

# BRONZE AGE ROCK ART AND BURIALS IN WEST NORWAY

## ARTE RUPESTRE Y ENTERRAMIENTOS EN EL OUEST DE LA NORUEGA EN LA EDAD DE BRONCE

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### Resumen

Se discute la relación entre petroglifos y enterramientos de la Edad de Bronce en el área occidental de Noruega y se presenta un método visual para el análisis del paisaje. Los petroglifos y los enterramientos son interpretados a la luz de la cosmología y rituales funerarios.

### Palabras clave:

arte rupestre, tumbas, paisaje, relaciones visuales, cosmología.

### Abstract

In this paper I discuss the relationship between rock art panels and burial cairns from the Bronze Age in West Norway. The method used is a visual landscape analysis, based on landscape architecture and psychology of perception. The rock art panels and the cairns are interpreted in terms of funerary rituals and cosmology.

### Key words:

Rock art, graves, landscape, visual relationships, cosmology

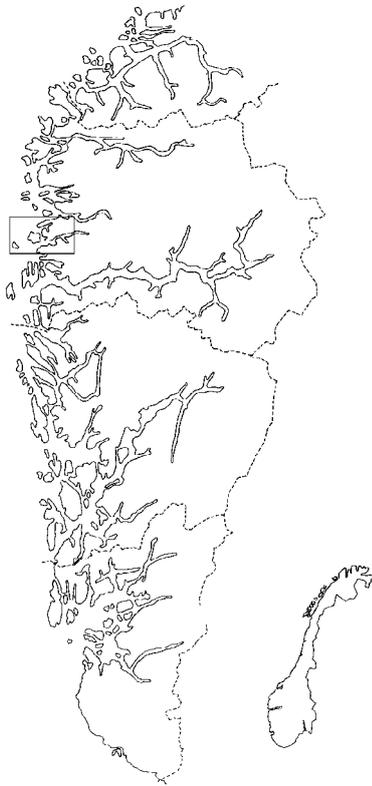
Traditionally, rock art researchers have focused on the meaning and interpretation of rock carvings as well as the classification and quantification of motifs. However, in recent years, interest has shifted to the archaeological context of the rock art and the relationship between rock art and the landscape as well as between rock art and other types of monuments. Although rock carvings are difficult to interpret, we may learn more by relating rock art to the landscape in which it is found, as well as to other monuments. If we understand the social context of the rock art, we may understand some of its meaning as well. In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between Bronze Age rock art and cairns and their relationship to the landscape in Askvoll, Sogn & Fjordane County, West Norway (Wrigglesworth 2000). In this area, the rock art is found near a large number of burials dated to the Bronze Age (1700-500 BC).

Both rock art and burials have been studied in terms of landscape and its influence on prehistoric people (Mandt 1978; Sognnes 1987, 1994, 1998; Hood 1988; Bradley 1993, 1997, 2000; Taçon 1994; Tilley 1994, 1999, 2004; Gansum 1995, Vevatne 1996; Vogt 1998; Østerdal 1999). However, the term landscape is difficult to define, as it encompasses many different aspects. Landscape can be the natural (physical) landscape, or a mindscape, a soundscape, a smellscape etc. Here, I define landscape as a series of places that embody "... (literally and metaphorically) emotions, memories and associations derived from personal and interpersonal shared experience" (Tilley 1999:177). This enables a discussion of the relationship between places as well as between monuments.

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## THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT



Three sites comprising 18 rock art panels in Askvoll in Sogn & Fjordane county were selected for analysis: Unneset (10 panels), Leirvåg (six panels) and Mjåset (two panels). The panels at Unneset are located at Staveneset, a headland that is also the westernmost point in West Norway (*fig. 1*). A panoramic view encompasses the North Sea, small islands and skerries as well as the fjord. The main shipping lane passes Staveneset. To the north there is a stretch of rough open sea, which can be hard to cross, particularly in bad weather. Mjåset is located along the Stongfjord, a few kilometres from Staveneset. There is a good view of the fjord as well as the shipping lane. The panels at Leirvåg, on the island of Atløy, are found at two separate locations: Leirvåg 1-2, 6 are located at Ytre Naustvikja, a small bay, while Leirvåg 3-5 are located at Leirvågneset, a small promontory. Again, the shipping lane passes the sites.

