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**Nordic Middle Ages – Artefacts, Landscapes and Society.**  
**Essays in Honour of Ingvild Øye on her 70th Birthday**

Irene Baug, Janicke Larsen and Sigrid Samset Mygland (Eds.)



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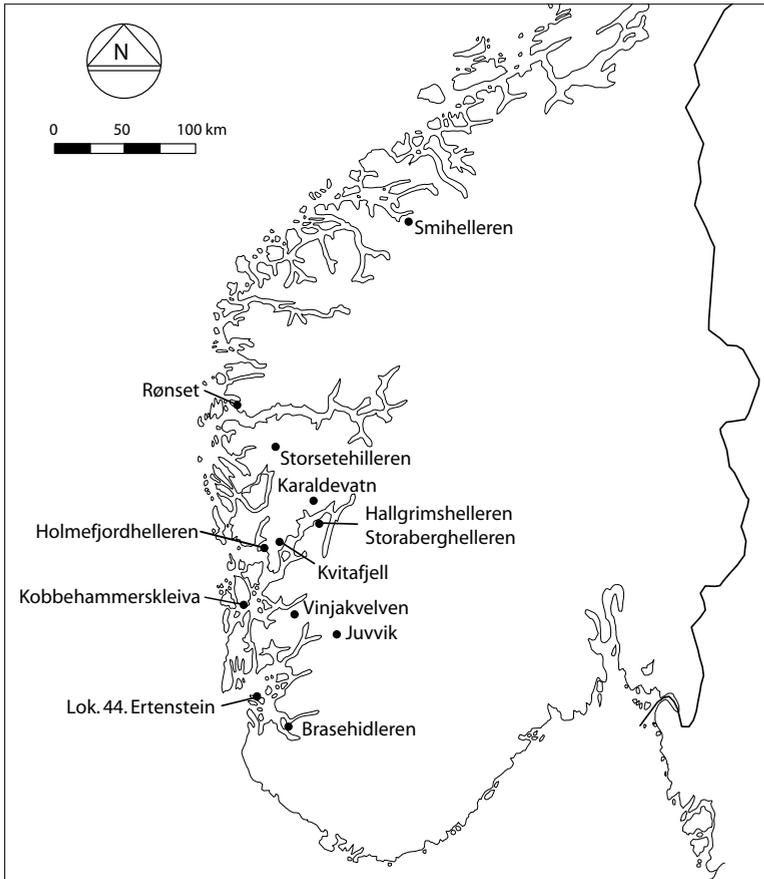


## Medieval Rockshelters in Western Norway – Activities, Functions and Social Identities

In her book, *Norges Landbrukshistorie* (2002) (The Agricultural History of Norway), Ingvild Øye discusses the importance of the outfield and points out that forests, lakes and mountain plateaux were important during the Middle Ages. Their resources – big game, fish, stone outcrops or iron – were extensively utilised, and a number of sites for production and processing as well as dwelling have been localised in such areas. One of these dwelling sites is the rockshelter ‘Storhedder’ in Setesdal, Southern Norway. A number of figures were carved on the stone wall of this shelter, among them geometrical figures, reindeer, elks, horses, foxes, and a man with a bow and arrow. Several runic inscriptions were also found. They are dated to around AD 1100 and one of them is interpreted as: ‘Vivil lived here’ (Hagen & Liestøl 1947; Øye 2002). On this basis, Ingvild argues that the site was probably used as a hunting station during the early Middle Ages. Furthermore, since the name ‘Vivil’ was mainly used for thralls and freed thralls, she suggests that the occupants of Storhedder were of low social status (Øye 2002, 391). For freed thralls, she argues, the outfield offered new possibilities and good opportunities for making a living.

If the interpretation of the Storhedder dweller’s name and status is correct, one may ask if a general trend is reflected here; whether rockshelters as a site-type were perceived as only fit for inhabitation for and by people from the lower strata in medieval society. For the previous period – the Iron Age – this has certainly been a common interpretation (e.g. Odner 1973; Myhre 1987), and it is also a widespread notion based on more recent folklore tradition that many caves and rockshelters were used by thieves, outcasts and poor individuals who had nowhere else to go (Hageland 2008). One may also ask whether only rockshelters in remote areas such as forests and mountain plateaux were used, or if lowland shelters, situated closer to agricultural settlements, were also occupied in the medieval period.

