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Human Skeletons in Motion, Defleshed Animals in Action and Transformation of Species in Northern Tradition Rock Art

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Abstract

This paper addresses attention to iconographical expressions in the Northern Tradition rock art of Scandinavia that have received limited awareness. Yet, as it will be demonstrated, this iconography contains valuable insights into past ideas and concepts. This study also examines the background for the production of Northern Tradition rock art. Recent dialectic procedures within prehistoric rock art research and studies of archaeological remains, including multidisciplinary methods, dating measures, and demographic analyses, have contextualised Northern Tradition rock art into a more defined reconstructed past social context, at least regarding Western Norway. This has further connected the rock art to demographic changes at the end of the Late Mesolithic period. It is argued that this demographic development triggered the production of rock art, allowing a deeper insight into past world views through iconographical visualisations. Based on this background, it is also argued that the imagery of the Northern Tradition reflects past societal conditions and work as a proxy for insight into Late Mesolithic world views.

Keywords: rock art; Mesolithic; demography; past ontologies; proxy

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1. Introduction

The Northern Tradition rock art of Scandinavia has been under archaeological investigation for more than a century, accompanied by documentation of many rediscoveries of sites throughout the 1900s and after the turn of the millennium (Gjessing 1936; Hallström 1938; Shetelig 1922; Lødøen and Mandt 2010; Fuglestvedt 2018). Despite documentation of other motives, the rock art tradition has been majorly synonymous with wild animal representations and has even been referred to as *Hunters' art* (Hansen 1904; Brøgger 1906). For decades, this characterisation has also influenced the meaning behind these animal images and the Northern tradition iconography in general (e.g., Shetelig 1922; Brøgger 1925; Hallström 1938; Mikkelsen 1977) (Figure 1). I claim that such an understanding of Scandinavian rock art has prevailed, alongside a subsistence perspective that animals are the main focus of Northern Tradition rock art (e.g., Gjerde 2010). However, it should immediately be stated that many contributions have also attempted to move beyond hunting and subsistence perspectives (e.g., Fuglestvedt 2018; Mantere 2023). Several ethnographic cosmologies have been studied as valid sources for an alternative understanding of the past (e.g., Hill 2011). These perspectives help to adjust traditional interpretations of archaeological remains for a deeper reconstruction of the characteristics of past societies, culture, and world views (e.g., Willerslev 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2012; Descola 2013). Over the last few decades, the image compilations within rock art sites have increasingly been referred to as narratives, advocating for further decoding and deciphering of the iconography. However,

uncertainties regarding how to interpret motifs; challenges in understanding the significance of various figures; and difficulty in understanding the relations between figures and what they might have been intended to express have caused significant hesitations in extracting more meaning from records of Northern Tradition rock art (Lødøen 2025). As a result, interpretations of the Northern Tradition rock art have been based solely on a limited number of figures—for the most part, animal representations—which is akin to isolating paragraphs or words in a manuscript that do not convey the full story. I should also add that we are faced with narratives incompatible with any foreign language, including unknown syntax, grammar and vocabulary. Despite this, many distinctive elements can be identified that are shared over larger areas or associated with regional differences.

