

The Cave Paintings of Norway

Introduction

The Norwegian cave paintings form a geographically confined phenomenon. They are concentrated in the two neighbouring counties of Nord-Trøndelag and Nordland which are in the northern region of the country. At the time of writing, twelve sites containing about 170 painted figures have been documented.

The Norwegian painted caves are remarkable in the sense that they are the only recorded examples of their kind in northern Europe. Located in desolate areas along the Atlantic coast, they are found in mountainous landscapes with a rugged shoreline. The consensus of opinion is that the majority of the paintings were made by hunter-gatherer-fishers during the Bronze Age (or the Early Metal Age as this period is referred to in northern Norway), and that they stayed in these caves on a short-term basis for ritual purposes only.

The Norwegian painted caves: an overview

The sites on the list below are numbered according to geography, starting from south (please see the map, fig.1). In addition to the site names, the list has entries for the district, county and borough as well as the year of discovery of the paintings.

Ytre Namdalen, Nord-Trøndelag

1. Fingals Cave, Nærøy (1961)
2. Solsem Cave, Leka (1912)



Fig. 1. Map showing the 12 cave painting sites in Norway the year 2013.

Sør-Helgeland, Nordland

3. Troillholet, Vevelstad (1988)
4. Skåren-Monsen Cave, Brønnøy (1978)

Salten, Nordland

5. The Cave of Store Hjertøya, Bodø (1994)
6. Brustein Cave, Gildeskål (1994)
7. Lønngangen, Gildeskål (2012)

Lofoten, Nordland

8. Helvete, Røst (1992)
9. Sanden Cave, Værøy (1994)
10. Kollhellaren (Refsvik Cave), Moskenes (1987)
11. Bukkhammar Cave, Moskenes (2001)
12. Hessura, Flakstad (2011)

With the exception of no. 5, all these sites are dark in their innermost parts.

These painted caves represent three geomorphological types. No. 7 has been eroded in a karst landscape, whereas no. 12 is a so-called talus cave. This means that it has been formed by a heap of huge boulders which gathered after a dramatic rockslide. The remaining ones are sea caves, or littoral

caves. They have been eroded in different kinds of metamorphic rocks.

The formation of the sea caves

The sea caves were formed by marine erosion of weak zones in vertical coastal cliff faces. This took place during the advance and retreat of Late Pleistocene glaciations. In metamorphic rocks, the weak zones are usually faults. Since they are distinguished by fragmentation, the vaults of sea caves are heavily fragmented.

The erosion of these caves was caused by the combination of enormous pressure released by the waves when striking rock cavities, the grinding movement of pebbles and gravel, and frost. Ground-down walls and scattered pebbles on the floor are characteristic features of sea caves (Bunnell 2004: 491-492).

There are many such caves along the westerly Norwegian coast, but few of them are more than 100 meters deep. As a rule,



Figure 2. The wide entrance to Bukkhammar Cave in Lofoten forms a big hole in a monumental landscape. (Photo: A. Kjersheim 2005.)

they have a simpler topography than those eroded in limestone. Due to the Holocene land uplift, their present terrain location is, to a varying extent, above sea level.

During the post-glacial era, these caves passed through substantial changes. Heavy precipitation and frost influenced the loose structure and provoked rock falls from the cliff face above the opening and from the subterranean vault. A common result is a talus ridge in the entrance area and steep conical screes outside and inside the opening. The interior darkness is partly due to the narrow opening caused by these collapses. Some entrances, however, have retained imposing dimensions (*Figs. 2 and 14*).

The total length of the painted sea caves varies considerably, the longest being about 195 m. Moving around inside them is often

Figure 3. The narrow entrance to the large Fingals Cave. (Photo: T. Norsted 1996.)



challenging. Boulders and irregular, sharp-edged blocks which have fallen from the vault add to the difficulty of finding a safe passage. Rock falls still occur.

The sea caves today

The sea caves are the most imposing kind among the Norwegian painted caves. When viewed from a distance, those having large entrances occur as unfamiliar and conspicuous formations. They appear as huge holes in the landscape. Two sites on the west coast of the Lofoten Archipelago, called Bukkhammar Cave and Kollhellaren (*Figs. 2 and 14*), are distinctive examples. On moving closer, the dimensions of their entrance areas may arouse feelings of being small and inferior.

Some sea cave openings cannot be seen from a distance, since they are narrow and almost blocked. Characteristic examples are the openings leading into Fingals Cave (*Fig. 3*) and Sanden Cave. Common to these sites, is the dramatic enlargement of their subterranean space immediately inside the opening.

Standing on top of the entrance talus, one looks into a dimly illuminated, underground landscape consisting of impressive rock formations. This is a bizarre and eerie environment. To enter, one has to climb down and proceed among the boulders and rocks that have fallen from the vault. Step by step, one senses that the light, movements, colours and sounds of the outside world are replaced by increasing darkness, low temperatures, high humidity, silence (except for the sound of dripping water) and the impact of huge masses of dark rock. Since these underground systems favour a minimum of perceptible life processes, they represent the sharpest conceivable contrast to our customary experience. We are entering a totally different, static world, excluded from the circadian rhythm which predetermines a socially ordered space. These cave interiors present a given set of conditions to which we respond rather than control.



Figure 4. The peculiar island of Treenyken, Røst in Lofoten. The painted cave called Helvete is below the middle peak. (Photo: T. Norsted 2001.)

