

The rock art of Norway

El arte rupestre de Noruega

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ABSTRACT

Scandinavia has an abundance of rock art sites and a lengthy tradition of rock art studies, with many sites still located in relatively untouched areas. As a scantily populated part of Europe, there are less modern infrastructures in many regions, which has helped to protect the sites and keep them more authentic. Only a few of them are known to a small part of the international rock art community, as they have mainly been published in Scandinavian languages. However, this situation is gradually changing, as more of these sites become part of the archaeological discourse and are frequently published in English. Nevertheless, the area is far from being some kind of rock art “utopia”, as many of the ancient images have been influenced in one way or another by modern factors, and especially by weathering. As occurs in other parts of the world, some sites have qualities that set them apart and which are particularly important in terms of focusing on them in greater detail in the future.

RESUMEN

Escandinavia tiene una gran abundancia de sitios con arte rupestre y una larga tradición de estudios sobre el mismo. Muchos enclaves se encuentran en áreas todavía relativamente libres de la acción del ser humano. El hecho de que esta parte de Europa se encuentre escasamente poblada también supone que hay menos infraestructuras modernas en muchas regiones, lo que ha contribuido a proteger y preservar estos sitios de modo más auténtico. Una porción de ellos sólo son conocidos por una pequeña parte de la comunidad internacional

de investigadores del arte rupestre, ya que han sido descritos y publicados principalmente en lenguas escandinavas. No obstante, esta situación está cambiando gradualmente, conforme más enclaves entran a formar parte del discurso arqueológico y a ser publicados en inglés. Sin embargo, esta zona está lejos de ser una “utopía” rupestre, dado que muchos de los registros gráficos han sido afectados de un modo u otro por factores modernos, y especialmente por el desgaste natural. Como ocurre en otras partes del mundo, algunos enclaves tienen cualidades que los hacen destacar y que los hacen especialmente importantes para centrarse en ellos con mayor detalle en el futuro.

INFORMATION · INFORMACIÓN

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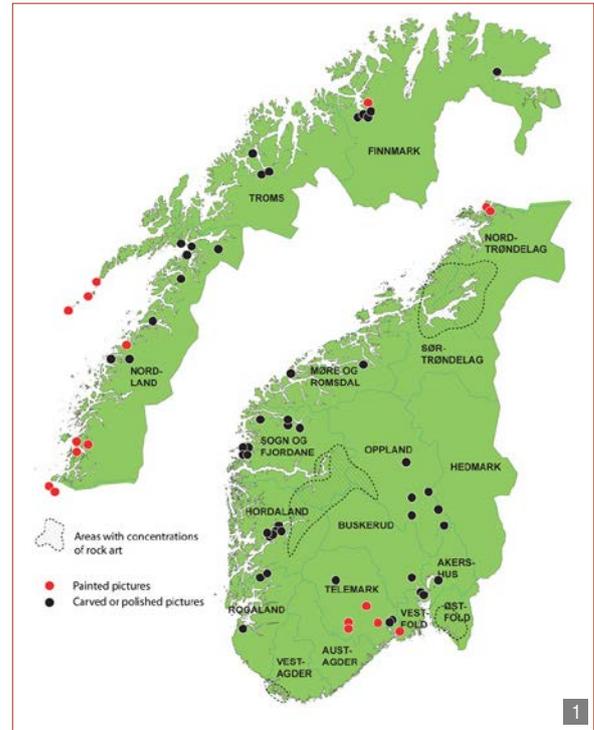
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1. THE DISTRIBUTION

This presentation offers a brief introduction to the nature of the rock art documented in western Scandinavia within the geographical and political boundaries of what is now Norway, where more than 1100 smaller and larger sites with rock art are known. Ranging from Finnmark in the North to the area of Lista in the South, they are found on the coastline, on islands, and also further inland, along fjords and riverbanks, on the shores of lakes, and in the sub-alpine and alpine areas, all the way to the Swedish border in the east. The sites vary from single images on small rocks, even portable rocks, to large numbers of panels with several hundred images. The iconography mostly consists of pecked or engraved images on panels or boulders of sandstone or granite, or paintings found beneath rock shelters or in caves. In some parts of the country there are particular concentrations of rock art, as well as major differences in both the numbers of figures found and in the type of images or motifs depicted, as if the traditions for creating rock art were much stronger in some areas than in others. Clear concentrations can be found in the counties of Østfold, Rogaland, Sogn og Fjordane, Trøndelag, Nordland and Finnmark.