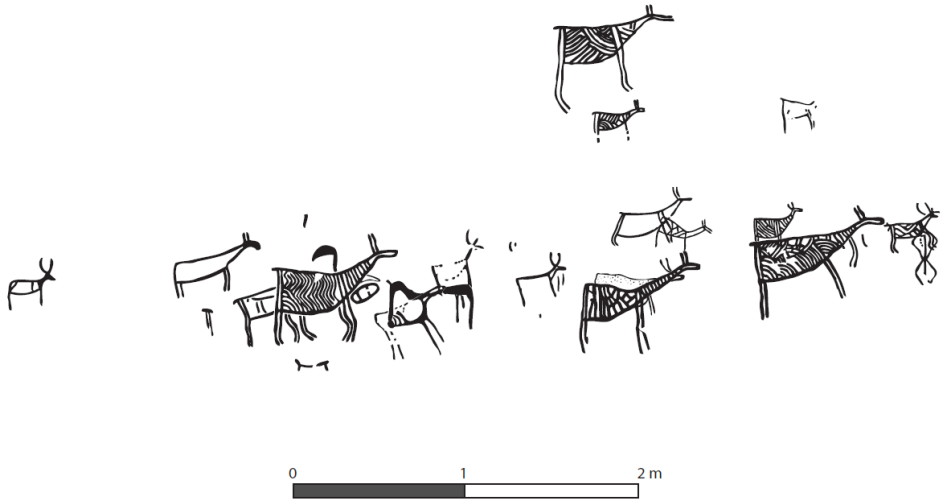


Figure 1. A representative perspective of the Northern Tradition rock art; a herd of red deer in motion. We are perhaps viewing both skeleton and living red deer with an anthropomorph to the right. From the Hardbakken panel at the Vingen site.

1.1. The Essential Dating of Iconography and the Rock Art Practice

Another challenge in the research of Northern tradition rock art, and even Scandinavian rock art in general, has been to connect the imagery's somewhat relative and asynchronous relationship with its contemporary context and the societies behind the rock art (Sognnes 2017; Lødøen 2013, 2015). It is often argued that iconography cannot be dated directly; the same applies to stone adzes or lithic projectile points. Yet, we are able to date these artefacts through contextual approaches and establish nuanced chronologies for such archaeological materials, structures, phases, and more. The principles are the same for rock art, where several scientific paleo-methods can be applied to better chronologically contextualise the iconography; however, in practice, this is rarely conducted. The distance in chronological frameworks between the rock art environment and the material archaeological sector has also reduced ambitions to connect the rock art to the societies responsible for its creation, which has, unfortunately, led to the adoption of simpler policies regarding the dating procedures and chronology accepted for rock art. This has resulted in a gap between chronological frameworks regarding archaeological material remains and past iconography. While archaeology has made significant developments in dating both archaeological material and past phases due to the development and improvement of scientific approaches, including, most notably, radiocarbon dating methods, the field of rock art studies has retained more relative approaches (Hjelle and Lødøen 2017). For most sites, this has produced unclear chronological frameworks that fail to connect with the societies behind the imagery, thereby reinforcing rock art studies' less serious reputation within archaeology and archaeological research.

1.2. The Need to Decolonise Modern Premises in Archaeological Research

In addition to the archaeological challenges mentioned above, there is also the issue of understanding prehistoric conditions from thousands of years ago without projecting modern Western ideas onto the past (Porr and Matthews 2017). Thus, the constraints of a modern perspective need to be mitigated by archaeological research in an attempt to reconstruct past world views. This requires a careful balance of humanistic and scientific methods, critical thinking, and an openness to alternative interpretations that may not align with current worldviews (Descola 2013). The application of scientific methods to identify patterns for a more neutral archaeological understanding has tended to attribute a modern awareness of all laws of nature to past cultures (e.g., Sørensen 2017). An adherence to objectivity and encouragement of modern verifiability have also imposed too many contemporary practices onto the past (Sørensen 2017). Archaeology has significantly benefited from the scientific field; however, I claim that its inferiority complex as a discipline compared to the scientific fields has also reduced humanism in many archaeological approaches. This has led to the interpretation and contextualisation of archaeological remains based on a more modern Western context (Sørensen 2017). This is not to disclaim scientific revolutions in archaeology (e.g., Kristiansen 2014). On the contrary, scientific methods are highly relevant in archaeology, but drawbacks arise when these methods and associated modern paradigms interfere too much with analyses that could provide insight into past thoughts (Sørensen 2017; Lidén and Eriksson 2013). Archaeological approaches achieved innovation through post-processual approaches (e.g., Hodder 1990; Thomas 1999), bringing new philosophical awareness into our field. Yet, in several areas of archaeology, the pendulum has swung back to more positivist trends (e.g., Sørensen 2017), perhaps in line with the increase in the scientific methods applied in archaeology, combined with traditional views regarding the Mesolithic (Elliot and Warren 2023).

