Whale images in the Northern Tradition Rock art of Norway, and their potential mythological and religious significance.

Trond Lødøen

I. Abstract

The Northern Tradition rock art of Norway features one of the largest concentrations of whale images in the world. Their representations vary greatly from north to south, with a high concentration in the more central regions of Norway. The different types of whales may have represented specific clans, tribes or groups in the past, or it is possible that each of the different types had their own specific meaning or roles in the past. This article will attempt to provide further insight into the character of the whale images in the prehistoric rock art record of Norway. It is especially striking to note the association or close connection between land animals and whales in their different representations. At many sites, the whale images are positioned on the different panels in a way that may indicate a transformation from whale images into different types of deer images, and then possibly back to whale images again, a facet that will be discussed later on in this paper. It will also be argued that the Northern Tradition rock art was related to mortuary practices, and that the wild animals that are shown – including the whales – were associated with beliefs about death, and that the rock images potentially helped to assist the transfer of souls that were being regenerated. The paper also discusses aspects of past world views, and will tentatively provide a number of suggestions regarding the potential mythological and religious significance of these whales.

Key words: Whale images, Mesolithic, Transformation, Regeneration and Mortuary Practices

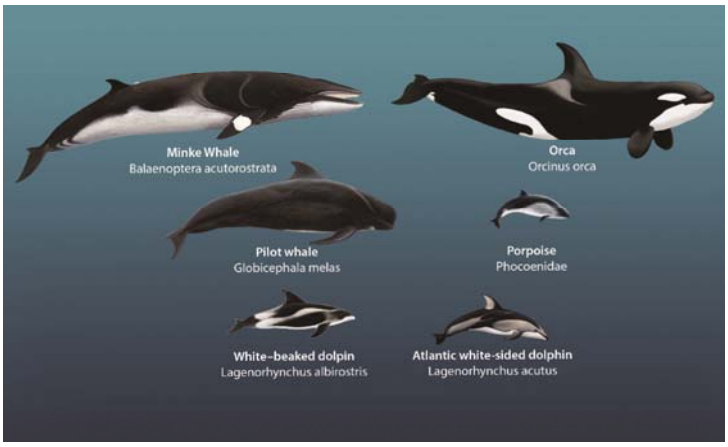

Fig 1. A selection of the most common whale images in the Northern Tradition rock art of Norway. Illustration Arkikon.

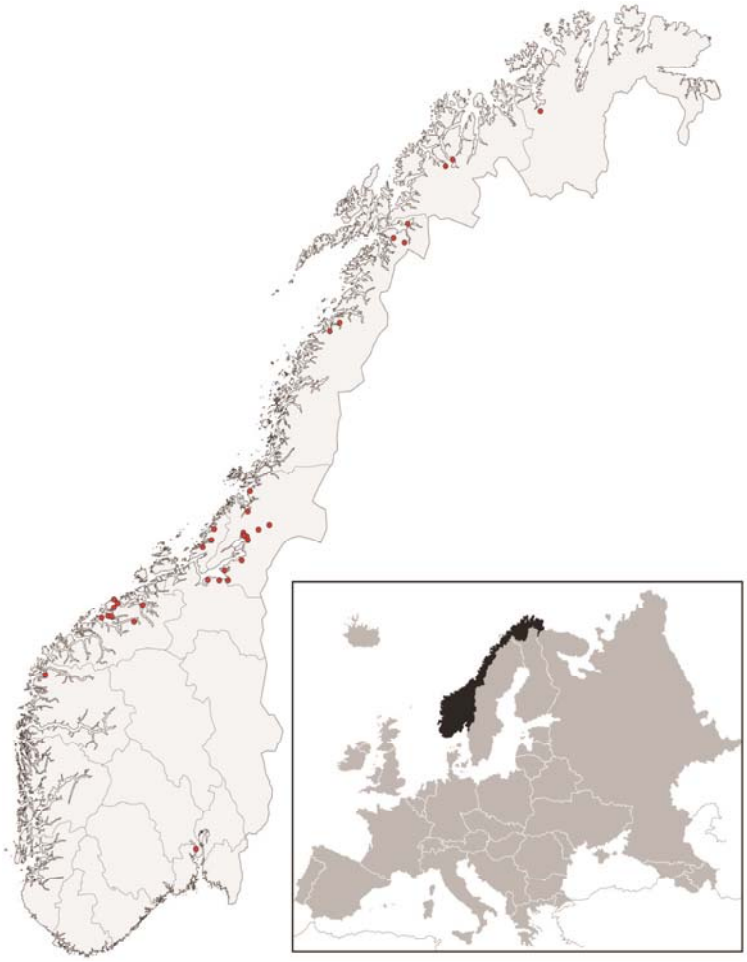

Fig 2. The distribution of whale images of the Northern Tradition rock art in Norway. Illustration Arkikon.

