

Things and Patterns – from Pyramiden to Patagonia

Festschrift in honor of Professor
Hein Bjartmann Bjerck

Birgitte Skar, Heidi Breivik og Martin Callanan (red.)



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Mesolithic Portable Animal Figurines in Coastal Western Norway

Knut Andreas Bergsvik, David Simpson, Hanne Årskog

ABSTRACT

Altogether six portable Mesolithic zoomorphic figurines are known from Western Norway. They are 3 to 5 cm long, naturalistically shaped in soapstone, and turned up during the excavations of residential sites on the outer coast. The occupation layers in which they were found have been dated to between 5,300 and 4,000 cal BC. The figurines all represent marine species: five of them sea birds, and the sixth probably a porpoise. This paper presents the figurines themselves, the sites, and the dates. They are thereafter discussed in an interregional context, focusing on the importance of these animals as prey, based on osteological material, and as images at rock art sites. We argue that while sea birds and whales do not seem to have been procured to any extent and are rarely represented in the rock art of Mesolithic Western Norway, these animals may still have been important for humans in their daily lives as mobile hunter-fishers.

Introduction

Portable animal figurines were sometimes made by pre-historic hunter-fisher-gatherer populations in Northern Europe and are occasionally discovered as stray finds or during excavations. They represent water birds, bears or snakes and several different raw materials were employed, such as ivory, bone, stone, wood and even amber. Such artifacts are rarely found in Norway, and since the 1960s only six figurines have been retrieved during excavations of Mesolithic settlements along the west coast (Fig. 1). Five of the figurines represent marine birds and the sixth is a whale. All were made of soapstone.

Since such figurines are rare, there is a need for basic evaluations of their chronological statuses and to establish a frame of reference for their interpretation. The first goal of this article is thus to present the figurines, their form and their condition, and to describe the circumstances under which they were found. Based on a discussion of the find contexts and the C14 dates, we will attempt to establish a chronological framework for this artifact type. The second goal is to discuss the regional and interregional context of the figurines, by

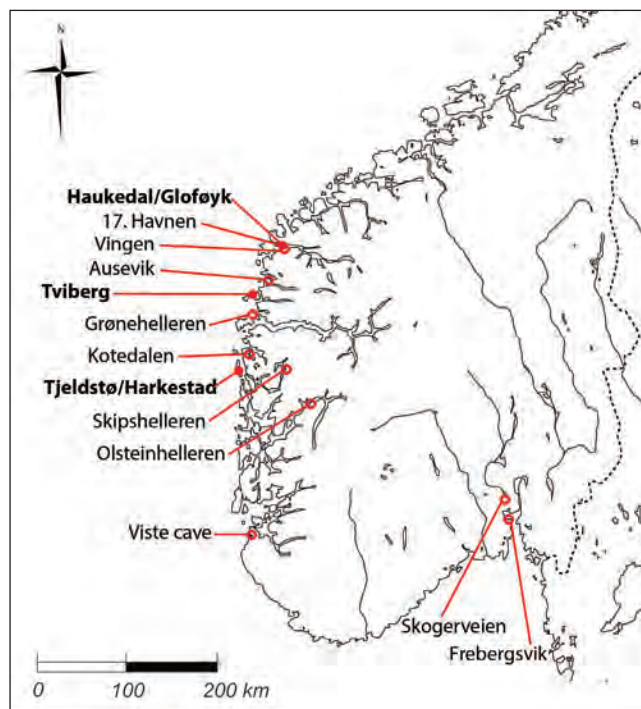


Figure 1. Southern Norway. The find-spots of the soapstone figurines and other sites discussed in the text. Map: David Simpson

comparing the importance of waterbirds and whales as prey in the different regions and how prominent these animals were in contemporary rock art. The final goal is to explore what roles the carved animal figurines may have played and how they were perceived during the Mesolithic.

