THE ALTA PETROGLYPHS

KNUT HELSKOG

IT ALL STARTED in the spring of 1973 when three areas of rock carvings were discovered near Alta almost simultaneously. In one case a specialist in the use of dynamite was assessing how best to remove a large boulder from a private garden; in the second case two young boys were playing on a rock surface; and in the third case a man sat down to light his pipe and enjoy the beauty of a quiet sunny night. They all suddenly saw reindeer depicted on the rock surfaces, and

TOUT A DÉMARRÉ au printemps de 1973, quand trois zones de gravures rupestres ont été découvertes presque simultanément près d’Alta. Dans le premier cas, c’est un spécialiste de la dynamite qui cherchait comment débarrasser au mieux un jardin privé d’un gros bloc de pierre; dans le second, deux jeunes garçons jouaient sur une surface rocheuse; et dans le troisième, un homme s’était assis pour allumer sa pipe et profiter de la beauté
that is how it began. Today, five major areas have been recorded with carvings consisting of altogether 49 sites; the total number of carvings is estimated to be more than three thousand.

The following account is based on the carvings from three of the five areas, as research on the other areas is still in its preliminary stages. Furthermore, it is based on a sample, since there are a number of observed but not recorded figures in two of the areas.

The carvings are located at 69°57′N and 23°10′E at the head of the Alta Fjord in Finnmark, N Norway, and are on surfaces situated between 8 m and 27 m above the present mean tide level in terrain which slopes towards the sea. They have been pecked into surfaces of red slate, hard grey sandstone, vulcanite and schistose sandstone. They are in a good state of preservation, those which are covered by peat (30%) showing no apparent signs of wear at all. Consequently, the carving technique which has been used can easily be studied and the carvings themselves examined in an authentic and almost unchanged condition.

SITES AND CHRONOLOGY

The five main areas are as follows:

1. Hjemmeluft/Jebmalaucka (the Norwegian name is simply a Norwegianised version of the Sami name "Jebmalauck")

In this area there are seven sites with from 1,500 to 2,000 carvings covering c. 30,000 sq. m. and there is a further area of c. 36,000 sq. m. containing prehistoric settlement and activity sites. The carvings are dated to the period 4200–500 BC, while the various occupation sites seem to cover the whole of the eight or nine thousand years that people have lived by the Alta Fjord. An area of 510,000 sq. m. is in public ownership.

2. Storsteinen

This group of carvings lies entirely on the upper surface of a rock. There are 570 carvings altogether, dated to the period 4000–1700 BC. The area is privately owned.

3. Atnamnanes

The carvings cover c. 2,000 sq. m., of which 300 sq. m. have been systematically examined and 600 carvings have been recorded. The adjacent c. 6,000 sq. m. contains settlement and activity sites. The carvings are dated to the period 2700–1700 BC, but some of the finds from the occupation site are later. The area is in public ownership.

4. Kåfjord

This area of rock carvings covers c. 500 sq. m. It is estimated that they date to the period 4200–1700 BC. The area is in private ownership.

5. Transferdalen

This is a group of 15 figures painted on a dry vertical rock-face. The figures are mainly humans and reindeer and are presumed to have been painted in the first millennium BC. The area is in private ownership.

The layman is probably immediately fascinated by the very high artistic quality of the carvings. Although the figures are greatly stylised, the prehistoric artist has managed to reproduce the characteristic features of the different animals using very subtle means, such as simply varying the emphasis of the line, and we are left in no doubt as to the contemporary fauna. There is a variety of schematic forms and most observers cannot fail to notice distinct differences in the animals, humans, boats and patterns at the various altitudes.

A statistical analysis of the figures based on their morphological forms has given four main clusters or groups, each located at a different altitude. Some types of figures, especially human stick figures, are found in more than one group, but as a rule there is little overlapping. On this basis the figures have been separated into four main diachronic phases. Some of the figures of Phase 4 give a further division into two diachronic units. These phases are dated as follows, in calendar years:

- Phase 1: 4200–3600 BC
- Phase 2: 3600–2700 BC
- Phase 3: 2700–1700 BC
- Phase 4: 1700–1100 BC
- Phase 5: 1100–500 BC

The dates are based on the dated changes in sea-level which in turn date the raised beach immediately below the different groups of carvings.

The combination of the visible stratigraphic location and altitude of the carvings, the groups of morphological types seen by correspondence analysis, and the location of these groups at specific altitudes give an unusually good foundation for reconstructing the chronology. In this respect the carvings in Alta are outstanding.