2. HUNTERS AND AGRARIAN ROCK ART - NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN TRADITIONS

Scandinavian rock art is normally separated into two different traditions, generally termed hunters' and agrarian rock art, or more recently the Northern and Southern Tradition. The Northern Tradition is associated with hunter-gatherer-fishermen and generally dated to the Mesolithic and the Neolithic periods, and includes motifs of wild animals such as red deer, reindeer, elk and bears, as well as whales, porpoises and seals, in addition to human figures and abstract motifs.

This contrasts with the Southern Tradition which has been strongly associated with agricultural societies, dated to the Late Neolithic, the Bronze Age and even the Early Iron Age, and characterised by ship images, concentric ring figures as well as anthropomorphic images and cup marks. Whether the images of the hunters and the farmers represent two distinct and independent traditions, or are in some way related to each other has been a topic of interest explored by researchers for many years. Better dating procedures seem to suggest

Figure 1 · The major distribution of rock art in Norway
 Figure 2 · Example of hunters rock art at the Bøla site in Trøndelag, Middle Norway. Photographer Trond Lødøen





Figure 3 · Agrarian ship images from Hornnes, in Østfold, South East Norway. Photographer Trond Lødøen

that they are separated by considerable time differences, although this may vary between areas. Traditionally, the Northern Tradition has been associated with hunting, and frequently interpreted as hunting magic. On the other hand, the Southern Tradition has been more associated with fertility and cosmology. However, in recent years the imagery of both traditions has widely been understood as narratives of a cosmological and religious nature. The two different traditions have separate distributions, but do also coincide in particular areas. In the Trøndelag area in the middle of Norway, it is particularly striking that rock art of the Northern Tradition regularly seems to be superimposed by images from the Southern Tradition, as if the sites of the former tradition could not be left uncommented by the iconography of a more recent ideology in this region. In general, however, it seems that the hunters' rock art is more likely to be found inside fjords or at the head of smaller or larger fjord systems. In contrast to the pattern of what is claimed to be agrarian rock art or rock art of the southern tradition, it can be found on the islands along the west coast, as well as in barren landscapes where it is unlikely that agricultural activity was carried out.

3. DATING AND CHRONOLOGY

The dating of the rock art found in Norway has always been a challenge, as no methods for direct dating have proven to be successful, and the indirect methods are all hampered by a number of uncertainties. The prevailing dating method for rock art of the Northern Tradition has been shoreline displacements and the assumption that the images were pecked into clean surfaces close to the contemporary shoreline in the past. The disappearance of the ice sheet that covered Scandinavia during the last Ice Age led to isostatic uplift in the postglacial period, which constantly changed the level of the shorelines. These

shoreline displacements can be scientifically dated, and have also been used regularly to determine the age of the rock art. The idea is that uplifted areas above the shore provided access to clean panels suitable for rock art. The shoreline data therefore provides us with a terminus post quem dating of the rock art, or the earliest possible moment for the production of images related to a changing shoreline. The claimed connection between the rock art and past shorelines has been utterly legitimized by the situation for the inland distribution of imagery, where most of the figurative hunters' rock art is found in the close vicinity of water tables at lakes or rivers. It has therefore been argued that the coastal rock art originally had a similar close connection to water, and that the dating of the corresponding shorelines immediately below the images provides a convincing dating for the rock art. However, this method has been strongly debated, since the levels chosen for images in the past may have varied due to factors such as wave action, sea splash or harsh coastal conditions. Therefore, there will always be a risk that images claimed to be contemporary due to shoreline dating could be ascribed to periods that are separated by hundreds or even thousands of years. There are also a number of cases where the location of rock art has obviously taken its point of departure in veins or conspicuous structures in the mother rock, and probably not where a shoreline was located for a while in the past. The background for the dating of the Southern Tradition is somewhat better and has been dated to a larger extent with the help of artefacts. Some ship images occur on dateable bronze razors in Scandinavia that are claimed to be comparable with ships in rock art, and some of the motifs have also been found on stone slabs inside graves where other dateable material has been documented, thus providing a much better background for accurate dating.