The animal figurines

All six figurines are relatively small, and about the same size, varying in length between 3 and 5 cm. (Figs. 2-7). All appear to have been shaped by lithic tools (cut, scraped or ground), although it is difficult to be sure about the specific tools used for this purpose because of the patinated surfaces they all have. In the case of some of the figurines, thin furrows have been made, most likely using a flake or blade struck from a fine-grained lithic raw material, such as flint or quartz crystal. The shapes indicate different naturalistic animal forms. Zoological evaluations of the bird figurines conclude that they are certainly waterbirds, having an appearance resembling the Anatidae family (ducks and geese), but with so few recognizable features that they also could represent other families such as the Alcidæ (auks) – possibly the great auk. The surfaces of all the figurines are smooth, which indicates that they have been kept in a pocket, on a necklace/thread or fastened to a piece of clothing.

The *Haukedal bird* (Fig. 2) is a complete specimen. The head is rounded and stretches forward, slightly sideways to the left. A tail is clearly marked, but there are no markings for feet or wings. The body section is made thinner or narrower than a proportionately realistic form. There are some markings/incisions across on the back, and on the left side, with the last one probably being a scar from the production itself. Considering the form and size of the body compared to the head, and the characteristic tail, it probably represents a waterbird, and possibly a duck.

The unique *Gloføyk bird* (Fig. 3) is cross-shaped and has several cuts and furrows. It has several criss-crossing shallow incisions on the entire “body”. There is a deep furrow lengthwise on one broadside and a furrow only around the “head” on the other broadside. At the end of one “wing,” and at the “head” and “tail,” there are cross-cut furrows. The end of the left “wing”—most likely the part which originally had cross-cut furrows—has broken off. However, this breakage did not result in it being immediately deposited or thrown away, since this part has traces of smoothing afterwards. It is not clear what function the deep furrows and crosses

had. One possibility is that they were cut for attaching or winding up a fishing line—and that this was the main function of the artifact itself. Nevertheless, the zoomorphic shape of the object indicates that it represents a bird in flight.

The *Tviberg bird* (Fig. 4) is not complete, as the head was broken off, probably in prehistoric times. The transition between the neck and the body is clearly marked and cut. The thick rounded body has a ridge on the back, and narrows gradually down towards the tail, which is also marked. Two small feet are spread out at the back, underneath the body. This figurine strongly resembles a waterbird, possibly a duck.

The *Harkestad bird 1* (Fig. 5) is complete. It has some similarities to the *Haukedal bird* in the shape of the head and the body, but the neck is somewhat longer, and the body is proportionately thicker. It has a tail, and it has carved out feet at the back, underneath the body. Because of the long neck and round body, it is likely that this figurine represents a waterbird, possibly a goose.

The *Harkestad bird 2* (Fig. 6) is complete, but only the outline of the bird has been ground, clearly shaping the head and back with sharp cuts. The head is small with a short beak, while the back is long and flat, ending in what could be a tail. The lower part of the body is also ground with clear cuts, but the overall shape is rounded like the other soapstone birds. The figurine probably represents a bird resting in water and shares some characteristics with the Little Auk (*Alle alle*).

The *Tjeldstø whale* (Fig. 5) is a complete specimen. It was carefully rendered naturalistically with a marked nose, a drilled hole for the mouth, a dorsal fin, two flippers, a belly and a tail (which lacks tail fins). A thin furrow is carved around the thickest part of the belly, just in front of the dorsal fin. The figurine seems to represent a harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) in view of the small size of the dorsal fin.

Sites and dates

All the figurines were found during excavation of the central areas of settlement sites or in middens. None of them were associated with features such as depressions or graves. However, the fact that they were complete or almost complete may indicate that they were intentionally deposited or possibly lost.

Portable soapstone animal figurines such as these occur rarely in Western Norway. In quantitative terms, 763 Middle/Late Mesolithic sites are known in Vestland county, and around 25% of these have



Figure 2. The Haukedal bird (B14588/1882). Photo: Svein Skare, Bergen University Museum



Figure 3. The Gloføyk bird (B14738/335). Photo: Svein Skare, Bergen University Museum



Figure 4. The Tviberg bird (B13129). Photo: Svein Skare, Bergen University Museum

been excavated (Bergsvik et al. 2023). No other animal figurines have been found in this region, which means that they are present at around 3% of the sites



Figure 5. The Harkestad bird 1 (B16900/4793). Photo: Svein Skare, Bergen University Museum



Figure 6. The Harkestad bird 2 (B16900/4709). Photo: Adnan Içagic, Bergen University Museum



Figure 7. The Tjeldstø whale (B16898/1291). Photo: Svein Skare, Bergen University Museum

excavated. As a result of this relative scarcity, a reliable typological framework has not yet been established. However, since the six figurines all stem from relatively well-dated contexts, we will here attempt to narrow down the dates for this artifact category. This is based on indirect C14 dates from charcoal taken out from the cultural deposits close to where the figurines were found, and/or from period-specific artifacts/raw materials found in the same contexts as the figurines. In the following, we will describe these contexts and dates in some detail. The relevant C14 dates from the sites are listed in Table I.