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C'est un groupe de 15 figures peintes sur une paroi verticale sèche. Les figures sont essentiellement des humains et un renne, on pense qu'elles ont été peintes au cours du premier millénaire avant J.C. La zone est propriété privée.

Le profane est sans doute immédiatement fasciné par la très haute qualité artistique des gravures. L'artiste préhistorique a réussi à caractériser les différents animaux en utilisant des moyens très subtils, comme par exemple de simples variations de l'épaisseur du trait, et il ne nous laisse rien ignorer de la faune contemporaine. Les figures sont stylisées jusqu'à donner une version simplifiée de la réalité, tout en retenant les traits caractéristiques. Les formes schématisées sont très variées et la plupart des observateurs ne peuvent manquer de remarquer des variations distinctes entre les formes des animaux, des humains, des bateaux et autres motifs aux différents niveaux. Une analyse des figures basée sur leur étude morphologique a permis de les classer en quatre groupes principaux. Quelques types de figures, notamment les figures humaines en forme de bâtons, se trouvent à plusieurs endroits, mais il y a en général peu de double emploi. En outre, chacun de ces groupes caractérise des sites spécifiques, à des niveaux différents.

On a divisé les figures en quatre phases diachroniques principales et une partie des figures de la phase 4 est subdivisée en deux unités diachroniques. Les phases sont datées comme suit:

- Phase 1: 4200–3600 av. J.C.
- Phase 2: 3600–2700 av. J.C.
- Phase 3: 2700–1700 av. J.C.
- Phase 4a: 1700–1100 av. J.C.
- Phase 4b: 1100–500 av. J.C.
Les dates sont fondées sur les changements datés du niveau de la mer, qui à leur tour donnent la date des mouvements du rivage immédiatement en dessous des différents groupes de gravures.

**INTERPRÉTATION**

La combinaison de la situation stratigraphique visible et de l’altitude des gravures, des groupes de types morphologiques analysés par analogie, et de l’emplacement de ces groupes à des niveaux spécifiques nous donne une base exceptionnellement bonne pour reconstituer la chronologie. C’est à ce titre que les gravures d’Alta sont remarquables. Une bonne part du fondement des scènes représentées sur ces gravures et de leur parenté générale avec les sociétés de l’âge de la Pierre récent de l’extrême nord de la Norvège dépend du cadre chronologique suggéré. Il n’a pas été possible de relier ces gravures à un groupe spécifique de peuples ou de communautés. On l’analyse indique qu’il y a des changements contemporains dans les gravures et dans la civilisation matérielle et la structure socio-économique du territoire pendant la période préhistorique en général, si bien qu’on a pu arriver à comprendre l’évolution et la signification des gravures par rapport au développement socio-économique et aux changements dans la civilisation matérielle. Dans certains cas, cela peut être la signification des gravures qui changent, dans d’autres c’est juste le style, enfin, mais non des moindres, cela peut être le choix du sujet. Un bon exemple de cette sélectivité est donné par le fait que certaines scènes peuvent être des types de gravures uniques ou ne sont pas représentés dans les phases successives. Un autre exemple est la prédilection des mammifères terrestres sur les osseaux et la faune marine, ou l’accent mis sur la chasse plutôt que sur les corvées domestiques, ou la représentation de figures humaines actives plutôt que passives. On trouve à la fois une continuité et une discontinuité qui ne peuvent pas toujours être métis en parallèle avec d’autres changements culturels répertoriés.

C’est une image assez complexe qui émerge, et parfois elle crée la confusion. Par exemple, certaines scènes, dans la phase 1, représentant des ours chassés à l’intérieur ou à l’extérieur de leur tanière et qui sont interprétées comme une preuve

**INTERPRÉTATION**

Much of the basis for the scenes which are portrayed in these carvings and their general relationship to the Late Stone Age societies of the extreme north of Norway depends on the suggested chronological framework.

It has not been possible to connect the carvings with any specific groups of people or communities. However, analysis indicates that there are contemporaneous changes in the carvings and in the material culture and socio-economic structure of the population in general. It has therefore been possible to arrive at some understanding of the development and the meaning of the carvings in relation to the socio-economic development and changes in the material culture. In some cases it may be the meaning of the carvings which changes, in other cases it may just be the style, and last but not least it may be the choice of subject matter. A good example of this selectivity is the fact that certain scenes or types of carvings are unique or are not repeated in successive phases. Other examples are

the dominance in all phases of land mammals over birds and marine fauna, the emphasis on hunting as opposed to domestic chores, and the depiction of active rather than passive human figures. Both continuity and discontinuity are found which are not always paralleled in other recorded cultural changes.

