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TREATMENT OF CORPSES, CONSUMPTION OF THE SOUL AND PRODUCTION OF ROCK ART: APPROACHING LATE MESOLITHIC MORTUARY PRACTISES REFLECTED IN THE ROCK ART OF WESTERN NORWAY

Abstract

The paper argues that the so-called 'hunters' rock art' of Scandinavia is closely connected to mortuary processes, and that its iconographic narratives are all associated with death beliefs. This will be demonstrated by a closer scrutiny of the imagery at the rock art sites Vingen and Ausevik in Western Norway including the background for their dating to the Late Mesolithic period. It will also be argued that other sites of this type elsewhere in Scandinavia should be understood as mortuary sites. To some extent the rock art sites will be studied in relation to their contemporary context and contemporary funerary remains and traditions in both Western Norway and southern Scandinavia. Through these approaches it will be suggested that rock art, death rituals and burials are complementary to each other, and that glimpses of a Late Mesolithic religion can be found where the iconography and funerary remains are merged. The approach also addresses the importance of certain animals in both religion and religious activity during the Late Mesolithic period.

Keywords: rock art, mortuary practises, secondary burials, regeneration, soul animals, horizontal cosmology, Late Mesolithic period

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INTRODUCTION

The paper focuses on the *role* and *function* of sites with *hunters'* rock art in Scandinavia, topics that are ardently debated in rock art research. Nonetheless, attempts to explain the content of the iconography and the meaning of the sites have often resulted in fairly unclear and contrasting explanations. Much the same can be said about the rather dubious dating of the imagery, often to the lengthy Neolithic period (Bakka 1973; Lindqvist 1994). The sites are normally characterised by wild animals such as red deer, elk, reindeer, bear and sea mammals, with the frequent appearance of both anthropomorphs and geometric motifs. They are claimed to contrast with sites containing the later *agrarian* rock art, characterised by another set of images, such as ships, circles, cup

marks and certain types of domesticated animals, and often dated to between the Late Neolithic and the Bronze Age (Mandt 1991; Lindqvist 1994). The high proportion of wild animals at the hunters' sites led researchers in the early part of the last century to interpret rock art of this kind as depicting prehistoric hunting strategies, hunting magic or hunting techniques (e.g. Shetelig 1922; Brøgger 1925: 78; Bøe 1932; Gjessing 1932; Hallström 1938; Bakka 1973: 156). During the 20th century, researchers gradually came to consider these locations as assembly sites or meeting places for different tribes or groups, but which were also associated with rituals and religion (e.g. Bakka 1973: 157; Badou 1993; Forsberg 1993; Walderhaug 1994: 107–8). Now we have come full circle, and the focus once again seems to be on hunting (Johansen 1991; Gjerde 2010: 9).



Fig. 1. Map of the County of Sogn og Fjordane, showing the location for some of the hunters' rock art sites in Western Norway. Illustration: Arkikon.

In this paper I will argue for a different perspective: that sites belonging to the hunters' tradition should be seen as forming a part of mortuary practises, and that the iconography is connected to beliefs and ritual processes associated with the handling of dead individuals. Its starting point and main focus will be Western Norway, where sites from this tradition have been dated to the end of the Late Mesolithic (Lødøen 2003; 2013; 2014; Hjelle & Lødøen 2010). However, I will argue for a similar role and dating for most – if not all – of the hunters' rock art elsewhere in Scandinavia. I find it likely that the rock art production was connected with changes in society, religion and burial customs in the latter part of the period. For the sites under discussion I will also claim that the iconography hints at mortuary practises following a structure of primary and secondary burials, which will be discussed in more detail below. I will tentatively argue that the iconography was directly linked to the handling of corpses, and

possibly dealt with the consumption of souls on the one hand, and skeletal remains on the other. These interpretations are supported by a number of shared similarities between rock art sites both in Western Norway and other parts of the country, and the nature of burial customs and contents found in cemeteries dated to the end of the Late Mesolithic elsewhere in northern Europe (Albrehtsen & Brinch Petersen 1976; Larsson 1988; Grünberg 2000; Nilsson Stutz 2003). Altogether this provides a clearer understanding of rock art, since identifiable features and elements in burial practises are mirrored and seem to be recognisable in the iconography. The images can therefore be understood as complementary to burial practises. Another interesting feature is that both the imagery and the grave goods highlight the importance of certain animals in death processes all over northern Europe (e.g. Grünberg 2000; Nilsson Stutz 2003). This would therefore seem to point towards specific species playing essential religious roles in hunter-fisher societies during this period, something to which I will also return.

## VINGEN AND AUSEVIK

This paper mainly focuses on two larger rock art locations in Western Norway; the *Vingen* site and the *Ausevik* site, both located on the inner coastline in the County of Sogn og Fjordane (Fig. 1). The *Vingen* site is in the Municipality of Bremanger, where rock art can be found around a small fjord surrounded by steep mountains, giving the area a somewhat secluded and dramatic atmosphere, and where numerous screes, boulders and seasonally varying waterfalls adds to its conspicuous character (e.g. Bøe 1932; Hallström 1938; Bakka 1973; 1979; Lødøen 2003; Lødøen & Mandt 2010; 2012). The rock art consists of more than 2200 images that are widely spread throughout this landscape, on rock panels, boulders and smaller stones (Lødøen & Mandt 2012). The majority of the images are red deer, stags with animal heads, geometric patterns and anthropomorphic images. In between panels with rock art, dwelling features have been documented, which would have been used for temporary and specialised activities (Lødøen 2003; 2013) (Fig. 2).

The *Ausevik* site in the Municipality of Flora is located some 40 kilometres south of *Vingen* in a less dramatic landscape, and the rock art is spread over a more restricted area, on undulating



*Fig. 2. The central area of the Vingen site with its numerous ledges, boulders and smaller stones over which the rock art is spread. Photo: T.K. Lødøen.*

bedrock shaped by glacial erosion (Hagen 1969; Walderhaug 1994) (Fig. 3). Approximately 300 images have been documented, dominated by red deer, anthropomorphs and geometric figures. Several researchers have argued for the similarity between the animal images at both Ausevik and Vingen (Hagen 1969; Bakka 1973; Walderhaug 1994), but as I will try to show below, there are even more important similarities. A great deal of attention has also been given to the geometric images, often understood as a more recent phenomenon, which has led to interpretations that this site is much younger than the Vingen site (Hagen 1969; Fett & Fett 1979; Prescott & Walderhaug



*Fig. 3. Overview of the Ausevik site, where panels are surrounded by areas where other archaeological remains have been documented. Photo: T.K. Lødøen.*

1995). However, studies have shown that these geometric motifs can just as likely be dated to earlier periods (Breuil & Obermaier 1935; Bégouën & Breuil 1958; Lødøen 2014).

#### THE DIFFICULT DATING – PREVIOUS SUGGESTIONS

The dating of the two sites has varied since they were first documented. Two decades after its discovery in 1912, Johannes Bøe (1932: 39) argued that the Vingen rock art should be dated to the end of the Stone Age. This was based on the fact that the altitude above sea level for a number of images corresponded with the level of documented Stone Age remains and dwelling features around the Vingen area. At a later stage, Gustaf Hallström (1938: 449) dated the rock art at Vingen to the Bronze Age, on the basis of stylistic similarities with other sites in both Sweden and Norway. New discoveries in the 1960s brought Egil Bakka to the site. His studies of superimpositions, relationships with shorelines and comparisons with both the location of dwelling sites and other rock art sites led him to conclude that the rock art was produced in the Neolithic period (Bakka 1973: 173). Later, he suggested a possible start as early as the Late Mesolithic period and a final phase in the middle of the Neolithic period (Bakka 1979).