Despite concerns related to this development, there are many approaches that can balance scientific revolutions and reconstruct past ontologies through ethnography and beyond (e.g., Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2012), allowing the reconstructions of past ontologies from approaches alternative to archaeological material. Nonetheless, archaeological remains from distant and even unknown past conditions seem to be contaminated by Western standards and associated modern connotations as soon as artefacts are unearthed. Decades of Cartesian-influenced interpretations in both archaeology and rock art studies, a reluctance to consider iconographical representations that dissonate with modern worldviews, and preferential selection of motifs that make the rock art compatible with modern Western ruling, including utilitarian and consumptive perspectives, influencing archaeology, have obscured the original thoughts and ideas behind rock art. The outcomes of such studies are mirror images and distorted caricatures of our contemporary society, driven by utilitarian and consumptive needs, disseminated under the guise of ancient material and lithic tools.

This is where rock art can make a *difference*, since the original relationships between the motifs are still preserved in the iconography. Therefore, these images can be used to decolonise reconstructions of past societies from their modern influence. This also accounts for the potential ontologies that the iconography reveals. This enables rock art, and in this context, the iconography within the Northern Tradition rock art of Scandinavia to serve as a *proxy* for insight into Late Mesolithic worldviews. In line with this, depictions and narratives can be used dialectically with material archaeological records to uncover more of the tangible and intangible prehistoric conditions associated with both iconography and material remains, helping to access past thoughts and ultimately reconstruct alternative worldviews. This perspective necessitates further research to understand the meaning behind rock art as well as the causes behind its production.

The article will draw attention to some of the distinctive yet less emphasised iconographical expressions among the motifs within the Northern Tradition rock art records of Scandinavia. These expressions serve as examples of images and compositions that offer relational, conceptual and ontological insight into past conditions that have largely been excluded, ignored, and overshadowed in previous analytical approaches and presentations of the rock art. The complexity and challenges of understanding the agency of past visual representations (e.g., Abram 1997) and how these images might have been perceived should also be emphasised more thoroughly (Belting 2011; Bredekamp 2015).

2. Materials and Methods

The basis of this paper is the almost 70 Northern Tradition rock art sites that have been documented in Scandinavia, most of which are within the borders of Norway (Lødøen and Mandt 2010; Fuglestvedt 2018). This includes smaller sites with only a few figures and larger complexes with hundreds and even thousands of images, such as the Alta complex in Finnmark, Northern Norway (Helskog 1999; Fuglestvedt 2018; Lødøen and Mandt 2010). There are many similarities between these sites, but also clear differences in their motives, where animal representations, such as cervids, anthropomorphs, bears, sea mammals, birds, and some fish types, are distinctive for this tradition, reflecting the local habitat where the different rock art sites are located (Lødøen 2017a; Fuglestvedt 2018).

Due to the limitations of this paper, this research will be restricted to Western Norway and the Ausevik (Hagen 1969; Prescott and Walderhaug 1995; Lødøen 2017a) and Vingen sites (Hallström 1938; Bakka 1979; Lødøen and Mandt 2010, 2012; Lødøen 2015), as well as some other smaller sites from this region. The Vingen site covers more than a square kilometre of rock art production, encompassing 2200 images in more than 340 panels, while the Ausevik site is limited to 300 images within 1500 square metres. These sites are represented by an overwhelming number of images depicting cervids, some anthropomorphs, birds, and sea mammals. However, several motives in the iconography remain uninterpreted.

To overcome the unfortunate chronological condition of the rock art, several excavations have been carried out at the Vingen and Ausevik sites, along with corresponding collections of archaeological material remains, accompanied by associated dating procedures and independent scientific dating of past human impact on the rock art environments (Lødøen 2013, 2014; Hjelle and Lødøen 2017).

The overarching goal has been to correlate more accurately dated past iconography with its contemporary society, as represented by excavated habitation sites, associated material remains, and other archaeological sources, in order to establish new points of departure for decoding the rock art and identifying some of the meaning behind the iconography.