Table I. Relevant radiocarbon dates from residential sites

Site	Context	Lab-ref	14C Date	Cal BC*
1 Haukedal	23x20y SW. Layer H6.	Beta-82834	5430 +/- 60 BP	4440 - 4054 cal BC
	19x21y SW. Layer H2.	Beta-82833	5220 +/- 70 BP	4247 - 3810 cal BC
	18x27y NE. Layer I4.	Beta-83491	6090 +/- 80 BP	5216 - 4797 cal BC
27 Gloføyk	49x92y SE. Layer B3.	Beta-88508	5340 +/- 70 BP	4334 - 3995 cal BC
Tjeldstø 5	518x452y. Layer 004.	Beta-331237	6120 +/- 40 BP	5209 - 4944 cal BC
Harkestad 1	188x265y NW. Layer C1.	Beta-338819	6120 +/- 30 BP	5209 - 4947 cal BC

* OxCal v4.4.4 Bronk Ramsey (2021); r5, Atmospheric data from Reimder et al (2020)

It should be noted that two more soapstone animal figurines are known from Western Norway, both from the county of Rogaland: a seal figurine from Nord-Sunde, Stavanger, and a bird figurine from Høyland, Sandnes (Gjessing 1945:276). However, they are not included in this analysis as they are stray finds and thus lack reliable contextual information. A later date than the Mesolithic cannot be excluded, as soapstone was used to make figurines in later parts of the Norwegian prehistory and early history (e.g., Kristoffersen 1993:193).

The Haukedal and Gloføyk birds were found in 1996 during excavations at the sites Haukedal 1 and Gloføyk 27 at Rugsundøy, Skatestraumen, Nordfjord. The Stone Age occupations of both these sites are from both the Late Mesolithic and Neolithic, and all occupational phases are represented by cultural deposits indicating relatively long-term occupation. The Haukedal bird was found in the Mesolithic bottom layer H, in close contact to the early Neolithic layers at the site. Although a Neolithic date cannot be excluded for this figurine, the context of the find makes it more likely to be connected to the Mesolithic occupations, which have C14 dates spanning c. 5,100-4,000 cal BC (Bergsvik 2002:111). The Gloføyk bird was found in layer C at the site. The composition of artifacts and raw materials found in this layer indicates a date towards the latter part of the Late Mesolithic, which is confirmed by C14 dating to 4,250-4,055 cal BC (Bergsvik 2002:243).

The Tviberg bird was found in a test pit in the rock shelter Trevollhamaren/Fuglehelleren on the island of Tviberg in Askvoll, Sunnfjord in 1967 (Inselset 2007). No C14 dates are available, but the figurine was found together with several Mesolithic artifacts, which are broadly dated to the Mesolithic (6,500-4,000 cal BC). There is a soapstone quarry in the rock shelter, but the quarry is most likely from the early historic or modern period.

The Tjeldstø whale and the Harkestad birds were found during excavations at Tjeldstø, in Øygarden municipality in 2012 (Årskog et al. in prep.). C14 dates and finds imply that both sites were used in the Late Mesolithic and Neolithic. The Harkestad 1 site had thick cultural deposits while Tjeldstø 5 was non-stratified. The Harkestad birds were found just one meter apart, in layer C1, dated to 5,210-4,960 cal BC. Altogether 88 soapstone line sinkers were found at the site. Of these, 13 had markings or ornamentation. The Tjeldstø site was a bit more difficult to date, and unfortunately the C14 dates from charcoal collected from the beach sediments surrounding the Tjeldstø whale were inconclusive, as they reflected both the Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age activity that had taken place there. Even so, the whale was found next to a couple of soapstone sinkers and conical cores of Late Mesolithic origin, and the C14 date of Late Mesolithic origin is identical to one of the C14 dates of layer C1 in Harkestad site 1, at 5,210-4,940 cal BC.