Attempts at dating the rock art at Ausevik have followed a more or less similar chain of reasoning, since its discovery in the 1930s. These started with Bøe, who focused on the similarities with the Vingen site but failed to publish any conclusions (Walderhaug 1994: 6). In the 1960s, Anders

Hagen (1969: 90–5) claimed that the presence of geometric images indicated that the site should be dated to the Bronze Age or even the Iron Age, while still seeing similarities with the animal images at Vingen in the same way as Bøe. In the 1970s, the same similarities led Bakka to argue that Ausevik was partly contemporaneous with Vingen and should be dated to the Middle Neolithic (Bakka 1973: 166). Some years later, Eva and Per Fett (1979: 90) argued for similarities in the iconography between Ausevik and the Megalithic art of the British Isles, and dated the rock art at Ausevik to the Late Neolithic. In the early 1990s, Eva Walderhaug (1994: 88) revisited the imagery and claimed to identify a series of images which had received less attention, comparing the iconography with the development of the material culture and related societal changes throughout the whole of the Neolithic period. She based her dating on Bakka's suggestion that it belonged to the Middle Neolithic, arguing in conclusion that increasing contact between hunter-gatherer groups and agricultural societies throughout the Neolithic period led to the gradual abandonment of Vingen in favour of Ausevik. The dating was later criticised by Morten Ramstad (2000), who questioned why Bakka dated Vingen using shorelines and Ausevik through a stylistic comparison with Vingen. If Bakka had used the relationship with the shorelines in Ausevik, as he did for Vingen, the site would have been dated to much older periods.

## IDENTIFYING THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF ROCK ART

I will claim that the major importance of rock art lies in its dialectic relationship with the contemporary material culture. Then, the imagery can shed light on past material remains, while patterns in the development of material culture are important for a better interpretation of the images, which can be understood as narratives at the rock art sites. In order to identify the contemporary context, more accurate and comparable dating approaches are essential for both rock art and material culture, or otherwise there is the risk of associating the rock art with societies and periods that are not contemporary (Lødøen 2013). The dating of rock art has always been difficult and associated with rather vague or eclectic chronological frameworks (Keyser 2001), something I see as a fatal problem for the identification of the societies behind the

imagery, as a result of which many approaches have failed to date the rock art. Besides, it seems to me that rock art researchers have been more occupied with analyses of the iconography and less concerned with detailed chronological studies. This contrasts with studies of material culture, where scientific approaches (e.g. radiocarbon methods, palynology, etc.) are under constant development to allow for the more accurate dating of prehistoric remains. Consequently, this has created a barrier for analysing rock art in light of the corresponding contemporary material culture. This also accounts for comparisons between different rock art sites, since the wide dating framework for the iconography has legitimised associating the images with a whole range of different time periods, where even contrasting types of societies, such as hunting societies on the one hand and farming societies on the other are claimed to have used the same rock art sites (e.g. Hagen 1969). Therefore, this paper strongly argues for the importance of more accurate dating procedures for rock images and rock art sites, in order to better identify the character of the contemporary context and its chronology. To some extent it seems that rock art studies are left with less ambitious and more relativistic approaches regarding its dating, where researchers have been less critical about the methods used. The prevailing methods in Vingen and Ausevik have traditionally been comparisons of stylistic similarities with other sites, studies of what have been claimed to be superimpositions of images and datings based on the relationship between the iconography and former shorelines (e.g. Hagen 1969; Bakka 1973; 1979). While the first two methods produce slightly more relative results, the latter approach has been the most common method for the dating of the *hunters'* rock art, and for a while also dwelling sites and other material remains. 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 shorelines. These shoreline displacements can be scientifically dated, and have also been commonly used to determine the age of the rock art. The idea is that uplifted areas above the shore provided access to clean panels that were suitable for rock images. The shoreline data therefore provides us with the earliest possible moment for the production of rock art.

As radiocarbon dating has become more readily available and accurate, dating on the basis

of shorelines has lost much of its importance for most archaeological agendas. In rock art approaches, however, the method is still used quite frequently (Helskog 1999; Sognnes 2003; Gjerde 2010). The arguments and procedure are still based on the idea that measuring the height of the coastal rock art and comparison with the geological chronology of shorelines will consequently date the rock art. Geological datings of shorelines are by themselves not highly accurate, although this varies, and arguments that the rock art was always produced near the water table are much less convincing. Nor is it clear what this *nearness* implies. Rock art in the inland areas, unaffected by postglacial isostatic uplift and often documented in the vicinity of rivers and lakes, has been used as an argument for claiming that all rock art was on shorelines or associated with water tables (Mikkelsen 1977: 180–5). In reality, however, the inland images vary by many metres to water tables at the different locations (Mikkelsen 1977). The same was probably the case for the rock panels on the coast, which varied with wave action and sea exposure along the shores. The necessary premise for dating based on the level of shorelines, that the rock art was produced immediately above the water table, is a prerequisite that I will claim cannot be guaranteed, and therefore the method fails as a relevant approach with regard to detailed aspects of rock art chronology. This said, there are some convincing examples that rock art seems to have been polished by wave action (Hesjedal 1994). Just as many examples indicate that natural cracks, striations and veins were used as the starting point for images and iconography, not the sea level (Bradley et al. 2002; Chippindale & Nash 2004). The approach can of course be used as a *terminus post quem* indication of age, which is what shoreline datings were always intended to be. However, they are far too frequently considered as being synonymous with absolute dating (e.g. Helskog 1983; 1999; Lindqvist 1994). This also leads to the definition of the vicinity between the shoreline and the rock art, which is highly relative. Some authors have used one metre, others five, some have used the average mean water level, and others the high tide mark (see Sognnes 2003 for examples). The different distances above the sea level mark different ages along the shoreline displacement curves, and therefore different time periods, which results in a clear risk of failing to date the rock art. Similarly, contemporaneous rock

art is at risk of being dated to different periods. I will claim that this has been the case in the past for Vingen, Ausevik, and a number of other sites. The fatal problem with datings based on shorelines is that they cannot convincingly clarify what the differences between the rock art and the sea were, and to what extent sea splash in exposed areas as opposed to more sheltered areas affected the choice of location for rock art.