1. Whales in Norwegian Rock art

The most common whale images found at Norwegian rock art sites, either on their own or together with other types of terrestrial animals, seem to be of six major types; Minke Whales, Orcas, Pilot Whales, Porpoises, White-beaked dolphins and Atlantic white-sided dolphins, with porpoises being the most common type by far (Lødøen and Mandt 2010; Sognnes 2001; Stebergløkken 2008) (Fig 1).

They are distributed unevenly in our area, with particular intensity in central Norway, which has amongst the densest concentrations of whale images in Europe (Bahn 1993) (Fig 2).

Their different natural sizes are reflected to some extent in the rock art, with porpoises measuring between 1–2 meters, and Pilot whales measuring close to 3 meters, mostly consisting of lines made by thousands of pecking marks made by pointed chisels that were probably struck by wooden mallets or soft hammers (Fig 3) (Lødøen 2015a).

Some of the images of Orcas in Northern Norway are of remarkable size and naturalism, measur-

Fig 3. A whale image from the world heritage site Hjemmeluft, Alta, Finnmark, Northern Norway. Photo:Arve Kjersheim

Fig 4. A large killer whale associated with a number of terrestrial animals at the Leiknes site, Tysfjord, Nordland. After Gjessing 1932.

ing between 6 and 7 meters, and polished into the rock (Fig 4).

Despite the fact that we find a larger number of images of terrestrial animals than whales, the latter have highly prominent positions on the many panels where they are found, and seem to have played a very important role in the past (e.g. Gjessing 1932, 1936; Lødøen and Mandt 2010; Sognnes 1996 and Stebergløkken 2008).

2. Two traditions in Scandinavian and Norwegian Rock Art

Scandinavian and Norwegian rock art is normally separated into two different traditions, known as hunters' and agrarian rock art, or more recently as the Southern and Northern Traditions. The Southern Tradition is strongly associated with agricultural societies (Goldhahn 1999; Sognnes 2001; Lødøen and Mandt 2010), dated to the Late Neolithic and the Bronze Age, and characterized by ship images, domesticated animals, anthropomorphic figures, concentric rings, spirals, and cup-marks and often found inside graves and potentially related to burial practices (Fig 5).

The older Northern Tradition is associated with prehistoric hunter-gather-fisher populations (Bjerck 2008; Lødøen and Mandt 2010). Its iconography is characterized by wild animals such as red deer,

Fig 5. Images of the Southern Tradition from the Hornnes site, Østfold, South Eastern Norway. Photo: Ragnar Utne

reindeer, elk, bear, anthropomorphic images, and different types of whales and sea mammals, and will therefore be examined in greater detail in this presentation (Fig 4).

3. Chronology and dating

The chronology of the Northern Tradition rock art has been a challenge for years, and for decades shoreline displacements have been used to date them for the most to the Neolithic period (Lødøen 2003). In recent years, excavations in the vicinity of several rock art panels have provided datings that come from a clearly defined part of the Late Mesolithic, between 7000 - 6000 years ago, which is a major milestone in the debate surrounding the dating of this rock art (Bjerck 2008; Lødøen 2003, 2013; Mandt & Lødøen 2010; Hjelle and Lødøen 2017). This is solidly supported by scientific investigations, documenting corresponding impact on the environment in the Late Mesolithic in the vicinity of rock art sites, which has contributed to a greater consensus that the Northern Tradition rock art should be dated to the indicated part of the Late Mesolithic – potentially even more delimited, and within a period of just a few centuries (Hjelle and Lødøen 2017).

4. Dwelling pattern

During the Mesolithic period, the dwelling pattern underwent a gradual change in Scandinavia, from highly mobile to more stationary habitation, culminating in the mid part of the Late Mesolithic, around 7000 years ago. From this point onwards, subsistence seems to have become more steadily based on marine resources, with habitation sites concentrated near tidal currents along the outer coast (Bjerck 2008:105). This sedentary structure may have resulted in stationary sites for rituals, and it is therefore striking that the dating of the Northern Tradition rock art seems to be contemporary with this change in habitation patterns (Lødøen 2015b). Furthermore, the location for most of the Northern Tradition sites seem to contrast with this habitation pattern, being mainly located further inland, or on the outermost part of the coastline, and in both cases, far away from habitation areas. This may have been due to the esoteric nature of rock art and the necessary precautions these societies took, as the cosmological forces found at the rock art sites could be harmful for other parts of society (Lødøen 2010).

5. Transformation and transition

As regards the whale images, it is especially striking to note the close association or close connection between different types of whales and terrestrial animals in a variety of ways, at the different rock art sites (Gjessing 1932, 1936; Mikkelsen 1977; Simonsen 1958; Sognnes 1996: 2001; Stebergløkken 2008). Apart from the fact that both types of species are mammals, the relationship between them that we find expressed on the rock art panels also seems to go far beyond natural behaviour, and suggest that these depictions were originally associated with past beliefs that emphasized relationships between the sea and the land, and often between cervids and whales (Fig 6 and 7).