The place where the light fades away and the darkness begins is an essential point in this subterranean world. When leaving this twilight zone and moving further into the cave, our senses, orientation, bodily control, and mental processes are heavily influenced by the darkness. The

Figure 5. The side of this menhir-like boulder facing the small entrance of Fingals Cave is struck by direct sun rays for a short time twice a year. (Photo: A. Kjersheim 2004.)



cave's topographic diversity contributes to reducing our perception of definable space. Besides, only parts of the surfaces and nearby spaces are illuminated by our headlamp.

The sensory perception related to entering, being in, and departing from these caves, is a profound experience. Assuming that we and people of the past share 'carnal bodies' and sensory organs, the shared experience of such stable physical phenomena as these caves may act as an important, contextual backdrop for the interpretation of past beliefs and practice (Bjerck 2012).

In a global perspective, the combination of deep caves and paintings are extremely rare. Apart from being scarce phenomena, the Norwegian painted caves must have had a symbolic and ritual potential equivalent to similar sites in other parts of the world.

The caves as powerful sites

Most of the Norwegian painted caves are located in remote and rugged places which may be termed as 'wilderness areas'. Being elements of dramatic, mountainous environments, close to the open ocean, these caves are marginal places. They must have

attracted great attention in prehistoric periods. In a global context, traditional beliefs assert that such dark subterranean passages towards the spiritual underworld are imbued with supernatural power. This power is an immanent reality of a sanctuary and connects it to the cosmic order. The rituals at these sites contribute to reinforce that order.

The recognition of powerful sites permeated, for example, the pre-Christian beliefs of the indigenous Sámi living in northern Fennoscandia, i.e. the north-western part of mainland Europe. Anthropological and archaeological records, and written sources from the 17th and 18th century that describe their cosmology, myths and ritual practice indicate that the Sámi regarded a whole range of striking, natural formations, in particular some mountains and lakes, as powerful ritual sites. These were connected to the invisible presence of deities and ancestral spirits, and often used for sacrifices (Manker 1957: 23-28).

Since the ethnicity of the Sámi is recognizable at the end of the first millennium

Figure 6. The huge chamber of Fingals Cave as seen against the 'menhir' and the entrance. (Photo: A. Kjerheim 1996.)



BC (Hansen and Olsen 2004: 36-41), and since the painted caves are located outside their traditional settlement area, it is doubtful whether they had any direct connection with the cave paintings. The beliefs of the pre-Christian Sámi, however, are interesting from an interpretative aspect since it is assumed that their shamanism, polytheism, magic and sacrificial practices had very old roots (Ibid: 352-353). This could mean that their immediate forefathers shared their animism and ritual practices with other hunter-gatherers in northern Fennoscandia. It is conceivable that these populations included those who used the Norwegian coastal caves during the Early Metal Age and made the paintings inside them (Norsted 2010).

The Norwegian cave paintings belong to the circumpolar, cultural complex which is represented by the traditional populations of northern Eurasia. Due to the early formation of Sámi ethnicity and their long-lasting, particular tradition permeated by animism, studies of Sámi religious symbolism and practices have increasingly influenced the interpretation of the prehistoric, northern Fennoscandian rock art (Helskog 1999; Lahelma 2008).

The caves and the cosmic order

The caves were symbolically connected to the tiered cosmos. In this cosmos, the main spiritual layers were above and below an intermediate layer that constituted the living world. The layers were penetrated by an opening and the central axis (*axis mundi*) that connected and fixed the layers. Marking the sacred centre, this axis was recognized as present on powerful ritual sites. The opening between the cosmic layers was used by the supreme deities when coming down to the earth and by the souls of the dead when descending to the realm of the dead (Eliade 1961).

The world view of the pre-Christian Sámi is regarded as significant in relation to the painted caves due to its shamanic and 'archetypical' character. In daily life, the Sámi world consisted of a visible, material and an



Figure 7. Panel I in Fingals Cave is situated at the transition zone between light and darkness. The paintings probably faced an arena for communal ceremonies. (Photo: A Kjerseim 2004.)



Figure 8. The innermost, small chamber in Fingals Cave is 115 m from the entrance. It contains 35 figures which are difficult to see on this picture. (Photo: A. Kjerseim 2004.)

invisible, spiritual dimension. These spheres might also be conceived as layers. Being always present, the spirits strongly influenced the living people and their environments. Conflicts between the spiritual and the living worlds had to be counteracted by sacrificial rites that often took place on ritual sites. These acts reinstated a balance in the living world.

To the indigenous populations of northern Eurasia, the invisible, spiritual worlds were copies of the visible world of the living. Hence, the most prominent and contrasting natural elements corresponded to the cosmic tiers. It has been suggested that those natural elements which corresponded to the upper, middle and nether cosmic layers would be the sky, mountains, and sea, respectively (Helskog 1999). Being naturally connected to these elements, the Norwegian painted caves must have been conceived by prehistoric people as sacred centres. Since the subterranean spaces of these caves would afford a contact with the nether, spiritual tier of the cosmos, the entry into these spaces would represent an entry into a part of the spirit world.