## IN SEARCH OF CONTEMPORANEITY – ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AND INDEPENDENT SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS

In attempting to bridge the gap between rock art and its contemporary material context, a number of excavations have been carried out in the immediate vicinity of rock art panels over several years (Løddøen 2003; 2007; 2013; 2014), fully aware of the fact that the recovery of archaeological remains in these contexts 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 production of the rock art. However, combined with scientific methods such as palynology and loss on ignition, independent data documenting human impact on the environment can be used complementary to the archaeological material in order to provide a much better insight into past activity, and the dating of the sites under scrutiny (Hjelle & Løddøen 2010). It is unthinkable that the production of rock art, at least in the quantity documented at Vingen and Ausevik, failed to produce other remains, which are then explored by the mentioned archaeological and scientific methods. This is of course a much more complicated approach than the use of shorelines to date the rock art, and entails a whole chain of ethical aspects, cultural heritage issues and legislation when it comes to excavations, etc. But I will claim that these approaches produce much better results for the dating of the activity. It also provides us with evidence derived from methods comparable to those used for the documentation of habitation sites or other archaeological traces, representing the contemporary context (Løddøen 2013; 2014), which also build up most of our archaeological understanding. Last but not least, excavations at rock art locations provide us with much more evidence regarding activity at the sites than the eternal movement of the sea and the gradual changes of the shorelines. It is therefore crucial that none

of the above-mentioned investigations have led to the documentation of any Neolithic material, which has been suggested by shoreline studies (Bakka 1973; 1979). On the contrary, all of the material discovered has been dated to a delimited part of the Late Mesolithic (Lødøen 2003; 2007; 2014). A sequence of radiocarbon dating results have delimited the occupation and general use of the area to the timespan between 4900–4200 calBC, with a potential earlier use of the area from 5400 calBC (Lødøen 2013). This is supported by independent palynological investigations of the area, documenting a corresponding impact on the vegetation during these centuries and later abandonment, which clearly demonstrates that the area was used during the latter part of the Late Mesolithic (Hjelle & Lødøen 2010).

A similar approach has been chosen for the Ausevik site, where some of my earlier attempts from a small test excavation led to conclusions that the site was used in both the Late Mesolithic and the Early Neolithic (Lødøen 2007). Recent and more thorough archaeological excavations in the immediate vicinity of the rock art have also delimited the activity at these sites to the period between 5000 and 4600 calBC (Lødøen 2014). These investigations have also clarified that my previous datings to the Early Neolithic were the result of disturbance of the stratigraphy at the site, probably caused by the unearthing of the rock art when the site was discovered in the 1930s, and possibly by later work in the 1960s (Lødøen 2007; 2014). The dating of the Ausevik rock art therefore closely corresponds to the dating of the Vingen rock art, and helps to explain the similarities in the iconography between the two sites (Lødøen 2014). This is a major milestone, I will claim, in the discussion of the dating of the site in itself and the associated similarities between Ausevik and Vingen.

#### HORIZONTAL COSMOLOGY, RITUAL LANDSCAPES AND THE SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION OF ROCK ART

Another similarity between the two sites, despite their different character, is their location. Throughout the Mesolithic the dwelling pattern underwent a gradual change. During the Late Mesolithic period, subsistence seems to have become more steadily based on fish and marine resources, and in the latter half of this period we



*Fig. 4. The suggested horizontal border, separating habitation areas on the coast from possible cosmological activities further inland. Habitation areas are shaded along the coast. Illustration: Arkikon.*

find a greater extent and amount of deposited material. This marks a gradual change in the mode of subsistence, from highly mobile to more stationary habitation. From now on habitation sites were concentrated in the vicinity of tidal currents and other such places with an abundance of marine resources (Warren 1993). This sedentary structure may have also resulted in stationary sites for rituals. In terms of habitus, this seems in general to be in between islands at the sheltered part of the outer coast. The sedentary or semi-sedentary structure is also reflected in the use of local materials for tool production, indicating a stronger sense of place and a much closer attachment to areas for the people of the Late Mesolithic in Western Norway (Skjelstad 2003: 100–4). It is therefore striking that the location of most hunter's rock art sites contrasts with this habitation pattern, and are located further inland. This, I will claim, provides an insight into another structuring principle from this period, probably related to cosmology, which has received little attention. An understanding of the cosmology as at least a three-tiered structure associated with an upper world, a living world and an underworld is most common among comparable societies in the ethnographic record. Examples

have documented that this was perceived also along a horizontal plane (Anisimov 1963; Zvelebil 2008: 43). Vingen is located in the eastern part of the habitation sites at Skatestraumen and Rugsund further to the west, Ausevik to the east of renowned habitation areas in the Flora basin and the outer part of Eikefjord, where the rock quarry at Stakaldeneset is located (Fig. 4). The same pattern accounts for a couple of sites south of Vingen and Ausevik, but also most sites along the coast further to the north. Of course, this may have been associated with the potentially esoteric nature of rock art and possible cosmological acts that called for secrecy, or alternatively that such a remote location in turn might have led to a cosmological-horizontal structure responsible for the location of most rock art from the Mesolithic. The same cosmological structure can most likely be seen through the many stray finds of Mesolithic axes in the interior which are probably votive deposits, deposited according to similar beliefs, and therefore emphasising this cosmological order (Walderhaug 1994: 103; Lødøen 1995: 106; Gundersen 2004: 112–5).

Another interesting phenomenon during the Middle and Late Mesolithic is an increased interest in stone, rocks, raw material and topography, elements that have all been given cultural significance. Several rock quarries chosen for their raw material sources seem to have been attributed with an ‘institutional’ position, from where tools such as axes spread within restricted frames in this period (Lødøen 2010; 2014). Axes were regularly deposited in the immediate vicinity of boulders, in screes or in conspicuous rock outcrops which could be considered as explorations in the past of rocks and landscape. This clear focus on rock and rock sources seem to be even more visible in the Late Mesolithic, when a sudden upsurge in the use of rock shelters has been documented. Many researchers have considered them to be dwelling sites (Bøe 1932; Mikkelsen 1971; Indrelid 1978), but their conspicuous and damp character has led other researchers to interpret them as ritual sites (Moyes 2012). The presence of burials and both human and animal bones inside these shelters (Bøe 1932; Indrelid 1978; Matland 1990), with only a small number of tools and waste flakes, have strengthened the latter interpretation. The same involvement with rocks can of course be seen through the use of rocks for imagery. Some of the mentioned rock shelters are also located in the

interior of Western Norway, beyond the suggested horizontal border, which clearly emphasises these conditions (Lødøen 2010). I find it likely that these aggregations of bones, which have often been described as ‘organic waste’, should be associated just as much with regeneration and cosmology as with hunting and subsistence – but in reality with both aspects. Altogether, this indicates that the interior zone, beyond the habitation areas, was associated with certain cosmological beliefs (Lødøen 2014).

## SIMILARITIES IN ROCK – RED DEER AND SKELETONS

The contemporaneity of Vingen and Ausevik obviously provides a much better explanation of the similarities between the two sites, such as the animal images discussed above. It also creates a new point of departure for analysing the iconography – within the frames of a Late Mesolithic society and its ideology – and suggests that important cultural changes were taking place at the end of the Late Mesolithic (Lødøen 2013; 2014). I will claim that the most essential similarities between the two sites are the character of the anthropomorphic figures on the one hand and their association with red deer images on the other. On the basis of the complete lack of elements indicating hunting scenes, I have previously argued that the activity is just as much reflecting other cosmological and ideological issues (Lødøen 2003; 2009). Animals are unquestionably highly recognisable in rock art and amongst the most common category of motifs, and therefore they have always received most attention, while on the contrary, less attention has been focused on the presence of anthropomorphic images, their character and location. Their appearance on the different rock faces, boulders or stones are often very simple and highly stylised, although a large number of them clearly show ribs, spinal columns and a very visible pelvis (Fig. 5). It therefore seems obvious that these were not meant to express living humans, nor dead individuals, but skeletons (Lødøen 2014). For some of them this seems most apparent through the expression of feet and hands, where palms are missing, but long fingers and toes are made explicit, strengthening the impression that these images are representations of the bone structure or anatomy of humans, where the soft tissue has disappeared. I will therefore claim that all anthropomorphs are *skeletons* or