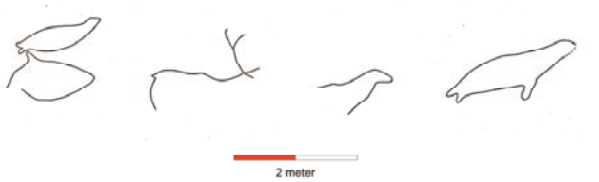

Fig 6. Reindeer associated with seals and a porpoise at the Valle site, Ballangen, Nordland, Northern Norway. After Gjessing 1932.

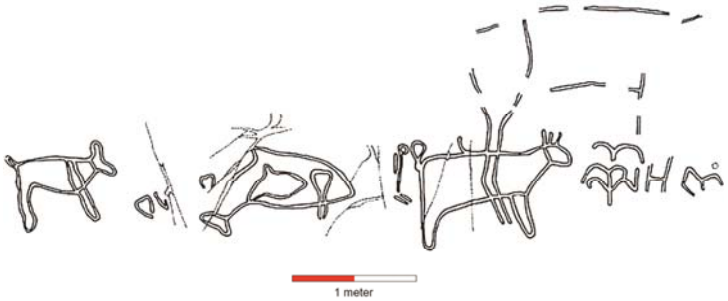

Fig 7: Possible transformation from a deer to a whale and back to a deer, from Rausand, Averøy, Møre og Romsdal. Note that the whale is shown as being pregnant, possibly as a reference to regeneration and resurrection aided by 'soul animals' After Sognnes 1996.

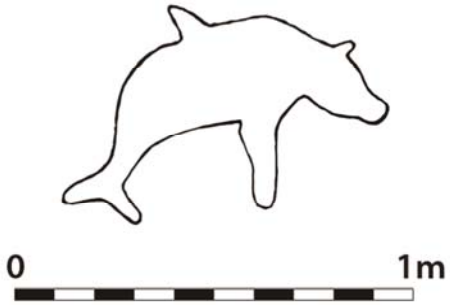

Fig 8: Apparition of bear and whale from Hammer, Beitstad, Trøndelag, Central Norway. After Bakka 1988.

At many sites, the whale images seem to be arranged on the different panels in a way that indicates transformations from whale images to different types of deer images or even bear images (Fig 8), and then possibly back to whale images and (Sognnes 1996).

These transformations seem to take place in the vicinity of the shorelines at the different sites, as if sea mammals were climbing onto the land and being changed into terrestrial animals. From north to south, different whales are related to different terrestrial animals in similar ways, despite being different species. The main message provided by the imagery where whales are represented often seems to focus on relationships between sea mammals and terrestrial animals. It is therefore tempting to consider this as being related to cosmology, as the whales were probably able to enter

underworlds – known from ethnographic parallels – and to act as mediators between the depths of the sea and the surface, between the underworld and the upper world, between the world of the dead and the world of the living (Westerdahl 2010). The transformative associations between deer and whales may have been due to the ability of elk, reindeer and red deer to cross open stretches of sea, in fjords and channels (Fig 9).

Fig 9: Whales and red deer helped in the process of regeneration and acted as meditators between the terrestrial plane and the underworld. The ability of these animals to migrate over sounds and fjords may have led to them being thought of as related, or capable of transforming from one to another. Photo. University Museum of Bergen.

Movements of whales, elk, red deer and reindeer in the same environment – the sea – may have been attributed with a particular cosmological significance and importance in these past societies, and provided their culture and cosmology with an understanding of the two cosmological levels as being related through these species.

The animal images of the Northern Tradition rock art have always received the greatest attention, and is mainly connected with hunting and the exploitation of resources. The compilations of images have been interpreted as hunting scenes, or otherwise as depicting some kind of magical hunting method used to entice or convince animals to surrender to the hunters. However, it has been more difficult to associate the human images from the iconography of the Northern Tradition with hunting strategies and hunting magic, and so these have been more overlooked. Their often stylised or schematised character makes them slightly more difficult to interpret in full, but many of them have prominent ribs, spinal columns, and feet and hands, whose palms are missing, but with clearly defined fingers and toes, obviously indicating that they are meant to show

