



# Hidden Messages – Rock Art in Special Landscapes in Central Norway

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## SUMMARY

What elements and qualities in a landscape may suggest communication with something other-worldly? Messages can be delivered orally, they can be sung, read and illustrated. Rock art as visual culture is a medium consciously used for function and communication. This article features rock art from different contexts in Central Norway. The rock art's common feature is that the art appears to be purposely placed where it is seen by few, where it is unavailable, or where it disappears at given times. By using a phenomenological framework in combination with landscape analyses, this study explores the various ways in which this phenomenon in rock art reveals communication between people and other worlds. The landscape plays a central role as the rock art and its surrounding landscape are intertwined. The landscape analyses are rooted in a phenomenological approach, with use of sensory methods. The landscape is also analysed on two levels: micro landscape and macro landscape. The analyses are used to open the discussion on the interpretation of 'hidden' rock art.

**Keywords:** rock art, landscape, phenomenology, sensory archaeology

## RIASSUNTO (MESSAGGI NASCOSTI – ARTE RUPESTRE IN PAESAGGI SPECIALI NELLA NORVEGIA CENTRALE)

Quali elementi e caratteristiche di un paesaggio possono suggerire la comunicazione con qualcosa di ultraterreno? I messaggi possono essere trasmessi oralmente, possono essere cantati, letti e illustrati. L'arte rupestre come cultura visiva è un mezzo utilizzato consapevolmente per uno scopo e per la comunicazione. Questo articolo presenta arte rupestre proveniente da diversi contesti nella Norvegia centrale accomunati da una precisa scelta del luogo e della posizione, collocata per essere vista da pochi, non è fruibile o rimane celata in determinati momenti. Utilizzando un quadro fenomenologico in combinazione con l'analisi del paesaggio, questo studio esplora i vari modi in cui questo fenomeno rivela un intento di messa in comunicazione tra le persone e altri mondi. Il paesaggio gioca un ruolo centrale in quanto l'arte rupestre e il paesaggio circostante sono intrecciati. L'analisi del paesaggio è fondata su un approccio fenomenologico, con l'utilizzo di metodi sensoriali. Il paesaggio inoltre è analizzato su due livelli: micro paesaggio e macro paesaggio. Le analisi servono a aprire la discussione sull'interpretazione dell'arte rupestre "nascosta".

**Parole chiave:** arte rupestre, paesaggio, fenomenologia, archeologia sensoriale

Rock art is often found in open areas suited for large groups of people to gather. This article focuses on rock art that appears to have been purposely hidden. There are several ways in which rock art can be perceived as hidden and this might tell us something about the intended receiver of the art. By approaching the rock art landscape from a phenomenological perspective, it may be possible to discern the hidden purpose behind the art. The landscape is also analysed by looking at the micro and macro landscape and what the rock art is directed towards in order to view the rock art in relation to the landscape it has always been a part of. As humans, we sense the world the same biologically. Influences such as sound, touch and light all play a role in the overall experience of a place. A landscape's agency affects our understanding by hindering or enhancing our senses, bodies and emotions. Rock art in the landscape can make 'demands' to us – we might have to climb, crawl, look up or look down in order to see it. By using the human body to experience rock art and landscape, one can address the relationship between structure and topography. The subject-

ive element in an experience is not superficial and one can see the landscape as a meeting place between humans and other worlds (TILLEY 2008). For rock art in situ it is possible to use visual archaeological landscape analysis (ALAV) to read the landscape room. The landscape's topographical elements become walls and floors which can help archaeologists envision how the landscape might have been structured in the past (GANSUM, JERPÅSEN, & KELLER 1997). The method benefits from having an interdisciplinary perspective, such as ethnography (SOLLI, GJERDE, & JERPÅSEN 2010). By breaking the landscape into macro landscape (large topographical elements surrounding the rock art) and micro landscape (the rock surface or the rock art's immediate surroundings) every aspect of the landscape is taken into consideration (GJERDE 2010).

A total of seven rock art sites in Central Norway were chosen for the analyses. The sites were distributed over three contextual groups: 1) graves, 2) caves and 3) sites along routes of travel. The different contexts underline the variation in the rock art material and the sites show the representation of unavailable and ex-

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cluding rock art regardless of context, period and geography. This phenomenon of rock art is not exclusive to Central Norway, but can be found throughout the world.