## MESOLITHIC BURIALS IN EUROPE AND WESTERN NORWAY

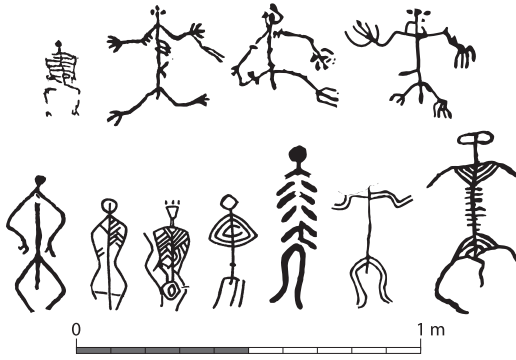


Fig. 5. A selection of skeleton motifs from Ausevik (above) and Vingen (below). Illustration: Hagen 1969, Lødøen & Mandt 2012.

representing bodies under *skeletonisation* and that the iconography and the narratives at both Vingen and Ausevik are directly connected to mortuary rituals. The similarities between the narratives in these locations form and share what I will refer to as a common mindset or even ideology behind the two sites, which are a most essential feature for a better understanding of the rock art. This said, the two locations have unique and individual expressions in terms of the nature of the anthropomorphs, where different features are particularly expressed, while at the same time they seem to emphasise that these images must be representations of fleshless bodies. Similar expressions can also be found at a number of other sites in Norway, such as Vangdal in Hardanger, Hordaland, but also at Tennes in Troms and Hjemmeluft in Alta, Finnmark (Lødøen & Mandt 2010), which will be investigated in greater detail in the future. The fact that skeletons appear so explicitly at a number of rock art sites indicates that the societies and the producers behind the rock art must have had a clear awareness and consciousness of skeletons, which must have been caused by clearly defined and institutionalised practises in the past. I see no other explanation as to why these images were produced than the fact that they were seen within the framework of secondary burials or secondary treatment of corpses. An understanding of this kind opens the way for a completely new understanding of the rock art, which 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 afterlife.

Mortuary practices have hardly been touched upon in the Mesolithic of Norway, as there are few burial remains in our area, something that also emphasises the problematic nature of discussing something that has not been found. This has also led to the fact that *death* – as a topic – barely exists in descriptions of these societies, except when it comes to animals, which based on archaeological literature seem to have been hunted without any moral or ethical concern (Taylor 2002: 12). As a consequence, Norwegian archaeologists seem to have imagined abstract societies where people only live, without experiencing any sense of loss, without mourning, and with hardly any religious perception. Much the same could be said about many other regions of Europe during the Mesolithic period. Although several hundred inhumation graves have been documented all over the continent, the numbers are relatively small considering the length of the period. This indicates for most of the members of these societies, that the general treatment of the dead must have been of a different kind (Taylor 2002: 22). It has also been argued that excarnation and later disarticulation were the main mortuary processes throughout most of the Mesolithic period, something that also continued into the Neolithic (Cauwe 1988; 2001; Nilsson Stutz 2003). In Scandinavia, however, exceptions to this practice seem to have occurred at the end of the Late Mesolithic, when a number of cemeteries appear. At sites such as Skateholm I and II in Scania, Sweden (Larsson et al. 1981) and at Vedbæk in Zealand, Denmark (Albrethsen & Brinch Petersen 1976), large numbers of burials have been documented, most of them single inhumation graves, although there are examples where more than one individual was buried in the same grave. The character of the cemeteries, where none of the graves seem to overlap or interfere with each other, as well as the completeness of the skeletons, seem to indicate that towards the end of the Late Mesolithic a somewhat higher respect for the integrity of the body formed a part of the ideology (Cauwe 1988; 2001; Nilsson Stutz 2003). Nevertheless, there is still evidence in this period of a practise where some buried individuals were disarticulated, with just small parts of the skeletons removed without disturbing the rest of the skeleton (Nilsson Stutz 2003). This practise



seems to have taken place after the soft tissue had decomposed, which would seem to indicate that those responsible for the disarticulation must have had a clear awareness of the process of skeletonisation. It is therefore very interesting to note that the same awareness of decomposition processes and a focus on skeletons is reflected in the iconography at hunters' rock art, likewise dated to the end of the Late Mesolithic.

## REGENERATION AND SECONDARY BURIALS

In most of the cultures we know, it is assumed that life continues in one form or another after death (e.g. Hertz 1960 [1907]; Metcalf & Huntington 1979; Bloch & Parry 1982), making it reasonable to assume that this was the case in Late Mesolithic Western Norway as well. Both humans and animals were probably expected to resurrect, and therefore their afterlife was a crucial task that had to be treated seriously. Mourning processes are often lengthy in nature, something that has barely been touched upon in the case of Stone Age Norway. As suggested above, it seems highly relevant to analyse both rock art and mortuary rituals in this period in the light of the phenomenon of secondary burial. These are processes where skeletons are exposed to certain members of the society, such as family members and/or ritual specialists, and provide us with an adequate explanation as to why skeletons appear amongst the rock images. The ethnographic record contains an abundance of information on secondary burials, and archaeologists also frequently argue for its presence in the archaeological record (e.g. Hertz 1960 [1907]; Bloch 1982; Bloch & Parry 1982; Metcalf & Huntington 1979). In anthropological and sociological theory

there seems to be a consensus that the practice deals with processes that separate the body and the soul (Hertz 1960 [1907]; Bloch & Parry 1982). Often the soft tissue is removed either by natural decomposition, through exposure, temporary burial, cannibalism or by physical actions such as excarnation, incineration or embalming (Hertz 1960 [1907]: 201; Murphy & Mallory 2000). A first phase or ceremony involves disposing of the softer tissue of the corpse, allowing the flesh to decay and the soul to be released (Hertz 1960 [1907]: 198; Metcalf & Huntington 1979). The second phase, where the individual is no longer thought to be present, deals with the remaining skeleton, which is often associated with the kin or group of the deceased (e.g. Bloch 1992: 4). The idea of resurrection or an afterlife, with associated mourning processes, is of course familiar in prehistoric Europe, where grave goods often accompany burials. What is highly interesting is that we can now associate rock art so closely with what is here termed 'consumptions of souls', and that the iconography can provide us with another set of information regarding the way bodies were treated in the past, as well as of the processes and thoughts related to death and mortuary practise in the Late Mesolithic.

## DEATH NARRATIVES, REGENERATION AND SOUL ANIMALS

Studies of the spatial distribution of the rock art at Vingen and Ausevik have revealed how the local topography was used in an active way. At Vingen, there are a number of east-west oriented ledges where only animals are depicted, as if they were being led into the area from a westerly direction, on the less exposed south-facing panels



Fig. 6. Movement of red deer towards the east or inland on one of the south-facing ledges in the Vingen area. Illustration: Lødøen & Mandt 2012/Arkikon.



Fig. 7. Returning animals, heading towards the west. Depicted on a north-facing panel and closely associated with skeletons. Illustration: Lødøen & Mandt 2012/Arkikon.