In recent years excavations in the vicinity of rock art panels have also become more frequent, although the



Figure 4 · A herd of reindeer at the Jiebmaluokta/Hjemmeluft, World Heritage Area of Alta, Finnmark, Northern Norway. Photographer Trond Lødøen

recovery of archaeological remains at these sites could be as relative to rock art as the level of shorelines, since depositions of remains may have taken place both before and after the rock art was produced. However, combined with scientific methods such as palynology, independent data documenting human impact on the environment can be used alongside the archaeological material in order to provide a much clearer insight into past activity, and the dating of sites under research. Archaeological excavations have clearly been beneficial in attempting to ascertain the contemporary context of the rock art and consequently identifying the producers and the character of the societies behind the imagery.

4. WORLD HERITAGE ROCK ART

Within the present borders of Norway, the Alta rock art in Finnmark, Northern Norway has been listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1985. It comprises a total of five different areas where rock art of the hunters' type or Northern Tradition has been discovered, all along the shoreline and surrounding terrain at the head of the Altafjord, bearing the names Jiebmaluokta/Hjemmeluft, Storsteinen, Amtmannsnes, Transfarelv and Kåfjord. Most of the sites are represented by images that are pecked into sandstone, although the Transfarelv area contains a number of painted images. The locality was the fourth Norwegian cultural monument on the UNESCO's World Heritage List. The world heritage area represents one of the largest concentrations of rock art of the hunter's tradition in Northern Europe. Together with the rock art in Tanum, Bohuslän in Sweden, which belongs to the agricultural or Southern tradition, these

are the only Scandinavian rock art sites that have been included in the UNESCO list to date.

However, there are several other sites with a world heritage potential within our present landmass, with both unique iconography, and which represent unique sources of the past. This does not only account for the rock images themselves, but also their setting in landscapes that have not changed to any great extent, if at all, since the images were produced. Some sites also contain a number of habitation sites or graves in the immediate vicinity of the rock art that may represent the contemporary context, and which are therefore highly valuable environments in helping us to acquire a deeper understanding of the rock art, and how the imagery was used by past societies. A few of the more important or best-known sites or concentrations of the Northern and the Southern Tradition, respectively, will be mentioned below.

5. POLISHED ROCK ART OF NORDLAND

Within a limited area of Nordland in Northern Norway, a unique type of rock art is found which has no known counterpart elsewhere. Polished lines in the mother rock make up the iconography where the shape and character of the images show an astonishing naturalism. Most of the motifs are large terrestrial mammals, such as elk, reindeer and bear. Other highly impressive images feature large whales with a length of more than seven meters using an amazingly accurate perspective. Whether these large whales were perceived at sea or on the land by the people who created the images is another unanswered question, as well as how they were able to display these perspectives and such an overwhelming naturalism. Some of the images show features of exposed



Figure 5 · A frozen moment of past animal tension represented by through a polished image from Lødingen in Nordland, Northern Norway. Photographer Trond Lødøen

impressionism in their portrayal of the behaviour of the animals, and were probably meant to show movement of the naturalistically outlined images. This particular type of rock art has been dated to the Mesolithic on the basis of shoreline displacements, although there are some doubts about this. So far only eight sites have been documented where the similarities between the different locations and the selection of images are striking, and there are some compilations regarding images and potential narratives that seem to display a common codex, in which particular sets of past meaning may be hidden. Due to the striking similarities

between the sites, it has also been suggested that this type of rock art may have been produced by one single individual.

6. COASTAL CAVE ART

A number of caves with painted images have also been documented along the coast of Northern Norway, as well as a few sites in the middle of the country. The majority of the caves are produced by wave abrasion on fracture zones resulting in relatively narrow and short cave systems. Inside