The rock art panels are located between 4 and 6 m.a.s.l. and are all found on outcrops in the shore area (*fig 2*). One panel is found in a secondary position at 15 m.a.s.l. There is no reliable shoreline data available for this area; however, I used a computer programme developed at the University of Tromsø, Norway<sup>1</sup> to give an estimate of the shoreline in the area, indicating a difference of about 5

*Figure 1. Map of West Norway showing the study area.*



*Figure 2. The landscape, a rock art panel is in the foreground*

<sup>1</sup> Sealev 32, University of Tromsø, Department of Geology.

metres from the present shoreline. This means that in the Bronze Age, the panels would have been located at the water's edge, and may even have been submerged at high tide. Today, some carvings at Leirvåg 3 are sprayed by water at extreme high tide. All panels face south toward the sea and the shipping lane; at Unneset, only outcrops with bands of quartz appear to have been selected for producing carvings.

The dominating motifs are ships and cup marks; there are also footprints, rings, anthropomorphic representations, a chariot, and various geometric motifs. Two small panels have cup marks only. Natural lines and crevices are sometimes incorporated into the carvings, e.g. at Unneset 7, where a crack in the rock surface forms the keel of a boat. The majority of the rock art is dated to the middle of the Bronze Age; however, some boats are dated to the Early Bronze Age (Mandt 1991; Wrigglesworth 2000, 2002). The close proximity to the sea and the fact that the majority of the carvings depict boats can be seen as a maritime rock art tradition in this area.

There are a number of cairns at Unneset and Leirvåg. My objective was to see whether a relationship between the rock art panels and the burials could be established. In addition to the cairns near the rock art, all burials that could be dated to the Bronze Age or had a possible Bronze Age date were selected for analysis. In total, 69 burials were selected, 40 of which are located near rock art panels. The largest site is Unneset, where 34 cairns are found along a short distance. Most of those burials are found within a 25 m radius of any given panel, in one case a cairn is found just above the panel (*fig 3*). Most of the cairns are damaged or covered by vegetation, and as there are no finds from the cairns, their date can only be established by construction details and location. Three cairns have been excavated, of which only one could be dated to the Bronze Age; none were located near rock art panels. A flint dagger and a stone axe have been found in contexts that indicate burials, from the Early Bronze Age and the Late Bronze Age respectively. The cairns are generally located at 5-20 m.a.s.l., near the sea or in places where there is a good view of the sea and surrounding landscape.



*Figure 3. A burial, visible as a small collection of stones, is located above a rock art panel*

## THE METHOD: VISUAL LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

The analysis of the rock art and the burials was carried out using visual landscape analysis, a method developed by Gansum, Jerpåsen & Keller (1997). This method offers both a terminology and a methodology for studying the landscape. It should be emphasised that the method is not used to analyse monuments, but the *places* where monuments are located and the qualities of those places. This means that the relationship between rock art panels and burials in the study area can be described through an analysis of visual relationships in the landscape. By systematically analysing the location of rock art panels and the burials, an underlying pattern may be uncovered, which in turn may shed some light on the meaning of the rock art and how the landscape was perceived and used in the Bronze Age.

Visual landscape analysis is based on landscape architecture (Lynch 1992) and psychology, in order to describe how people perceive the landscape. A central concept is orientation, that is, how people structure and recognize their surroundings (Gansum et al 1997:11). Although the landscape is experienced individually, the experience is part of a larger cultural framework, where experience is constructed socially and culturally. Knowledge of the landscape is thus based on both personal and cultural experience. Landscape perception is another key concept – people do not see the landscape as a single unit, they select elements that they “see” and to which they ascribe meaning. Consequently, the elements that individuals notice and the meaning that they attribute to those elements are social and cultural constructs.

The concept of the landscape room is fundamental in visual landscape analysis. Using an analogy from architecture, the landscape is seen as an empty room, where the sky is the ceiling, the ground is the floor and mountains, hills etc. constitute the walls. The landscape room is defined by a continuous flat surface and is delimited by the walls or by a change in the ground so that a visual discontinuity or a visual barrier is formed. The floor may be broken by an edge or a line. An edge is a sharp visual barrier in the terrain, while a line is a weaker barrier (Gansum et al. 1997:13). The landscape room and its perception are thus structured by topography. There are small-scale and large-scale landscape rooms, as well as superior and inferior rooms, where a superior landscape room can consist of several inferior rooms. How a landscape room is perceived depends on the position of the observer, it is the point from where the observations are made that determines how the room is perceived and defined. It is important to note that this method is subjective and only describes how the observer perceives the landscape; it is a tool for describing features in the landscape rather than an accurate description of a prehistoric reality. The modern landscape is different from the prehistoric landscape, as it is the result of hundreds or thousands of years of development. Pollen analysis can indicate the type of vegetation in the area to be studied, but it can give no information as to where the vegetation was located. Consequently, visual landscape analysis can only be used to describe the main landscape elements, such as mountains and hills, rather than smaller features. In the case of Askvoll, where the majority of the monuments are found in a typical coastal landscape, it is likely that the Bronze Age landscape has not differed greatly from the present landscape.