(Lødøen 2010; Lødøen & Mandt 2012) (Fig. 6). This contrasts with narratives on the north-facing panels, where animal herds that are often associated with skeletons seem to be leaving the area (Fig. 7). Animals therefore seem to take part in circular movements. In the following, I will argue that it is likely that this was not perceived as a life cycle, but perhaps as a ‘death-cycle’ or a ‘soul-cycle’ (Fig. 8).

Similar narratives can be found at Ausevik, where a related group of images seem to make use of the microtopography of this site. On some parts of the panels, the animals are depicted in a similar way as if entering the area from a westerly direction. They are then led towards geometric circular motifs, after which they change their direction towards the west again, and from then on seem to be associated with skeletons (Figs. 9 & 10). At both sites skeletons are depicted in close association with red deer, which clearly seem to take part in these death actions. In Figures 8–13, this pattern is indicated by white arrows for the eastern movement of animals and by grey arrows for the western movement of animals and skeletons.

On some panels, red deer surround the skeletons, while on others the skeletons seem to be leading animals in different directions. A very special feature at both Vingen and Ausevik are images where skeletons are depicted as riding red deer, also heading westward, as if the animals were carrying the skeletons out of the area (Fig. 11). I find it reasonable to consider that these representations signify the final journey of an individual’s remains, where skeletons (or

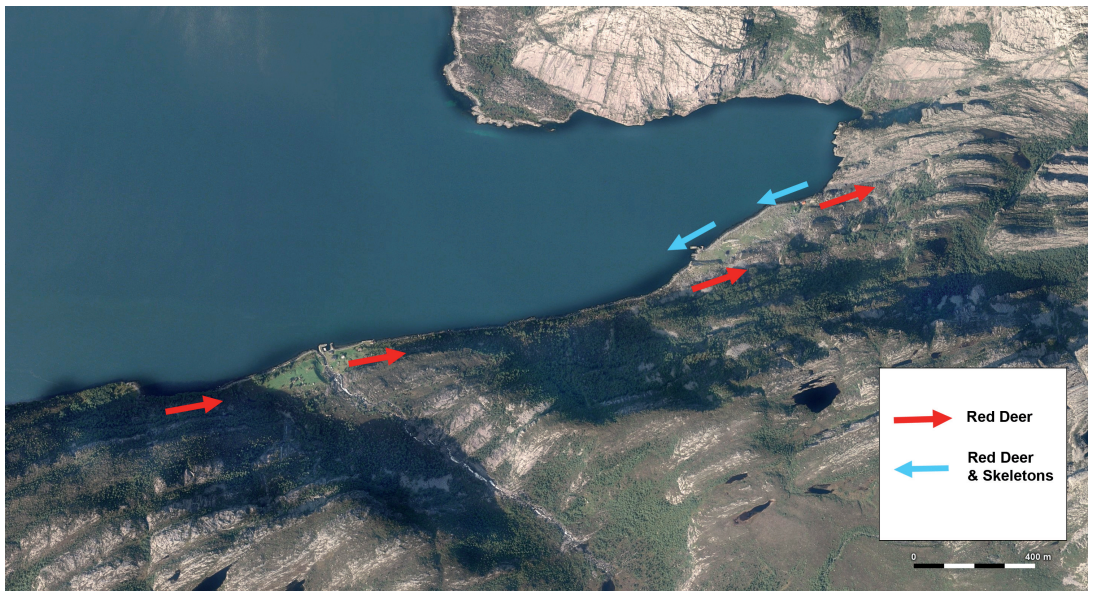


Fig. 8. Circular movement showing how the topography has been actively used in this area, where animals are only depicted on south-facing ledges, and seem to be heading eastward or towards the inner part of the Vingenfjord (red arrows). On the north-facing panels, animals seem to be associated with skeletons and heading westward, leaving Vingen (blue arrows). Illustration: T. K. Lødøen/Arkikon.



Fig. 9. Related movement in Ausevik, as in Vingen, where groups of animals or single animals are moving in an easterly direction (red arrows), after which they change their direction westward and are accompanied by skeletons (blue arrows). Illustration: T.K. Løddøen/Arkikon.

alternatively, the souls of the deceased) are being led towards other cosmological levels or stages. The long, narrow necks of the animals and the absence of antlers suggest that the deer taking this journey are mostly hinds, which also supports interpretations associated with regeneration. Similar notions concerning female animals are known from the ethnographic record (Guemple 1994; Willerslev 2007: 32, 105; Zvelebil 2008: 44), highlighting the close relationship between humans and animals. I would therefore like to suggest that the sites were associated with the handling of human skeletons and perhaps the passing away of the soul, and that in these processes animals such as red deer – in their natural habitat in this part of northern Europe – played a significant role. This also helps to understand how the same species and their bone and antler remains were dealt with in other archaeological contexts, and perhaps also why such remains were deposited in prehistory. Similar narratives

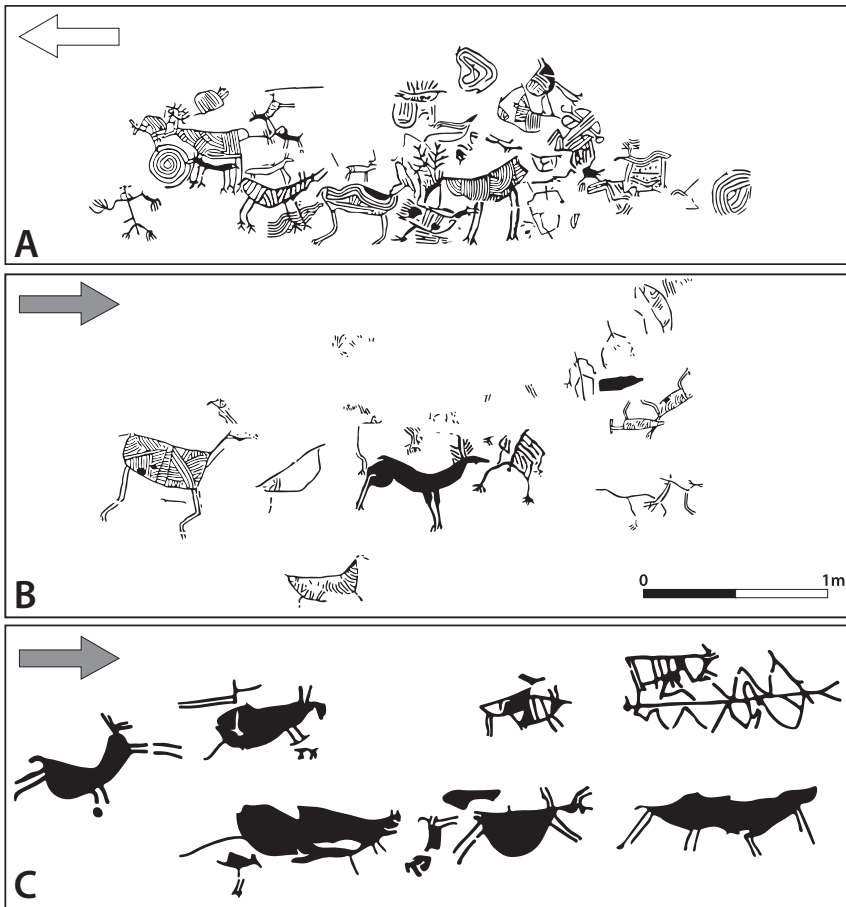


Fig. 10. Movement of animals in Ausevik. In the southeastern part of the site the red deer seem to be heading eastward and towards circular motifs (A), after which they turn westward and are closely associated with skeletons (B and C). Illustration: T.K. Løddøen/Hagen 1969/Arkikon.