The caves as 'chosen' sites

The paintings are the direct evidence of the use of the Norwegian caves as ritual sites. It is generally assumed, on the basis of indirect datings (see later), that the painting activity took place within the period of 1700-500 BC. Since many of these caves were clearly visible and accessible during the entire post-glacial era, it is doubtful if the 'cave painters' were the first ones to venture into them. Since the caves are found within a confined region, it has been suggested that they represented a particular population who made paintings in caves as a kind of identity marking (Sognnes 2010: 92). Another interesting issue is the reason for choosing particular caves for this painting activity.

Bjerck (2012: 54-55) has examined 20 other caves in the 'right' region, all with satisfactory conditions for preservation, without discovering any paintings at all. According to him, many of these sites are even larger and more impressive than those caves in which paintings have been recorded. He wonders if imaginable paintings in the 'empty' caves would be difficult to detect without special equipment. (The present



Figure 9. Some of the zoomorphic and human-like figures in the small, innermost chamber of Fingals Cave. (Photo: A. Kjer-sheim 2004.)

author can assure the reader that this is not the case if normal LED lamps are used.)

The potentiality of these caves is indicated by a particular combination of qualities: the seclusion of their deepest, subterranean spaces from the outside world, their conspicuous, underground topography, and their darkness. After switching off the light while standing in the dark and silent zone, one may soon enter a state of peaceful 'nothingness' that normally is not reached by living people without the use of mind-altering drugs (Bjerck 2012: 59). Such a meditative state, induced by sensory deprivation in deep caves, may after a few hours lead to otherworldly experiences, such as those visions (hallucinations) that are characteristic of shamanic practices (Lewis-Williams 2002: 124). Assumed to be hallucinogenic places, Norwegian caves have likely been recognized and used for the stimulation of otherworldly visions. This quality may have been extremely effective in some 'chosen' caves. It is conceivable that the visions, in one way or another, were connected to the paintings.

The caves and their relationship to shamanism

Over the last few decades, the Norwegian caves and their paintings have increasingly been associated with shamanism. Except for the paintings, the shamans have left few and doubtful traces in these caves. Therefore, the shamanic world and practice in northern Eurasia are used here to give an imagined impression of shamanic activities in the Norwegian caves.

In northern Eurasia, the shamans of historic times were the only ones who acted as the mediator between man and the spiritual world. In addition to being religious leaders, they had a far-reaching, social responsibility. Their exceptional status was based on their unique ability to use a deep trance as a means of 'travelling' to the spiritual worlds to obtain information about how crises could be counteracted. These 'journeys' to the spiritual spheres were associated with the tiered cosmos since this was used by the shamans as a symbolic system for their freedom of movement in space. The out-of-the-body travels to spiritual realms had the existence of a

'free soul' as a prerequisite. During a state of deep trance, this soul was released from the shamans' bodies. Another prerequisite was to have helping spirits as protective and advisory travel companions. Without them, the shamans would not be able to function (Bäckman 1975; Pollan 1993; Hansen and Olsen 2004).

The shaman was chosen, trained and initiated based on his particular capability of attaining altered states of consciousness and use them beneficially. He (sometimes she) was endowed with an exceptional, mental power because of his mastering of the free-soul. When being in the state of deep trance, the shaman, being represented by his free-soul, existed immaterially and experienced levels of reality that are impossible to imagine by people having a normal, western background and mind. In fact, dreaming and dream images may represent weak and obscure reflections of the shaman's experiences while being in the spiritual worlds. Hence, it may be hard to under-

stand – and believe in – the shaman's world view, abilities, and practice. The members of his own society, however, trusted in his notions and methods because they were able to witness their efficiency.

The neophytes were chosen when they were quite young. They protested violently, but in vain. Their resistance could have been caused by the prospect of carrying heavy burdens of responsibility for the well-being of the society. During their training, they had to undergo physical and mental suffering, such as extreme isolation and serious symptoms of illness (Pollan 1993: 81). This was considered necessary for the attainment of the shaman status. In the Sámi context, most of the training was entrusted to seasoned shamans and to spirits of deceased shamans that resided in sacred mountains (Bäckman 1975). Records from other parts of the world indicate that parts of the shaman's training and initiation took place in caves. It is possible that the Norwegian painted caves were used for similar training and initiation as well.

Figure 10. View of the innermost part of Solsem Cave. There are paintings on both walls. (Photo: A. Kjerseim 1999.)



According to the records about the pre-Christian Sámi shaman, he was able to accomplish tasks in a variety of states, from light to deep trance. In a light trance the shaman was quite aware of his surroundings, and his helping spirit appeared so that he was able to, for example, heal the sick. The deep trance was induced with the help of his own chanting (called *joik*) and drumming. The shaman lay down, and when his breathing halted, the deeply moved bystanders perceived that his free soul had left his body for the journey to the spiritual realm. In this situation, he was extremely frail, so touching his body might cause his death. After a while, an assisting woman who might have been a shaman, too, started to chant in a way that guided him back to normal consciousness. The 'journey' would normally last between ½ and 1 hour. Subsequent to his return, the shaman would use chanting to inform about his experiences and the sacrifice needed to please the powerful beings of the spiritual world. Due to this sacrifice, the balance of the liv-

ing world was re-attained. The deep trance provided the shaman with increased, mental power which enlarged his field of action (Pollan 1993).