The analysis is carried out by defining landscape rooms and observing the various qualities of a place, assigning a set of codes to the location of each monument describing those qualities. The following terms are used to describe the qualities of place:

*Extrovert:Introvert* describes whether the superior landscape room can be seen from the place.

*Public:Private* describes visibility of a place from the landscape room – a place is public if it can be seen from either the superior or interior landscape room, while it is private if the visibility from the landscape room is poor.

*Exclusive:Inclusive* – a place is classified as exclusive if building new monuments near an existing monument is impossible, while it is inclusive if there is room for new monuments. A rock art panel will always be exclusive, particularly in the study area, as it is confined to a particular outcrop.

## THE VISUAL LANDSCAPE

The analysis showed that the rock art is found at or near edges in the landscape, such as the water's edge or on outcrops that form a sharp visual barrier or discontinuity. These edges form the boundaries between two or several inferior landscape rooms. The places where the panels are found are visible from a distance because the rock outcrops form clear visual barriers in the landscape, and the panels are visible from the entire landscape room, or most of the room (*fig 4*). The panels that are located between two rooms address more than one room at the same time, and thus their location is extrovert, public and exclusive. My interpretation is that these panels are public, i.e. that they were meant to be seen when moving along the shore. In other words, these sites were available to a larger group of people, and the ritual of making rock art could have been a collective experience. All panels are accessible, they can be reached from all directions, although the carvings are generally visible when one stands in front of the panel. One panel, Leirvåg 4, is coded as private as it cannot be seen from a distance when approached from land, and is only visible when standing directly in front of the rock. This would have been rather difficult, as the only place where it is possible to view the images is a small, narrow ledge in the rock face. As the sea level would have been a few metres higher in the Bronze Age, it is likely that this panel was intended to be seen from the water only. However, it would still have been accessible to a larger group. Above this panel, the rock forms a natural amphitheatre and it is tempting to interpret this as a public arena where a larger group could assemble for ceremonies.

The panels generally address a local area, that is, the inferior landscape room, but as they are located at edges that are visible over large distances they also have a greater effect in the landscape, although they do not dominate their surroundings. All panels address the sea and the main shipping lane. The places can be seen from a passing boat; however, this does not mean that the rock art was meant to be seen from the sea or from the superior landscape room. The outcrops blend into the rocky terrain and are difficult to distinguish; the rock carvings are difficult to see unless one moves close to the panels. This indicates that the view from the panels may have been more important than the view of the panels from a distance; passers-by would most likely have had prior knowledge of the sites and know where to look.

A similar pattern emerged for the cairns. They are generally found on hillocks and slopes that have a clear profile in the landscape, forming sharp visual barriers. The barriers also act as boundaries between two inferior landscape rooms, and the cairns are visible from most of the room. The cairns are generally located at extrovert, public and exclusive places; they dominate the landscape and have a monumental effect within the inferior landscape room. Some cairns were located in inclusive places, as there is room for more than one monument. However, rarely more than one monument was built in those places, with the exception of one group of seven cairns. There is a high degree of visibility

between the cairns as well; it is generally possible to see at least one monument – a cairn, a rock art panel or both, as well as places where other monuments are located – from every cairn. My interpretation is that they are public and were intended to be seen; there is at least a visual relationship between the two types of monument. The cairns address the sea and the shipping lane, in some cases having a panoramic view of the coast. However, unless one sails quite close to the shore, the cairns are difficult to spot from the sea as they blend into the rocky terrain. This is especially the case at Unneset, where the cairns can be hard to see even from the shore (*fig 4 and 5*). The view from the cairns thus appears to have been more important than the view from the sea, i.e. from the superior landscape room.