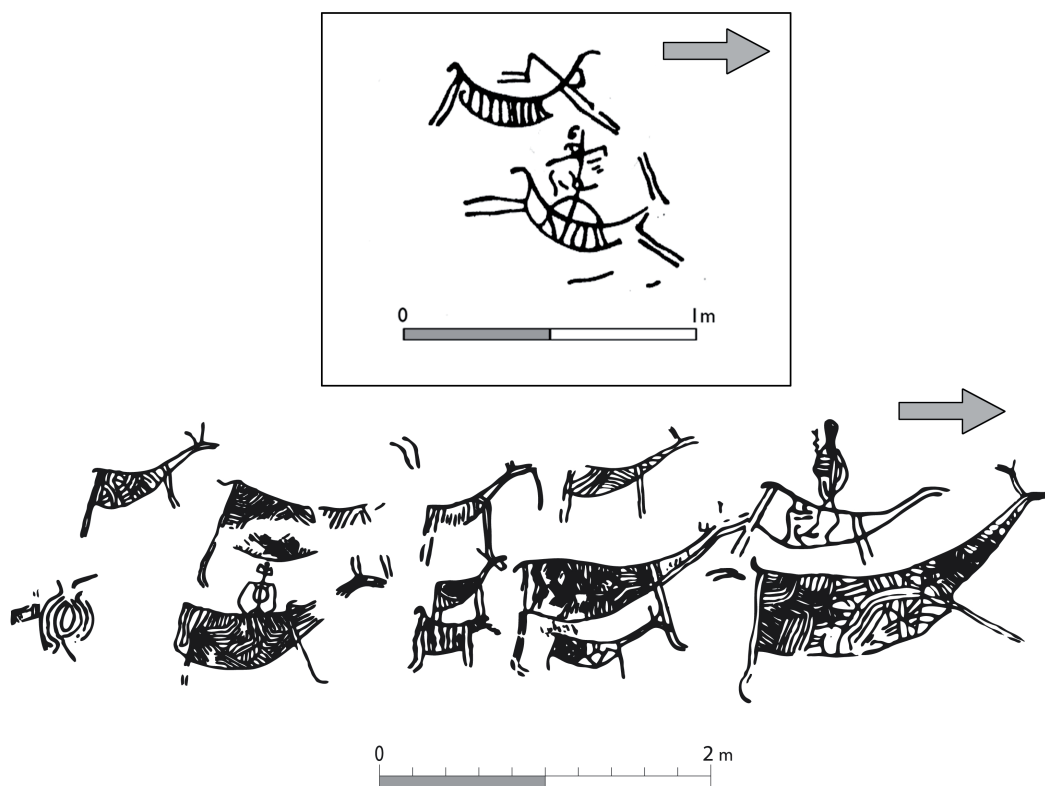


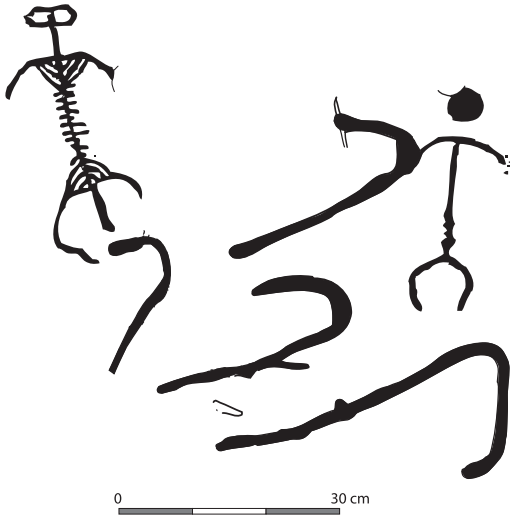
Fig. 11. Skeletal figures riding deer, perhaps as an expression of regeneration, in which deer played a crucial role. From Ausevik (inset) and Vingen. Illustration: Lødøen & Mandt 2012/Arkikon.

Fig. 12. Skeletons protected by animal-headed staffs thus preventing interference by red deer or 'soul animals'. Illustration: Lødøen & Mandt 2012/Arkikon.

can be found elsewhere, for example in Alta, in Finnmark, Northern Norway, where skeletons are depicted as if they were being carried by another species, reindeer (Berg 2003:17), in what is the natural habitat for this animal, and so these compilations of images seems to be closely related to the narratives and processes that were carried out in relation to sites such as Vingen and Ausevik. In Vingen, the situation is further complicated by depictions of animal-headed staffs, which seem to prevent individual animals from escaping the area. Animal-headed staffs often appear in the vicinity of red deer, and it seems obvious that they were perceived as having the ability to control and hinder the movement of particular animals. I find it likely that the presence of staffs in itself was there to prevent approaches by red deer (Lødøen 2009). In some places these staffs can be found in large numbers around skeletons, which I see as

protection from interference from red deer (Fig. 12). This may indicate that particular skeletons were not yet ready for further involvement with red deer, or that these individuals were taken out of regenerative circulation.

There are still challenges left on how rock art of Vingen and Ausevik should be understood, what the relationships between different rock art motifs were and what the rock art represents. Since all the anthropomorphs seem to be skeletons, I find it likely that most of the animals similarly depict excarnated and dead animals. This is supported by the fact that most of the animals have internal body decorations resembling the skeleton structure. Conversely, images without any decoration or with the body fully pecked may represent living animals. A central feature found in many of the Mesolithic burial sites in Europe are red deer bones or antlers within the graves, suggesting the



*Fig. 12. Skeletons protected by animal-headed staffs thus preventing interference by red deer or 'soul animals'. Illustration: Lødøen & Mandt 2012/Arkikon.*

same relationships seen in the rock art (Larsson et al. 1981; Grigson & Mellars 1987; Larsson 1988; Kannegaard Nielsen & Brinch Petersen 1993; Grünberg 2000). The joint deposition of human and red deer bones in what has been interpreted as votive deposits gives additional strength to this reasoning (Conneller 2006: 139–64). I therefore

find it likely that red deer were understood as 'soul animals' in this area. They were decisive for the fate of the individual, and protected the soul during its transition from someone who had recently died to another individual, maintaining the necessary cycle of rebirth (e.g. Hultkrantz 1953: 412–30; Guemple 1994: 118–24). It also seems reasonable to consider that these animals were only hunted on special occasions and with special consideration.