The grave contexts consist of two Bronze Age chambered cairns located by the Trondheim fjord. One in the inner part of the fjord, Steine at Byneset in Trondheim (fig. 1), and one by the fjord mouth towards open sea, Rishaug, at Agdenes in Orkland (fig. 2). Both cairns had decorated grave chambers. Unfortunately, both cairns were destroyed and only fragments of the decorated chambers remain. Both cairns would have had sea view, but were more isolated in the landscape in the sense that they were not particularly visible coming from land. Along the coast of Central and Northern Norway, there are a number of painted caves. They all feature monotone human figures that are placed in the deepest darkness of the caves or in the breaking between light and dark (BJERCK 2012). The featured caves are the Solsem cave at the island of Leka and the Fingal cave at the Gravvik peninsula. The caves are only a few kilometres away from each other in a straight line and they are both dated to late Neolithic/early Bronze Age. Both caves have steep entries, making it difficult to get into the cave space. The caves appear as portals in the solid rock (fig. 3). Entering these caves demands physical and mental will from humans. In caves, taking the darkness, fear and the lack of senses into account is essential when interpreting the space (BJERCK 2012). Like graves, the paintings in the caves are directed towards a dark, closed and dead room. In addition, the uniformity of the painted human figures underlines the specific message in the cave (HELSSKOG 1999)(fig. 4). The travel contexts consist of three different sites connected to travel and transport routes. The first is Honnhammer in Tingvoll, where numerous Stone Age rock paintings have been found on cliffs plummeting into the Tingvoll fjord (fig. 5). The paintings are difficult to see from land, but are visible from boat. Placed on steep cliffs, the paintings are unavailable and access to them could easily have been controlled either physically, mentally or socially (NYLAND 2011). The second is Selbustrand, a site where the rock art has been dated to the Bronze Age and is carved on boulders along the shoreline of the lake called Selbusjøen in Selbu. The boulders are flooded most of the year and are only available in the spring. Again, the rock art is barely visible from land and the art is clearly directed towards the water. Even the footprints carved on the boulders stand as if looking out over the water (fig. 7). The third and last site is Bøla in Steinkjer, in particular the full-sized carved reindeer dating from the Stone Age. The reindeer has been carved in a waterfall connected to the Bøla river. Where it stands, the waterfall ran in part over the reindeer making it look as if it was coming out of the waterfall (NORBERG 2020) (fig. 8). The waterfall and the reindeer create an audiovisual impression which enhances the general experience of the landscape and the rock art.

The chosen rock art sites show how rock art may have been deliberately placed in special landscapes and that

the sites have been visited repeatedly. These factors indicate a religious connection to the site and they prove that the sites have not merely been places of passage. Despite the varying contexts of the sites, there are some similarities between them.

#### TRAVELLING IN DANGEROUS PLACES

There are no functional reasons for placing rock art in dangerous places such as steep cliffs or in caves (HELSSKOG 1999). Placing rock art in physically restrictive sites must have had a purpose. For instance, the rock art at Nämforsen and Norrfors in Sweden is located on small slippery islands in the middle of a roaring river. Just getting to the islands to make the rock art would have posed great risk. In other words, the power of the rock art might be linked to the danger of its placement (GOLDHAHN 2002). This could be the case of the Bøla site, the Honnhammer site and the caves in Central Norway. These sites are all placed in landscapes that pose danger whether by loud noise, flow of water, steep cliffs over water or dark and narrow caves (fig. 9). It seems unlikely that the people who created the rock art in these sites were unaware of the danger imposed by these special landscapes and one should acknowledge humans' will to expose themselves to danger just because it is dangerous (SOGNNES 2007). This adds another layer of interpretation to the rock art as it is located in landscapes that demand courage and willpower from the creators of the rock art. These people have been drawn to landscapes that evoke strong feelings such as fear, claustrophobia and fear of heights. In addition to this, the landscapes may challenge the senses in that one might lose one's sight in the caves or one might get closed in by unrelenting noise from a waterfall. By overcoming these types of landscapes, one can emerge on the other side as reborn. There might have existed an idea that a more profound form of communication was achievable in places where the landscape presented an obstacle for humans to overcome.