These questions will be explored below on the basis of archaeological and historical sources. We will present a survey of activities associated with caves and rockshelters and discuss aspects of the social identities of shelter users in the Middle Ages and early modern period. The archaeological data are from excavated shelters in Western Norway, in the counties of Møre og Romsdal, Sogn og Fjordane, Hordaland and Rogaland (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Medieval and early modern rockshelters in western Norway referred to in the text.

## Sources, methods and data

Caves and rockshelters occur in large numbers in Norway. In the relevant area, no karstic caves are present, but there are a small number of caves along the coast which have been formed by wave action. Rockshelters are much more numerous and have been created as a result of geological processes such as erosion in fault-zones and fissures, or because of rock-fall. There are also large numbers of boulder-rockshelters with enough space underneath for human occupation. Until now, no field surveys in Norway have been directed solely towards the identification and excavation of medieval caves and rockshelters. However, in a number of instances, medieval artefacts and occupational layers have been recorded in the upper strata of shelters where the primary aim has been to investigate prehistoric use.

In the current project, the goal has been to single out the medieval and early modern period material. Through fieldwork and investigation of archives and museum collections, a total of 260 caves and rockshelters with traces of human use have been identified in Western Norway. Thirteen of these have traces of use that date to the medieval and early modern periods c. AD

1000-1650. Caves and rockshelters that have been created artificially as a result of quarrying during the Middle Ages are not included and will not be considered here (e.g. Baug 2013). The sites relevant for this study, which are exclusively rockshelters, can be dated partly by the C14 method, partly on the basis of artefact typology. With rather broad dates available and the limited number of relevant shelters at hand, it was decided that the sites from the medieval and early modern periods should be treated as one category. For the level of inquiry applied here, this approach should be acceptable even if the period covered is rather long and is one that certainly saw significant changes to many aspects of life.

There are major differences with regard to the excavation methods that have been applied, as well as in the sizes of the excavated areas of the shelters. There are also differences regarding the dating evidence; in some cases only C14-dates of culture layers reveal activity, in other cases the rather broad dates supplied by C14-dates and artefact typology can be combined to provide more precise dates. Here, broad dating frames are applied: early- (c. 1000-1150), high- (c. 1150-1350) and late medieval (1350-1536) periods as well as the early modern (c. 1536-1650) period.

In terms of the written sources, Sagas and tales of the Icelanders, Sagas of the Norwegian kings, *Færeyinga saga* and the *Landnámabók*, have been surveyed in order to locate passages where the human use of caves and rockshelters (denoted by the Norse word *hellir* [pl. *bellar*] which covers both cave and rockshelter) have been mentioned. The value of these sources for the problem at hand requires some critical consideration. First, it is generally held that these texts were recorded in Iceland during the 12th-14th centuries. In this respect, they are contemporary to the early centuries of the period under consideration. In addition to dealing with events during the medieval periods, several of these sources also deal with incidents during the Merovingian and Viking periods (the late Iron Age). However, since all of the texts were recorded during the medieval period, the perception of the functions of the rockshelters in the late Iron Age may just as likely reflect their medieval use. Second, as many of the sources deal with Icelandic early history, several of the sites referred to are situated in Iceland, although caves and rockshelters in Norway, Greenland, and the Orkneys are also referred to. Considering the close contact between these areas and Western Norway during the period under study here, it is argued that the information on the use of shelters in the historical sources is relevant for how they were used in Western Norway. Third, as many historians point out (e.g. Helle 2011), we cannot be sure whether the saga texts refer to real events and – in our case – if the particular rockshelters and the people that used them existed in reality. In this context, however, historical correctness is neither of major importance nor the main value of these sources. We here delimit ourselves to an ‘anthropological’ approach (Bagge 2014), which means that our primary interest is connected to how the human use of the caves and rockshelters is described and how they are perceived by medieval writers.

