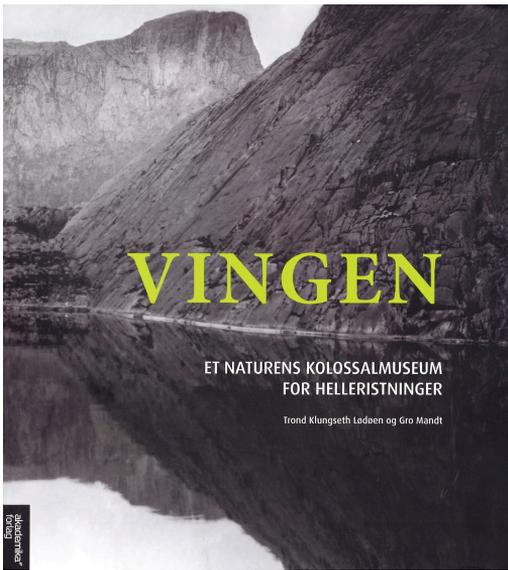


Trond K. Lødøen & Gro Mandt: *Vingen – et naturens kolossalmuseum for helleristninger*. [Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning, Serie B Skrifter, vol. 146]. Akademika, Trondheim 2012.



The rock carvings of Vingen in western Norway constitute one of the most important but, at least to my mind, also one of the most mysterious rock art sites in northern Europe. Several factors have contributed to the mystery, including the difficulty of accessing the site, baffling imagery, uncertainties pertaining to dating, and a lack of a good general overview of the more than 100-year long history of research and documentation carried out at Vingen. Johannes Bøe (1932) published a study on the site in the 1930s, but with subsequent documentation projects the number of carvings has tripled and is today over 2200. Now, Trond Lødøen and Gro Mandt of the University of Bergen, who know the site probably better than anyone else, have produced an excellent volume that unveils at least some of that mystery and makes the site accessible to researchers, even if at this stage only those who speak Norwegian. With its 460 pages of careful research, outstanding illustrations and a useful catalogue, the work

is a landmark study in Nordic rock art research. Because the authors have made a point of situating the art in an archaeological context, which is accomplished through a series of excavations, pollen analysis and 14C-datings, the book is of relevance to all who work with the Late Mesolithic of northern Europe.

The title of the book speaks of Vingen as a ‘colossal museum of rock art’. At first, this seems a bit strange, as both ‘colossal’ and ‘museum’ are words that seem out of place and even misleading in the context of hunter-gatherer rock art. However, the title finds an explanation on p. 14, where it is explained that this is how Kristian Bing – who discovered the site in 1910 – first described it in the journal *Oldtiden* a century ago. Perhaps the title is also a nod to Gustaf Hallström, the great Swedish rock art specialist of the early 20th century, who studied Vingen and published his results in the first volume of his *Monumental Art of Northern Europe from the Stone Age* (1938). Like Hallström’s book, the present volume is also of ‘monumental’ (though maybe not colossal) proportions, weighing c 2.4 kilograms. This was famously one of Christopher Tilley’s (1991) critiques of Hallström’s work – that he had created a monument to himself in the form of a stale rock art catalogue, but had failed to say much about the meaning of the art – but the same critique clearly does not apply here. Although there is a catalogue, the present volume is a product of a very different era – and perhaps different kind of scholars – and is not afraid to speculate on meaning.

The book is divided in two sections, the first section (Chapters 2–7) consisting of the actual text, and the second section of the catalogue. Section one is an exploration of the site and its history of investigations. The authors examine (Chapter 2) the special features of the surrounding landscape, and consider the various natural phenomena (storms, soundscape, shifting waterfalls, etc.) that make an impression on contemporary visitors and may go some way towards explaining why this particular fjord was chosen for carving. They also look at the range of figures, which consist mainly of red deer, ‘animal-headed staffs’, geometric patterns and anthropomorphic images,

and present a good discussion (Chapter 3) of the history of discoveries and fieldwork at the site, enlivened by old photographs and other documentary material. Chapter 4 relates the administrative efforts to protect, document and monitor the site.