*Figure 4. A typical landscape room, the edge is formed by a rock art site. Note how difficult it is to see the monuments in this area.*



*Figure 5. The black arrows indicate the burials and the red arrow indicates a rock art panel.*

The visual landscape analysis gave some interesting results. It showed that in the study area, rock art and burials had similar locations in the landscape – in public, extrovert and exclusive places, close to the sea. Although they are located in highly visible and accessible places, they can be difficult to see from a distance. There is also a visual relationship between the monuments – it is possible to see at least one monument or the place where a monument is located from every rock art panel and the majority of cairns.

As most of the cairns are damaged and none of the cairns near the rock art has been excavated, determining whether there is a chronological relationship between the cairns and the rock art is difficult. This means that other approaches must be found, and that chronology will be less important. There are several possible interpretations of the relationship between rock art and the cairns in the study area: 1) the rock art was produced first and then the cairns were built; the cairns were built first and then the rock art was made. 2) The rock art was produced and then forgotten; the cairns were built with no knowledge of the rock art. 3) The rock art and cairns are contemporary and the rock art was made as part of burial rites. 4) There is no link between the rock art and the cairns.

Since there is no conclusive dating evidence, it is impossible to determine whether the rock art or the cairns were the first monuments to be constructed. The cairns outnumber the rock art panels, so it is likely that if a direct relationship between the rock art and the cairns did exist, the rock art was made in relation to a small number of burials, and that some of the cairns were built first. The rock art and the cairns must be seen as the products of related actions. If the presence of one type of monument determined the location of the other, then there is a relationship between the two and the chronological sequence is less relevant. It seems unlikely that the persons who built the cairns did not know about the rock carvings and vice versa. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that cairns were deliberately placed in relation to the rock art. At Leirvåg, they are not located in the immediate vicinity of Leirvåg 1 and 3, but are rather placed at a distance. The rock carvings have been dated to the Early Bronze Age, while the cairns are dated to the Iron Age or have a general Bronze Age date. Here, the impression is that the burials were placed at a distance to avoid conflict with the carvings. At Unneset, on the other hand, the cairns were placed closer to the rock art, in one case at the top of the panel, suggesting a more intimate relationship. Although there is a pattern in the location of the cairns, there is no uniform pattern in the relationship between rock art and the cairns.

Both rock art and burials are so closely located that at least one panel or cairn is visible from any given monument at Unneset and Leirvåg, so that there is a clear visual relationship between the two types of monument. Consequently, this visual relationship must have been important when a new monument was built, and later generations may have believed that visual contact with older monuments was required. The monuments were built throughout the Bronze Age and into the Iron Age, new monuments being built in relation to older ones. The monuments may also have been used over a long period. John Barrett (1999a, b) introduces the term *chronologies of landscape* to show that although a monument was constructed at a certain date, it may have been used more intensively later. Older monuments were a visible reminder of the past, possibly also of known individuals and ancestors, and were imbued with meaning and references to the (mythical) past. Accordingly, building new cairns near existing ones or near rock carvings, or making rock art near cairns, could have been a way of establishing a relationship with the past, the ancestors, in order to legitimise or protect particular interests (Barrett 1999b:26f, Bradley 1993). The cairns as well as the rock carvings could have been cultic places related to ancestral worship (Kaliff 1997), where the monuments were a physical manifestation of a mythical past.

## LOCATION AND MEANING: A COSMOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Does location indicate meaning? As seen above, both rock art and cairns are found at specific locations in the landscape in the study area. They are found close to the sea at public, extrovert and exclusive places and as this is a recurring pattern in the study area, the location appears to be clearly planned, rather than unintentional.

Knut Helskog (1999) has suggested a model for the rock art in Alta, Northern Norway, where the landscape is organised in three zones based on a cosmology where the cosmos is split into three: the upper, middle and lower world. Many Arctic groups divide the world into three: heaven, the earth and the Netherworld. In Saami<sup>2</sup> cosmology, water is seen as a gateway to the Netherworld (Helskog 1999:76). The Alta rock carvings are located in the shore zone, a liminal zone where water, land and sky meet. In winter, this is the last place to be covered by snow and ice, and in spring, the ice melts here first. The transition between land and water is ambiguous, it is related to both life and death and as such, it cannot be defined. Such places are often believed to be places where supernatural powers can be reached. The perceived presence of supernatural forces could be a reason for placing rock art and cairns on or near the shore. Correspondingly, placing burials at higher points in the landscape brings them closer to the sky, as hills are a meeting-point between the sky and the earth, an axis mundi (Eliade 1959; Gerdin 1999).

