

## ROCK ART AS MORTUARY PRACTICE IN THE LATE MESOLITHIC OF WESTERN NORWAY

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This paper will try to provide answers to a number of basic but challenging questions about rock art that were asked by the editor of this volume. The questions are meant to provide answers on when rock art was produced, why it was created and to whom it was directed, and will be more precisely specified below. In order to provide appropriate answers I have chosen the Vingen site in western Norway as my point of departure, where more than 2,200 images are distributed around a small fjord on several ledges running from east to west, on numerous boulders and smaller stones, in a very dramatic and barren landscape (figure 1). The iconography is dominated by images of red deer, animal-headed staffs and anthropomorphic images, all of which are arranged into different groups of motifs (Lødøen and Mandt 2010).

### When was the rock art produced, and by whom?

This is probably the easiest question to answer, although there have been several approaches to this topic over the years. The rock art of the site has normally been understood as belonging to the hunters' art or the Northern Tradition, but has nevertheless been associated with a whole range of periods, such as different subdivisions of the Neolithic, the Mesolithic or the Bronze Age (Bøe, 1932; Hallström,

1938; Bakka, 1973; 1979; Lødøen, 2003; 2013). These chronological categorizations have come about through comparisons with other rock art sites and geological studies of past shoreline positions affecting the site in the post-glacial period, based also on the assumption that the rock art was repeatedly produced immediately above the shoreline on clean surfaces that were gradually raised by isostatic activity. I will claim that these approaches have resulted in fairly vague dating frameworks, as studies of similarities in the iconography prevent us from defining more absolute chronologies, and because we no longer know about the relationship that rock art may have had with past shoreline levels (Lødøen, 2013).

In recent years, systematic archaeological excavations have been carried out in the area and in the vicinity of several panels with rock art (figure 2). These investigations have produced a new background for achieving a better chronology of the rock art, through the extensive radiocarbon dating of cultural layers and the documentation and analysis of deposited artefacts (Lødøen, 2013). In general, both these artefacts and the cultural layers are as relative to the rock art as the ancient shoreline positions. However, in combination with independent scientific methods such as palynology and loss on ignition, new possibilities have been provided that allow us to isolate periods of human effects on the environment, which can then be correlated with both the deposition of cultural layers and the production of images, consequently helping us to delimit and define a period when the rock art was produced. Human activity at the site seems to be most consistent between 4900 and 4200 cal BC,



Fig. 1. The Vingen site and its location in western Norway



Fig. 2. One of the many excavations in the vicinity of panels and boulders with rock art, providing new information about when the rock art was produced

although there are some traces of activity from as early as 5400 cal BC (Lødøen, 2013). This corresponds strongly with analyses of vegetational development, which only documents modest human impact prior to 4900 cal BC, followed by much more substantial clearance and deforestation until 4200 cal BC, when the deciduous forest seems to have been much denser, as if the vegetation were once again sealing off activity at the site. This time span also corresponds with loss on ignition investigations, which conclude that there was less activity prior to 4900 cal BC and after 4200 cal BC (Hjelle, Lødøen 2010; Lødøen, 2013).

In addition to this evidence, archaeological excavations have documented a pecking tool in the vicinity of one of the rock art panels whose pointed end corresponds to the pecking marks that make up the lines in the images at the site. The tool was recovered from a cultural layer dated to 4580–4360 cal BC (Lødøen, 2013). The geochemistry of the pecking tool has also been analysed, and it is clear that its provenance corresponds with a diabase quarry to the south of Vingen which was used intensively during the Late Mesolithic period, and which therefore supports the cultural context for both the tool and the rock art (Lødøen, 2003; 2013). Excavations in close proximity to the rock art panels at the Ausevik site, a short distance to the south of Vingen and which has a similar type of rock art, have recently provided radiocarbon results

of deposits of a highly contemporary character (Lødøen, 2014), which therefore supports the dating evidence from Vingen. Based on the available evidence, it seems plausible to date the rock art on the basis of human activity by hunter-fisher groups in the area to between 4900 and 4200 cal BC, corresponding to the latter part of the Late Mesolithic period. Future approaches may be capable of precisely delimiting the rock art activity at Vingen. The images are very similar to each other, and so it would seem reasonable to suggest that they were produced within a much shorter time span, perhaps just a few generations, although the iconography and the area

may still have been used for hundreds of years on the basis of the iconography, which could have functioned as grand ancestral narratives for many generations.

### **Why was the rock art produced?**

Until now, most researchers have mainly focused on the animal images in the rock art, often concluding that the imagery must have been associated with hunting activity or the exploitation of resources, and arguing that the site functioned as a hunting ground or an assembly site for the exchange of knowledge between different groups. This is probably also caused by the assumption that the rock art was produced by hunters or hunter societies. However, the presence of highly significant anthropomorphic images provides us with substantial information of a completely different kind, offering an alternative interpretation of the rock art. Having studied these images in detail, I consider that all of them are representations of deceased individuals, not only dead members of the societies, but definite skeletons, and this provides us with much more information about the content of the rock art. This also seems to be the case for the human-like images at the contemporary site of Ausevik, where ribs are highly visible, palms are missing, but long fingers and toes leave little doubt that these are representations of skeletons (Lødøen, 2014).

