

# Rock art in Northern Fennoscandia and Eurasia

– painted and engraved, geometric, abstract and anthropomorphic figures

Rock art is one of the oldest artistic expressions in the world, dating back about 35 000 years. The oldest pictures are the painted ones and can be considered as a universal “language” for all mankind, “readable” for almost everyone. The “language” differs in many aspects, but can also be possible to understand in different cultures over great geographical distances. In this article I will focus on the so called geometric, abstract and human figures found on rock-engravings and paintings in the northern part of Norway and Russia, and some figures from Finland. The same figures are also found outside this region, and the interpretation made here may also be relevant for other areas.

Within the interregional perspective the interpretation could also be regarded within the framework of agent-network theory where rock art could be seen as a part of a network where ideas and material culture inter relates over a larger geographical area (Damm 2007). The study area in focus includes sites from Forselv in Nordland in the west, Fishing peninsula on Kola, Russia in the east, Laffjord, Finnmark in the north to Vitträsk, Finland in the south (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Map showing the study area and the sites mentioned in this article. (map: ESRI & NORUT, Alta. Adaptation: Bernt Holst).



It is the iconographic interpretations which will have the main focus in this paper, with examples from both painted and engraved figures from different sites in the area. I will also discuss the dating of some of the sites in question.

### **Painted and engraved**

Painted and engraved rock art has been regarded as two different traditions, both cultural and chronological in Norwegian rock art research (Hesjedal 1990, Helsing 1999, Simonsen 2000), while Swedish and Finnish scholars state that the painted pictures can be from the same period of time as the engraved, or even older (Taskinen 1999, Kare 2000, Bertilsson 2004). The question addressed here is whether this picture is relevant for the Norwegian painted rock art as well.

In Norwegian rock art research a hypothesis about three categories of the rock art in Troms and Nordland has been put forward, these categories being, polished, engraved and painted rock art (Hesjedal 1990). In the discussion of these categories, Hesjedal has evaluated the painted rock art in caves which he regards as the youngest, not the pictures on the open cliff walls as are in question here.

### **Shamanism**

It is relatively common to associate rock art with shamanistic explanations and to regard rock art within a cosmological perspective (ex. Kare 2000, Helsing 1999, Devlet 2004, Bertilsson 2000, Hesjedal 1990, Stolyar 2000, Lewis-Williams 2003, Lahelma 2008).

Siberia and Central Asia have often been regarded as the homeland of shamanism (Pentikäinen et al. 1998, Devlet 2004, Berg 2005), but are also known among the Sami and other aboriginal populations in the Arctic and elsewhere, and observed and documented in historic times (Hultkrantz 1978, Pentikäinen et al. 1998, Lahelma 2008). In this article the ethnographic parallels from the eastern tradition in connection with in-

terpretation of the pictures in question will be evaluated. Scholars in religion history regard shamanism as quite old, impossible to date exactly (Eliade 1970), but suggest that it may be dated far back in time. Devlet characterize shamanistic traits in Siberian rock art as protoshamanistic (Devlet 2004:19).

Shamanism is regarded as a complicated belief system, based on trance connected to the shaman him/herself, given the authority to communicate with the other worlds. The animistic way of life is common among all Arctic people; the beliefs that all phenomena in nature had spirits and was a part of the real world (Vorren & Manker 1958, Eliade 1970, Siikala 1992) is fundamental in shamanism. The cosmos is regarded as divided in different worlds, varying in numbers between different cultures. Among the Sámi people as well as other groups, cosmos was divided in three, the upper, the middle and the under world (Vorren & Manker 1958). Communication and "out of the body" travels between these worlds was conducted by the shamans who had the ability to get in contact with the spirits on "the other side", often with help of guardian spirits.

The shamans are recognized by special material attributes as the drum, the coat with pendants and the headgear. The rich decorated coat and the other items marked the shamans' status among the Siberian and Central Asian people (Devlet 2004:19). Devlet points to the ethnographic sources of native people in Siberia and Central Asia as important to understand rock art in the same area and also for area outside Siberia.