These approaches performed well, dating the activity in both Ausevik and Vingen sites to the end of the Late Mesolithic period, which is a significant discovery. There is no longer support for dating the Ausevik rock art to the Bronze Age (Hagen 1969) or the Vingen iconography to the Middle Neolithic period (Bakka 1979), as previously claimed. Production phases for the iconography within the Ausevik and Vingen sites have been narrowed down to the timespan 7000–6600 cal BP and 6900–6200 cal BP, respectively (Lødøen 2013, 2014; Hjelle and Lødøen 2017). These two sites, therefore, are adequately connected with the increased sedentism experienced during the Late Mesolithic period (Bergsvik 2001), and are potential communal sites for ceremonial and cosmological activities in the vicinity of sedentary areas (Lødøen 2015; Fuglestvedt 2018).

Even more striking is the connection between the dated activity at the Ausevik and Vingen sites and recent research regarding the demographic development in Western Norway, where a gradual decline in the population seems to have taken place from around

7000 to 6200 Cal BP, with a sharper fall towards the end of this period (Bergsvik et al. 2021). Although the climate became slightly colder towards the end of the late Mesolithic period, the archaeological record of Western Norway provides no evidence of ecosystem collapse (Groucutt et al. 2022; Jørgensen and Riede 2019; Lundström 2023). There are no other clear traces in the archaeological material that can explain this development, such as warfare or migrations (Lundström 2023). Based on this context, I suggest that this might have been caused by an epidemic situation (Lødøen 2025).

Other methods included in this research are systematic comparative studies of iconography over the years from most sites housing Northern Tradition rock art, searching for shared similarities (Lødøen and Mandt 2010; Lødøen 2017a). Among the motifs that have significantly altered the understanding of the Northern Tradition rock art are the presence of *human skeletons*, represented at many Northern Tradition sites (Lødøen and Mandt 2010). If acknowledged at all in earlier research, these have been regarded, at best, as humans or anthropomorphs but barely considered as skeletons in former studies. Their skeletal features have instead been understood as part of ritual outfits connected to past shamanism (e.g., Helskog 1990; Gjerde 2010). However, many of these anthropomorphic representations demonstrate visualised traces of postmortem treatment, manipulations, and even disarticulation (Lødøen 2014, 2015) that correspond with human osteological evidence recovered in Scandinavia and even Europe, both within burial contexts and elsewhere (e.g., Grünberg 2000; Nilsson Stutz 2003; Schülke et al. 2019). This suggests that the majority of the images could be human skeletons.

3. Results

In relation to the perspectives raised above, important results gained from this study include repeatedly occurring representations in iconography that, to a major extent, have escaped attention during previous analyses of the rock art. Due to the limited scope of this study, only three different categories are focused on and discussed in this paper, namely human skeletons that seem to be in motion, defleshed animals in action, and visualised transformations of species, all providing a deeper insight into past ideas behind the rock art.

3.1. Human Skeletons in Motion

Anthropomorphic images have not received much attention in earlier research, as mentioned above. However, their interpretation as skeletons has shifted the perspective on Northern Tradition rock art, linking it much more closely to the handling of the dead and mortuary procedures (Lødøen 2014, 2015). The displayed human skeletons are often represented as if they are animated, active, performative, and under *movement* (Figure 2). Some of these images are represented with spread legs and straightened arms, as if under motion, which is a pattern that seems to be shared for human skeleton images at many sites within Norway (Fuglestvedt 2018; Lødøen 2015; Helskog 1990). The stylised presentation of these images limits insight into their details, and of course, what looks to be vital and animated may not have been the intention, but merely a matter of presentation. However, the suggested movement or animation of the skeletons appears to be emphasized in scenes depicting interactions between human skeletons and animals, such as skeletons shown riding, being transported by, or carried by red deer (Figure 3) (Lødøen and Mandt 2012).

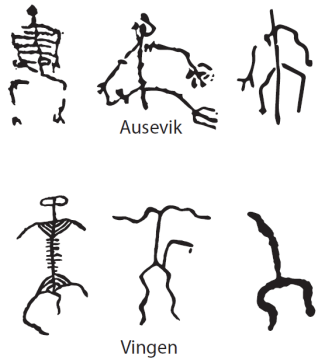


Figure 2. Skeletons demonstrating varying degrees of manipulation, animation, and potential movement. Images obtained from the Ausevik and Vingen sites.