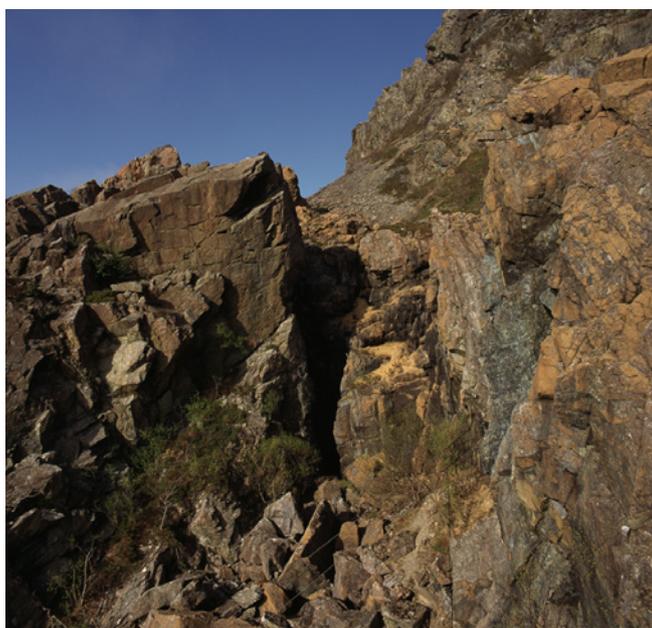


Figure 6a · The entrance of the Solsem Cave, at the island Leka, Nord-Trøndelag, Middle Norway. Photographer Arve Kjersem



Figure 6b · Anthropomorphs from the interior of the Solsem Cave. Photographer Arve Kjersem



Figure 7 · *The interior environment of the Fingal Cave, Nærøy, Nord-Trøndelag. Photographer Arve Kjersheim*

these, images of a highly homogeneous character have been documented, consisting almost exclusively of anthropomorphic images. The first site – the Solsem Cave - was documented in 1912, found by a group of adventurous children who explored the interior of the caves with the help of a small torch. This was the first cave art to be discovered in Northern Europe after caves with Palaeolithic art had been discovered in France and Spain. However, their dating is much more recent, probably from the Bronze Age, but potentially also from the Neolithic and Late Mesolithic. A few more sites were discovered during the mid-19th century, ending in an explosion of documented sites in the 1980s and 1990s, with the same repertoire of anthropomorphic images, ranging from a few to more than twenty figures. Other archaeological remains have been documented in some of the caves, which may have been connected with rituals that were performed in close association with the images. The archaeological material has also suggested a dating to the Bronze Age for most of the cave paintings. It is also tempting to understand the images, mostly of anthropomorphic figures, and the location inside rocks or in the ‘underworld,’ as being associated with mortuary rituals.

7. THE VINGEN SITE

Situated at the coast of Western Norway, the Vingen site is one of our largest concentrations of rock art, but first and foremost it is renowned for its dramatic, barren and relatively untouched landscape. Around a small fjord, more than 2,200 images of the Northern Tradition have been documented on small stones, big boulders and larger panels. Images of red deer, animal-headed staffs, geometric motifs and anthropomorphic figures are scattered throughout this environment, and re-discoveries are constantly being made. Over the last couple of decades, a number of archaeological excavations and scientific investigations have been carried out in the area, which have greatly improved our knowledge of past activity in the area. In between the rock art locations, several dwelling features have been documented and partly excavated. Inside some of these structures, smaller rocks with imagery of the same kind as elsewhere in the area have been found, emphasising the contemporaneity between the imagery and the dwelling features. Its location in a harsh coastal environment means it is difficult to reach, although this has not prevented the site from suffering a number of



episodes of vandalism. This has led to better protection of the area, and it is now only accessible with certified guides organised by the hosting municipality. This site is described in greater detail elsewhere in this volume.

8. NATURALISTIC ANIMALS AND HUNTERS' ROCK ART OF THE NORTHERN TRADITION

Larger and smaller concentrations of hunter's rock art or the Northern Tradition can be found along the coast, from the far north all the way to the south of the landmass, but seem to be more or less absent in the south western parts of the country. Most of the hunters' sites are located along fjord systems or at the head of shorter fjords, but in southeast Norway the pattern seems to be prolonged further inland and up river valleys, as if this pattern of distribution had an extension inland in this area. It is striking that most of the rock art of this tradition seems to be dated to the Late Mesolithic. In this period, habitation sites were mainly located further west along the coast. The distribution of the rock art into the interior therefore seems to mark a clear contrast to the habitation pattern, which more strongly associates the rock art with activity that



Figure 8 · Movement of animals on a south facing panel, set in slanting sunlight from the Vingen site, Bremanger, Sogn og Fjordane, Western Norway. Photographer Arve Kjersheim
 Figure 9 · Rock art of the Northern Tradition from Kløttestoss, Drammen, South East Norway. Photographer Ragnar Utne