Antti Lahelma (2008) has in his dissertation on Finnish rock art a thoroughly discussion and historical evaluation on the use of shamanistic interpretation in rock art research in Fennoscandia, and has in different papers demonstrated aspects concerning shamanism and rock art (Lahelma 2005, in press a, in press b, 2007).

Rock art figures associated with shamanism are often human figures with headgear, mask, X-ray styles humans, boats, birds and

The dating of the sites where the figures are located will also be examined and discussed.

### Geometrical figures

Geometrical figures are found in all the countries in question, and was first published by Gustav Hallström in 1952 (Hallström 1960, Kare 2000:100, Lahelma 2008). Antero Kare has also been engaged in the question of these figures and has published a number of articles of the issue (Kare 2000, 2002). In the following a selected number of sites from Norway, Finland and Russia with geometrical figures will be described and compared, the dating and interpretation will be discussed.

The most famous Finnish figure of this kind is one at Vitträsk (fig. 2) in the southern part of Finland, found by Jean Sibelius in 1911 (Taskinen 2006). The figure shows a frame with fringes and a geometrical pattern situated on a stiff cliff wall. Fragments of two more geometrical figures are found on the same wall.

Parallel to these figures are found at the World Heritage sites, in Alta where the same pattern appear, but with a reindeer associated to the engraved figure (fig. 3). The figure is situated at the Ole Pedersen panel in Hjemmeluft 18-20. m.a.s.l. Other geometric figures are found at the Bergheim panel in Hjemmeluft 23-25 m.o.s.l. (fig. 4) and at the Kåfjord site; a rhombic shaped figure with long fringes on one side (fig. 5).



Fig. 2. Geometrical figure from Vitträsk in Kyrkslätt, Finland. (Aquarelle Ritva Bäckman/Museiverket 1988)

so called geometrical or abstract figures. The figures are known at all rock art sites over a large geographical area with local variation in expression.

In this article I have made a selection of certain geometrical, abstract and human figures, painted and engraved from different sites in Fennoscandia and Russia to compare the similarities and the interpretation of them.

Fig. 3. Engraved geometrical figure with reindeer from Ole Pedersen, Hjemmeluft, Alta. The figure is painted by the Alta Museum. (Photo: Reidun L. Andreassen)



Fig. 4. Engraved geometrical figure from Bergheim, Hjemmeluft, Alta. (Photo: Knut Helskog).

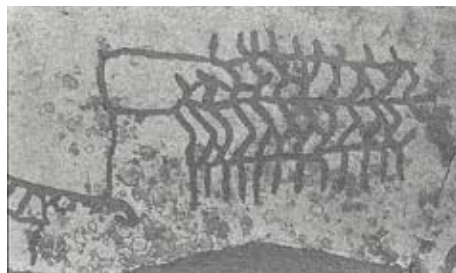




Fig. 5. Engraved geometrical figure from Kåfjord, Alta. (Photoscanning: Metimur, tracing: Karin Tansem).

Yet another parallel to these is the engraved figure from Forselv close to Narvik (fig. 6) with an elk associated with an en-



Fig. 6. Engraved geometrical figure with elk from Forselv, Narvik. (Photo: Hebbba Helberg).

graved geometric figure without fringes. It must also be mentioned that all together 12 abstract figures with rhombic and quadratic shapes, more or less equal to the one mentioned above (Helberg report) were found at Forselv.

#### Painted figures

During the last 10 years new rock paintings are found in Finnmark, Norway and Rybatcy, Russia close to the Norwegian border. Some of these are abstract figures of different kinds. One of the most spectacular was found during survey in Tranfarelvdalen, Alta in 2004, a site known of painted figures from the 1960. The figure (fig. 7) was situated high up (50 m.a.s.l.) on a stiff cliff wall, showing a labyrinthlike picture, quite different from the above mentioned (Nordstedt 2004, Andreassen 2008). A parallel to this is a painted slab (fig. 8) found in a grave in Nyelv in 1937 (Gjessing 1942; Simonsen 1958, 1961; Hallstøm 1960; Schanche 2004;

Fig. 7. Painted geometrical figure from Tranfarelvdalen, Alta. (Photo: Arve Kjersheim, colour strengthened in computer).