The travels of the Sámi shamans usually had the sacred mountains, the realm of the dead and faraway places in the living world as their main destinations. If some souls in the realm of the dead missed a living relative and wanted him or her to join them, it was commonly believed that they abducted the free soul of the living relative who afterwards became seriously ill. The shaman was summoned to travel to the realm of the dead to recapture the missing soul, and he might succeed if he promised a satisfactory sacrifice. Being in a deep trance that secured him immaterial existence, the shaman was the only living person who could survive in the realm of the dead (Bäckman 1975).

This realm of the dead and the deepest part of the caves must have formed a symbolic connection. As mentioned earlier, both were likely perceived as parts of the nether tier of cosmos. Hence, it is conceivable that

the shamans who used the Norwegian painted caves as their activity arena would travel to the realm of the dead while staying in the deepest parts of these sites.

The helping spirits, who were summoned by means of drumming, were able to transfer their supernatural power to the shamans. Being invisible to ordinary people, the helpers appeared to the shamans as zoomorphic or human-like beings. When facing crisis, a shaman could convert himself into his helping spirit, thus taking on a zoomorphic, anthropomorphic or therianthrope ('combined') shape. In fact, numerous rock art motifs have been linked to the relationship between the shaman and his helping spirit. There is no reason to exclude a similar background for the painted motifs in the Norwegian caves.

In northern Eurasia, the shamans were dressed in particular costumes, especially prior to their travel to a spiritual realm. These costumes should, in various ways, express the shamans' extraordinary skills and power. Referring to their flying ability, the costumes were adorned with feathers. The



Figure 11. The large group of 14 human-like figures on the eastern wall of Solsem Cave. (Photo: A. Kjerheim 1999.)

headgear might consist of complete bird wings or antlers, while the shoes could have a hoof-like shape. Hides from those animals that represented the shamans' helping spirits were the common raw materials of the costumes. These were adorned with symbols that protected against evil forces (Pollan 1993: 116). Related costumes were likely to have been common in northern Eurasia, even in earlier periods. In addition, the shaman was equipped with a drum and a pole with an animal head on top. Both are to be seen as motifs on the rock carvings in Alta dating from 4200-3600 BC. The animal head on the pole symbolized the helping spirit. In the Norwegian caves, parts of the shaman's costume, the animal-headed pole and other kinds of attributes have been recorded in groups of human-like figures.

The caves as ritual sites

The cave-space has distinct advantages as a ritual setting. Thus, prehistoric people explored and adapted each cave according to its topography and in terms of the particular shamanistic cosmology and social relations that prevailed at that time and place.

Figure 12. One of the eastern wall figures of Solsem Cave. It evidently wears a head gear. (Photo: A. Kjersheim 1999.)



The combination of darkness and a suitable layout could form a cognitive model in the Norwegian caves. Hence, 'pioneers' who ventured into them likely examined the entire interior to understand how their spaces could be suitable for ritual use. None of these caves are alike, and very few of them have a broad repertoire of 'activity areas'. Still, people must have had shared notions about these caves and the rituals that were appropriate in them. Being dissimilar, physically speaking, the cultic activities could have varied correspondingly from one cave to another.

The individuality characterizes the placing of the paintings, too. A common feature is their location either in the vague transition zone between light and darkness or in the dark parts of the cave. Rock surfaces that are illuminated from the entrance have no figures at all. (The shelter-like cave of Store Hjertøya is the one exception.) Another common feature is the fact that the majority of the figures are collected in groups. These groups are often located in a twilight zone and especially in places where there is space enough for assembling a number of people who took part in communal ceremonies (*figs. 7 and 11*).

Major parts of the Norwegian painted caves were used as arenas for ritual. This is evidenced by their topography and the presence of paintings. As for rituals performed in caves, the religious aspect was a decisive criterion. The common purpose of group rituals was the creation of a strong, emotional experience – a catharsis – which changed and enforced the self-apprehension of those involved. These group rituals had a leader (this was usually the shaman's assignment) and included a symbolic, formal part in which the belief in the invisible powers above was referred. This entailed invariant actions based on a prescribed format and distinct means of communication (Bell 1997: 150; Stone 2012: 367). Since this behaviour was structured, it needed a structured space – hence, the integrity of space in the ritual process. Being permanent and stable, caves might be regarded as the most important sacred spaces in the pre-architectural era.

A basis of the catharsis experience is people's recognition of the cave as imbued with supernatural power. This power induces *alterations*. Hence, people who passed through the cave spaces were recognized as having experienced an empowering transformation. This property is undoubtedly relevant to the role of caves as arenas for rites of passage.

Several Norwegian caves have assumed qualities as ritual theatres. Being in darkness, effectively isolated from the outside world, the sensory impression of the participants could be manipulated by the ritual leader's use of dramatic effects based on, for example, light, sound, and various kinds of surprises. Moreover, the topographic

qualities of these caves must have been fully acknowledged and made use of. The combined layout of the cave and the location of the paintings might provide premises for ritual patterns of movement.

As mentioned earlier, sacrificial remains have been detected in two of the Norwegian caves (Solsem Cave and Helvete). Having been brought into the sacred spaces from the outside world, even sacrifices were empowered. The offerings included mainly food and were always given to the spirits by humans. According to ancient rules, the spirits needed food, and they expected people to procure the nutrition (Pollan 1993). During the ritual, people took delight in the meal and left the remnants for the spirits.

Figure 13. The monumental cruciform figure on the eastern wall of Solsem Cave is the largest cave painting in Norway. (Photo: A Kjersheim 1999.)