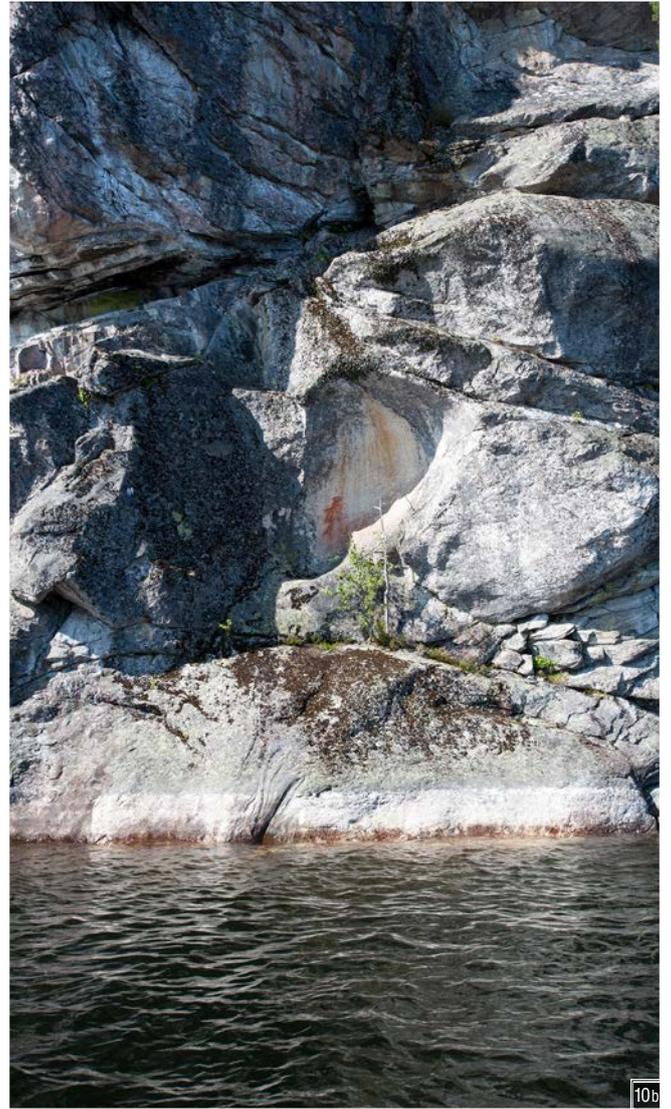


Figure 10a . *Painted images can be found closely associated with anthropomorphic or animistic features as here at Lake Nisser, Telemark, Southern Norway. Photographer Trond Lødøen*
 Figure 10b . *A painted depression underneath the anthropomorphic feature (see left). Photographer Trond Lødøen*

differs from the habitation pattern, and may therefore be more closely associated with esotericism or cosmology. Since the northern tradition are strongly linked with herds of wild animals or marine mammals with a more or less naturalistic expression, the imagery has often been associated with hunting and subsistence. Less attention has been given to the many figures of anthropomorphs and even skeletons which support the idea that these images, and these rock art sites, can be much more strongly linked to mortuary rituals and religion, something that will be explored in the future.

9. PAINTED IMAGES AND NATURAL FEATURES

Apart from the images in Transfarelvdalen, Finnmark and in the numerous caves, several other concentrations of painted images have traditionally been documented at sheltered sites along the north-western coast in the county of Møre og Romsdal, and along valleys and near lakes and river systems in the Telemark area, in the south of Norway. Greater awareness of the existence of this category – which may be hard to acknowledge and identify as the paint is faint and often faded – has led to a number of new discoveries in recent years. In many places

there seems to be a striking connection between the painted imagery and natural features, where rock formations have anthropomorphic or animalistic features. This is especially the case in the Telemark area, which shares a number of characteristics with sites in Finland and Northern Sweden. Some of these sites are also found in close association with pecked rock art of the Northern Tradition, which may suggest that the painted sites could date from the Mesolithic, although datings from the Neolithic and Bronze Age have also been suggested.