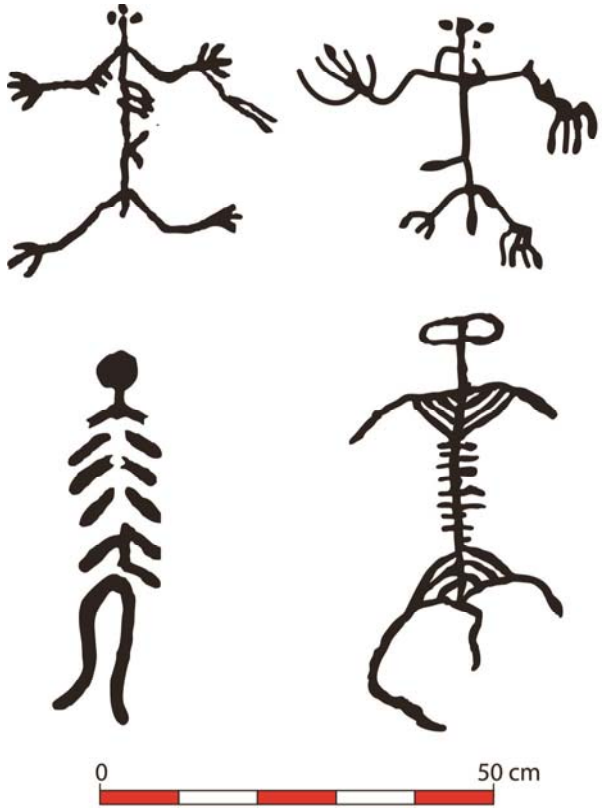

Fig 10. Some skeleton images from the rock art sites Ausevik, Flora (above) and Vingen, Bremanger (below) Both Sogn og Fjordane, Western Norway. After Lødøen and Mandt 2012

skeletons (Lødøen 2015b) (Fig 10).

This implies that the producers of these images must have been clearly aware of the existence of these de-fleshed or excarnated individuals. From this we can also assume that this was associated with secondary burials - death practises that were meant to ensure that the soul was released from the body (Hertz 1960 [1907]; Metcalf & Huntington 1979; Block & Parry 1982), which provides a completely new understanding and interpretation of the rock art (Lødøen 2015b).

Numerous examples from the ethnographic record seem to suggest that life was thought to continue after death, which also seems probable for past cultures. It is therefore likely that this was also the case in Norway and Scandinavia and many other parts of the world in the Late Mesolithic, and also other periods of prehistory. Humans and animals were probably expected to return to life after death as part of a regenerative cycle, and therefore their afterlife had to be treated with great respect. The ethnographic record also contains an abundance of comparative sources on secondary burials, which is also frequently argued for within the field of archaeological research. There seems to be consensus amongst theories on secondary burials within anthropology and sociology that this deals with processes in which the body and soul are separated (Bloch 1982). Based on the large number of skeleton images that have been documented, it is highly interesting that we can associate the rock art so closely with potential death practises, and perhaps the consumption of the souls (Lødøen 2015b), and that the iconography can provide us with another set of details regarding the way human bodies were treated in the past, as well as the processes and thoughts associated with death and mortuary practises, something that also accounted for the whales and whale images, to which I will return later on.

Mortuary practices have rarely been discussed in the archaeological literature dealing with the Mesolithic in Norway, due to the lack of remains of burials in our area. This has led to the topic of death being relegated to the side lines when discussing and exploring these societies, based on their archaeological remains

(Lødøen 2015b). Most archaeological studies and agendas seem to be occupied with subsistence and the exploitation of resources, thereby leading to much more functional, practical, and economic interpretations of the rock art. This has often led to portraits of extreme cultures or caricatures of societies, where people only live, experiencing no loss, without mourning, and with barely any religion or religious acts . The same economic-functional focus also seems to have been used to characterise a number of other regions in Europe when dealing with descriptions and representations dating from the Mesolithic.

Although several hundred inhumation graves from the Mesolithic have been documented all over the European continent, if we consider how long this period lasted, then these are quite few in number, implying that the majority of individuals who died during the Mesolithic were not buried in inhumation graves (Grünberg 2000), and that the death practises may have been of a varied and differentiated character. Several researchers have therefore claimed that excarnation and subsequent disarticulation probably represented the main procedures used in mortuary processes, throughout most of the Mesolithic period and into the Neolithic (Cauwe 2001). At the end of the Late Mesolithic, these practices seem to have undergone a change, as several cemeteries seem to have appeared (Albrethsen and Brinch Petersen 1976; Larsson et al 1981). In these cemeteries, none of the graves seem to be in conflict with each other, and the skeletons are undisturbed, seeming to suggest that mortuary practises were indeed undergoing a change at the end of the Late Mesolithic (Nilsson Stutz 2003). Some degree of disarticulation can still be documented in the cemeteries, which is also reflected in the rock art, as a number of human figures seem to be shown as incomplete (Fig 10). However, in the same way as the cemeteries, the iconography from the rock art sites dated to corresponding periods would seem to suggest a focus on more or less complete skeletons.