Figure 14. The monumental entrance to Kollhellaren is about 50 m high. (A. Kjersheim 2006.)

The rituals in the caves took place outside normal experience and social framework, but the supernatural, transformative power of these sites has made them attractive to those who desired to undergo a spiritual revitalization. The paintings in the Norwegian caves clearly provide evidence that deep reasons, stemming from religious concepts and desires, have attracted people to these sites. We know, for example, that groups living on the islands of the Lofoten Archipelago during the Early Metal Age had to cross dangerous waters in small boats to visit 'their' cave (Fig.4). Such a daring deed stresses the importance of this otherworldly connection (Norsted 2010).

The ritual making of the cave paintings

Earlier in this article I have discussed the relationship to shamanism. There, I have

tried to make use of contemporary witness accounts and some later analytic approaches to these accounts from the fields of ethnography and history of religion. Several of these approaches have a respectful attitude towards the old Sámi notion that living humans have a free soul, and that this soul could be released by the shaman during deep trance so that a journey to the spiritual realm would be possible. However, there is another approach to this remarkable phenomenon which might be easier to understand, or accept. This is used by, for example, Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams for their analyses of Late Palaeolithic cave art. They regard the shaman's out-of-the-body journeys as a hallucinatory phenomenon. Here, I will try to make use of their approach.

The most spectacular ritual function of the painted Norwegian caves is undoubtedly linked to their assumed quality as hallucinogenic places. It is conceivable that the existence of paintings in these caves should be related to 'visions' attained inside their dark spaces by shamans and other initiated people while being in a state of altered consciousness.

By using the notion of 'other initiated people', I refer to those members of the society who went into the caves to induce a state of trance and attain hallucinations. This connection with the spiritual realm must have been perceived as highly significant. Those who had this otherworldly experience would probably have a strong feeling of being transformed and empowered, and according to Lewis-Williams (2002), they were secured a prominent position within their society. This 'charging' of supernatural potency resulting from trance and hallucinations has been associated with traditional vision quests performed by young North American Natives. They usually went to a remote, isolated spot, for example a cave, to fast, meditate and induce the altered states of consciousness in which they received visions of the helping spirit that would impart the power requisite for shamanic practice (Ibid.).

According to Eliade (1972), the speciality of the shaman, namely keeping portals

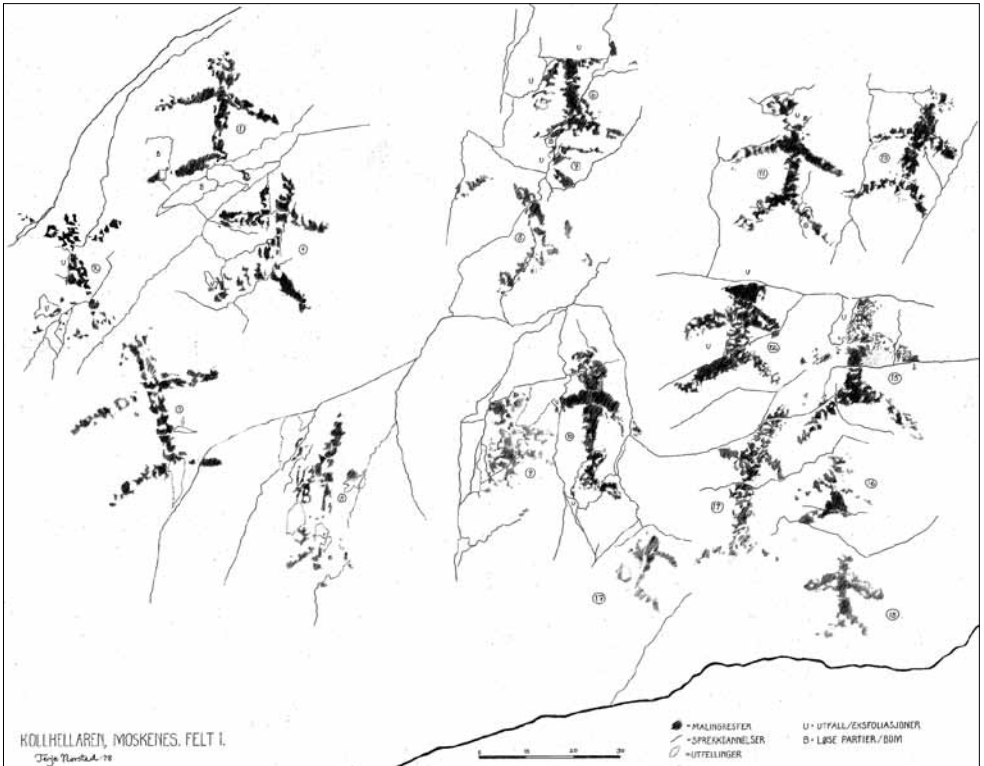


Figure 15. The panel I figures of the eastern gallery of Kollhellaren. (Drawing based on detailed measurements and slide projection by T. Norsted 2001.)

to the sacred spheres open for contact on behalf of his society, was a widespread capacity among people far back in prehistory. If he is right, the extent of this capacity has been reduced, leaving the shaman of historic time as the only 'trancer' and ritual specialist in their society. If the scattered groups of people living in the Norwegian cave paintings region existed prior to the beginning of this specialization, they would probably still be able to 'keep portals to the sacred spheres open' because of a shamanist potential among their members. Speaking of this possibility, it is obvious that the shamanist symbolism has deep roots. The animal-headed pole, for example, occurs in Early Neolithic petroglyphs in Alta. It reappears in the Norwegian cave paintings and was still in use by Sámi shamans about three centuries ago.