Fig. 8. Tracing of painted slab from Nyelv, Nesseby (Tracing: Povl Simonsen)

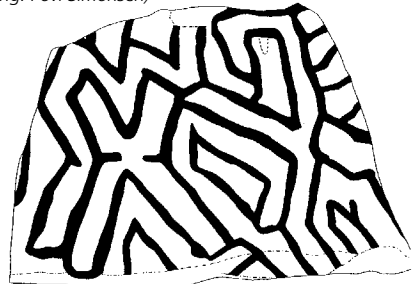




Fig. 9. Painted geometrical figure from Mayka cave, Fishing peninsula, Kola, Russia (Photo: Vadim Likachev)

Andreassen 2006b). Simonsen points out that the slab has its parallel both in rock art and on decorated bone items from the arctic area. He characterised the painting as a "carpet patterned" and urged that it was similar to the Vitträsk figure, an argument denied by Hallström (1960:365).

Another group of painted abstract patterns are found in 1984-85 at the rivers Pyaive and Mayka, Rybatcy/Fishing peninsula, Russia under a cliff roof (fig. 9) and was first published by Vladimir Shumkin in 1990 (Shumkin 1990, 2000, Alexandrov & al. 2007, Andreassen 2008). The figures can be characterised as geometrical, but differs from the abstract frames found at Vitträsk and Hjemmeluft. The figures consist of parallel lines painted with fingers according to Shumkin (ibid:224).

An equal pattern was found at Indre Sandvik II, Porsanger, Finnmark in 2001 (Schanche 2004, Helberg 2004, Andreassen 2008) (fig.10). All together 70-80 figures were found on 3 different panels at this site, consisting of anthropomorphic, animals and geometrical patterns. As the pictures show the figures from Indre Sandvik and Mayka are similar both in expression and site characteristics.

A parallel to both painted and engraved geometrical figures are found on ornamented boneartifacts from the Varanger area (fig. 11), like combs and other objects.

On this background I would propose that geometric patterns are grouped in three groups according to similarities and differences.

Group	Characteristics	Sites
1	Square and rhombic geometric pattern with and without fringes	Vitträsk, Hjemmeluft, Kåfjord, Forselv
2	Parallel lines	Indre Sandvik, Mayka
3	Labyrinth like patterns	Transfareldalen, Nyelv



Fig. 10. Painted geometrical figure from Indre Sandvik, Porsanger (Photo: Reidun L. Andreassen).



Fig. 11 a and b. Decorated bone artefacts from Gressbakken, Nesseby (Photo: Varanger Samiske Museum).



## Anthropomorphic figures

Anthropomorphic figures are also interesting in connection with shamanism and rock art. Several scholars have pointed to figures with headgear or horns as shamans (ex. Shumkin 2000, Kare 2000, Forsberg 2000). A recently found painted site in Norway, Lafjord in Finnmark, has an anthropomorphic and a zoomorphic as the most distinct figures (fig. 12). The site was found in 2006 (Skavhaug 2008), and is situated on an isthmus between two fjords. On top of the cliff, Mesolithic sites were found in 2008, and in the vicinity also house sites from younger Stone Age are observed. The anthropomorphic seems to have two sets of arms, possible holding an item, and the zoomorphic seems to be connected to the human figure. It could also seem like the human figure has horns or some kind of headgear, although this is difficult to interpret due to cracks in the cliff.

Another human figure from Indre Sandvik II, Porsanger, Finnmark should be mentioned in this connection. The figure is situated under an overhanging rock at the lowest part of the site close to the geometric figure. This figure has clear horns or some kind of headgear (fig. 13), and can be compared to similar painted figures from for instance Hossa in Finland (Kare 2000:107), Solsemhula (Nordstedt 2006), engraved figures from Kåfjord, Alta (Andreassen 2007, 2008), Amtmannsnes (Berg 2005), Vingen, Ausevik (Viste 2004) and Tanum, Sweden (Bertilsson 2004) to mention a few.