The archaeological and historical sources will be discussed below in the context of activities, function and social identities. Other aspects of the rockshelters – such as religious and ritual use – are also relevant for the medieval period, for example, connected to the well-known sanctuary, Sunnivahelleren at Selja (e.g. Hommedal 1997). However, a discussion of these latter purposes is beyond the scope of this contribution and will be dealt with elsewhere.

## Activities and functions

Activities in the shelters are indicated by the archaeological, as well as the historical sources. The following will present detailed descriptions of the archaeological data and the saga texts, as well as a discussion of activities associated with shelters.

### **Shelter-use according to historical sources**

Archaeologist and anthropologist Knut Odner has argued that rockshelters (during the early Iron Age) may have been considered as dwelling places on an equal footing with built houses (Odner 1973, 152-153). He bases this partly on a *gríðamál* (oath recitation) in *Grettis saga Ásmundssonar*, where, amongst other things, the following is said about a *níðing* (truce-breaker):

*'Hann skal firraz kirkjur ok kristna menn, heiðna hólða, hús ok hella, heim hvern, nema helviti' (Grettis saga Ásmundssonar 72).*

*'He shall be barred from churches and the company of Christian men, heathens, houses and caves, from every world except hell' (Translation from The saga of Grettir the strong 72).*

Nevertheless, few other medieval sources mention ordinary people that dwell in rockshelters. When this does occur, the individuals have usually been forced into the situation, and many of the shelter users are in fact villains, or at least people on the run. Again, in *Grettis saga* 57 and 58, whilst on the run, *Gretti* lives for a time together with *Hallmundr* and his daughter in a large rockshelter close to Balljökul in Iceland. Later, he also dwells in a cave on the advice of *Björn Hidtdalakkapi*. In both cases, *Gretti* is a fugitive and the shelters are used as hideouts. *Grettis saga* may be considered a problematic source for the questions addressed here because it has several traits in common with the fantastical *fornaldersögur* (Ommedal 1977, cf. Røthe 2010), which means that the references to caves in these stories are merely literary inventions. The same problem is true of some of the other Sagas and tales of the Icelanders in which young men visit giants in caves and rockshelters, for example, *Barðar saga* and *Bergþúa Þattr* (Heide 2014). The story in *Orkneyinga saga* 61 of the visit of the young *Rögnvaldr jarl* (*Kali Kolsson*) to the *Dollshellir* (Dollsteinhelleren) at Sunnmøre, Norway, should probably also be counted among these. The aspect of giants living in caves will, therefore, not be treated further in this context. Nevertheless, the recurring theme from *Grettis saga Ásmundssonar*, of caves and rockshelters as hiding places or places of refuge, is also mentioned in several of the more realistic documents and sagas.

In *Ólafs konungs Tryggvasonar* 48 in *Snorre Sturluson's Heimskringla*, a rockshelter in Gauldal, Trøndelag, is used as a hiding place by *Hákonar jarls* and his thrall *Karkr*. Also in *Heimskringla* in *Upaf Inga konungs* 6, the pretender to the throne, *Sigurdi Slembidjárn*, spent the entire winter in a cave in Gljuvrafjord at Hinnøy, Northern Norway, with more than 20 of his men whilst on the run from the king (Fig. 2). In *Orkneyinga saga* 95, a rockshelter close to the sea at Hellisey, Orkney Islands, is used as a hideout for *Haraldr jarl*, his crew, and even his ship. In the *Harðar saga ok Hólmverja* 33, *Porgeirr gyrdilskeggi* gathered his men in a rockshelter at Arnarvatnsheiði, Western Iceland, and stayed there until they were attacked and had to flee to another location.



**Figure 2.** Sigurdi Slembidjárn together with his men outside the rockshelter in Gljivrafjord at Hinnøy. Drawing by Wilhelm Wetlesen in the illustrated Norwegian version of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*, 'Snorres kongesagaer', published in 1899.