Since the Norwegian cave paintings are almost exclusively connected to the walls, it is conceivable that the hallucinations in these sites were related to the cave walls. According to Lewis-Williams (2002), Late Palaeolithic people perceived a cave wall as a highly charged, spiritual phenomenon which he refers to as a 'living membrane'. Concurrently, these people must have perceived that the spirit world existed behind these membranous walls. That is why people in a state of deep trance could attain 'visions' of the spirits and eventually, 'make a journey' through the membrane into the spiritual world. This experience in a dark cave would be a mental journey into another, supernatural dimension (Clottes 2003: 24). Thus, the common element of hallucination was likely to be the ritual stepping stone that entailed the making of paintings

in the Norwegian caves. The visions might, to a certain degree, procure 'models' for the paintings.

What sort of spirits did the hallucinating people 'see' in these caves? If they 'saw', for example, the spiritual helpers, this would agree with the experiences of the North American questers. Remembering the notion that the prehistoric people went into these caves to undergo a mental transformation and empowerment, and remembering that the supernatural power was related to deep trance and the helper's presence, it is conceivable that the visions were perceived as helping spirits.

The majority of the figures in the Norwegian painted caves are human-like. This reminds us of the belief that the main helpers of the Sámi shamans were spirits of deceased shamans. Sometimes appearing as young men in nature, they resided in sacred mountains and served as ritual models (Bäckman 1975). Some human-like images also include shamanic attributes, and many

of the figures are collected in groups which could be associated with communal ceremonies. Such additional elements might originate from the visions. Being painted, these additions may indicate that the motifs refer to prescribed religious conduct.

The spirits that were 'seen' or 'visited' were probably materialized when painted after the hallucinations had ended. As a powerful material, the paint would likely facilitate the transference of supernatural power from the spirits behind the membrane to the painters. The painted groups consisting of several figures were usually composed nearby an expansive area where a number of people could assemble (*figs. 7 and 11*). Here, the paintings probably had didactic functions, serving as a kind of ritual reference. Hence, 'ordinary' people coming into the cave could perceive the spiritual world and its powerful beings that emerged from the walls as paintings. Every image made hidden presences visible (Lewis-Williams 2002). Other paintings were made



Figure 16. Two comparatively distinct figures from panel I in Kollhellaren. (Photo: A Kjersheim 2006.)

in small, out-of-the-way places where only one or two persons could gather (*fig. 8*). Still, it is possible that all the images had a common meaning: they were important for the establishment of connections with the supernatural world.

Entry into these caves as well as the preparation of paint and the actual making of the images was probably a series of inter-related, ritualized contexts. It is conceivable that many generations of people returned to these sites over a long time even if the painting activity was interrupted or ended. The cave and the figures existed and could still be used even if their meanings came to be changed.

The motifs of the cave paintings

The Norwegian cave paintings were normally applied on the walls, but there are exceptions: in a chamber forming the inner-

most part of Brustein Cave, the majority of the figures were placed on the low ceiling. In addition, a slab with a painting of three human-like figures was raised in the innermost part of the chamber.

The main motifs of these cave paintings are animal-like and human-like figures. The zoomorphs represent a clear minority, but in Skåren-Monsen Cave, they are the only motif. The remaining zoomorphs are placed among the human-like figures, but their crudeness often makes the identification of the kind of animal a difficult matter (*fig. 9*).

In the Norwegian caves, there are 'abstract' combinations of lines as well as 'formless' spots. These spots appear to originate from a mere touching of the rock surface with paint on the fingers. This touching of the 'membrane' was obviously very important, and by including the paint, a powerful material, the contact with the

Figure 17. Panel IIA in Kollhellaren appears to depict a ritual. The 'leader' is to the far right and carries a ritual object. (Photo: A Kjersheim 2006.)



spiritual realm would obviously be facilitated (Clottes 2012: 20).

Most of the human-like figures are depicted frontally, being 12 – 95 cm high. The head is usually circular and in-filled, whereas the torso is formed by one line. The arms and legs, being also formed by one line, are sprawling. More than half of these figures compose groups consisting of 6 to 18 'participants'. Some 'group-less' figures have eye-catching locations. None of these 'free' figures are completely isolated.

No examples of Norwegian, figurative rock art are characterized by such a homogenous design pattern as these anthropomorphs. Many of them might be characterized as 'iconic': they seem to have no apparent relationship to time, place, and action. Contrary to many Upper Paleolithic images in the caves of France and Spain, the Norwegian figures are rarely connected to any natural formations of the cave wall (raised areas, recesses, holes, cracks, etc.) that would provide a preceding clue to motif and shape (Norsted 2006: 20). Due to their uniform appearance, these figures have been called 'stick men'. A closer study, however, may reveal telling variations and details. Some are depicted in side view and appear as if being in motion. Others have 'attributes': short, narrow lines, interpreted as 'head gear', standing out from the top of the head (*fig. 12*). Some hold an oblong object, and many are phallic (*Ibid.*).