It is a rather complex and, at times, confusing picture which emerges. For example, the scenes of bears in Phase I which are being hunted in or outside the den and which are interpreted as evidence of bear ceremonialism are not found depicted after 3600 BC, except for a few single bears, some of which are being aimed at with a spear. The point is that even if types of carvings disappear, this does not necessarily mean that the belief associated with the carvings disappears. In the example given, it is known that bear ceremonialism was a part of the Saami religion as late as the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. The expression of the belief has merely changed in form, or perhaps a particular variation in form, such as using carvings, was no longer practised. The same might be the case with the appearance of new carvings. Similarly, there are quite distinct morphological changes within the same class of figures between one phase and the next. In some cases these are clearly stylistic and not real: nobody in their right mind would claim that d’un rituel de l’ours, ne sont plus trouvées représentées après 3600 av. J.-C., à l’exception de quelques ours isolés, dont certains sont percés d’un javelot. Le fait est que, même si ce type de gravure disparaît, cela n’indique pas nécessairement que la croyance qui y est associée ait disparu. Dans l’exemple donné, on sait que le rituel de l’ours a fait partie de la religion lapponne jusqu’au XVIIIe ou XIXe siècle. L’expression de la croyance a simplement changé de forme, ou peut-être un changement particulier dans la forme, comme l’utilisation des gravures, a-t-il été pratiqué plus...
reindeer and elk change shape as they do in the carvings. In other cases, for example the patterns on the boats, the morphological variation must, at least to some degree, have been real and is informative of technological and structural variation. From the archaeological evidence in Scandinavia, such a variation might for example reflect the difference between small egalitarian hunting-fishing communities and possibly ranked or stratified societies in the Later Bronze Age/Early Iron Age.

The variation and continuity in class, types, sub-types and choice of depictions through time essentially reflect a variety of changing factors like religion, style, technology and socio-economic organisation.

Seen as a whole, these changes occur simultaneously at least five or six times. They are seen as changes in all of the classes of the carvings at the beginning of each new phase, and occur in style or form and in context, as well as in kind and frequency. In addition, some changes correspond with greater changes in the general archaeological sequence for Finnmark, suggesting a possible wider range of changes besides those seen in the depictions on the rock surfaces in Alta.

PROTECTION
Since the discovery of the many rock carving sites in the Alta area, there has been an ever-increasing stream of visitors to the sites. At first (1973-1980) it was especially Storsteinen in Bossekop which attracted attention. The site is in two private gardens and to the great irritation of the inhabitants, there were tourists standing outside the living-room and bedroom windows at all hours of the day and night (there is daylight all round the clock in the summer). In addition, marks and scratches from the visitors were actually found on the carved figures themselves and on the rock surfaces generally. As we became increasingly aware of the large extent of the area of carvings in Hjemmeluft/Jiebmaluoka, it was decided to direct attention there and away from Storsteinen. The trees have now been planted around Storsteinen.

If this does not stop the traffic and prevent further wear, the carvings will be covered by a double layer of compact turf.

By discouraging the public from visiting Storsteinen, Amtmannes and Kåfjord, there was naturally an increased interest in Hjemmeluft/Jiebmaluoka. It would be a breach of the original traditions for anyone to change the carvings in a way that is not visible to the eye, or that does not immediately affect the meaning of the carvings. It is therefore essential that any action taken to protect the carvings should be in harmony with the natural environment and the cultural heritage of the area.

The carvings at Jiebmaluoka. During the summers of 1982 and 1983 the area around the carvings was subject to considerable erosion from the visitors. The extremely fragile Arctic vegetation, with its very slow rate of growth, was badly damaged, and the carvings were exposed to vandalism in the form of scratching, marks and paint.

In order to prevent this increase in erosion, all visitors are now conducted through an entrance area from which they are led by a guide. Gravel paths have been laid out and weatherproof boardwalks constructed on the terrain, and these link the different areas of rock carvings and settlement sites. The whole system is graded, so that it is equally accessible to visitors dependent on a wheelchair. When complete, there will be 3 km of paths and walkways in three large circuits. In order to make the system function, particularly when there are large numbers of visitors, traffic will move in one direction only. It is forbidden to leave the paths except at specially designated points, such as at rest and activity areas.

