

The Space of Red Ochre

The Stone Age Gallery in the Province of Ångermanland, Northern Sweden

Abstract

In a limited area of northwest Ångermanland have been discovered 13 new rock paintings during the years 1996 to 2004, partly as a result of a systematic survey. Of these paintings four sites are presented where the span of contextual features is made clear. Most are unusual in Sweden. One is unique by representing the expected site of a carving, not a painting. The location of the paintings is seen as a product of the context, including elements of nature and the Neolithic basic winter settlements (4500-2500 BC), of which so far the same number as the paintings have been found in the area. The discoveries and their interpretation presumably will give indications on how to contextualize rock paintings and thereby to apply the survey model in the future.

Introduction.

Fourteen rock paintings have now been discovered in the northwestern part of the province of Ångermanland, Northern Sweden, (Footnote 1; Fig 1). Of them, 13 were found from 1996 to 2004. There were documented 7 during the last years, 2003-2004. There are four other provinces in Norrland with registered rock paintings. One is found in Hälsingland, 17 are known in Jämtland and Härjedalen, which are usually observed together as the two components of one administrative county. Two have been found in that part of the province of Lappland which is within the county of Västerbotten. This means that Ångermanland has presently got 46 % of the rock paintings known from Norrland. There are only known 8 other sites in the remaining southern provinces of Sweden, three in Bohuslän and five in Värmland.

A truly representative distribution map of rock paintings in Sweden has to be quite different. That is to say that like other distri-

butions of ancient monuments the present spread is due to active search. The discoveries of later years in Ångermanland only indicate the area where a systematic survey has been carried out. A further continuation of this survey into the seemingly empty northwestern parts of the province presents an inspiring task.

It appears only to be a question of time until rock paintings will be discovered in the neighbouring province of Medelpad. Hitherto the survey has been based on environments and archaeological contexts which are known as well from other areas. This goes for, in particular, the adjacent parts of eastern Jämtland and southern Lappland. What it referred to in Medelpad is especially the entire water basin of the river Gimån, including the tributaries inside Jämtland, with the lakes Holmsjön and Leringen. In the western part of Medelpad there ought to be rock paintings in the area of Haverö.

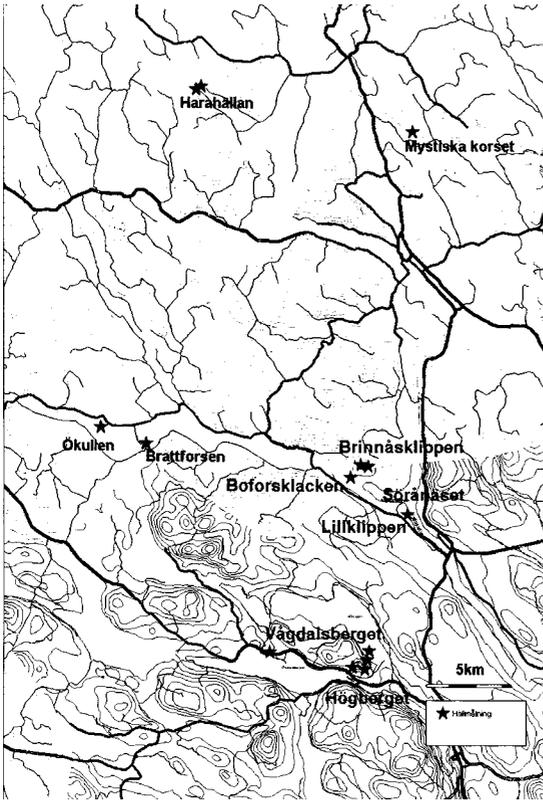


Fig. 2. Sweden with the central part of Norrland and the province of Ångermanland. The described area is found in the Northwestern part of the province. From Ramqvist 2002a: 145, fig. 7.1.

Sverige med den centrala delen av Norrland och landskapet Ångermanland. Det beskrivna området är i nordvästra delen av landskapet. Ur Ramqvist 2002a: 145, fig. 7.1.

Fig. 1. The distribution of rock paintings in the Northwestern part of the province of Ångermanland. From Viklund 2004d.

Fördelningen av hällmålningar i nordvästra delen av landskapet Ångermanland. Ur Viklund 2004d.

A suitable survey area also presents itself in eastern Jämtland in the central part of the river Ammerån, which is adjacent to Ångermanland. Additionally, the milieu of southern Lappland offer prospects of several further discoveries than the single painting published so far.