10. SHIPS AND CIRCLES OF THE AGRARIAN TRADITION

Highly synonymous with the Southern Tradition are the numerous sites with ships, foot soles, processions, and concentric circles. These sites are spread from the Southern coast of Norway along the coast and up to Trøndelag, although a few sites with ship images can be found as far north as Alta in Finnmark. At some sites we can see sun symbols above the ships which have resulted in interpretations that the ship images were capable of carrying the sun across the sky. This has led to the hypothesis that these were “day-ships”, while those with-



Figure 11 · *Night perspective of the boulder Håhaugsteinen, with ship and sun symbols, Ullensvang, Hordaland Western Norway. Photographer Arve Kjersheim*

out circular images would have been “night-ships”, something that has been claimed to have formed a part of past cosmologies. Many of the ship images are found close to Bronze Age grave mounds, on the bedrock beneath Cairns or in their immediate vicinity, and even inside grave chambers. In the latter case it also seems feasible to consider the ships as “mediums” that were capable of assisting deceased members of societies – or perhaps their souls – on their final journey, in accordance with an ancient cosmology and concept of re-birth.

In southeast Norway, on the eastern side of the Oslofjord area in the county of Østfold, there are particularly high concentrations of rock art of this tradition. Boat and ship images occur in countless variations, as well as two- and four-wheeled carts, swords, spears and axes. Human-like figures are found in great numbers, and there are depictions of palm prints and foot soles. Red deer stags, wild boar, horses, dogs and oxen are regularly featured, together with a number of tree and plant motifs. Various abstract and geometric shapes, such as rings and chequered patterns occur in great numbers, and there is an abundance of cup-marks, either individually or in groups. The area and the rock art share many similar features to the World Heritage area in

Sweden as it belongs to much of the same environment. In addition, more than 2,700 rock art panels belonging to the Southern Tradition have been found in the border region of Østfold and Bohuslän.

11. CUP MARKS

In south-central parts of Norway, there are several areas with particular concentrations of cup marks. This is one of the simplest categories of motifs in Scandinavian rock art. Their shape and character varies, although they are normally round, semi-circular depressions, with a width of up to 10 or 12 centimetres and a depth ranging from very shallow indentations to a couple of centimetres. Their simple shape, widespread distribution and lengthy period of use make cup marks the most mysterious and puzzling of all rock art motifs. Some sites have only one single cup mark on a rock surface, while others contain more than a hundred. In our area they are often randomly distributed over surfaces, but occur also in groups, in lines, or form other patterns. It has been commented that some are linked with shallow grooves, and others are incorporated into more complex figurative motifs.



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Figure 12 · Ship images from Solberg, Østfold, Eastern Norway. Photographer Arve Kjersheim
 Figure 13 · Cup-mark site at the summerfarm Hodnane from the 1940s, Luster, Sogn og Fjordane, Western Norway. Photographer Johannes Bøe

In some mountainous farm meadows, concentrations of rock surfaces or stones embedded in the earth are almost completely covered with cup marks. The densest concentrations can be found in Sogn og Fjordane, Hardanger and Valdres. Elsewhere in Southern Norwegian mountain areas, only a few sites are known, including sites in the upper parts of Gudbrandsdalen, in Østerdalen and in the western part of the Telemark area.

12. THE ROCK ART OF NORWAY SEEN FROM A WIDER PERSPECTIVE

Despite the fact that Norwegian rock art has traditionally been categorised into two basic branches – the Northern and Southern Traditions – there are a number of features and traits associated with the different sites and locations from which we can obtain a more nuanced picture. This also includes how the rock art within the present national borders not only relates to the rest of Scandinavia, but also to the rest of Europe. Several sites in Norway can find

their shared counterparts on the other side of the Swedish border. The same can be said about a number of sites in Northern and central Norway which share many of the features of images and sites found in the Kola Peninsula and even in Karelia, both in Russia. Astonishing similarities can also be found between Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish sites in how painted images are organised according to the landscape, and anthropomorphic and animistic shapes in cliffs and rock outcrops. Other similarities can be found between Western Norway and the British Isles and Ireland in the case of concentric and circular motifs. Within the same chains there are also striking similarities in iconographic motifs involving concentric imagery and red deer between Western Norway and Galicia in the Iberian Peninsula. There are also a number of other traits and features in the prehistoric rock art iconography of Norway that would benefit from a broader analytical European perspective in the future.