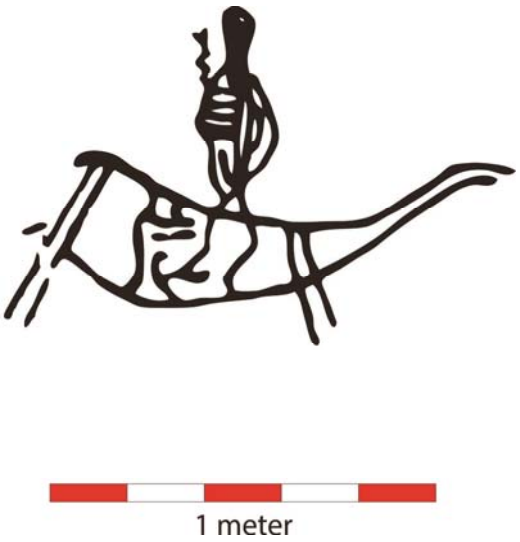

Fig 11. Skeleton images carried by an animal from the Brattebakken panel Vingen, Bremanger, Sogn og Fjordane in Western Norway. After Lødøen and Mandt 2012.

It is also tempting to understand this potential ideological, religious, or mortuary change as somewhat dramatic and controversial, and therefore to consider it as being related to the production of rock art. There seems to have been a surge in the number of Northern Tradition sites and imagery of this type during this period, perhaps as a consequence of social changes, or changes in ideology or religion, or alternatively as a reaction against these ideological or religious changes during this period. This may have fuelled the need for rock art, to compensate for or react against these potentially new trends in mortuary practise.

At a number of sites, human skeletons are as-

sociated with different types of mainly terrestrial animals, which appear to be taking part in these potential death actions. On some panels, animals are surrounding skeletons, while on other panels animals seem to be leading skeletons in specific directions. One highly explicit compilation that has been found at a number of rock art sites consists of excarnated human figures, which are apparently being carried by animals (Lødøen 2015b) (Fig 11).

It is therefore tempting to suggest that the rock images were produced by specialists in charge of mortuary practises, who were in contact with other realms as a result of their duty of caring for the deceased's soul and their progression to the afterlife, and in which rock art was potentially used to access the relevant cosmological stages. It has been argued that rock art panels were used to interact as a membrane in a three-tiered cosmology (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990), between the world of the living and the underworld. The narratives on the rock face may therefore have ensured that released souls were transferred to the correct individual, and treated in the appropriate manner. As a result, this would have become especially important over a period of several centuries in the Late Mesolithic, when mortuary practises, and perhaps religion and ideology seem to have been under strain.

What adds to this mortuary perspective is the spatial distribution of the rock art, which often takes the local topography into account at the sites. One illustrative example of this is the site of Vingen in western Norway, with approximately 2200 images, and which is characterised by a number of east-west oriented ledges where only red deer are depicted on the south-facing sides, as if they were being herded into the area from a westerly direction (Lødøen 2015b) (Fig 12 and 13).