Geographical space

The parishes concerned are Bodum, Fjällsjö and Ramsele in northwestern Ångermanland. Bodum and Fjällsjö belong since 1974 to the county of Jämtland (fig. 2). Ramsele is a part of the township of Sollefteå in the county of Västernorrland. The area is intersected by two large rivers, Faxälven and Fjällsjöälven, which debouch into the even larger river Ångermanälven. A huge number of lakes, tarns and wetlands are drained by

these rivers. A natural bifurcation channel called Vängelälven connecting Faxälven and Fjällsjöälven has got a central significance in the area. This water system now attains importance due to the recent discovery of the two rock paintings at Harahällan in the unregulated river Nagasjöån. The watershed between the river valleys where they were found can be characterized as a high altitude area, which is unusual in this connection. The bedrock mainly consists of granite. The terrain belongs to what has been called the "Norrland mountain hillock" (Swed. 'bergkullterräng') type from the point of the topography. A considerable number of heights, some up to about 500 m. a. s. l., with steep rocky sides and boulders is typical of the area. From the point of view of natural potential for rock paintings this terrain appears quite favourable.

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As the context of the rock paintings should not be considered only the specific localization to rocks or boulders. This context rather belongs to their environment and "hinterland". In the view of the present author this is the most valuable starting point when surveying in the field. In this perspective, the rock paintings are only a part of an aggregate, when "hanging", as they appear, on rocky surfaces. In a metaphoric sense their "frames" consist of their gallery environment. Only by way of the understanding and localization of these "frames" a systematic survey will be successful.

The spatial relationship of paintings and habitation appears as increasingly more evident. The habitation sites consist of remains from the winter or basic settlements. They are usually dated between 4500 and 2500 BC. The implication is obviously that the paintings and the settlement remains are contemporary. Both reflect the human significance of the area and its excellent natural conditions. Additionally, they once instilled stability and safety among human beings. There is a strong temptation to see the paintings as a visual expression of these qualities.

In this respect these views differ from those of scholars who connect elk hunting pits with paintings. After all, hunting pits are in principle found all over the place. There are more than 30.000 registered hunting pits in Norrland! There is no distinction in this huge number. Drawing a parallel to the pits our altogether 40 paintings represent appx. 0,0013 % of them. On the other hand the basic settlements are much fewer in number. It is true that the absolute majority of the pits are found inland like the paintings, but most of the dated pits originate in the Bronze and Iron Ages or even later times. In fact, they were used into our own times. Pit hunting in Norrland was prohibited by law as late as AD 1864. Certainly, there is a close, sometimes an intimate, contact between paintings such as the group of four at Högberget and some hunting pits. But this does not prove contemporaneity between these categories

of remains. At the very most, the closeness proves that the elks for thousands of years have used the same paths of migration.

The supreme importance of the elk in the area should never be forgotten. We are in the very *Realm of the Elk*. The elk is the most dominant motive among rock carvings and paintings. Elks are also commonly found carved on artefacts of slate. The majority of the bones found at winter settlements are elk bones. There is indeed a deep continuity. We find hunting pits in the neighbourhood of many a modern hunting beat in the forest. The beats may also be furnished with recently constructed elk towers. Sometimes there are rock paintings as well. Close to every recently discovered rock painting 1996-2004 there are consistently old as well as fresh elk droppings.

The field method even in the future will be to look for conspicuous places in the landscape. At the same time it is necessary to try to apprehend the discreet, very subtle, signals surrounding these places. A necessary prerequisite will be the knowledge of the locations of Neolithic settlement sites. Starting from this basis the survey work today seems to succeed at levels a. s. l. of about 200 m and upwards. On the other hand a systematic effort should also be directed towards similar places in lower terrain. Perhaps the lack of rock painting at lower levels would be just a gap of knowledge, at least to some extent? What could be called "micropanels", i.e. sculptured or carved slate objects with the same motives as the paintings, have indeed been found also in lower levels.

Four sites with rock paintings

The span of features between these four, of 14 chosen sites in total, with rock paintings, is unusually large in a Swedish context. By *Harahällan* is actually meant two sites but they are counted as one single site. This span indicates that we should not in principle exclude any specific locations at all in the landscape during a survey. Furthermore, such an indication leads to the reflection that surveys of rock paintings probably should



Fig. 3.