Since the artifact material found together with the figurines indicates a Late Mesolithic date, and the relevant radiocarbon dates fall within the middle and late part of the Late Mesolithic, it is suggested here that the animal figurines be given a relatively broad date range of between 5,500 and 4,000 cal BC (Bjerck's chronozones LM 3-5: Bjerck 2008).

This date range is supported by the fact that soapstone was a frequently used raw material for line sinkers during the same period. The sinkers are dated to 6,000-4,000 cal BC and are also spatially distributed in the same geographical area as the animal figurines. Many of the sinkers are made in a fashion that resembles the crafting of the figurines, in terms of the smoothing of surfaces and making of furrows. An additional aesthetic element is that a small percentage (2-4%) of the sinkers are decorated with notches and grid-shaped surface incisions, as well as sometimes more complex patterns (Bergsvik 2017, Åstveit 2018).

The regional significance of birds and whales

Having established the dates, we will now move on to the regional contemporary context of the animal figurines, by exploring the provenance of the raw material (soapstone) and the significance of birds and whales to the Mesolithic populations in Western Norway.

Since soapstone was a commonly used raw material during the Late Mesolithic, one possibility is that a few specific sources were known and exploited by the Mesolithic inhabitants of Western Norway, and that there was a distribution network for this raw material, as was the case for greenstone and diabase for adzes (Olsen and Alsaker 1984). However, no soapstone quarries dated to the Mesolithic have yet been located. In addition, the geochemical analyses of soapstone that have been conducted on materials from later periods have shown that in these later periods many outcrops were utilized (Hansen et al. 2017). Given there are numerous outcrops of this raw material in close vicinity to all the find spots of the animal figurines, pending geological analyses of the Mesolithic soapstone figurines we hypothesize that locally available soapstone outcrops were utilized to produce the Mesolithic animal figurines and sinkers.

According to the distribution map (Fig. 1), all the animal figurines are found on the outermost islands along the coast, and this is also often the case for the soapstone line sinkers. Furthermore, the residential sites are mainly situated on coastal islands and channels, closely connected to the contemporary shorelines. In this marine environment, boats would have been indispensable (Bjerck 2008, Bergsvik and Ritchie 2020, Lundström 2023).

Considering that the Late Mesolithic populations had such a marked marine orientation, it is necessary to explore the importance of marine birds and animals to the economy, as food and as sources for clothes and tools. To do this, we will discuss osteological assemblages at excavated sites. Only a few Mesolithic sites on the west coast of Norway have bone material preserved, and of these, only a handful have assemblages contemporary with the animal figurines (5,500–4,000 cal BC). These sites are the open-air site Havnen 17 phases 2a and 2c (Senneset and Hufthammer 2002), the rock shelter Grønehelleren phase 1 (Olsen in Jansen 1972), and the rock shelter Olsteinhelleren (Bergsvik et al. 2016). The rock shelter Skipshelleren phases 6 and 7 (Olsen 1976:44) would also be relevant here, but the bird bones collected at this site have not yet been correlated to specific phases. Table II presents a list of

the identified bird species at the three relevant sites. Considering the differences in preservation and sampling, and the low number of sites, these data should be treated with caution. The three sites probably also had different functions in the settlement system. While the coastal sites Havnen 17 and Grønehelleren are interpreted as being base camps (Jansen 1972, Bergsvik 2002), the fjord site Olsteinhelleren was used during briefer occupations, most likely as a field camp (Bergsvik et al. 2016). One would expect the bone assemblages to vary according to these locational and functional differences.

Table II shows that relatively few bones have been identified, and they are from just a few bird species. The species determinations based on the bones show a good match between the types of birds represented by the animal figurines and the ones they hunted. Interestingly, the bird bone assemblage from the fjord site Olsteinhelleren includes mainly terrestrial birds, whereas the coastal sites Havnen 17 and Grønehelleren only contain bones from marine species. This makes sense, considering the types of birds that would be available in fjord/forest environments compared to on the coast.