When looking at the groups of human-like figures, we may perceive that an event is going on. This is suggested by the distinctiveness of one of the figures which appears to play a leading role. This might be the largest one or the one which is placed in the periphery of the group. Sometimes, this 'leader' carries an attribute (*fig. 17*). These groups impart a vaguely narrative message (*Ibid.*).

How the figures were painted

The pigment is invariably iron oxide red. Spills in Fingals Cave and Solsem Cave clearly show that the paint was liquid. Possible remains of its preparation have been detected on the flat surface of three peb-

bles in the innermost chamber of Fingals Cave (*fig. 8*). (Their colour has later been worn away by many visitors.) Analyses (x-ray diffraction, SEM-EDS) have shown that the paint contains a considerable amount of calcium carbonate. This may result from natural processes, but it may also indicate that the pigment was mixed with the carbonate-bearing water dripping from the vault. Such use of dripping water may have had a symbolic meaning, based on the notion that it emerged from the otherworld (Norsted 2010: 242).

The smallest, human-like figures have a simple shape. They are mainly composed of straight lines which are 12-15 mm wide. This indicates that they were painted with a fingertip. Brushes have been used, especially for the larger, dominating figures. These are composed of slightly curved and comparatively broad lines with a slightly varying breadth due to the changing pressure on the brush (*fig. 16*) (*Ibid.*: 243).

Today, this paint has a weak cohesion and adhesion, resulting in the pigment tending to spread on the surface when exposed to wetting by condensation. This is the main reason for the blurred appearance of a number of cave figures (*fig. 12*). The paintings are particularly vulnerable when the surface is moist. Touching them under these conditions causes the pigment to come off readily (*Ibid.*).

The prehistoric context of the paintings

We have no credible dating for the Norwegian cave paintings, but shells found in cultural deposits in Solsem Cave, and dispersed seal knuckles with cut marks, found in Helvete and interpreted as remains of sacrifices, have been radiocarbon dated (Bjerck 1995: 127; Sognnes 2009: 88). The results indicate that the activities in these caves took place between 3700 and 2500 years BP. Whether the paintings were made during this period is uncertain, but plausible.

In this period, coastal groups in the cave paintings region were hunter-gatherer-fishers who largely used stone and bone

tools. Concurrently, some coastal groups in the same region, instead of relying exclusively on natural subsistence, became increasingly more dependent on farming activities (Sognnes 1983: 117; Hesjedal 1994: 5). This represented a radical break with the traditional, circumpolar life pattern. Those two cultures may have existed side by side in the cave paintings region. It is possible that this resulted in antagonisms. Taking this into account, it has been suggested that the cave paintings were the outcome of an increasing ritual activity among the hunter-gatherer groups. If so, this might have contributed to a marking of group identity and social balance (Hesjedal 1990: 212-214; Bjerck 1995: 148).

It has usually been claimed that the Norwegian painted caves were used exclusively as arenas for ritual activities. This is clearly evidenced by the archaeological material from Solsem Cave. No flakes from the production of stone tools have been found in this cave or in any other Norwegian painted cave. Apart from the paintings, the ritual activities in Solsem Cave have been evidenced by individual stray finds, for example bone artefacts which probably could produce simple musical sounds (Bjerck 1995: 129-131).

Fingals Cave

Fingals Cave is the southernmost painted cave in Norway. After the discovery of the paintings in 1961, the site was documented by Sverre Marstrander. His article (Marstrander 1965) is a primary source of information. A new survey was carried out in 2004 and 2005 (Norsted 2008). During this work, we doubled Marstrander's number of figures. The definitive number, 49, is the greatest in any cave in Norway. Apart from 4 vague zoomorphs, all the figures are human-like. Many of them are quite distinct. The height of the anthropomorphic figures is 18-48 cm. They are dispersed on four panels.

The cave is oriented towards ENE and its entire length is 115 m. The narrow entrance

is 90 m above present sea level (*fig. 3*). Just inside, there is a vertical rock face with a ladder and a steep talus that forms the descent to the floor level. Down here, we are almost in the middle of a huge chamber which is 55 m long, almost 11 m wide and more than 15 m high. In the centre of this chamber, stands a 4.5 m high, menhir-like boulder which has fallen from the vault. Twice a year and only for a short time, its side facing the entrance is struck by direct sunrays (*fig. 5*). On these occasions, it is possible to see two small, finger-painted human-like figures in the illuminated area (panel IV). As for the floor of the huge chamber, it is covered with irregular sharp-edged blocks which add to the difficulty of moving around (*fig. 6*). The chamber ends with a narrowing that marks the beginning of a long corridor. Just here, we perceive the division between light and darkness. And just here, located opposite, there are two groups of human-like figures (panel I and II). The one on the southern wall (panel I), comprise six figures partly painted on white concretion (*fig. 7*). The other one is heavily fragmented due to extensive dripping from the vault.

The corridor is 50 m long and very narrow. At its end, there is a small chamber, 5 m long and 1.5 m wide (*fig. 8*). The headroom is low. The floor consists of gravel and some pebbles. As mentioned earlier, three of these pebbles were probably used for paint preparation. The greatest asset of this small chamber, however, is 35 figures which are dispersed on both walls (panel III) (*fig. 9*). Many of them have been painted on white concretions. The zoomorphs are located here. Some of the human-like figures have 'attributes' and are crudely organized in tiers.