Fig. 4.

Fig. 5.





Fig. 6. The rock paintings of Harahällan are found on these two erratic boulders. The larger painting is on the boulder to the left. Photo: Bernt Ove Viklund.

Hällmålningarna på Harahällan finns på de två stora klippblocken. Den stora målningen är på blocket till vänster.

Fig. 3. The rock of Boforsklacken seen from the ground level. In the abri to the left are found the 'lying' paintings. Are these the only of their kind in the North? On the panel below to the right is the surface 2 with approximately 10 figures. To the right of this is surface 3. Photo: Bernt Ove Viklund

Boforsklacken från marknivå. I abrin till vänster är de 'liggande' målningarna. Är dessa de enda kända av sitt slag i norr? På fältet nedanför till höger är yta 2 med ungefär 10 figurer. Till höger om den är yta 3.

Fig. 4. The rock painting of Högberget 3 is situated to the left of the entrance of the boulder cave and on the north face of the boulder. An archaeological excavation has been carried out in the interior of the cave by the RANE project (Lindgren 2004). Photo: Bernt Ove Viklund.

Hällmålningen Högberget 3 är placerad till vänster om ingången till blockgrottan samt på norra sidan av blocket. En arkeologisk undersökning har utförts inne i grottan av RANE projektet (Lindgren 2004).

Fig. 5. The rock painting Brinnåsklippen 1. Note the rounded overhang and the narrow ledge. Photo: Bernt Ove Viklund.

Hällmålningen Brinnåsklippen 1. Notera det rundade överhänget och den smala terassen.

be counted among the most exacting tasks among archaeological surveys.

The rock painting at *Boforsklacken* in the parish of Fjällsjö is the first to be described (Fig. 3). The second painting is found on the wall of a boulder cave placed high on the flank of *Högberget* in the parish of Ramsele (Fig. 4). The third is found at *Brinnåsklippen* in the parish of Fjällsjö (Fig. 5). The fourth and the fifth, which are the latest discoveries, were found at *Harahällan* in the river Nagasjöån in Fjällsjö and Bodum (Fig. 6).

This group appears to show the span in the choice of Stone Age Man in the landscape. Their choice meant conspicuous places, "quality-marked" with a modern term, on which to paint their motives in red ochre.

The idea of a special relationship of rock art to water does not work in this area. Obviously, our Stone Age people did not distinguish at all between closeness or distance from water. On the other hand water is present in some form wherever we are and whenever we are there. Mist, haze, rain, frost, hail, snow, ice, all of this only

expresses the power of water to change its form. Winter and its cold, which can be very severe in Northern Fennoscandia, transforms all water to land during a considerable part of the annual cycle. Rivers, streams, brooks, tarns, lakes disappear as waters along with the extensive wetlands of various shapes and varying degrees of wet, they appear as comfortable floors for walking, hunting and travelling. When winter is at its most severe stage even the rapids disappear. Every water then becomes land. The rock paintings in this environment therefore belong both to water and to land. They represent solid states as well as passing conditions. They represent the changes of human adaptation to nature along the annual cycle. With it goes the presence and the absence of the elk. Those who painted on the rock must have been subconsciously very aware of all this. Probably the area surveyed was more or less their stationary abode and their "orbit of catchment". The four chosen sites may also have been imbued with supernatural powers, if we reflect on shamanistic aspects in the management of the paintings. The milieu of this article point to a suggestive and sometimes hallucinatory effect of the sites out in the open.

The importance of the factor of cold is certainly to be considered in a shamanistic ritual. According to testimonies of later times exertions of different kinds belong to a favourable seance. Not only darkness and heat would be trying to subarctic Man. The season of regular winter could approximately cover half a year up here. Temperatures of minus 35-40 degrees (Celsius) are not uncommon. So far the lowest temperature recorded is about -50^o C. Summer temperatures could reach plus 30-35 degrees C. In the immediate vicinity of boulders and rocks they may even be higher. This possibly means a difference during one single year of 70-80 degrees. The variation of extreme daylight during summer and extreme darkness during winter is another factor, although the latter is greatly alleviated by snow and ice and the (to strangers surprising) effect of the celestial bodies of the night. During the first part of summer there is even at this subarctic latitude a short

period of more or less permanent daylight. During the darkness of December before the snow has settled the forest may appear pitch black like "inside a cave."