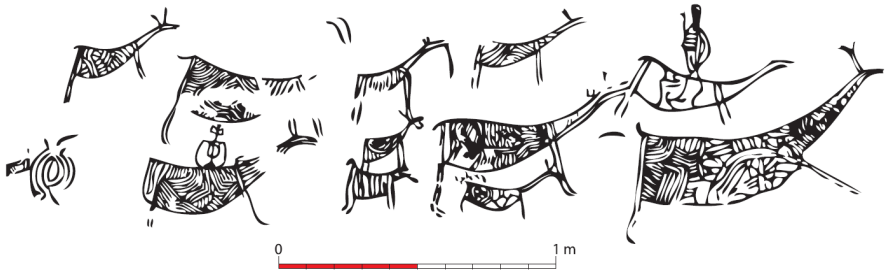


Figure 3. Human skeletons and red deer in motion from the Brattebakken panel in Vingen.

3.2. Defleshed Animals in Action

Somewhat similar to the human skeletons are visualisations of many animal images that seem to take the character of defleshed or excarnated cervids. Some reservations can also be raised against this interpretation, as most animal images in the iconography are highly stylised. However, explicit differentiations between animals are accounted for in various compilations of the images where muscles and flesh are clearly visualised, creating a distinction against animals with a lack of such features and defleshed characteristics (Figure 4). The latter could include representations of dead cervids, but similarly to the human figures mentioned above, they are depicted as highly active and performative, as well as interacting with the human skeletons (Figure 5).

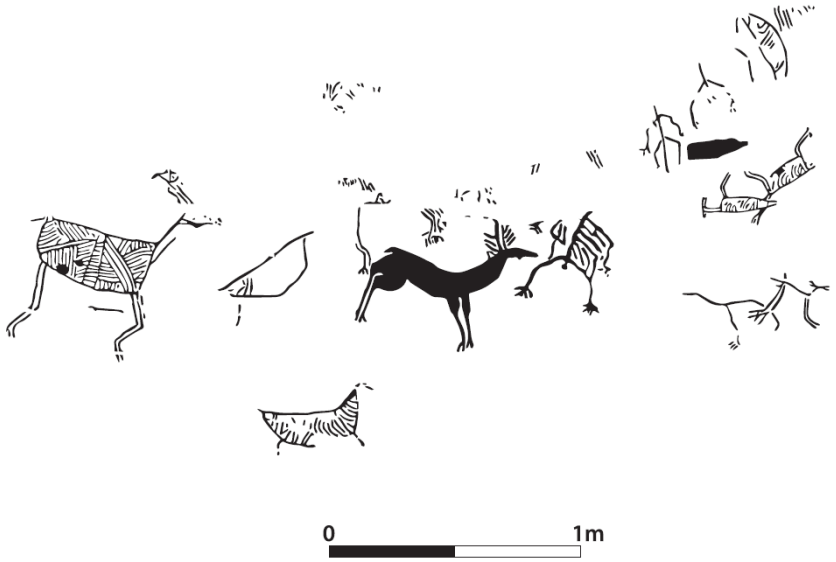


Figure 4. Both flesh and defleshed animals in action from images at the Ausevik site. The central red deer has its muscles explicitly visualised, and the body is filled with pecking marks perhaps indicating flesh, while being followed by a defleshed animal, represented by pecked lines and where the muscles and flesh seem to be missing.

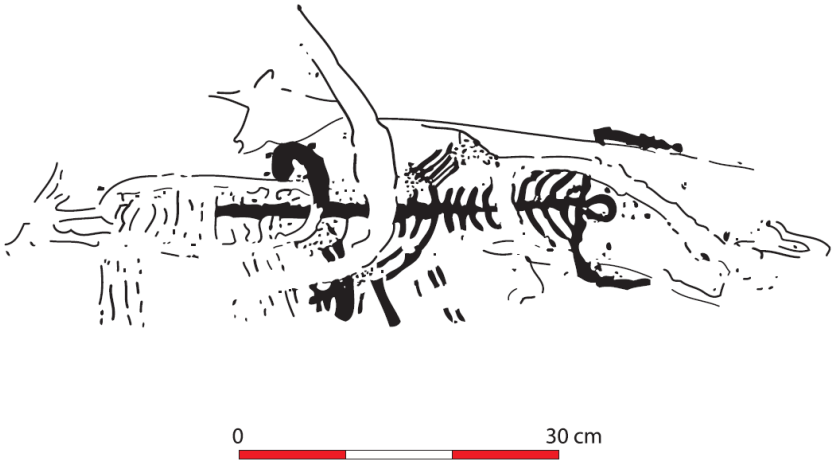


Figure 5. Transformation between a red deer and a human skeleton, suggesting the kinship and common origin between these two species.