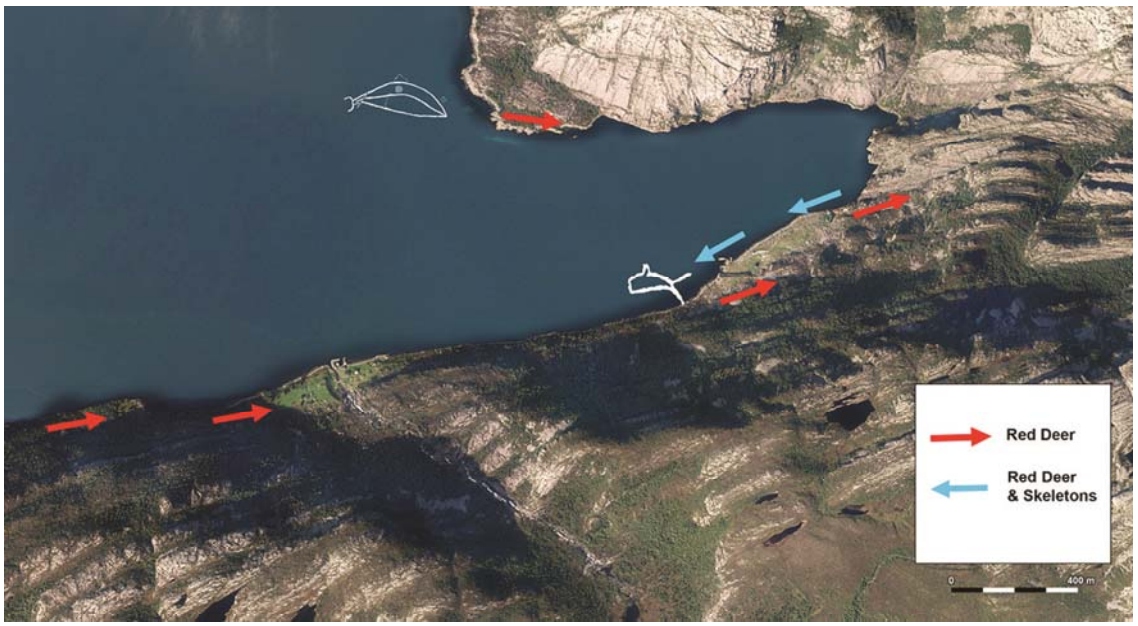

Fig 12. Two whale images and their connection with a possible 'soul cycle', at Vingen Bremanger, Sogn og Fjordane, Western Norway. The animals appear to being led towards the Vingen rock art complex from the west on south facing panels, then returning towards the west in association with skeletons on north facing panels. Illustration Lødøen/ Arkikon.

Fig 13. A Porpoise entering the shore of Vingeneset, Vingen, Sogn og Fjordane, and then associated or transformed into red deer. Illstration Lødøen/Arkikon.

This contrasts with narratives on the north-facing panels, where animals associated with skeletons seem to be heading westward again. It would therefore seem that the animals are involved in circular movements, which could be understood as a regenerative life or soul–cycle. A similar distribution of narratives in the iconography can be found at a number of sites, where a similar interplay seems to take advantage of the micro-topography of the different sites. In the case of Vingen, it is especially striking to note that on either side of this circular movement, a porpoise seem to be associated with red deer, or at least following red deer, before the red deer associated with skeletons change direction and are changed back into an image of a whale, and return to the sea (Lødøen and Mandt 2012: 202, 424) (Fig 13). Similar structuring principles can be found at other sites, such as the world heritage site in Alta.

What this seems to indicate, as part of a larger picture, is that souls were released through excarnation and mortuary processes, and appear to have been transferred from the deceased, and carried on or over land by terrestrial animals, before the souls were transferred to whales (or the cervids guiding or carrying the souls were transformed to whales), allowing the souls to reach the underworld or realm of the dead. In line with the iconography, it seems reasonable to consider that whales had the ability to carry souls returning from the world of the dead, as part of an endless cycle of rebirth, and it is therefore interesting to note that some whales seem to be carrying unborn or newborn individuals from the depths of the sea, as part of this regeneration process (Fig 14).

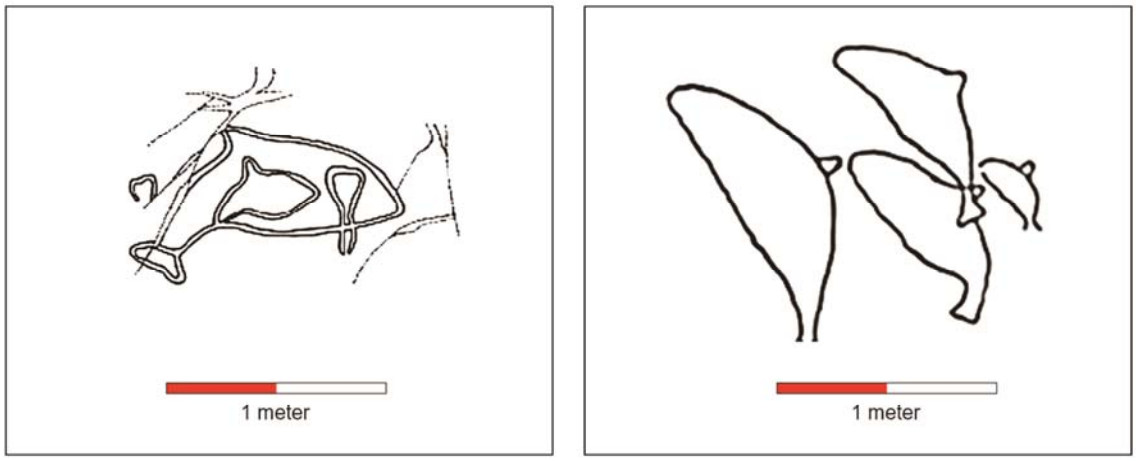

Fig 14. The return of potential souls from the realm of the sea as part of a 'soul cycle'. Left: The Rausand site, Averøy; After Sognnes 1996. right: the Bogge site, Nesset. After Gjessing 1936 Both Møre og Romsdal, Western Norway.