In such conditions it is rather surprising that the paintings have survived. The tensions in the stone between cold and heat, the work of frost-bite in crevices and fissures, the shifting light conditions, all seem to conspire towards obliteration. But miracles still occur. It is less of a miracle if paintings survive inside a cave. In caves the variations of light, humidity and temperature are much less marked than in open terrain.

There is some urgency as to the documentation of these paintings in open terrain. Today, some of them are so blurred and fragmentary that very soon nothing may be seen of them, let alone be discovered at all. You may develop trained eyes but your objectivity will still be problematic. Three of the new discoveries were in fact covered by algae and lichens. These very surfaces of rock had nonetheless been intentionally chosen for their potential. Any kind of wholesale brushing of rock surfaces would be out of the question. The brush had to be applied with utmost care on a very limited area, but the preliminary judgment could happily be confirmed. These paintings, which were successively uncovered are Lillklippen in Ramsele, Brinnåsklippen 2 and Ökullen in Fjällsjö (see the survey map). No one has the faintest idea on how many paintings have been missed because of growth of lichens, or for that matter destroyed entirely throughout the millennia.

How then to approach the immaterial aspect? Much can never be communicated in the relationship between the observer and the painted surfaces. Their language is not ours, and interpretations of details would depend on language. Only a speculative element could help us, at least to some extent.

The open-air paintings appear to have had, like today, a direct contact with the environment. This environment means many



Fig. 7. Part of surface 2 at Boforsklacken. From Kivikäs 2003: 89. Del av yta 2 på Boforsklacken.

things, the sun and the moon, the starry sky, *aurora borealis* = the northern lights, the winds, the forest, the water, the heights and hills, as well as vegetation, animals and men. This should be seen in contrast to cave paintings, of which about ten are already known from Norway, where exists total or partial darkness.

Most of these cave paintings are found in the "sluice of light," at the border of light and darkness. Accordingly the same kind of 'holiness' could never be applied to the daylight paintings as to the landscapes of the underworld. The 'holy' things must in our case be found in the intimate contact with everything under the sun and the sky. Only with this done the integration of the rock paintings in the microcosm of the environment and the macrocosm of the universe would be complete.

Boforsklacken in the parish of Fjällsjö

This rock painting was discovered in 1996 by way of an archaeological excursion made during the folk and music festival of *Urkult*. The festival was arranged at Näsåker, the site of the famous rock carvings of *Nämforsen*. Boforsklacken had been singled out consciously for a survey of rock paintings. A number of elk pits and Stone Age habitation sites were found in the neighbourhood. At a distance of two kilometres to the southeast of the painting was documented a basis settlement, which seems to contain the foundations of a Neolithic winter hut. As a whole, the area is rich in ancient monuments.

The settlement milieu of *Sörånäset* at the confluence of the rivers *Vängelälven* and *Fjällsjöälven* and the adjacent Neolithic "row-house" site of *Bastuloken* have few parallels



Fig. 8. The rock painting Högberget 1, where an archaeological excavation was carried out by the RANE project (Lindgren 2004). Photo: Bernt Ove Viklund.

Hällmålningen Högberget 1 där en arkeologisk undersökning genomförs av RANE projektet.

in the woodlands of Norrland. The archaeological milieus are indeed extensive. This complex could be considered as a stimulating pivot of past cultures in the area.

Boforsklacken is an impressive site when seen quite closely. But approaching it from the forest it appears as quite a surprise to the visitor. At the foot of the rock there are often recent droppings of elk. The paintings are divided into three panels in an area of about 11 x 4 metres, facing the southeast. The height a.s.l. is 220 m. Surface 1 to the left is located in an *abri* protected by a rocky roof. It contains at least two small elks painted lying in an angle of 45°.

To go there to study it means that a regular climb is necessary. Possibly there were once two or more people who helped each other to paint. As far as I know this painting is unique in the North.

Surface 2 is the biggest. In optimal weather condition about ten different motives seem

to be indicated (Fig 7, after Kivikäs). Elks dominate. There is at least one human figure. Surface 3 has got three rather shapeless colourings which are difficult to interpret. This surface is like the former partly covered by algae and lichens. In addition, limestone (chalky) sediments cover part of the paintings.