3.3. Transformation of Species

This leads to the third category of Northern Tradition rock art iconography discussed here, which is the representation of other types of transformations between humans and non-humans (Figure 3) and sea mammals and terrestrial animals (Figure 6). Many of these transformations are not observed in nature, suggesting perspectives beyond mere subsistence. Transformations between animals and humans, or more specifically, transformations between defleshed cervids and human skeletons are also identified (Figure 5). Such visualised transformations can be found at many sites containing Northern Tradition rock art (Lødøen and Mandt 2010).

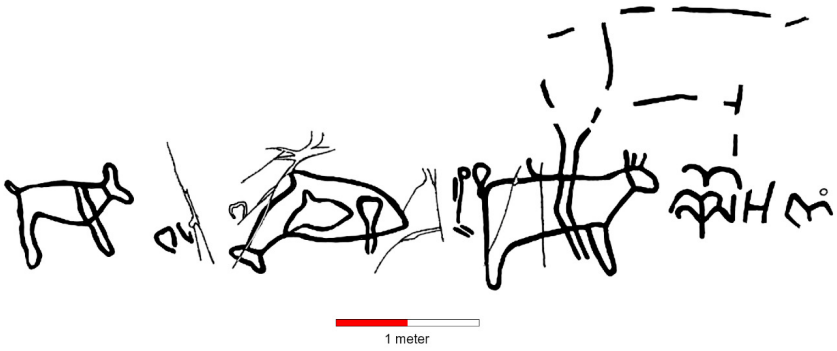


Figure 6. Potential expressions of transformation between sea mammals and terrestrial animals from the Rausand site, Møre og Romsdal.

These three categories highlight what I will claim is essential to this rock art, explaining its appearance, relevance, and creation.

4. Discussion

A common challenge when dealing with rock art is to qualitatively decide whether the iconography and its associated compilations represent mythological, cosmological, or even creational narratives. On the basis of ethnography, it seems reasonable to suggest that the egalitarian hunter–fisher–gatherer societies behind the iconography related their images to conditions and world views where most of their surroundings were animated and where cosmology, mythology, religion, and subsistence were interconnected (e.g., Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998). It is further reasonable to suggest that, for the societies that roamed and settled in Mesolithic Scandinavia, this also implied a coexistence with forces, influential spirits, ancestral souls, and other corresponding elements for both

humans and animals in their environment, which were perceived to be just as real as living humans and animals (Hallowell 1975; Morrison 2000; Guemple 1994; Rio 2020; Mosko 2008; Jordan 2011).

The characteristics of the chosen examples align well with such a perspective and can, in more modern terms, be characterised as belonging to the *supernatural world* or representing *supernatural conditions*. However, for these Mesolithic traditional societies, these images probably reflected past visualised realities (Hallowell 1975; Morrison 2000). Despite spirits often being characterised as invisible, they can be heard and perceived, such as through shadows, the wind, and weather (Morrison 2000; Mosko 2008) and regarded just as real as humans in the flesh. From such a perspective, vital human skeletons might have represented animated spirits or souls. Examples from the ethnographic record have demonstrated that deceased individuals, rather than being deemed clinically dead as in modern Western societies, could have been believed to undergo transitional phases between the living world and the spirit world, retaining their animation and communication with the living (Bloch 1982; Metcalf and Huntington 1979). The same view might also account for the defleshed or excarnated animals, representing corresponding souls to cervids in flesh. The iconographical representations of skeletons in motion, defleshed animals, bodily interconnections between cervids and humans, and further transformations clearly cannot have arrived out of nowhere (Figures 4–6). On the contrary, this must have represented ideas and concepts that reflected past conditions and, through the means of visualisation in rock art, provide us with qualitative information regarding ontologies and relations between past species in the Late Mesolithic period. This is significant and rock art is one of the few archaeological resources for such insight. In traditional societies such as the Mesolithic period under discussion, ontologies were likely maintained through oral means, leaving no traces. Decayed organic remains that might have materially demonstrated connections between humans and animals through objects, symbols, or materials represent limitations for our insight, emphasising the value of the rock art and what it contains. With new approaches, the content demonstrated through iconography might still be traceable in some of the fragmented material remains found in archaeological records, which could help formulate even more thorough, holistic reconstructions of the past.