Fig. 12. Anthropomorphic with reindeer from Lafjord, Nordkapp (Photo: Reidun L. Andreassen, colour strengthened in computer).

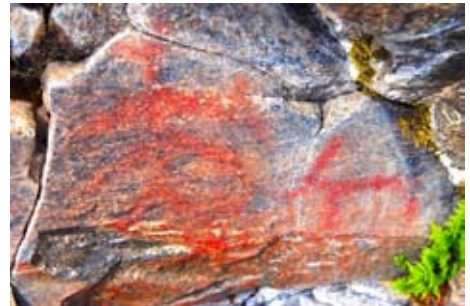




Fig. 13. Anthropomorphic figure from Indre Sandvik, Porsanger (Photo: Reidun L. Andreasen).

### Abstract figures

A last group of figures, is the cross and the lines which are found at all painted sites mentioned in this article. Cross figures are more rare, and is just found at the Transfarelvdalen site. High up in the mountain, close to the abstract figure (6) a small cave was found with an overhang ceiling. Hidden on the cave ceiling, a cross figure (fig. 14) was found, and on a small shelf in the deepest part of the cave, some wooden sticks was placed. Both the painting and the sticks seemed quite "fresh" as if it was placed there "yesterday", and was therefor at first rejected by both the Tromsø Museum and the Finnmark fylkeskommune as something old. The freshness can however be explained by the dry and dark environment for both the painting and the wooden sticks. The questions why the cross was made and who should climb high up in the mountain to paint a cross under a rock, remained however unanswered. I would therefore propose that the cross is regarded as a part of the other paintings in Transfarelvdalen and compare this cross with other crosses found at Astuvanslami (Lahelma 2005, 2008:58) and Saraakallio (Kivikäs 2001:147) in Finland which is regarded as part of a shaman's ritual. There is no good explanation to what the sticks represent; and whether they also should be interpreted into a prehistoric context, remains to be seen.

### The dating of painted rock art

The chronology of painted rock art has been an issue in Norway as well as in Finland, and several suggestions have been put forward. In Norway the opinion has been divided concerning the age of painted rock art. Some scholars argues that it is younger than engraved rock art (Helberg 1997, Helskog 1999, Schanche 2003), while others have the opinion that painted rock art in Norway can be of the same age as the Finnish and can be part of a long tradition, dating back to Mesolithic (Lødøen 2004, Nordstedt 2006, Andreassen 2008). This point of view is more in accordance with our Nordic and Russian colleagues (Taskinen 1998, Bertilsson 2004, Shumkin 2000, Lahelma 2008).

Fig. 14. Painted cross from Transfarelv, Alta (Photo: Hebba Helberg)



Most of the Scandinavian archaeologists working with rock art agree upon the fact that the sites are connected to water in a direct way (Simonsen 1979, 2000, Helskog 1989, 1999, 2000, Ramqvist 1989, Hesjedal 1990, Kare 2000, 2002, Sæthersdal 2002, Bradley et al 2002, Bertilsson 2000, 2004, Taskinen 2000, 2006, Lahelma 2008). Helskog (1999) points to the fact that rock art is made in the beach zone intentionally and that this zone is the transmission zone between the three different cosmological worlds, the upper, middle and underworld, represented by the sky, the seashore and the sea. This zone is regarded as special powerful where communication with the spirits was taking place.

With this as a fundament, both Norwegian and Finnish rock art is dated based on shore displacement chronology (Møller 1987, 1989). Finnish scholars assume that the Finnish rock paintings are made either from a boat or by standing on the ice in winter time, and calculation of where to stand on different heights have been made (Kare 2000, Bertilsson 2004). In Alta, Norway Knut Helskog has

used the same method to work out a relative chronology for the rock engravings in Alta (1989, 2000) and has proposed a time span from 4200 BC to AD 200. An important point is that Helskog regards the painted rock art in Alta as the youngest (1999). Hesjedal has used the same method to propose a chronology for the large naturalistic engraved figures in Nordland (1994).