The iconographic material at the sites discussed here is both vast and complicated, with issues of chronology that need to be considered, making it impossible to explore the iconography in greater detail in this paper. In both Vingen and Ausevik, which as noted represent the natural habitat of red deer, a strong bond exists between red deer and skeletons, whereas elsewhere in Scandinavia elk, reindeer or even whales appear in a similar role. The animal species depicted in rock art thus probably also corresponded to the natural habitats of different animal species. In my view, this could also be understood as reflecting a shared ideological or religious mindset amongst societies producing rock art. It is tempting to suggest that the primary treatment of dead bodies may have taken place at the rock art sites or in their immediate vicinity. Future studies of the soil strata at rock art sites, using scientific methods such as phosphate analysis and advanced chemistry, may provide



*Fig. 13. Several features that were previously interpreted as dwelling depressions have been documented in the vicinity of rock art panels. As these depressions contain elements associated with special activity and since many of the neighbouring panels have depictions of skeletons, they could possibly be interpreted as being related to mortuary practices. The illustration presents the suggested character of one of these dwelling features or tombs; to the left of the structure is one of Vingen's larger panels, where also a number of skeleton motifs are depicted. Illustration: T.K.Lødøen/Arkikon.*

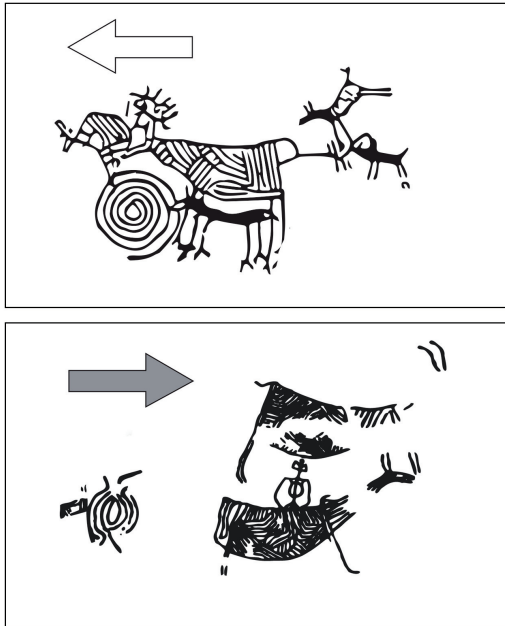


Fig. 14. A shared mindset in both Ausevik and Vingen; above red deer seem to approach concentric images from west in Ausevik, and below they seem to leave such images heading west accompanied by skeletons. Illustration: Hagen 1969, Lødøen & Mandt 2012.

answers to what actually happened at the sites.

It is also possible that excarnated skeleton remains were eventually deposited in the sea adjacent to the rock art panels. As suggested by the excavations at Kanaljorden in Motala, Sweden (Hallgren 2011a), or several sites along the Norwegian coast (Sellevoll & Skar 1999; Bjerck 2008), the sea or wetlands may have been perceived as a natural passageway for the remaining bones to the otherworld. Similar remains in both Sweden (Hallgren 2011b), Denmark (e.g. Grøn & Skaarup 1991), the British isles and Ireland (Conneller 2006: 139–64) seem to suggest that both skeletons, human bone remains and bodies were deposited in open water or in the sea as part of intentional acts of burial. It has even been argued that such deposition was normal, while burials on dry land formed an exception (Strassburg 2000). This also helps to explain why skeletons are missing in the iconography at some sites. Even if skeletons are not always present, based on their presence at many sites, I nonetheless suggest that all sites with the hunters' rock art were associated with mortuary practices. The task of the ritual



Fig. 15. A frequently occurring motif in Ausevik, but which is also present in Vingen. Previously interpreted as vulva or a symbol of fertility and sexuality, but which in all likelihood should be understood as a symbol separating the world of the living from the world of the dead. Illustration: T.K. Lødøen.

specialists who produced rock art was to keep the 'soul animals' under control, using imagery where skeletons often became part of the narratives, even if depicting them was not necessary if bodies, skeletons or individual bones were present at the rock art site, but of which there are very few remains today. In future research, excavations or soil studies with the help of phosphate investigations, DNA studies and other scientific analysis – primary or secondary – at the rock art sites, for a better understanding of how the rock art was used in mortuary processes.

## SHARED IDEOLOGIES AND TERRITORIES BY DIFFERENT TRIBES OR BANDS?

Despite the numerous similarities between Ausevik and Vingen, there are also clear differences. This may indicate that the two sites are associated with different groups or societies that shared the same ideology, cosmological platform and material culture, but had local differences in terms of their iconography, their detailed expressions and potential narrative structure. Perhaps the two sites represented different bands, tribes or groups that shared a number of basic beliefs, but where local variations in death rituals reveal differences in practises, expressions and understanding. One particularly interesting difference is the presence of several dwelling features in Vingen, something

which is absent in Ausevik – either because of differences in the ritual use of the site or because they have not been found yet. Investigations of these structures suggest that they were only used sporadically, and may thus be linked to mortuary processes. The majority of the structures seem to be closely associated with rock art panels and carved boulders, where also images of skeletons are present (Lødøen & Mandt 2012; Lødøen 2013). In addition, while regular artefacts are few in number, several stone slabs with rock art were found deposited inside the structures, further enhancing the link with cosmological acts and death rituals (Lødøen 2014). I have argued earlier that the dwelling features may have been shelters for the ritual specialists who produced the rock art (Lødøen 2014). This could still be the case, but the association of structures with images of skeletons opens the possibility that they were excarnation huts, or alternatively, that they functioned as containers or even tombs for discarnated or disarticulated bone material (Fig. 13). Similar hut structures may have been present

at Ausevik or other such sites, but have not yet been recovered.

Another difference between Vingen and Ausevik are the animal-headed staffs, found in large numbers in Vingen but are rare in Ausevik. The numerous geometric images in Ausevik may have a parallel in Vingen in the images interpreted by Bakka (1973) as vulvas. However, I do not believe these images have any sexual connotations (see Lødøen 2014), but find it more likely that they represent portals to a world beyond the living as in several places in both Vingen and Ausevik, red deer are depicted as if they are entering or leaving such figures (Fig. 14). In Ausevik, one of these images is depicted at the bottom of a rock depression which is always filled with water, as if to underline that the motifs should be associated with passageways into the beyond and even into the subaquatic underworld (Fig. 15). The rock surface in Ausevik may have been considered as penetrable, due to the softness of the rock and its eroded, glacial character, with numerous depressions. This also helps to understand the great number of geometric images



*Fig. 16. One of the skeletons from the Grøneheller location, Solund, Western Norway, potentially representing new ideas by its completeness and therefore complementing the anthropomorphic rock images. It does however indicate moderate disarticulation by the removal of chest bone and mandible after skeletonisation, but prior to recent excavation. Photo: University Museum of Bergen.*

at Ausevik. In Vingen, there was less need for such 'passage images', because numerous natural passages and cavities formed by boulders exist at the site. These cavities, where rock art is regularly found, were probably thought to provide a similar access to the world beyond (Lødøen 2010).

## RELIGIOUS CHANGE AT THE END OF THE LATE MESOLITHIC?

The production of rock art at both Vingen and Ausevik seems to have begun after the second half of the Late Mesolithic and ceased before the beginning of the Early Neolithic. The same chronological range seems to apply to most of the hunters' rock art of Scandinavia (Bjerck 2008: 105; Gjerde 2010: 394; Lødøen & Mandt 2010), and it also applies to cemeteries such as Vedbæk and Skateholm, which only appear to have been in use at the end of the Late Mesolithic. I therefore find it likely that the production of rock art was included as an additional element in mortuary practices, resulting in sites such as Vingen, Ausevik, and others. This may have been triggered by religious changes during the same period, possibly as a result of increased sedentism or other such changes.