From several archaeological contexts in Europe, there is evidence of human–animal relations that stretch beyond mere subsistence, where Mesolithic societies demonstrate relationships between past species that cannot be observed in nature (e.g., Conneller and Elliot 2025). The classic frontlets from Star Carr are amongst such examples that have been suggested to address both metamorphoses and kinship between humans and cervids (Clark 1954; Conneller 2004). The same was observed on carved boulders argued to represent metamorphoses of fish and humans at Lepenski Vir, Sebia (Boric 1997), and between other animals and humans such as the incised teeth of wild boar and elks found in a human skull in a Mesolithic grave at Zvejniek, Latvia (Conneller and Elliot 2025), possibly expressing what was perceived but not seen. To this, examples can be added from ethnography, including tales and narratives where animals were believed to have kinship with humans (e.g., Zwelebil 1993; Descola 2013), which might have been thought interwoven through regeneration. Ethnographic studies have also demonstrated that conversion from animal to human and from human to animal is a constant feature in animist ontologies (Descola 2013) and aligns well with the traits of transformation between cervids and humans; and perhaps seen as the gateway to appropriate regeneration in the Mesolithic period. This is also supported by the presence of red deer bones and antlers in mortuary contexts (e.g., Larsson et al. 1981; Grigson and Mellars 1987; Kannegaard Nielsen and Brinch Petersen 1993; Grünberg 2000) in line with the associations drawn between cervids and humans in iconography, indicating that red deer and humans in

these Mesolithic societies were eternally connected. Modern scientific research has even demonstrated that red deer are attracted to humans and human settlements (Meisingset 2008; Howsare 2024). Of additional interest are ethnographic studies from circumpolar areas that frequently refer to animals as masters, which might be of equal relevance to Mesolithic societies (Jordan 2011) as the frequent presence of cervids in rock art. There are also many examples demonstrating how hierarchies within animals, their behaviour, and even their mating rituals influenced the origin and organisation of human societal conditions, routines, and even ceremonies (e.g., Storm 1995; Tonna et al. 2019). The outcome of these past societies sharing their environment with red deer, sea mammals, and other species during the Mesolithic period is their sharing of the same cosmology. Such coexistence in the past could also have shaped origin myths and formed ontologies, causing a dialectic dependency between different species and between animals and humans.