It is however necessary to emphasize that the relative method of dating shore lines is uncertain all the time the materials for dating are driftwood, shell and other marines deposits which can give margins of error (Corner et al. 1999) and therefore the datings are approximate. Møller and Holmslett (1997) have developed a shore-displacement diagram for Northern Norway and Kola. The BP dates are extrapolated from this diagram also available on [www.imv.uit.no/english/science/sealevel/index.htm](http://www.imv.uit.no/english/science/sealevel/index.htm)

If we however assume that both painted and engraved rock art have the same water connection and apply the same method on

Table 1. Dating of painted and engraved rock art sites based on shore line displacement

Locality	Isobase	Masl	BP (Møller 1997)	Calibrated age BC (Ox. Cal) <sup>1</sup>
Pyaiveye, Fiskerhalvøya	20	26 m	8200	7300 – 7140
Maika, Fiskerhalvøya	20	23 m	8000	7050 – 6840
Indre Sandvik I, Porsanger	23	40 m	8600	7600 – 7590
Indre Sandvik II, Porsanger	23	20 m	5300	4230 – 4050
Transfarelv 1 og 4, Alta	27	18 m	4400	3090 – 2940
Transfarelv 2 og 3, Alta	27	50 m	8600	7600 – 7590
Lafjord, Nordkapp	10	15 m	6000	4910 – 4845
Forselv, Narvik	34	33 m	5900	4800 – 4600

Based on this table the sites can be sorted in two different phases as follows:

Table 2. Phase proposal for painted rock art in Fennoscandia and Euraisa

Phase	Calibrated age BC	Sites
I	7600 – 6800	Pyaiveye, Maika, Indre Sandvik I, Transfarelv 2 and 3
II	4900 – 2900	Indre Sandvik II, Transfarelv 1 and 4, Lafjord and Forselv

the painted and engraved sites mentioned in this article, the following table (table 1) can be put up with maximum dates.

I would emphasize that the intention is not to give an exact dating of Norwegian and Russian rock paintings, but to see whether there are some correlation in the dating of different sites over a large geographic area, which the two phases demonstrates (table 2).

The oldest group shows correlation of the painted sites at Fishing Peninsula, the highest site in Indre Sandvik and Transfarelvdalen 2 and 3.

The youngest group correlates to phase I in Hjemmeluft according to Helskog (2000:8) and consists of both painted and engraved figures.

This shows that the painted figures in Finnmark and Russia might be older than assumed and the oldest in Fennoscandia/Eurasia.

### Discussion

How are these figures to be understood? I have so far pointed to shamanism as an explaining factor, and will in the following explore this further by comparing the rock art with ethnographic data from Russia.

#### Group 1

Antero Kare (2000) suggests that geometric figures from group 1 are traps for the soul

of the animals, although there is no animal associated to the figure at Vitträsk.

Lahelma (2008: 59) suggests that the net-like figures from group 1 can be interpreted as sacrificial platforms and find support for this suggestion in the similarities with figures at Sámi drums. This idea was first launched by Luho in 1971 (Ibid: 59).

Another interpretation could be that these figures represent the coat of the shamans during the trance with the helping spirit, which in this case is a reindeer and an elk (Devlet 2004, Andreassen 2008) or a shaman gone to the "other side", taking the shape of a reindeer or an elk.

As mentioned above the shaman's equipment known from ethnographic data might be the iconographic fundament in some of the figures. Russian archaeologists point to the fact that anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures with "skeleton" patterns might be associated with shamans (fig. 15). This assumption has its ethnographic parallels among the Yakutes in the eastern part of Siberia. Develet emphasizes the coat of the shaman and points to the similarities between ethnographic data and rock art form Kalbak-Tash in the Altay Mountains (fig. 16) (2004:20). The same similarities can be observed from the data in the historic ethnographic material in Finnish museums (Pantikäinen et. al. 1998). An interesting observation made by Finnish ethnographers is that the attributes of the shamans also

Fig. 15. Anthropomorphic figures from lower Angara, Manzia (after Okladnikov 1966)



Fig. 16. Anthropomorphic figures, shamans with coats from Altay region (after Kubarev 1988, Kubarev and Jackson 1996).



represent the three divided cosmos, where the headgear represent the upper world, the coat the middle worlds and the footgear the underworld (ibid: 109) and where they also point to the complex symbolic images reflected in the shaman's coat.