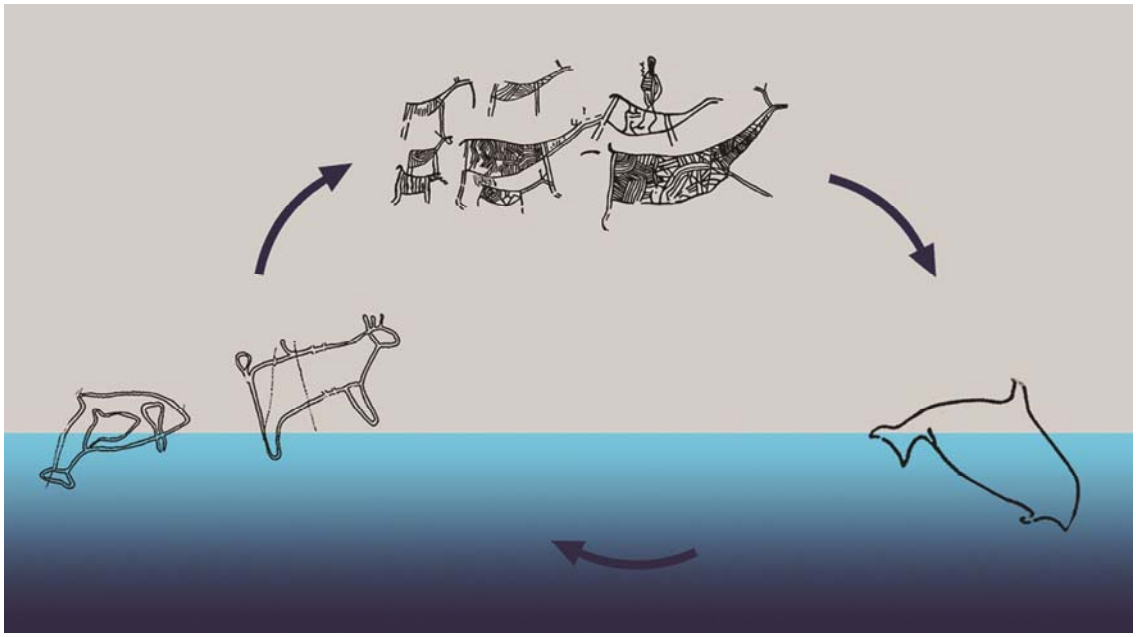

Fig 15. A possible 'soul cycle' represented by images from three different sites. Left: the he Rausand site, Averøy, Møre og Romsdal; centre: the Vingen site, Bremanger, Sogn og Fjordane. Western Norway ; right: the Hammer site, Beitstad, Trøndelag, Central Western Norway. Illustration: Lødøen/Arkikon.

This is illustrated by images from three different Northern Tradition sites, as shown in this illustration (Fig 15).

It is tempting to suggest that different parts of such a regenerative circle have been depicted at the different rock art sites dependent on variable focus amongst different groups, but where the background has been derived from an overarching cosmology or ideology shared by the societies behind the rock art.

Despite the fact that skeleton images are quite explicitly expressed in the rock art, few burials from the Mesolithic have been documented in Norway. However, several human bone remains and skulls dating from the Mesolithic have been recovered from the sea (Bjerck 2008). Elsewhere in Scandinavia and other parts of Europe, similar depositions seem to indicate that skeletons, human bone remains, or bodies were regularly deposited in the sea or in fresh water as part of institutionalised practises (Conneller 2006; Grøn & Skaarup 1991; Hallgren 2011). It therefore seems likely that excarnated skeleton remains were deposited in the sea, as natural passageways for the remaining bones, which then could reach an underworld beyond the realm of the living, perhaps as part of the final mortuary process. It has also been argued that depositions at sea were something normal, with burials on dry land being an exception to the rule (Strassbourg 2000). Most of the Northern Tradition rock art sites are also exposed to the sea, and may therefore have been sites where these depositions took place. In these final processes, whales may have played an especially important role, in helping the souls or the skeletal remains to find the right path (Fig 16).

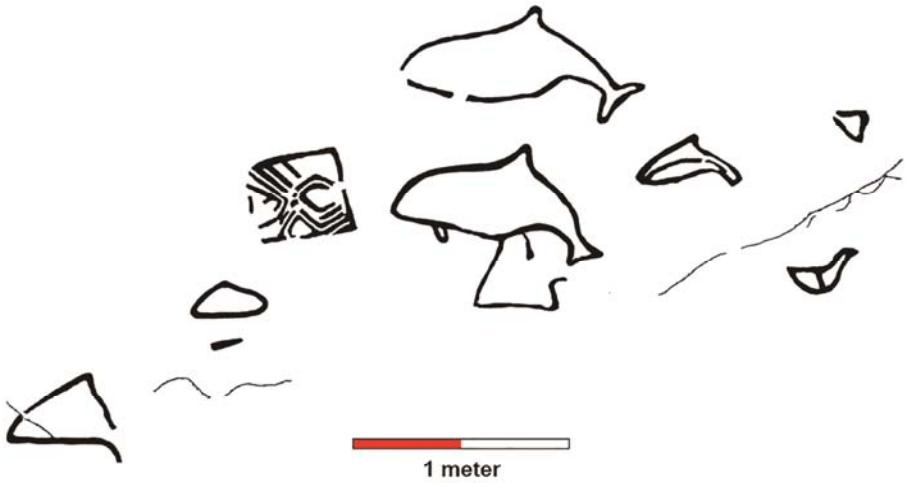

Fig 16. A number of porpoises from the Søbstad site, Averøy, Møre og Romsdal, Western Norway.