Visualising the Unseen

However, the fundamental questions are not only associated with *what* was visualised, but also why it was visualised. I would therefore like to suggest that it was the demographic development at the end of the Late Mesolithic period, approximately 6500-6200 Cal BP, that resulted in the production of rock art. Neutrally, this period is termed as undergoing *a demographic decline*; in reality, this must have represented a full crisis, and a potentially dramatic shock for the Mesolithic societies in Western Norway, experiencing a high loss of members in their communities. The few archaeological traces identified from the subsequent period 6200–6000 Cal BP emphasise the devastating consequences of this decline, as the Late Mesolithic societies seem to almost disappear from Western Norway at this time (Bergsvik et al. 2021; Åstveit 2008; Bjerck 2008), thus representing a full Mesolithic collapse. In another publication, I argue that this was caused by an epidemic situation, such as a plague or similar circumstances (Lødøen 2025). This might have led to certain processes or rituals in an attempt to mitigate the situation, thus triggering the production of rock art. This interpretation of iconography as visualising what was not visible or part of imagination, but ontological realities for these societies, relates to the connections it draws between red deer and humans and between sea mammals and cervids (Lødøen 2017b, 2022). This is somewhat comparable to how masks have been created and applied by traditional societies in social, ritual, and ceremonial settings, representing visualisations of spirits (Lévi-Strauss 1983; Benz and Bauer 2014; Dietrich et al. 2018). The suggested demographic crises may have resulted in an understanding that something was at stake, perhaps broken or interrupted, that called for a need to visualise and repair relations with ancestral souls or spirits, which were believed to be compromised due to this crisis. That this all-encompassing situation became so significant that the creation of rock art and leaving expressions in rock panels—which might have been perceived as a surface for contacting a possible underworld or another cosmological level—was chosen as a solution to try to change this catastrophic disorder. There are clearly challenges in trying to understand whether the iconographical content should be understood as representing a desired outcome or reactions against situations these societies were set in, such as a disturbed cosmological circle in need of repair. However, we know that when societies are under pressure, new ideas emerge, and symbols, images, and icons can be equally important for creating a sense of unity (e.g., Benz and Bauer 2014; Johnson 1982; Goldhahn and May 2019). To this, we can add insight into mortuary processes and the handling of the dead, where disarticulation procedures, perhaps meant to change the outcome of infections through the removal of body parts, were followed by restoring and reestablishing animation to an individual through resurrection. These recurring expressions, in the Vingen and Ausevik sites and elsewhere, might have told pieces of the same story or the same situation, where the world of these societies was

distorted due to declining demographic circumstances. With the possible extinction of this population, Northern Tradition rock art also disappears, and it was never resumed in later times (Lødøen 2015; Fuglestvedt 2018).

Continued analyses and big data analyses of larger quantities of images and associated parameters connected to the archaeological material record might reveal more meaning from both the Northern Tradition iconography and corresponding archaeological material remains, which can be analytically utilised to enhance deeper and further meaning from other archaeological contexts and approaches. Such ideas, retrieved through rock art, help establish an explanatory framework from which more of these past realities can be constructed.

Most of the figures in Northern Tradition rock art are taken from the animal world, including an overwhelmingly large number of cervids, some sea mammals, birds, and fish. Very few objects or material items seem to be depicted. This excludes a large quantity of species and objects that did not qualify as depictable categories, which raises more questions that need to be explained. One may wonder what relationship these different categories had that qualified them to be depicted, which is something that should be explored further. The identification of such connections or common patterns will advance the suggested proxy of rock art, providing more insight into past world views.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to connect the Northern tradition iconography more thoroughly to the society in which the rock art was created, and also suggest that Northern Tradition rock art contains visualised images that perhaps border the seen world and the perceived world, where spirits, souls, and living species interact. However, for Mesolithic people, this was most likely understood as nothing but the real world. This interpretation helps to provide deeper insight into past belief systems and thoughts that are no longer visible—and were probably rarely visible—but part of the social conditions under constant development through oral, symbolic, and other forms of social communication in the past. I claim that the outcome of these studies represents a framework that can be broadened and applied to other sites and rock art complexes, providing better insight into the past and an alternative understanding of the narratives behind the iconography. This study also addresses the importance of adapting material archaeological remains within the framework of rock art studies. There are also many other compilations and figurative combinations in Northern Tradition rock art that can be isolated and which reappear at many panels and locations, that probably represent defined and meaningful expressions or concepts of the past. Thus, the results of this study can be added to and eventually lead to a deeper decoding and deciphering of the iconographical content.

This study also provides a detailed insight into what rock art might have represented, drawing on elements that were never seen, but perceived and visualised through rock art. Such indications are rudimentary in the remains of Late Mesolithic existence and close to non-traceable through material archaeological remains. However, such relations between different species and image categories have been preserved for thousands of years, in contrast to the fragmented remains retrieved from excavations and where analyses expose them to other influential processes. Therefore, Northern Tradition rock art provides an alternative perspective that can serve as a proxy to examine archaeological material remains for better insight into past conditions and worldviews.

The suggested framework that is outlined regarding visualisations of spirits, the perceived but unseen, and the suggested triggering of rock art production due to crises might also represent an applicable explanatory framework for understanding other rock art traditions, such as the Southern Tradition rock art from the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age.

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