Fingals Cave has a very dramatic topography. Moreover, it may include a sequence of 'stations' for ritual procession from the opening to the ending. Station no. 1 is the entrance, the transitional zone dividing the outside and inside world. Station no. 2 is the 'menhir'. The moment of its illumination connects the dark underground world

to the life cycles and the social order of the outside world. Station no. 3 is the place where the darkness begins, and where those two opposite groups of paintings are located. This is probably the main arena for common ceremonies (*fig. 7*). The last station is the end chamber. In this small room, there is space for only 2 or 3 persons. This was likely the only place that was taboo for common people. We are now far from the entrance, and the way back is strenuous. A prolonged stay in this small chamber may arouse deep feelings of isolation.

Fingals Cave is closed to the public.

Solsem Cave

This cave is oriented towards the north and is only 40 m long (*fig. 10*). Due to its narrow entrance and curved lay-out, the innermost part is dark. The cave contains 24 figures which are divided into two opposite panels (panel I and II). The best preserved and most interesting one is the panel on the eastern wall (panel I). This includes 14 human-like figures which are 37-80 cm high (*fig. 11*). Some of them have 'attributes': four have 'head gear' (*fig. 12*), two hold an oblong object, and three are phallic. The cracks on the wall create a dark pattern, and condensation moisture has caused spreading of the pigment making the figures rather blurred. Still, this large group (6.30 m long) is very impressive.

To the right of these anthropomorphs there is a very large cruciform figure (*fig. 13*). Being 2.64 m high and 3.27 m wide, this is the largest figure among the Norwegian cave paintings. Its crossbar appears to be held by one of the human-like figures. In addition to being a unique, powerful symbol having several possible meanings, it is interesting as the most evident example of the use of brush. The lines are 5.5-6 cm wide, and the vertical line which is well preserved, has distinct 'joints' showing when the painter changed position or added more paint to the brush.

Following the discovery of the paintings in 1912, two curved, concentric stone rows

across the walls in the innermost part of the cave were recorded. These have been interpreted as marking the ritual zones. Only small parts of these rows are still preserved.

Solsem Cave is closed, but it is open during the high season to groups of visitors accompanied by an approved guide.

Kollhellaren

The paintings in Kollhellaren were the first of their kind to be discovered in the Lofoten Archipelago. This took place in 1987. The cave is situated in a spectacular, mountainous landscape, and the boat trip to reach the site involves crossing one of the world's strongest maelstroms. The opening of the cave is easily seen from the sea

Figure 18. The entrance of Kollhellaren as seen from the interior. (Photo: A. Kjersheim 2006.)



because of its dramatic shape (*fig. 14*). Its height is estimated to be about 50 m, while its maximum width is 12 m. Since it faces north, a large part of the cave is illuminated by the midnight sun. The ground plan forms a cross, and the entire gallery system is 195 m long. The meeting point of the galleries, or the origo, is located 60 m from the entrance. From being 12 m wide at the origo, the main gallery becomes increasingly narrower. Two human-like, fragmentary figures are to be found in the dark part near the end of this gallery, 96 m from the entrance.

The outermost part of the cave, from the entrance to the origo, is impressive because of the huge dimensions. The main panels of paintings are found in the side galleries. At the beginning of the wide eastern gallery, on the northern wall, there is a group of 18 anthropomorphs which are 15-42 cm high (panel I) (*figs. 15 and 16*). Being faintly illuminated during the midnight sun period, this panel is slightly greenish due to the growth of algae.

The western gallery, on the contrary, is more like a small chamber. A panel of 6 human-like figures with a height between 20 and 60 cm is found on the dark, northern wall (panel IIA) (*fig. 17*). Since some of the figures are awkwardly positioned on protruding surfaces, the group has a crude character. The largest figure, to the far right, is depicted in side view and seems to address the rest of the group. It holds an oblong object with a bend at the top. This looks like a shaman's pole, the bend thus being the animal head. A kaross-like costume is perceived. Although being in a fragmentary state, this panel provides the best evidence in the Norwegian caves of a ritual being depicted.

Several 'loose' human-like figures are also located in this chamber. All in all, Kollhellaren contains 30 figures.

The cave is closed, but the greater part of it is open during the high season to groups of visitors accompanied by approved guide.

The safeguarding issue

The meaning and value of the Norwegian cave paintings has changed radically from their having a ritual function to their current status as cultural monuments and possible tourist attractions (*fig. 18*). This change places great demands on how these sites should be safeguarded and presented in present-day reality. The extreme vulnerability of the paintings and other archaeological materials in the caves indicates that the safeguarding must include decisive elements of risk preparedness (Norsted 2010: 245).

The painted caves are automatically protected. According to the preamble of the Norwegian Cultural Heritage Act (1978), these monuments should be conserved 'as scientific source material and as an enduring basis for the experience of present and future generations and for their self-awareness, enjoyment and activities'.

According to the Act, we should cater for the interests of both science and the general public. Attaining such a balance is sometimes problematic. Most of the Norwegian caves are open, physically speaking, and there is often a serious risk that valuable source material will be altered or lost if public access is casual. The focus which the Act places on future generations, however, helps to draw up boundaries for the use relative to susceptibility.

To ensure that our descendants will have the opportunity to experience the cave paintings in Norway, public accessibility should be assessed and strictly controlled. This strategy has been chosen for selected caves and their pre-historic imagery in other parts of the world. A similar policy is increasingly relevant for related sites in Norway.

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