In view of these small numbers at different site types, we may ask how important fowling was for the Mesolithic people. When comparing the NISP (number of identified specimens) for bird bones to those for fish and mammals at the sites, fish—particularly gadids—greatly dominate, and cervids have a reasonable share. Bird bones, on the other hand, make up only c. 0.5% at Havnen 17, 0.03% at Olsteinhelleren and 5% at Grønehelleren. Since the excavated soils from Grønehelleren were not sieved, there is a general lack of fish bones, which contributes to a higher percentage of bird bones at this site than at the other two sites.

Concerning whale bones, these are even rarer. To our knowledge, only two bones from a white-sided dolphin have been retrieved from the Late Mesolithic phase 6/7 at Skipshelleren (Olsen 1976:44). As indicated above, there may be many reasons for these low percentages of bones, such as limited local availability of birds and whales, taphonomic loss, and differences in collection methods. We also cannot disregard the possibility of taboos, restrictions or rules concerning their deposition (e.g., Mannermaa 2008a, Mansrud 2016). Nevertheless, based on the information available, it is probably fair to say that although birds and whales were procured, they were not particularly important during the period 5,500–4,000 cal BC. This is supported by the fact that two sites with bone assemblages from the

earlier part of the Mesolithic—Kotedalen and Sævarhelleren (the latter close to Olsteinhelleren)—also generally lack both bird and whale bones (Hufthammer 1992:62, Bergsvik et al. 2016). On the other hand, bones from various marine and terrestrial bird species

were identified in the earlier Mesolithic Viste cave in Rogaland. At Viste, bone fragments of a porpoise (*Phocaena communis*) were also found (Brøgger 1908:13, Degerbøl in Lund 1951).

Table II.

Sites	Alcidae (Auks)	<i>Alca torda</i> (Razorbill)	<i>Alca impennis</i> (Great auk)	<i>Uria aalge</i> (Common guillemot)	<i>Cephus grylle</i> (Black guillemot)	<i>Fratercula arctica</i> (Puffin)	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i> (Shag)	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> (Cormorant)	<i>Larus argentatus</i> (Herring gull)	<i>Somateria mollissima</i> (Eider duck)	<i>Cygnus</i> (Swan)	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i> (Sea eagle)	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i> (Black grouse)	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i> (Capercaillie)	<i>Turdus</i> sp. (Thrush species)	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i> (Eurasian jay)	<i>Lagenorhynchus acutus</i> (White-sided dolphin)
Havnen 17 phase 2a and 2c (5400-4850 cal BC)*S	2			2	1												
Grønehelleren phase I (6000-4000 cal BC)**NS		1	5	3		1	4	3	1	1	1	1					
Olsteinhelleren (5600-4800 cal BC)**S		1											1	2	2	1	
Skipshelleren phase 6/7 (5300-4000 cal BC)**NS																	2

* Burned assemblages

** Unburned assemblages

S Sieved 2mm mesh

NS Not sieved

One may argue that even if birds and whales are not well represented in the Late Mesolithic site middens, they may still have been socially or ideologically important as animals people related to and communicated with. If this were the case, we would expect them to be present in rock art, where animals generally play prominent roles. In Western Norway, there are two large rock art sites—Vingen and Ausevik—which are situated in coastal environments close to where the Haukedal, Gloføyk and Tviberg birds were found. These two sites are dated to the Late Mesolithic, c. 5,000-4,200 cal BC, in other words contemporary with the portable animal figurines (Lødøen 2014, Hjelle and Lødøen 2017). Vingen has around 2,500 figures, and Ausevik around 400 figures. The question is to what extent, and in what ways, birds and whales are present in the motifs at those two sites. The answer is that they are hardly present at all. At Vingen, red deer figures

greatly dominate, together with some abstract motifs and humans. There are two possible bird figures (at Vehammaren 1 and Brattebakken), and two possible whale figures (at Vingeneset 12 and Bak Vehammeren 7) (Bøe 1932:Tafel 5, Lødøen and Mandt 2012:174, 202, 317, 424). All of them seem to operate alone on the panels. Similarly, at Ausevik red deer dominate together with abstract motifs. There is one certain bird figure, along with two additional possible bird representations (Loc. II), all of which are integrated in the panel with red deer, a human being and other complex figures. No whale figures have been identified at this site (Hagen 1969:13, Walderhaug 1994).