As has been mentioned above there are Stone Age habitation sites at this locality. The closest is found just 50 m from the site. Others lie at a distance of about 100 m. Behind the rock is found a number of elk pits. A poster has been set up to introduce visitors to this milieu of past cultures, explaining its attractions in four languages.

Högberget 3 in the parish of Ramsele

This rock painting was found in 2001 and is the third of a total of four at Högberget. The painting faces southsouthwest. The height a.s.l. is about 285 m. The siting is unique in

Fig. 9. The human-like figure close to the rock painting Brinnäsklippen 1. Note the profile of the head. Photo: Bernt Ove Viklund.

Den människoliknande figuren intill hållmålningen Brinnäsklippen 1. Lägga märke till profilen av huvudet.



Sweden. It is on the wall of a boulder cave. Probably it represents an elk figure, if so anyway a fragmentary one. On the outer north wall is found another painting, extremely blurred, but representing the contours of an elk and a triangular human figure.

The painting site is anthropomorphic in quite a particular aspect. Has the wall and the northern side of the boulder been painted because it reminds you of a vagina? Several of the visitors, male as well as female, have imagined an "erotic" quality in the site.

Close to the four rock paintings of Högberget are found elk pits. The closeness to Hög-

berget 1 is conspicuous. In no other rock painting site are the hunting pits that close to the painting. This painting was discovered in 1996. The site has been excavated by archaeologists (Fig. 8). The datings show several cultural stages immediately adjacent to the painting as well as in the elk pit. The time horizon of the painting is 3700-3330 BC and of the pit 1440-1260 BC. In the Early Neolithic fires have been lit at the paintings, and in the Bronze Age an elk pit has been used nearby. Perhaps the fire was lit in connection with a ritual of painting. Could this indicate that the painting was made in the darkness? Or the carbon may perhaps rather be remains of the production of red ochre?

The boulder cave at the painting was also excavated. There are several layers there as well. The earliest datings lie in the shift between the Mesolithic and the Neolithic, 4340-4040 BC. The later stage of the elk pit is dated 1410-1000 B. The combined results of the excavations give two alternatives for the dating of the painting. Either they were made in the Early Neolithic or in the Bronze Age. A sensible suggestion would presumably be the earlier stage.

Brinnåsklippen 1 in the parish of Fjällsjö

This rock was singled out for survey. The discovery came at the end of 2003, precisely during the first arrival of winter. The first snow fell in connection with the documentation. The painting is indeed difficult to find. A search without very precise coordinates could be expected to last for some time. The distance to the river Vängelälven is about 1 km. The closest painting sites are Brinnåsklippen 2, only some hundred meters to the west, and Boforsklacken a scant km to the southwest. The siting is unusual in Sweden, on a concealed ledge, which cannot be seen from the foot of the rock. The most conspicuous feature when approaching the site is an natural anthropomorphous figure in the rock to the right of the painting (Fig. 9). This is the first indication of the site, but it is thus only accessible when the visitor is quite close. The "head" of this human-like rock sculpture is huge in comparison with the painting, in fact the latter is situated so to speak on the "shoulder" of the natural form. The painting consists of a scene comprising three essential components. The contours of an elk can be seen and above its head a distinct zig-zag motive. Behind the elk stands a male figure with an erection directed towards the back of the elk.

It is easy to imagine a shaman behind this scene. But what does it "mean?" The majestic human face must have been a guide to the site even when the painting was to be made. The trinity of components must give some of its significance, elk, male human, zig-zag wave. What does the latter stand for? Snake, worm, contour of rocks,

running water, perhaps the frames of the northern lights? It is not quite uncommon as a motive of slate artefacts with carvings. The male figure with his penis at the elk may not represent bestiality performed, perhaps rather the close relationship between human beings and the animals. The little terrace has also something to say. A lonely and unseen place, if this is sought for.

Harahällan at the border between the parishes of Fjällsjö and Bodum

The fourth site is *Harahällan*. So far, studies of literature and conversations with colleagues in Finland and Norway indicate that its siting may be unique in the entire *taiga* region, extending far away to Siberia. Neither does it resemble anything met with in the North. The paintings are found *in an environment which we recognize as typical for inland rock carvings*. This means that the location resembles the carving sites of *Nämforsen*, *Ångermanland Norrfors* and *Laxforsen*, *Västerbotten*, *Glösabäcken*, *Jämtland*.