#### THE INFLUENCES OF WATER AND SOUND

In Central Norway, the sites of Bøla and Selbustrand are examples of rock art that is greatly affected by the changing seasons and weather. Both seasonality and water levels decide whether or not the rock art can even be seen. Variations in seasons can be regarded as activation/deactivation of a site's significance. For example, a site could be activated or deactivated depending on whether it was available by foot or boat. Once activated, the site might have been reserved for certain members of society who could have had exclusive rights to sanctify the site with rock art (Ljunge, 2010). Various bodies of water have been viewed as points of contact between the human world and other dimensions. Amongst the Sámi people it was believed that one could reach the underworld through the bottom of the holy lake Savio. The presence of gods, spirits and passages to other worlds in the landscapes where the humans resided, makes it probable that communication between the profane and the sacred was as essential as eating and sleeping (HELSSKOG 1999). The Sámi

beliefs that natural formations in the landscape, such as mountains, waterfalls and lakes, were imbedded with immaterial powers are thought to be remnants from beliefs stretching thousands of years back in time. Powerful natural formations were the homes of spirits and other mythical creatures. These formations were also used for sacrificial rituals and they were marked with stone circles or wooden figures. This praxis might be seen at the Bøla and the Selbustrand sites, only here they were marked using rock art (NORSTED 2006). For both these sites, the sound of water is another factor to consider when interpreting the rock art. At Bøla, there is a great amount of noise emitting from the waterfall where the reindeer is carved. At Selbustrand, the melting of the ice in the spring creates loud rumbling. When the lake is free of ice, a constant lapping of water almost sends the observer into a meditative state. These aspects must be included in the interpretation of both the rock art and the landscape as the sensory impressions affect the overall understanding of the art and the place. At Bøla, the noise from the waterfall completely encloses the observers as they stand with the rock art in a room walled by sound. The volume will drain anyone of energy after a couple of hours. The relationship between sound and landscape creates a liminal sphere which might have represented the relationship between the profane and the sacred (GOLDHAHN 2002). Liminal spheres that contrast land and water, summer and winter, the wild and the domestic, the quiet and the loud, not only mark the physical change in the landscape but mark the change in the individual's or the group's cultural/psychological stage. Even though the Bøla reindeer and the rock art at Selbustrand are covered by water at certain times of the year, the knowledge of the rock art's whereabouts could have been sufficient in communicating with spirits and beings from other worlds. In other words, the communication was always open.

#### ON THE BRINK OF OTHER LANDSCAPES, AND OTHER WORLDS?

Rock art sites which are located on the brink to other landscapes, like liminal zones, can be interpreted as especially powerful places for humans to communicate with other-worldly spirits. Liminal zones in the landscape are places where worlds meet and might be the reason why these places were adorned with rock art. In shamanistic cultures there existed religious practices connected to experiencing other realities. This is made possible by the help of human or animalistic spirits. The shaman's travels to other worlds come from the cosmological view that there were three levels of worlds: a world above, a human world, and an underworld. Openings in the borders between these worlds were designated places for a shaman to see the other dimensions. The cosmological view would have been rooted in the known world, meaning that for example the underworld could be under water or inside solid rock (NORSTED 2006). Several cultures across the world have had the belief that rocks have been inhabited by other beings. Among Algonquian peoples there existed an idea that rock art by water was inhabited by

small, hairy and humanlike creatures called Memegwashio. The Memegwashio would seal their magical portals in the rock by a handprint in blood. Similarly, the Sámi people believed certain mountains and rocks were holy and inhabited by other beings. In Finnish folk poetry there are mentions of snakes and deer living inside rocks (LAHELMA 2010).