Sikke Viste (2004) regards the geometrical figures from Vingen and Ausevik on the Norwegian west coast in a similar way where the geometrical figure is a manifestation of the appearance of the shaman.

### *Group 2*

The figures from group 2 are different from the figures in group 1 and it is difficult to see the same iconographic association as for the figures in group 1. The difference is expressed in the lack of frame and fringes around the figure, but it must be added that the pattern itself has some kind of similarity.

Another group of artefact it could be interesting to compare this patterns with, is the ornamented bone artefacts found on the south side of Varangerfjord (Simonsen 1961) especially the so called combs (fig.11a ) or a pendant (fig. 11b ), where the patterns can be compared to the patterns on the rock art. The combs with water birds on top can give some associations to bird figures in Siberian mythology where water birds signify the creation of earth and are also regarded as the shaman's helping spirits (Pentikäinen et al. 1998:107). Within this line of interpretation it would be possible to interpret the bone artefact as something belonging to the shaman either as a part of the headgear or something hanging on his cloak.

Another possible interpretation could be that these are signatures or some kind of coat-of-arms for a group of people.

### *Group 3*

The question is whether the figures in group 3 can be interpreted as the shaman's carpet as Simonsen suggested or if they could be understood as something else?

To answer this question I will draw the attention to the painted rock found in 1937

in a cairn at the younger Stone Age site Nyelv in the eastern part of Finnmark (fig. 5). In my opinion this figure could be understood as part of the death ritual, a rite de passage from one condition to another where the dead has to pass through complicated labyrinths to find his way to the other side, and will not be able to find the way back to the living (Andreassen 2008). This explains the painting in the Nyelv cairn. Red ochre as we assume the pictures are painted with, is frequently associated with death rituals and found in graves in Oleni Ostrov, Russia (Stolyar 2000) and Pispä, Finland (Edgren 1998). The Nyelv painting is compared with the figure from Transfarelvdalen, which is suggested to be the oldest of all figures in question, about 7500 BC. A closer look at this figure will reveal that it is painted on the wall close to a large vertical crack and with two horizontal cracks running through the figure, a trait observed also at Finnish rock paintings (Korsman 2000: 36-37) and can be explained as entrances to the other side – inside the rock so to speak, an interpretation which enforce the notion of the rock as a membrane between the worlds (Lahelma in press b: 155).

### **Conclusion**

It seems likely that painted and engraved rock art with the same motifs have existed side by side and can be regarded as part of the same shamanistic tradition. It is also demonstrated, by applying the same dating method as for engraved rock art, that the painted figures might be older than earlier assumed, and among the oldest in Norway.

Rock art is a universal language found all over the world. Interpretation and understanding of rock art over large geographical areas can lead to other perspectives and associations than interpretations in more local settings, although the one does not exclude the other. Rock art is created in a society where also other objects could have a meaning connected to the same symbolic and sacred sphere, as for instance bone artefacts. The interpretation suggested here is inspired by ethnographic parallels from Sibe-

ria and might also demonstrate the long life of the shamanistic tradition. Similarities over a larger geographical area can be explained by network agent theory, where the same expression can be found far away from each other and might demonstrate cross-cultural contacts and interaction between groups over a large geographical area.

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### Dataprograms

1998: Relative sealevel Changes in Fennoscandia. Sealevel software. Version 3.51  
<http://www.imv.uit.no/english/science/sealevel/index.htm>

OxCal radiocarbon calibration software. Version 3.10

<http://c14.arch.ox.ac.uk/oxcal/OxCalPlot.html>

### Note:

<sup>1</sup> All <sup>14</sup>C- dates were calibrated using the OxCal. computer program with one sigma or 68,2% probability.

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