Whether the manipulation or disarticulation of skeletons formed a natural part of the death rituals in Western Norway in the Late Mesolithic is of course unclear, but a number of images of anthropomorphs at panels in both Vingen and Ausevik appear to have skulls, arms or rib bones missing. Some images of skeletons seem deformed, with their arms and bones in positions that suggest manipulation (Hagen 1969: Figs. 4 & 34). Investigations of Mesolithic burials at Vedbæk and Skateholm have similarly demonstrated, for example, that ribs could be detached from the rest of the skeleton during burial and exhumation (Nilsson Stutz 2003: 244). I consider that this emphasises the secondary treatment of the anthropomorphs shown without ribs, or just a few of them. Despite the fact that Mesolithic burials in general are almost non-existent in Western Norway, several skeletons were discovered in a rock shelter at the Grønehelleren site in Solund to the southwest of Ausevik in the mid-1960s (Jansen 1972). The dating of these burials has been discussed, but subsequent investigations and radiocarbon datings suggest a Late Mesolithic date (Indrelid 1978; 1996). Three of the skeletons were in a poor condition, but one of them was described as being very well preserved

(Fig. 16). Even so, it was pointed out that the chest bone and parts of the jaw of the deceased were missing. I find it reasonable to argue that this burial reflects practices similar to those observed at Vedbæk and Skateholm, and that it forms a link between the two, indicating that similar traditions and cultural expressions are also reflected at rock art sites such as Vingen and Ausevik. All of them suggest a greater respect (compared to the Early and Middle Mesolithic) towards the integrity of the body, although with some disarticulation of the skeleton still present.

## CONSUMPTIONS OF SOULS – THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF ROCK ART

Some of the most important questions in rock art research relate to the meaning of the iconography in its social context. What is the importance and significance of rock art? And of course, what happened at the rock art sites, apart from the obvious, i.e. the production of images? A fundamental question is of course the role of rock art, and to what extent the images represent real situations, ideology, mythology or some other aspect of society, or whether the art was so deeply integrated with daily life that it was linked to a number of different purposes simultaneously. These are all questions that are unlikely to be answered anytime soon.

Many have argued that rock art is a means of communicating with the underworld, and that the images could have been used to negotiate with cosmological forces. Alternatively, there is the idea that the prehistoric rock art specialist was able to understand messages that were partly present on the surface, as if jutting through from an underworld (often understood as the world of the dead), and was capable of extracting them through the rock surface, understood as a membrane where images were left as a part of this communication (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990). Within these frameworks of explanation, I find it likely that acts related to cosmological perspectives and associated with the mortuary rituals may have taken place at the rock art sites. I also find it likely that the images were made by specialists who were responsible for mortuary rituals, and who also had the ability to communicate with the relevant cosmological levels.

I therefore suggest that the primary burials focused on the soul of the deceased and informing the underworld about the event of death by means of



the rock art. The production of rock art may have been a direct result of an ideological conflict with the earlier, more complete practice of disarticulating the dead, as opposed to new ideas that influenced the Late Mesolithic societies. The remaining bones could then be treated according to prevailing customs and traditions. This may have involved depositing them at appropriate locations in the vicinity of the habitation areas, which may have reinforced group identity and kin relations, and as I suggested above, depositing some of them at rock art sites either temporarily or permanently. A number of practical considerations arise from this, including the feasibility of transporting a corpse to a rock art site. It is therefore possible that only some of the bones were deposited in the excarnation or dwelling huts. None of the structures have been fully excavated, but the results from small test excavations suggest at least some form of special activity (Løddøen 2013). The narratives in the rock face or ‘membrane’ may have been intended to ensure that the bodies were treated in the correct way to enable the transition from the world of the living to that of the dead, and that released souls were transferred to the right individual and treated in the appropriate manner.

Based on this evidence, I argue that deceased members of society were initially buried or underwent some kind of primary treatment. After some time had passed, the remaining bones or the skeleton were unearthed for secondary treatment, which may have involved disarticulation or reburial in the vicinity of the rock art sites or, alternatively, carrying the remains back to the habitation sites. This helps to explain why there are few documented graves and burials, and why human bones are occasionally found in middens, dwelling contexts or other similarly profane circumstances (e.g. Bjerck 2008: 101). This has not been recorded often in Norway, as the preservation of bone material in our areas is generally poor, but elsewhere in Scandinavia skeletal remains have been documented within habitation areas (e.g. Newell et al. 1979; Larsson et al. 1981; Taylor 2002: 10). They have typically been interpreted as implying a lack of concern towards the dead, but this is unlikely to have been the case. Seen from the perspective of secondary burial, the bones or skeletal remains were less important, as the primary burial processed the more important remains of the deceased, such as the soft tissue and the soul. An alternative explanation is that the primary burials took place in the vicinity

of the habitation sites, and that the remaining bones or some of them were taken to the rock art sites such as Vingen and Ausevik after discarnation and decomposition. Further light could be shed on this matter by archaeological excavations in the future.

For decades, researchers have been puzzled by the lack of graves from the Stone Age in Western Norway. It has usually been argued that the relatively poor preservation conditions have destroyed most of the remains from the simple inhumation graves that would be expected in the area. However, the rock art and recent research on burial archaeology indicate that secondary burials – part of a complex system of thoughts within the disciplines of anthropology and sociology – were certainly present but have received little attention. The associated process of disarticulation may also indicate that other types of burial customs were used.

## CONCLUSION

The suggested link between rock art and mortuary rituals provides us with a more detailed knowledge of potential death processes, but also a much better understanding of the role and function of rock imagery for prehistoric societies. Consequently, this provides us with information about past beliefs and a valuable insight into Late Mesolithic religious practise and understanding. I argue that for most of the Mesolithic, deceased members of society underwent treatment associated with secondary burials, and that the remaining skeletons were later disarticulated. However, in the Late Mesolithic there seem to be indications of a greater respect towards the integrity of the body, as indicated by the large cemeteries in southern Scandinavia, as well as rock art sites such as Vingen, Ausevik and others.

At cemeteries such as Vedbæk, Skateholm and Grønehelleren, we see the end product of Mesolithic death rituals. Obviously, we have no way of knowing how the dead were mourned, or similar intangible funerary rituals, but now we can retrieve some of these ideas from the images at the rock art sites. At least some knowledge of these processes may be gleaned from the narratives: the iconography in Ausevik and Vingen which clearly hints at death processes, with numerous skeletons, may therefore broaden our understanding of death rituals. We do not know if these were used for everyone in this period, or only for a few individuals. These ‘chosen few’ could be the equivalent of the shamans of Siberia or the *noaidi* of the Sami, who

were able to move between cosmological spheres, and therefore also to negotiate death or the afterlife. These are all questions that will be investigated in the future, based on the idea that rock art deals with mortuary perspectives.

The horizontal cosmology that is suggested in this paper also offers ideas as to where in Norway we should search for hunters rock art that has still not been discovered, namely along the fjords or in the interior areas, mainly to the east of the larger aggregations of Late Mesolithic habitation sites. I believe this contains a number of traces of shared thoughts used in the organisation and production of rock art. The significance of specific animals in mortuary rituals is another issue which probably raises questions that should be explored in greater detail, based on both the presence of images of certain animals in the rock art and the remains of different species in human graves from the period in question. Of course, this is also relevant in terms of how we interpret depositions of red deer bones and antlers at habitation sites, which should be seen in relation to human bones and skeletons.

The Mesolithic has always been overshadowed by the Neolithic when it comes to symbolic expressions, advanced rituals, religious perspectives and even mortuary rituals. Now, new results and different approaches have revealed that highly specialised and complex religious perspectives were indeed present in Late Mesolithic societies.

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