By laying the dead in burial cairns one has ensured that the dead become part of the landscape in their own topographical element. The inside of the cairn is private and appears as a transition between the living world and the realm of the dead. Rock art in the privacy of a grave chamber might therefore have been part of burial rituals to help the dead into their new state. The Bronze Age burial cairns in Norway were all placed by water which in itself symbolize a liminal zone. The transition between land and water is an undefinable place that can be connected to both life and death and these associations might be the reason why the burial cairns were placed like this in the landscape – as a transition from life to death (WRIGLESWORTH 2002). Like the grave chambers, the caves are separate rooms, or landscapes, within the macro landscape. The cave entries, like those at the Solsem cave and the Fingal cave, make up an obvious portal into another world within the mountains. In order to explore the insides of the caves, one has to physically cross the threshold of the cave doors. Caves may have been believed to be passages to the underworld in the shamanistic cosmos. The walls, ceiling, floor and rocks within the cave were given more meaning. Not only could humans have hallucinatory travels to the underworld, but physical travels into the darkest depths of the caves (CLOTTES & LEWIS-WILLIAMS 1998; OUZMAN 1998). Certain special members of society, like shamans, might have been the only ones given access to caves whereas other members of society might have been kept out. The caves could have been either public or private, which means the rock art would also have been either public or private. Cave rooms that require crawling or that have uneven floors are contributing factors to whether the cave was public or not. The entries might have been public, but in the case of Solsem and Fingal there is no rock art at the entrances. It is more physically demanding to reach the rock art in these caves and it is therefore natural to assume that the rock art was reserved only for a certain group of people. Rock art placed in the innermost and darkest part of a cave, i.e. the rock art that is both difficult to reach and to see, could signify communication with spirits or creatures of the underworld rather than other humans (COONEY-WILLIAMS & JANIK 2018; JANIK & KANER 2018). The uniformity of the human figures found in the Solsem and Fingal caves give a haunted expression and the feeling of being watched (fig. 10). Mixed with the loss of senses and heightening of other senses, the cave room becomes an other-worldly experience.

At the Honnhammer site, some of the paintings are available from land whilst others are situated on cliff walls that plummet into the fjord below. Honnhammer I is reached by foot. The paintings are on a rock

wall beneath an overhang which creates the appearance of a rock portal (fig. 6). In this case, the rock art is painted on the wall of the landscape room and, in addition to this, the paintings seem to be within a portal of stone. Honnhammer I also has another intriguing element: the rock art has been painted on top of a zoomorphic rock formation. The formation appears to be a deer head, but it requires the correct light in order to be clearly visible. The special aspects to Honnhammer I could be clues to the purpose of the place. Even though the rock art is available from land, it is not given that anyone could take part in the ceremonies or rituals that took place there. In Aboriginal rock art there are examples of motifs only a few initiated people were allowed to paint. Even if the rock paintings were washed away, their descendants would still act as if the rock art lived on inside the rock (GOLDHAHN *et al.* 2021). Two aspects are relevant for the material from Central Norway: 1) that rock art can live on within the rock and in the memory of a society even when the art in a way disappears, and 2) that it is plausible that some rock art was reserved for some special members in a society and that they were given access to certain landscape rooms. This could be the case for many rock art sites. A site's function as a ritual place may have turned the entire rock art area off limits. This would have made it possible for a selected few to control the access of the place. When the rock art was placed in inaccessible places, like the rock art on the cliffs at Honnhammer, controlling access would have been even more achievable (NORSTED 2006).

Many cultures have associated water with a cosmological world. Among the Sámi people it was believed that one could reach the underworld through water and that in an animistic world the surrounding nature is filled with spirits and other-worldly beings that are unlike humans. Mountains, waters and animals have souls and can be the physical renditions of spirits. These could choose to help the humans or not. Rock art may therefore have been an attempt to please these spirits who were essential to the survival of a human society (HELKOG 1999; NORBERG 2020). The Bøla site might have been just this, but it might also have been a site of seasonal rituals. The deep carvings of the Bøla reindeer suggest that it was carved at multiple occasions, for instance at certain times of the year for hunting purposes. In shamanistic societies, sacrifice could have played a part in the hunting rituals. By sacrificing part of the hunted game to spirits who guarded the prey, one ensured that the prey was honoured and new animals were born. The spirits who guarded the prey could reside inside rock and could take the shape of the prey, like a reindeer (NORSTED 2006). Actions are rooted in cosmological, religious and ideological ideas. Rock art could have been attached to different aspects within a society such as a person, a particular ritual or communication. Rock art might have been the primary in ideas and rituals and humans were simply vessels for placing the rock art in the landscape (SYVERTSEN 2002).