There is no doubt that marine resources—particularly fish—were a major nutrient source for coastal populations during this period. However, not a single fish has been identified at Ausevik and Vingen. This means that the rock art panels clearly do not present

us with an overview of Late Mesolithic diets. Still, while fish bones are extremely well represented in the site middens, we have seen that birds and whales are almost absent there too. Taken together, this indicates that water birds and whales played relatively modest roles in economic life, and probably also as motifs depicting other relations to animals during the Late Mesolithic in Western Norway.

Birds and whales in neighboring regions

The Mesolithic contact networks stretched beyond Western Norway eastwards and northwards along the coast (Bjerck 2008), and it is therefore relevant to investigate the significance of birds and whales in those neighboring domains. In the case of Eastern Norway, no rock shelters have been dated to this period, and preservation conditions for bone are unfavorable at most open-air sites. One exception is the coastal site Frebergsvik in Vestfold, which has been dated to c. 4,900–4,000 cal BC (Mikkelsen 1975), where marine mammals—particularly whales—dominate, with the porpoise (*Phocaena phocaena*) and white-beaked dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus albirostrus*) as the ones identified to species. Several marine birds were also utilized at the site, such as the great auk (*Alca impennis*), auk (*Alca torda*) and common murre (*Uria alge*). Very few terrestrial mammals or fish were identified. This result should not be taken as representative of the overall economy, as Frebergsvik may have been a special purpose site for hunting marine birds and whales. However, based on a recent review of the faunal data in Mesolithic Eastern Norway, it is generally argued that marine species played an important part in the economy of the coastal populations in this period (Glørstad 2010:82). The argument that marine species were important is supported by Mesolithic rock art. Just 30 km to the north of Frebergsvik lies the site Skogerveien (dated to 6,400–4,700 cal BC). Here, two large and carefully carved whale figures were prominently placed on each of the panels A and B. Interestingly, they have both been identified as white-beaked dolphins. In panel B there is also a marine bird figure, and there are several fish figures as well (Mikkelsen 1975:137, Mikkelsen 1977, Engelstad 1934:Pl. XLVII). It is important to note, however, that most of the figures in the coastal Skogerveien panel represent elks (*Alces alces*), and that carvings of elks totally dominate the interior rock art panels in this region (Mikkelsen 1977). This emphasis on locally available species shows that there may have been some

variation in the importance of animals depending on which landscapes people used and occupied.

In Central Norway, no excavated Mesolithic sites have environmental conditions that have allowed bone to be preserved. It is therefore not possible to evaluate the economic importance of birds and whales in this region. In contrast to Western Norway, however, these animals occur frequently at Mesolithic and Neolithic rock art sites along the coast of Romsdal and Nordmøre, and particularly by Trondheimfjorden. The bird figures—all of which probably represent water birds—occur as several different “Gestalts” (intuitive types), which are shoreline dated to around 4,000 cal BC (Stebergløkken 2016:187), thus overlapping slightly with the lower dating range of the portable soapstone birds. The rock art whale figures are distributed across the same area as the birds. The dates of some of their “Gestalts” span the Neolithic and latter part of the Late Mesolithic periods, but the majority belong to the Neolithic period (Stebergløkken 2016:197), which prompts reservations about making comparisons between the regions. We also emphasize that fish figures and boats frequently occur in Central Norwegian rock art, even if cervids also here make up the greatest shares (Stebergløkken 2016:161).

Bearing in mind the extensive coastal networks during the Late Mesolithic, and since water birds and whales were more common in rock art in Central Norway, there is naturally a possibility that the animal figurines were made there and distributed to Western Norway through those networks. However, two factors speak against this option. First, no figurines of this type have yet been found in Central Norway, which you would expect if this was the source area. Second, soapstone was not a commonly used raw material for sinkers or any other artifacts during the Mesolithic in Central Norway, even if there are many outcrops that have been utilized in later periods. The same arguments apply to Eastern Norway as a source area. The soapstone animal figurines are therefore likely to have been produced in Western Norway.