In the *Vatnsdæla Saga* 44, Þorkel hides in a cave by the river at Vatnadalur, Northern Iceland (which was later called the *Kröfluhellir*). In the *Bandamanna Saga* 12, the wounded Óspakr took refuge under a rockshelter in the Miðfjörður area in North-West Iceland and was later found dead. Furthermore, in *Færeyinga saga* 16, the fugitive Þorkel (*Turrafrost*) hides in a cave close to his father's farm in Trøndelag, Middle Norway. In the *Fóstbræðra saga* 23 (*Hauksbók* version), the rockshelter, later to be called *Þormóðshellir*, at Eiriksfjord, Greenland, was the hiding place for *Þormóðr* and, finally, in the *Eyrbyggja saga* 40, *Björn Breiðvíkingakappi* takes refuge for three days in a rockshelter after being surprised by bad weather (produced by sorcery) on a journey to Snæfellsnes, Western Iceland.

In the last three examples, it is specifically stated that the men quickly got tired of staying in the rockshelters. *Þormóðr* even gives himself away because of sheer boredom, and *Björn* composes a song where he complains about the conditions in the shelter:

*'Sýlda skark svanafold  
síðum, þvít gæibrúðr  
ástum leiddi oss fast,  
austan með hlaðit flaust.*

*Víða gatk vasbúð.*

*Víglundr nú um stund  
helli byggir hugfullr  
hingat fyr konu bing.'*

*(Eyrbyggja saga 40)*

*'From the east, my laden ship of planks  
Has plied the ice-cold earth of swans,  
ever since the flirting bride  
brought us straight to love;  
many hardship I've endured,  
but now the hardy battle-tree  
has made a cave his home a while,  
instead of a woman's pillow.'*

*(Translation from The Saga of the People of Eyri 40)*

The cold and exhausted *Björn* finally makes it down to the farmhouses at *Kamb* and the saga adds, laconically, that he stayed there for the rest of the winter.

A few sources briefly mention rockshelters and boulders as places for hiding or for storing goods. In *Eyrbyggja saga* 57, we are told that *Snorra goða's* wreckage is taken care of by the man *Alfr* under the cliff *Guðlaughshöfða* in *Bitra* in North-West Iceland. In the *Orkneyinga saga* 106, it is also mentioned that when *Sveinn Asleifarsun* raided the *Sudreyjar* (the Hebrides), people hid personal property in screes and under boulders.

From this survey of the saga texts, it is relatively clear that caves and rockshelters are only rarely mentioned and that such sites seldom are central to the activities that are described. In these sources, they are primarily hideouts or storage places for goods. With the exception of *Sigurdi Slembidjárn's* occupation, they are only used for brief periods. This rather narrow range of use may be considered somewhat suspicious, and one could also ask whether the caves and rockshelters mentioned in these more realistic texts were mainly literary motifs or inventions which served the purpose of invoking particular associations for the readers or listeners. These associations may have been related to a general perception of caves and rockshelters in medieval society. On the other hand, a literary motif would not work if people did not recognise it as meaningful and could not connect it to real landscapes and the real use of such places. In a manner different from the saga texts, archaeology provides evidence for such 'real use' and this will be explored in detail below.

### **Shelter-use according to archaeological sources**

In the following discussion, the range of artefacts and ecofacts found in the archaeological sources are presented and the 13 shelters included in the study are classified according to interpretations of their main functions. As will be clear, a broad variety of activities took place in the shelters. Here, however, a distinction is made between what may be termed the primary or main function of a site (e.g. as a shieling or a smith's workshop) and the secondary activities that took place during occupation related to these primary functions (such as spinning, eating or smoking). This distinction is based upon an evaluation of the archaeological material available and also the shelter's topographical location.