The water of the rapids at Harahällan gives a suggestive effect during the ice-free period. The boulders are another conspicuous feature. Under the paintings there are boulder caves, one of them a kind of natural "bubble pool" under a roof. To take a bath here really gives a feeling of exclusivity. Such an experience naturally leads to questions: was this a place of a *catharsis* once, mental, corporeal? The sounds of the racing waters even lend a feeling of musicality. The water flow varies from very strong to quite still.

During high winter the rapids will freeze and all waters will be covered with ice.

The larger painting is found on an erratic boulder placed on the solid rock. This boulder lies on the Fjällsjö side of the parish border. The direction of the painting is at a right angle to the river. Under the boulder is a cavity where the water flows. During high water the water partly surrounds the boulder. On top of it is a zoomorphous but natural feature resembling a sitting or rather brooding bird figure.

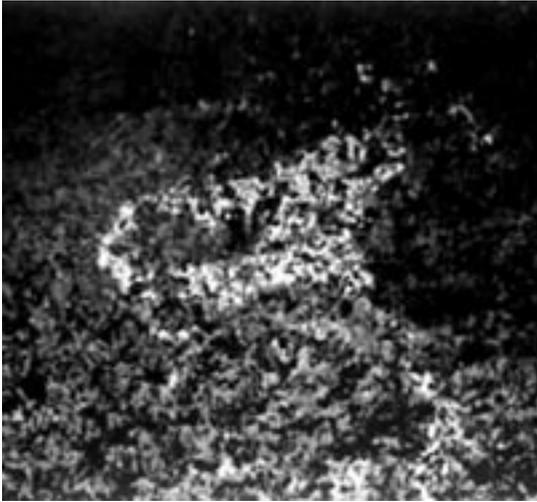


Fig. 10. The most distinct elk figure at Harahällan. Photo: Bjärne Engholm.

Den tydligaste älgfiguren på Harahällan.

The painting is found within a surface of 2 m long and 1,4 m tall. It faces east-northeast. The angle of the overhang of the rock is 45° . To the left of the painting is the most distinct of the elks (fig. 10). It is painted with contour-lines, 27 cm long and 9 cm tall. The contour itself is 3-7 cm wide. To the left of the elk above it and to a crack in the boulder there are colour fragments and a possible back of an elk. Under the distinct elk is another elk, with fragmentary contour-lines, 25 cm long. To the right are the contour-lines of yet another elk, 60 cm long and 24 cm tall. Within the surface there are other colour fragments. Probably about 10 different figures are indicated on this surface. The elks seem to "walk" upstream the river, towards the lake Nagasjön.

The painting called *Harahällan 2* is found 5 m east-northeast from the first site. It is a fragment of a small elk. A contour is 14 cm long and 5 cm tall. Its direction is southeast. In contrast to the elks of the first boulder this elk is thus "walking" across the river.

The band society in question

The area under scrutiny in northwest Ångermanland has thus during the last years suddenly become the most well-endowed with

rock paintings in Sweden. This Stone Age gallery consists of 14 paintings, which is our *Space of Red Ochre* in the title. Before the recent discoveries only one single painting was known in the area. This single site is situated at *Brattforsen*. The land surface of the area comprises 20 x 30 kms from north to south. The discovery of yet other paintings as well as more Neolithic basic settlement sites can be foreseen. Of the latter 13 have been found during later years. Before that only one was known. The result so far of the survey indicates a connection between these types of ancient monuments. The basic winter camps are so to speak seconded by rock paintings. The over-all interpretation is that of a human band society divided into smaller groups at strategically located winter camps. The hunt for the most important quarry, the elk, will in this way be equally distributed over the area. The area was probably in advance intentionally partitioned according to previous knowledge on the whereabouts of the elk during different seasons. During the summer the band presumably assembled at the collective central settlement at *Sörånäset*. This site is particularly favourable for several concurrent reasons, strategically not the least, at the confluence of two rivers, in fact even three, since the third is a bifurcation between the two others. Fishing must have

been superb at the site. The results of hunting for smaller quarry and of the gathering of the resources of the taiga environment could easily be brought there by water and land. The promontory of the main settlement could be seen as a huge funnel of land surrounded by water. In the immediate neighbourhood are additional habitation sites as well as elk pits. If extended to adjacent areas mentioned in the introduction the potential for a further successful application of these principal ideas appears as evident.

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Footnote 1

The 13 discoveries of the years 1996 to 2004 have been presented in Viklund 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c.

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