This interregional comparison thus shows that there were marked differences between Western Norway and the other two regions, which agrees with conclusions based on other types of data (Bjerck 2008:102). While marine birds and animals played modest roles amongst the western populations, in coastal Eastern Norway, dolphins, fish and water birds were specifically targeted—at least at some sites—and the rock art also shows a greater preoccupation with these species. In Central Norway, Late Mesolithic/Early Neolithic people were also ori-

ented towards marine domains in their rock art, with water birds and whales being common, and carvings of fish and boats also frequently appearing.

The significance of the portable animal figurines

It is paradoxical that people in Western Norway mostly turned to large ungulates to express their relationships with animals when they were so strongly connected to the sea and fishing in their daily life. Why would this be? Why did birds and large marine mammals not play this role? An explanation may be that the Mesolithic populations in this region—together with those in central, eastern, and northern Norway—shared a cosmology or an overarching “tradition” in which large terrestrial mammals, particularly elk and red deer, were the most important beings for the creation and order of the world. Other beings or animals were present to varying degrees, perhaps depending on their economic importance and regional significance, but it was the large cervids that played the main parts (Glørstad 2010, Damm 2024:107).

In this respect shamanism could have been important. It is argued that shamanism was deeply rooted in circumpolar mindsets extending back to the early Stone Age in Scandinavia (Lahelma 2007), and this probably also included Western Norway, as indicated by some of the figures at Vingen (a motif that is also present at Ausevik), where “shaman” humans ride on red deer on their way to other worlds (Gjerde 2002:129; see Lødøen and Mandt 2012:316, Hagen 1969:34). However, while red deer, elk or reindeer could act in this way, ethnohistorical accounts from northern Eurasian peoples indicate that water birds such as ducks and swans could also fill the role of spirit helpers. An important element of shamanism in many circumpolar cultures is the movement between different realms of the tripartite universe: Shamans can travel to the upper and lower worlds, and according to these accounts they do so with the help—or in the shape—of water birds, mainly because of their ability to move by flying, walking and diving (Zvelebil and Jordan 1999:109, Herva and Lahelma 2020:143). Based on the presence of wing elements, modified bird bones and bird figurines in funerals, this is also argued to have been the case amongst Neolithic hunter-fisher-gatherer groups on Gotland and in the eastern Baltic (Mannermaa 2008b). It is possible that these characteristics of water birds—and possibly also whales—were important in Western Norway even if the meanings and relations

were not clearly played out in the open, stationary, and “public” spheres of rock art. The soapstone figurines may, for example, instead have been the belongings of the shamans themselves and been used as helpers or paraphernalia during inter-world travels. Nevertheless, while a connection to shamans and shamanism is a possible interpretation, several experts argue that a too strong focus on these aspects leads to a neglect of important daily rituals (Jordan 2001:91, Hill 2011, MacRae 2013, Fuglestad 2018:222). In our case, it is possible that the figurines instead operated as personal effigies: items and actors which were connected to the activities of the everyday, mobile hunter-fisher life, outside the influence or involvement of the shamans.

Several authors have suggested the character of such relationships meant that some animals were considered ontological “other-than-human persons.” They had an ability to act and behave in ways that were like those of humans, in the sense that they had agency and intentionality (Hill 2011). However, they were “dressed” differently from humans, and it was perhaps that very difference which triggered specific human-animal relationships. These relationships may have been manifold and the contexts in which they operated pluriform. Ian MacRae suggests a handful of such contexts for the Dorset zoomorphic carvings: “children playing in a snowhouse, going to sleep or waiting out a storm, using the animals to enact their games, a young girl watching her mother sew or cook, playing with a little owl; a boy (or girl) using the carvings to simulate the hunt...” (MacRae 2013:192). Another context could be the hunt itself, with the figurines being personal amulets, and thus parts of the hunting gear. According to ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts of the use of amulets amongst Inuit hunter-fisher groups in the recent past, there were two basic types. One type consisted of parts of animals. They were relatively small and could be made from organic material, such as bone, skin, or feathers. The others were animal representations: animal figurines carved from bone, ivory, or stone. Both kinds of amulets could be fastened outside or inside a piece of clothing, secured around the neck, kept in a purse, hung from the roof of the house, or integrated in weapons or boats (Burch 2006:368-369). They can thus be considered “embodied thoughts” which were held close to the person (Ingold 2000:126), and through these figurines their owners hoped to summon the spirit beings of the animals. According to Erica Hill (2011), animal amulets were used for different “magical” purposes. One was immobilization rituals, which enabled the hunter to approach and take prey.