The presence of these obviously disincarnated anthropomorphic representations clearly addresses

the fact that the societies and the producers behind the rock art must have had a clearly institutionalized awareness of skeletons. I will therefore claim that this must be associated with secondary burials or the secondary treatment of corpses, which provides us with another understanding of the rock art (figure 3). It is then more complementary to studies of burial remains, and provides us with a better insight into some of their thoughts regarding mortuary rituals and the afterlife. It is interesting to note that in Scandinavia, there seems to be a higher presence of cemeteries in the Late Mesolithic period, which may correspond with the dating of the rock art.

It has also been claimed that from the Palaeolithic and through most of the Mesolithic, mortuary rituals involved secondary rituals leading to disarticulation in their final stages (Cauwe, 1988; 2001; Nilsson Stutz, 2003). However, in the Late Mesolithic there seems to have been greater respect for the integrity of the body and a focus on the completeness of skeletons. Studies of secondary burials have also argued in favour of the soft tissue being highly associated with the soul, and that the disincarnation process releases the soul (Hertz, 1960[1907]; Block, Parry, 1982; Metcalf, Huntington, 1991). From the ethnographic record, we also know of the belief in the soul being carried from one individual to another with the help of animals or animal spirits (Guemple, 1994; Willerslev, 2007: 32, 105; Zwelebil, 2009: 44).

This also leads on to the idea of how the iconography is organized in the area. The Vingen site is characterized by a number of ledges running from east to west, and it is interesting to see how these were actively used to structure the prehistoric rock art. The images all seem to be arranged in a highly conspicuous manner, where only animals on the south-facing ledges are depicted as if they are being led to the site from the west. This motion is balanced by iconography or narratives on

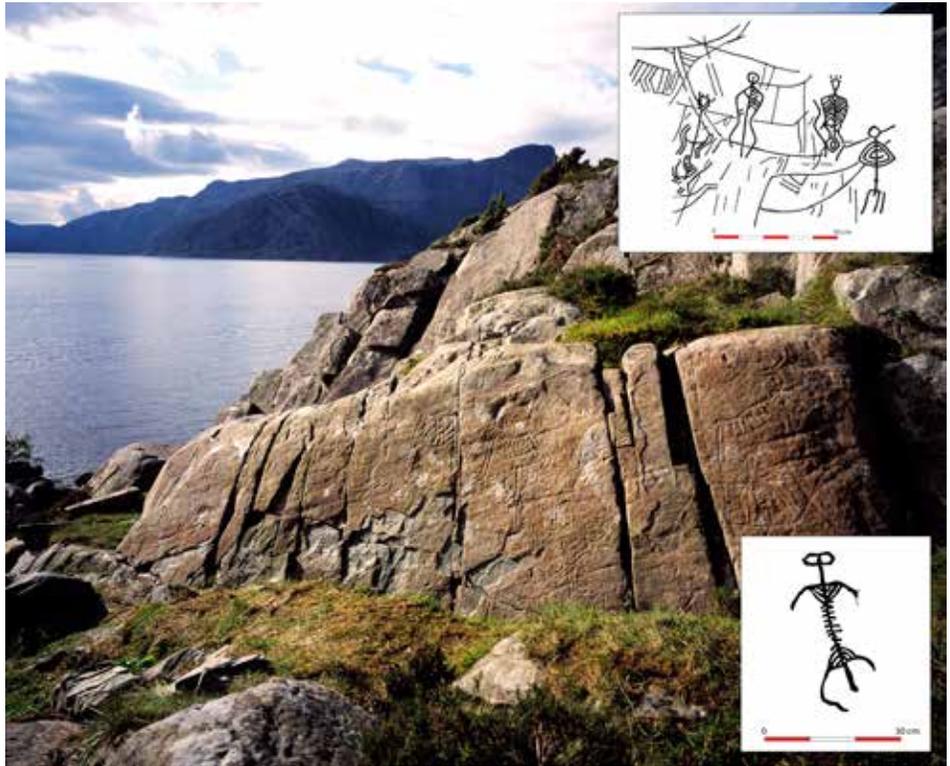


Fig. 3. Some of the skeleton and red deer images, which clearly associate the rock art with mortuary rituals

the north-facing ledges, where animals who are often accompanied by skeletons seem to be moving in the opposite direction, from east to west. I will therefore suggest that this should be perceived as a potential death cycle or soul cycle, and that the rock art deals first and foremost with past understandings of regeneration (Lødøen, in press). This way of understanding the rock art sites from this period also seems to be supported by their location in the landscape, often at the head of fjords or in the inner part of the coast, while habitation sites during this period, the Late Mesolithic, seem to be more permanently located at tidal currents on the outer coast, thus providing a steady supply of resources for these groups. This implies that the rock art sites are associated with a much more withdrawn or concealed location, which may be connected with the esoteric nature of rock art matters or cosmological activity. Perhaps they were dealing with forces that could have been harmful for the rest of the population, and were therefore kept at a distance. Based on ethnographic studies, it seems plausible to argue that these societies may have had at least a three-tiered cosmology, separating the living world from both an upper world and a corresponding underworld, where deities or death spirits may have existed. Cosmological levels