In Chapter 5, the authors review the different interpretations offered to the carvings over the years, with the aim of situating them in the varying theoretical frameworks of 20th century archaeology. The familiar theories of hunting magic and fertility cult are there, but given the complexity of the site, it comes as no surprise that there is little consensus among researchers. In their previous publications, the authors have likewise presented their own ideas concerning the meaning of the carvings, with Mandt exploring gender theory and Lødøen discussing, among other things, the notion of the rock as a membrane between the worlds and Vingen as a site of mortuary ritual. One of the great merits of the book is that in spite of this background, neither of the authors have put great emphasis on their pet theories, but present a balanced discussion that does not aim to provide an answer to everything. This is a wise decision in a book that is set to become a standard reference work on one of the main centres of northern rock art.

The same chapter also discusses the dating of the site, which alas cannot be worked out using shore displacement chronology. Previous estimates have thus been mostly based on stylistic comparison and have ranged from Late Mesolithic (Egil Bakka) to Neolithic (Eva Walderhaug), Bronze Age (Gustaf Hallström) and even Iron Age (Anders Hagen). This lack of a reliable basis for dating has obviously been crippling to any attempts to interpret the site, and the only way out of the impasse has been through excavations carried out mainly by Lødøen. These excavations have revealed a series of dwelling features apparently related to the carvings, find material that included pecking tools, and a series of radiocarbon dates that strongly suggest a principal carving period between 5000 and 4200 calBC – Late Mesolithic, that is.

In order to understand the formation of the cultural landscape at Vingen, the authors proceed to discuss (in Chapter 6) the later history of land use at the site and its surroundings. Although remote, the fjord has been inhabited by farmer-fishermen for centuries, and its surroundings feature Neolithic rock art, Bronze Age cairns and

other remains from the prehistoric and historic periods. Finally, in Chapter 7, the authors present their own reflections on the site, its mysteries, and its future.

Section two (or Chapters 8–10) presents the archaeological source material – consisting mainly of tracings, of course, but there is also an overview of the excavations carried out at the site. The tracings have been made over the decades by numerous different people, but have now been digitized in a uniform manner, and a system of referencing has been devised for organizing the large body of material. This is no doubt the most important accomplishment of the book: making all of this varied material available at a glance, and providing a guide to a site that is confusing and widely spread out in the landscape. The carvings of Vingen are found scattered over a considerable area on various rock panels, boulders and smaller stones – sometimes even hidden in little cavities formed by boulders – making it difficult to get any general impression of the site. For that, you really need a volume like the present one.

Although the 2200 or so carvings at Vingen are impressive and their proper presentation requires space, what really justifies the size of the book is the dazzling natural setting in a small fjord surrounded by steep mountains, screes and waterfalls. Tilley chose to spend a period of time in a small cabin at Vingen, writing a 60-page long chapter about the site in his most recent work on landscape phenomenology (Tilley 2008), and having had the privilege of visiting the site myself, I can testify to its great beauty and the almost overwhelming presence of the mountains looming over the carvings. Although rock art is universally associated with special surroundings, few sites can compare with Vingen in this respect. This sense of place, which is essential to understanding the art, may be impossible to fully convey in printed media, but the excellent colour photographs that illustrate the book at least make an effort.

The ‘coffee table’ format combined with a lively but scientifically referenced text has proven to work well in presenting rock art research, as exemplified by books such as *Journey through the Ice Age* by Paul Bahn and Jean Vertut (1997) or *Images of Mystery* by David Lewis-Williams (2003), which have succeeded in reaching both academic and lay audiences. The Vingen book continues in this coffee table tradition, but also

in the great tradition of Hallström, Gjessing and others, making available a large body of systematic documentation for future research. The combination is not entirely without problems, as even though the text is highly accessible, the bulky volume is scarcely comfortable bedtime reading for the general public. At the same time, and as noted above, although the catalogue may present a slight burden to the lay reader, it is also the greatest scientific merit of the book. To make it even more accessible to researchers worldwide, one can only hope that an English translation is being planned.

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