Archaeological data reflect activities of different kinds and from these activities stays of variable duration may be inferred. The presence of charcoal thus shows that a shelter was heated by fire, and when it occurs in combination with burned bone one may assume that food was prepared

and consumed at the site. Spindle whorls show that spinning took place; hones indicate that tools such as knives or sowing needles were sharpened, and slag shows that metal working, such as the refinement of raw iron and/or artefact production, took place. One may argue that the range of activities documented at a site also has a bearing on the duration of the stays in the shelter, which may have differed widely. For example, evidence for heating and food consumption may be the results of single night's stay as well as longer term stays. On the other hand, it may be argued that spinning (that would also require that fibres were available to be spun) and tending to tools reflect that the users of the shelter had organised themselves for stays of a longer duration, for example, a season or a period of some weeks. Alternatively, they may have repeatedly returned to the shelter, leaving behind their whorls/hones for future use. The presence of pottery, soapstone vessels, bakestones and similar heavy and easily breakable inventory may, along the same line of thinking, indicate stays of some duration.

In the presentation of the archaeological sources below, the shelters are ordered by their location in the landscape. The basic data are presented in figures 3 and 4. A summary of the main functions of the shelters is provided in figure 11.

The two shelters, *Karaldevatn* and *Vinjakvelven* are situated in the sub-alpine zone (above 800 masl).

*Karaldevatn* lies close to the shoreline of a lake in the Bjølvo watercourse. The site has been test-pit surveyed (Valvik 2001) and is radiocarbon dated to the early or high medieval periods. No artefacts were found. The shelter had been modified with slabs placed on the floor and erected as walls. The shelter covered c. 15 m<sup>2</sup>. Red deer and reindeer, as well as small game are available in the area and fish are present in nearby lakes. The presence of charcoal indicates that the shelter was heated or that food was prepared during stays. According to the excavators' assessment, the local area around the site is unsuitable for the location of a shieling and they suggest that the shelter functioned as a station for hunting/fishing in the mountain areas and was related to communication across the mountains to the Voss area (Valvik 2001). Based on the available data, we find these suggestions plausible and classify the shelter as a possible mounting hunting/fishing station.

*Vinjakvelven* lies c. 45 m north of a river in the mountains of the Etne municipality in Hordaland. The shelter is very small, only c. 1 m deep. The stone foundations for a small house of a younger date lay immediately in front of the shelter. The shelter was test-pit surveyed and a charcoal layer was C14-dated to the late medieval or the early modern periods. No artefacts were found. The area has been used for shielings for the farms in Etne in recent history (Martinussen & Myhre 1985, 31). As for the shelter at *Karaldevatn*, large as well as small game are available and fish are present in nearby water systems. Again, the presence of charcoal indicates that the shelter was heated or that food was prepared during stays. It is suggested here that the main function of the shelter was to be used in connection with hunting/fishing trips and that these activities were related to the occupation of the nearby shielings. The shelter is thus classified as a probable mountain hunting/fishing station/shieling.

The remaining 11 shelters are situated in the lowlands. Four shelters, *Storsetehilleren*, *Kobbehammerskleiva*, *Brasehidleren* and *Juvvik*, lie in the outfield at some distance from contemporary agricultural settlements.

Name	Museum No.	Farm, Municipality, County	M.a.s.i.	Meters to nearest agricultural settlement	Previous occupations <sup>1</sup>	Size of exc. area (m <sup>2</sup> )	Excavated year	Size of the shelter (m <sup>2</sup> )	Reference
Smiehelleren	T23210	Monge, Rauma, Romsdal	75	400	BA, EIA, LIA	24	2005	24	Sauvage 2005, Haug 2012
Rockshelter at Rønset		Rønset, Hyllestad, Sogn og Fjordane	67	250	none	test-pits	2008	70	Baug 2013
Storsethelleren	B6729, B6755, B13948	Store Matre, Masfjorden, Hordaland	70	2400	EIA	1914; 9 1985; 4	1985	54	Bjorn 1915, Ringstad 1985
Karaldevatn		Indre Ålvik, Voss, Hordaland	890	4800	none	test-pits	2001	15	Valvik 2001
Hallgrimshelleren	BRM 678	Sævarhagen, Jondal, Hordaland	13,5	100	BA, EIA	3	2005-06	70-80	Bergsvik et al. 2014
Storberghelleren	BRM 679	Bakke, Jondal, Hordaland	90	200	STA	test-pits	2006	25	Bergsvik 2014
Rockshelter at Kvitafeill		Fugleberg, Kvinnherad, Hordaland	110	1750	none	test-pits	2006	60	Weber 1984, Baug 2013
Holmefordhelleren	B14234	Søre Holmefjord, Fusa, Hordaland	40	250	BA, EIA	4	1984	51	Bjerck 1986
Kobbehammerskleiva	B15176	Spissøy, Bømlo, Hordaland	4,5	1200	BA, EIA, LIA	21,5	1995-96	24	Anfinset 1995, 1996, Bommen 2009
Vinjakvelven		Stordalsvassdraget, Etne, Hordaland	820	5000	none	test-pits	1983	not known	Martinussen & Myhre 1985
Rockshelter at Juvvik	S6437a-e	Gauttun, Suldal, Rogaland	100	60	none	collected	1936	not known	Storvik 2011
Lok. 44 Rockshelter 1	S10390b-1	Ertenstein, Rennesøy, Rogaland	20-22	420	STA, BA	15	1989-90	5	Høgestøl 1995
Brasehelleren	S7863a-g	Melting, Forsand, Rogaland	200	2500	none	test-pits	1952	not known	Storvik 2011