Another was allurements, which attracted the prey to the hunter, based on the idea that “like attracts like.” Both types of amulets could be applied in this way. A third approach was to invoke the abilities or characteristics of the animals, in other words, what the animals do and how they behave.

Based on the “machine-oriented ontology” approach, Hein Bjartmann Bjerck has argued that the attention of archaeologists needs to shift from the analysis of what *things are* to what *things do*. In this approach, humans and non-humans are considered together, blurring the nature-culture dichotomy (Bjerck 2022:28). In our case, it is therefore relevant to ask what birds and whales *did* to make them interesting and important to humans.

There are indeed many similarities between most birds and humans, such as sociability, playfulness, caring for their children, language and freedom (Goldhahn 2019:3ff), characteristics shared with whales too. However, birds and whales also have a multitude of distinctive characteristics which are connected to how they behave—qualities that it would be important to invoke during hunting or in other contexts. As pointed out above, relevant “marine bird” characteristics during the Mesolithic would have been the ability to fly, to swim and to dive, and to move easily between the sky, earth, and water. These are all qualities that humans lack but would have liked to possess, not least in exposed and unpredictable coastal environments like these. The ability to move fast over long distances during the changes of the seasons would have been similarly attractive, as would their excellent vision. Not least, the watertight feathers of marine birds would have been considered a great property considering the weather conditions along the Norwegian coast. In the case of whales, they are swift swimmers capable of staying underwater for a very long time. Although perhaps not known during the Mesolithic, they have extremely good hearing. A further quality was fat. Particularly during the cold periods of the year, northern hunter-fisher-gatherers are preoccupied with fat, a characteristic of marine birds and whales which they also provide for humans. Importantly, the raw material of the figurines may have contributed to these human-animal relationships and supported them. Soapstone has some special qualities compared to other stones. It has a “fatty” consistency and feel to it, very associative of animal fat. Interestingly, a Norwegian traditional dialect word for soapstone is “fettstein” (fat stone), like the German word “speckstein.” In spite of the fact that it is soft, it is also durable and can be warmed up and cooled down repeatedly without cracking.

Conclusion

Occasionally, during the excavations of Stone Age sites, special artifacts are found, which can lead to new understanding and provide new perspectives on how people thought and behaved. Examples of such artifacts include six small soapstone animal figurines—five water birds and one whale—that turned up during the excavations of sites along the coast of Western Norway. In this article, we have attempted to describe them and date them as precisely as possible, to establish a regional and interregional context for the figurines, and to support an interpretation of their significance.

The figurines were found at residential sites, some of which had been used for extended periods of time during the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods. However, detailed stratigraphic analyses and evaluation of C14 dates from the contexts where the figurines were found indicate that they are all from the Late Mesolithic and can be dated to between 5,500 and 4,000 cal BC.

Since the carved figurines so clearly represent whales and birds, the archaeological faunal assemblages dated to this period were examined to find out how important these species were as food and raw material resources for the Mesolithic people. It turned out that although the animals were hunted, they represented just a tiny portion of animal procurement. A survey of the contemporary rock art in this region led to the same result: Birds and whales make up only a small portion of the motifs at these sites. A comparison with the neighboring regions of Eastern and Central Norway showed that water birds and whales were more common in site middens and rock art panels there than in the west, indicating that these animals were more important there, although without portable figurines of the kind we can see in the western assemblages playing a role.

Even if water birds and whales are minimally present in the middens and rock art of Western Norway, the figurines show that they were important to people, and most likely it was no coincidence that these animals were chosen as motifs for carving. One possibility is that water birds—because of their connotations of cosmological travels—could be important to shamans, and that the figurines were made and used by such individuals. Most likely, however, their significance was more mundane. We argue that the animal figurines instead should be considered in an ontological perspective as “other-than-human persons”: as animals that humans related to and associated with in their

daily life at the camp sites as well as during hunting forays. The figurines were found at sites on the outer coast, in landscapes that were rich and giving, but also dangerous and challenging. A way to cope and prosper in these marine environments would therefore have been to connect to and emphasize the abilities, strengths and potential of water birds and whales.

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