To stop visitors from marking, scratching, scribbling or painting on the carvings or on the


zones de gravures rupestres et les sites de peuplement.
ment. Tout le système est aménagé en pente, de sorte qu'il est également accessible aux visiteurs en fauteuil roulant.

Il y aura 3 km d’allées et de sentiers répartis en trois grands circuits, et pour que le système fonctionne bien, notamment lorsqu'il y aura une très grande affluence de visiteurs, le flot ne circu-
lera que dans un sens. Il est interdit de quitter les allées, sauf à des endroits désignés, tels que zones de repos et d'accès.

Pour empêcher les visiteurs de tacher, d'égare-

Pour protéger non seulement les gravures et les sites de peuplement, mais aussi l’ensemble du milieu dont ils constituent une partie, la zone en entier a reçu le statut de monument classé, en vertu du paragraphe 21 de la Loi sur le Patrimoine et l’État a acquis les terrains qui étaient propriété privée. Les bâtiments situés à l’intérieur du territoire, tels que maisons d’habitation et hangars à bateaux, continueront à être utilisés comme avant.

Un des principes directeurs de l’exploitation de Hjemmeluft est que le site doit continuer à vivre, et qu’ainsi, les activités qui traditionnellement appartiennent à cet endroit se poursuivent aussi longtemps qu’elles n’entrent pas en conflit avec les monuments classés. Ces activités font partie de l’histoire locale. Elles englobent les hangars à bateaux et les activités qui en découlent sur le rivage ou dans l’eau; elles comprennent les filets à saumon et les chevalets pour sécher le poisson, l’agriculture, les pâturages et la récolte des baies sauvages. La seule activité agricole aujourd’hui est le pâturage du bétail, mais une habitation de paysan/pêcheur va être désormais reconstruite dans le cadre des anciennes installations qui sont au cœur de Hjemmeluft et, cela permettra en

of wild berries. The only farming today is
cattle-grazing. However, it is planned to recon-

As well as these aspects of cultural history, the
natural environment, including geology, botany
and zoology, will also be connected with
the walkways in the form of information boards
and an education service. This means that we are
making as much use as possible of the natural
and cultural history of the area and we feel that
what we are offering is a good way to create interest
in and for the values which exist in
Hjemmeluft/Jebmalaokta and other places.

It is important that the area gives the appearance of being under constant supervision and it is
therefore a matter of extreme urgency that the
projected museum is built as soon as possible.

The carvings at Alta are essentially of outstanding
universal value, both as documents of the evolution of symbolism through four thousand
years of history in the northern hemisphere, and
as a scientific object for studying trends in art and
symbolism, all within the framework of human
society. It is therefore of utmost importance
that they are protected from modern destruction,
at the same time as they are presented to the
public. One of the aims of preserving our cultural
heritage must be the continued documentation of
prehistoric cultural systems, beliefs, ideologies
and meanings, both in an attempt to understand
the past and as a living part of our own cultural
present.

quelque sorte, de relier les zones de gravures
rupestres situées de part et d’autre de la baie.

Il est essentiel que la zone protégée puisse être
subie une constante surveillance, et c’est pour¬
quoi il est d’une extrême urgence que le musée projeté
soit construit au plus vite.

Le Ministère de la Culture a donné son accord pour subven¬
tionner le travail de planification, et nous avons
l’espoir que le nouveau musée sera prêt dans
quelques années.

Les gravures d’Alta ont réellement une valeur
universelle exceptionnelle, à la fois comme témoignage de l’évolution de la symbolique à
travers quatre mille années d’histoire dans l’hémisphère nord, et comme objet scientifique per¬
mettant d’étudier les tendances dans l’art et le
symbolisme, tout cela dans le cadre de la société
humaine. C’est pourquoi il est de la plus haute
importance qu’elles soient protégées de la de¬
struction moderne, tout au long, en tant que présentés au public.

Un des objectifs de la sauvegarde de notre patri¬
moine culturel doit être la poursuite du travail de
documentation sur les systèmes culturels préhis¬
toriques, leurs croyances, leurs idéologies, et leurs
significations, à la fois dans un effort de comp¬
prendre le passé et comme une partie vivante de
notre propre présent culturel.