The rock art and cairns at Leirvåg, Mjåset and Unneset are closely related to water – they are located near water and would have been even closer in the Bronze Age; the rock art in particular would most likely have been located at the water's edge. Today, the sea washes over some panels during storms or at extreme high tide, indicating a strong link between rock art and water. At Unneset and Leirvåg, all panels are found in front of or “beneath” the cairns, and are located between the burials and the sea. The rock art could thus be a link between the burials and the sea. Water is usually associated with life, fertility, birth, death and regeneration. It gives life, but it can also take life and is thus a powerful symbol. If the landscape were divided into different zones, the rock carvings may have served as a transition from the burial to the water – helping the dead cross a liminal space from the living to the Netherworld. This is supported by the fact that the ship is the dominating motif, and can be seen as a metaphor for the journey to the Netherworld. At some panels, e.g. Unneset 7, the boats appear to “sail” from the burial to the water and back again. I have suggested elsewhere that this could be a depiction of a cosmological concept of death and regeneration (Wrigglesworth 2000, 2002). The boats can be seen as metaphors for death and the journey to the Netherworld, but they also symbolise life and regeneration.

## ROCK ART AND BURIAL RITES

How are we to understand the contexts in which the rock art was made and the cairns built? There are no finds from the Bronze Age indicating settlements near the sites, the few existing finds were found in contexts suggesting burials and votive deposits. A few artefacts from the Early Neolithic and some rock shelters are the only evidence of settlement, but they are not found in the vicinity of the burials and rock art and are not contemporary. The sparse archaeological evidence suggests that there were

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<sup>2</sup> The Saami are an indigenous people living in northern Fenno-Scandinavia and Russia.

no settlements near the sites. This implies that the sites were considered as special places, where rituals were performed and the dead were buried.

Burials and rock art are usually considered as the results of rituals (Artelius 1996; Barrett 1994; Goldhahn 1999; Kaliff 1997; Widholm 1998), in particular *rites de passage* (van Gennepe 1999 [1909]; Turner 1967). If there is a relationship between the rock carvings and the cairns at Unneset and Leirvåg, the rock art could have been made as part of funerary rites, aiding the transition from the living to the dead. The chariot at Unneset 5 does indicate a burial ritual (*fig. 3*). This is a unique motif in Norway in that it is depicted from the side instead of from a bird's eye perspective; it is the only depiction of a chariot in West Norway, and the only parallels are found in Sweden, in particular the chariot from the Kivik burial (Marstrand 1963; Mandt 1991; Oestigaard and Goldhahn 2006). A cairn is located at the top of the outcrop where the chariot is carved. Consequently, it is tempting to interpret this as a burial context; the difference being that the decoration was made outside the burial instead of inside the burial chamber. Although rock art in burial contexts is known in Norway, this is a phenomenon found mainly in Southwest Norway (Syvertsen 2002, 2003, 2005) and in Central Norway (Sognes 2001), and the only known burial with rock art in West Norway is Mjeltehaugen, a unique monument (Linge 2004, 2005, 2007; Mandt 1983). This implies that rock art within burials may have been a regional phenomenon; another possibility is that in most areas, rock art simply was not made inside burials.

The low number of burials near the rock art panels indicates that only a small number of people were buried at Staveneset and Leirvåg. If we assume that these individuals were prominent persons in the community, their deaths would have caused disruption to everyday life. This would have caused chaos among the living, new social relationships had to be established and power had to be redistributed. Accordingly, the rituals that took place here could have been part of renegotiations of power in which the living participated. These sites were public arenas as well as liminal places where supernatural powers were present, the place where the ancestors dwelt, and so the sites would have been important places for re-establishing order in the community.

The cairns at Unneset and Leirvåg were built throughout the Bronze Age and well into the Iron Age, which means that the sites were part of the collective as well as individual consciousness and memory. Leirvåg and particularly Unneset were important places and tradition demanded that some burials at least took place there. Some burials were also associated with rock art, by building the cairn near rock art panels, or by making rock art as part of the burial rituals. Only a few individuals were buried here during the Bronze Age, and so a possible interpretation is that these persons were important people in the community, perhaps even religious leaders who were buried in a cosmologically significant and liminal place.

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