A [recent study](#) argues that these human footprints created during the Scandinavian Bronze Age, roughly 3,700 to 2,500 years ago, were not mere art or decorative symbols because the petroglyphs weren't placed at random. They were deliberately arranged around water sources and shallow depressions where rainwater naturally gathered and flowed, and also near natural cracks and fissures, where minerals were found.

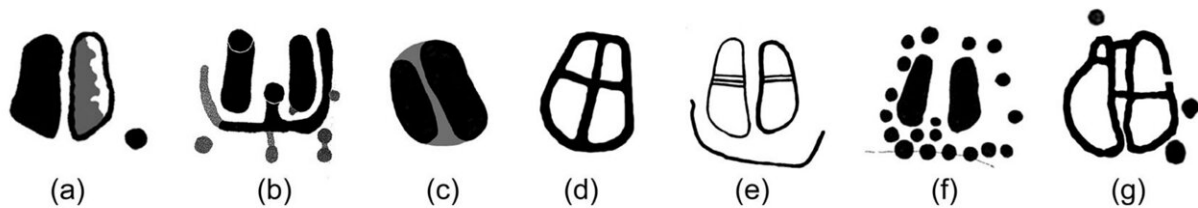
The footprints were not uniform, as some were single, some came in pairs or different shapes and sizes, suggesting they represented two different individuals. The author proposes that some solitary prints may have been created with the intention of being paired later, perhaps to symbolize marriage, agreements or friendships formed over time.

The findings are published in the *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*.

Purpose carved in stone

Scattered across southern Scandinavia are rock art that belong to a distinctive tradition dating to roughly the Nordic Bronze Age, around 1700–500 BC. Archaeological evidence suggests that these societies in the region experienced major changes in their lifestyle with the rise of [bronze metallurgy](#), which helped create long-distance trade networks across Eurasia, extending as far as the Mediterranean.

More than 90% of Bronze Age rock art is made up of simple cupmarks, while the remaining carvings depict more complex motifs such as boats, human-like figures, and animals. Then there are the podomorphic motifs—footprints or footsoles carved on rocks—which stand apart from all the above as they are almost exclusive to Scandinavia. Unlike other forms of rock art, the footsoles were also carved at roughly life size.



Different variations of 'paired' podomorphs. Credit: *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* (2026). DOI: 10.1111/ojoa.7002

Earlier studies mostly treated these carvings as symbols, paying little attention to where they were placed or how they may have been used. In this study, the author decided to look into the possible role the footprints might have played in social or ritual activity, not just what they represented.

To do so, the study followed a bottom-up approach, focusing on the physical evidence of the carvings themselves rather than starting with general theories. They closely studied central-eastern Sweden, a landscape varied enough to reveal patterns in the placement of the carvings.

Using Swedish national databases, they mapped the number, type, and location of the carvings, examining how the footprints fit into the region's broader geography and whether they were intentionally positioned near specific natural formations.

The analysis suggested that these carvings were not just pictures or religious symbols, but objects created to serve a purpose. A closer look at the footprints pointed to them being made by first leaving a wet print on the rock, then pecking or hollowing out the impression while it was still visible.

Many footprints stood alone, which the author believed may have been an open invitation for another person to later carve their own beside it. When they appeared in pairs, they were almost always asymmetric, suggesting they belonged to different individuals.

Carving them together may have been a ritual way of making a bond or agreement permanent. The study also pointed out that podomorphs likely carried more than one meaning or purpose, many of which cannot be fully understood through formal analysis alone.



Four different sites with podomorphs in Sweden. Credit: *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* (2026). DOI: 10.1111/ojoa.7002

This unique perspective into the historical imprints left in stone could help us better understand the complex social practices of those who came before us. Further investigation into similar rock art can enrich our historical knowledge and make cultural tourism and education feel more relatable.

More information: Fredrik Fahlander, A step in stone. Ontologies of podomorphic petroglyphs in Southern Scandinavian Bronze Age, *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* (2026). [DOI: 10.1111/ojoa.70020](https://doi.org/10.1111/ojoa.70020)

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