I therefore find it likely that cervids such as elk, reindeer and red deer, bears, and whales were all thought of as "soul animals" (Hultkrantz 1953; Guemple 1994; Lødøen 2015b). These animals may have been responsible for the transfer of souls from the deceased to newborns by both terrestrial animals and sea mammals, and through all of the respective cosmological levels, by both sustaining and controlling the necessary regeneration of souls. The main task for the rock art specialists was to protect and control the movement of deceased or their souls through the imagery on the numerous panels with rock art. The narratives on the rock face may have ensured that released souls were transferred to the right individual, and treated in the appropriate manner (Lødøen 2015b).

For prehistoric cultures, most elements in their landscape and environment were probably animated,

and it was therefore important to interconnect all of the cosmological levels as part of the explanatory frameworks for their culture and existence. It also seems that within these frameworks, red deer, elk and red deer or bears, in association with whales, had very specific roles in the mortuary processes. It would appear that all of these species were also hunted, with their importance being derived from the fact that they were exploited, and consumed, in combination with a series of restrictions, taboos, and other considerations that had to be taken into account, to avoid provoking and releasing potentially harmful forces.

The reality of the past, something that is quite unattainable for us, was probably much more nuanced, with more complex explanations and beliefs regarding the association between humans and animals that differentiated much more between terrestrial animals and different types of whales, such as this association between a Minke whale and several bears (Fig 17), in a rather complicated narrative. These may have also operated on other cosmological scales, a subject that will be explored in greater detail in the future. This idea also includes birds (especially sea birds), who are able to move between different cosmological levels, and which are included on a number of panels containing whale images (Fig 18).

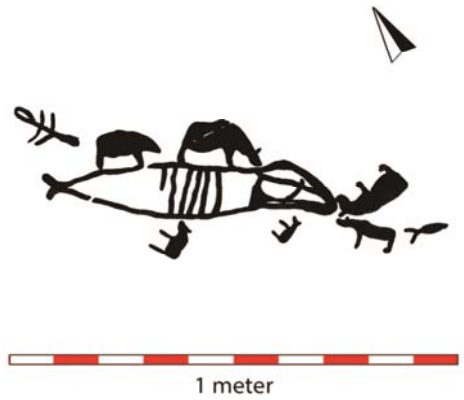

Fig 17. A potential cosmological perspective involving a Minke whale and bears at Hjemmeluft, Alta, Finnmark, Northern Norway.site, Beitstad, Trøndelag, Central Norway. www.alatrockart.no

Many other sites and motifs could have been mentioned, but the limited scope of

Fig 18. Whales deer and seabirds that might have had particular cosmological importance in the past, from Hammer, Beitstad, Trøndelag, Central Norway. After Bakka 1988.

this paper prevents me from presenting them.

Although the sites are different, their location and the presence of skeletons in association with animals demonstrates a number of similarities that may have formed a part of the same system of change, clearly demonstrating on a large scale the conflicting perspectives caused by the introduction of new ideas that affected Late Mesolithic societies.

At the very end of the Late Mesolithic, cemeteries seem to disappear, and rock art production came to an end, perhaps as a result of another fundamental change in ideology, or a return to previous belief systems, which no longer required rock art (Lødøen 2015b).

II. Conclusion

It is reasonable to ask why the images of whales are quite few in number compared to the many terrestrial animals; this may have been due to a limited ability to perceive whale behaviour in the depths of the sea, limiting their representation on the numerous panels, compared to images of red deer, reindeer and elk, which were much easier to perceive, study, and associate with cosmological ideas. On the contrary, it is also reasonable to ask why there are so many whale images in central Norway, why the representations or images of skeletons vary, or why all of the Northern Tradition sites are quite different. The sites from the Northern Tradition are separated by thousands of kilometres, and the rock art tradition seems to have lasted for several centuries. The production of rock art in itself may have been adjusted according to oral tradition or different interpretations, or depended on different cultures, ethnic groups, or local traditions. It may not have been necessary to depict images of skeletons in some areas, as they would have been physically present. Similarly, it may not have been necessary to depict whales, as other elements could have been used that are no longer present at the sites.

The iconographic material at the sites in question is both vast and complicated, and the chronological dimensions must also be evaluated. However, as a concluding remark, I would therefore suggest that all of the rock art sites from the Northern Tradition seem to have dealt with the way in which the dead were handled, and perhaps the abandoning of the soul, and that within these processes, animals such as cervids and whales – in their natural habitat in this part of Northern Europe– played a significant role.

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