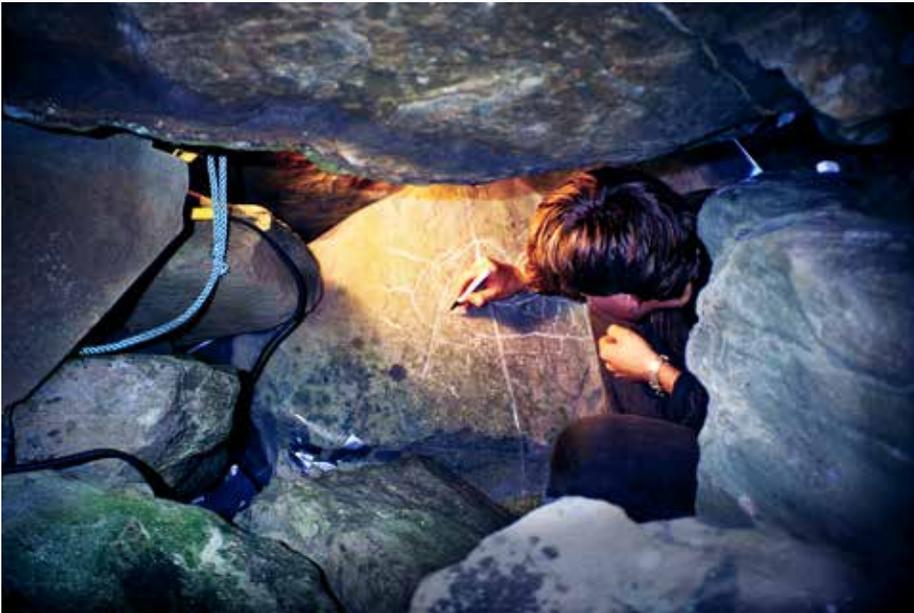


Fig. 4. The location of images in between boulders, where natural cracks and veins make up part of the iconography, and the active use of the natural topography seem to indicate that clear attention and focus were directed towards a perceived underworld.

could also have been perceived along a more horizontal orientation, thereby helping to explain why rock art sites from the hunters' tradition are often located in the interior, possibly indicating that certain death spirits were present in the interior where most of the rock art sites were located (Anisimov, 1963; Zwelebil, 2008: 43). It should also be mentioned that the latter perspective corresponds with votive deposits of axes, which seem to be highly present at least in the interior of western Norway during this period.

It is therefore interesting to see that the skeletons and red deer are highly associated with each other on the rock art panels, but also in the cemeteries in the form of antlers or bone fragments from red deer in human graves. Another factor in the Vingen site is that there are a number of features that were previously interpreted as dwelling sites, which are now partly excavated, and where more specialized activity has been documented (Lødøen, 2003; 2013). These are located in between boulders and panels with rock art, and also seem to be closely associated with skeleton images. However, their content are in a poor state of preservation. But it is interesting to consider these structures as communal tombs or similar, where bone materials from disarticulated clan or group members were stored or gathered for their afterlife. Or perhaps they may have functioned as disincarnation huts, where

the soul could have been released. The dating of the abandonment of the site is interesting, and also seems to correspond with a new epoch of disarticulation that seems to have taken place in the rest of Nordic and Atlantic Europe, using the megalithic chambers from the Early Neolithic. How western Norway relates to this is far from clear, but this could be a research topic for the future. This type of function for the inhabited depressions corresponds with the narratives for the area, in which animals are led to the site and seem to depart with skeletons. In order to answer the why question I will therefore claim that the

rock art site deals first and foremost with the souls, in combination with regenerative matters. It is not yet clear for whom the site was meant, or if the skeletons that can be identified are representations of specific individuals or more collective ideas.

#### **To whom was the rock art addressed?**

As the iconography clearly takes advantage of natural features in the rock, and many images are depicted beneath stones and inside cracks, they seem to be related to a potentially perceived underworld of the past, something that also seem to fit with votive deposits found beneath boulders that have been documented from the same period (figure 4). This seems also to fit well with interpretations claiming that the surfaces where rock art has been found were perceived as a membrane separating the world of the living from the realm of the dead or the underworld (Lewis-Williams, Dowson, 1990). The rock art therefore functioned as a means of communication, as it was both brought up from the underworld and left in the border zone between different realms. The images pecked in the surface of the rock or in the membrane could also be used to impose ideas from the living world on spirits in the underworld, and as such may have made sure that souls being released and transported from an individual were guided by the rock art to their appropriate realm.

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