## CONCLUSION

In the graves, the rock art is hidden in closed chambers, immortalised in the landscape. The rock art's surroundings are a stark contrast to the open rock art sites. The rock art in the graves are turned inwards toward the dead in complete darkness. Similarly, the rock art in caves is also directed to the darkness. In addition, the caves offer a landscape room that puts humans to the test both physically and mentally. The rock art sites by the travel routes show other meanings of hidden rock art. Whether the environment features unavailable terrain, submersion or discomfort, the rock art sites all have a form of excluding factor. The chosen rock art sites in this article are found in special landscapes which may indicate its use, but to whom or what is the rock art directed towards? Rock art that is placed in graves or in the inner and darkest parts of caves do not seem primarily to have been communicating with living humans. At the sites by travelling routes, the rock art is directed at water. At sites like Selbustrand and Bøla, the water even takes the rock art away at certain times of the year. A seasonal re-encounter with the rock art might have been activating or deactivating the site as a ritual scene. The rock art is placed at transitional places in the landscape, especially the transition between land and water. These places could be associated with both life and death. The fascination of water, unknown depths, and a place where humans could not live might have strengthened the ideas that water contained special powers within a landscape. Other worlds could exist in water or in rock, and openings at their borders could have been viewed as a way to communicate with the beings within. Special qualities in a landscape contribute to the possible meeting between the natural and the supernatural. The qualities can include elements that activate other senses than the visual of the landscape and rock art. Sites where sound can create separate aural rooms help to ground distinctions between the profane and the sacred. The psyche is equally tested at sites where sound is not present, leading one to create illusions oneself. A phenomenological approach and landscape analyses give more layers to the interpretation of rock art and may bring us closer to its creators.

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Fig. 1 - The remainders of the grave chamber at Steine. (Photo: Ane Aasmundstad Sommervold).



Fig. 2 – From the grave chamber at Rishaug. (Photo: Ane Aasmundstad Sommervold).



Fig. 3 – The entrance to Solsem cave. The entry appears as a dark chasm in the otherwise solid rock wall. There are 21 human figures painted in the cave. (Photo: Arve Kjersheim from Lødøen, 2010, p. 26)

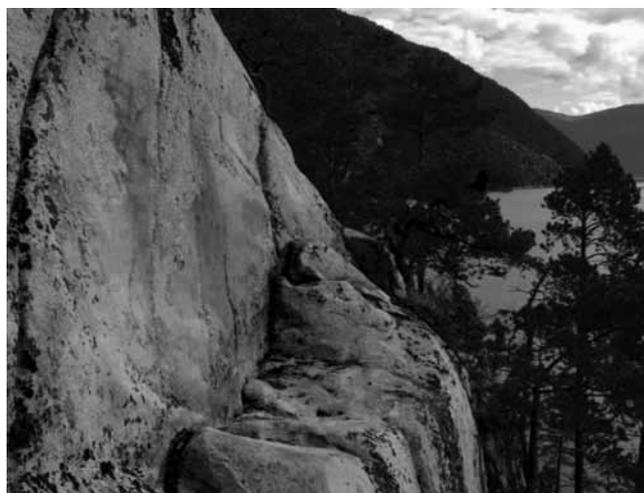


Fig. 4 – Some of the human figures found in the Fingal cave. There are 48 figures in total. (Photo: Bernt Kjørsvik).



Fig. 5 – One of the panels at Honnhammer. (Photo: Eva Lindgaard from Sauvage & Stebergløkken, 2017, p. 13).



Fig. 6 – Honnhammer I is underneath an overhang, creating something like a doorway in the rock. The zoomorphic formation is difficult to discern just under the painted deer to left. (Photo: Åge Hojem & Raymond Sauvage from Sauvage, Hojem & Lindgaard, 2015, p. 20).



Fig. 7 - Imprints of feet emerged along the shore of Selbustrand in the spring. (Photo: Heidrun Stebergløkken).



Fig. 8 - The Bøla reindeer in 1907 when the waterfall still ran naturally. Today the waterfall is blocked by a concrete wall. (Photo: Gustaf Hallström from Norberg, 2020, p. 161).



Fig. 9 - The Bøla site flooded, emitting tremendous noise and danger. (Photo: Odd Bratberg).



Fig. 10 - The human figures in the Fingal cave make an eerie impression. (Photo: Arve Kjersheim from Norsted, 2008, p. 29).