1: Previous occupations: STA: Stone Age, BA: bronze Age, EIA: Early Iron Age, LIA: Late Iron Age

**Figure 3.** Basic data from the medieval and early modern rockshelters in western Norway. The shelters are listed geographically from north to south.

Site	Lab. No.	Excavated unit and layer	Method	Sample Material	14C Age BP	Cal. AD Age Range 2s	Reference
Smiehelleren	T-18218	Hearth in house 100005	Standard	Charcoal different species	465±45	1327-1617	Sauvage 2005
Rønset rockshelter	Tra-785	Test-pit 1, layer 1	AMS	Charcoal betula	810±35	1176-1272	Baug 2013
Rønset rockshelter	Tra-784	Test-pit 1, layer 5	AMS	Charcoal betula	990±30	989-1153	Baug 2013
Rønset rockshelter	Tra-786	Test-pit 2, layer 3	AMS	Charcoal pinus	940±30	1025-1160	Baug 2013
Storsethilleren	T-6947	Square E, 40 cm below the surface	Standard	Charcoal betula	780±110	1026-1397	Ringstad 1985
Storsethilleren	T-6951	Square F, 30 cm below the surface	Standard	Charcoal coryllus	340±140	1393-1891	Ringstad 1985
Karaldevatn	T-14903	Test-pit 1, layer 2	Standard	Charcoal different species	840±45	1046-1273	Valvik 2001
Hallgrimshelleren	Poz-15418	11x/29y, layer E	AMS		860±30	1049-1256	Bergsvik et al. 2014
Hallgrimshelleren	Poz-15420	Test-pit 2, layer 5	AMS		315±30	1484-1648	Bergsvik et al. 2014
Hallgrimshelleren	Poz-15422	Test-pit 2, layer 7	AMS		320±30	1483-1646	Bergsvik et al. 2014
Storabergshelleren	Poz-19349	Test-pit 2, layer 3	AMS		315±30	1484-1648	Bergsvik et al. 2014
Kvitafjell rockshelter	Tua-6702	Test-pit 1, layer 2	AMS	Charcoal pinus	875±35	1041-1246	Baug 2013
Kvitafjell rockshelter	Tua-6703	Test-pit 1, layer 4	AMS	Charcoal betula	845±35	1050-1265	Baug 2013
Kvitafjell rockshelter	Tua-6704	Test-pit 1, layer 4	AMS	Charcoal pinus	950±35	1021-1161	Baug 2013
Kvitafjell rockshelter	Tua-6705	Test-pit 1, layer 4	AMS	Charcoal pinus	840±35	1052-1267	Baug 2013
Kobbehammerskleiva	Beta-88559	94x/198y, SV, feature A, layer 3	AMS	Charcoal coryllus (shell)	890±60	1027-1251	Anfinset 1996
Kobbehammerskleiva	Tua-7000	93x/199y, SV, layer 4	AMS	terrestrial mammal	890±40	1034-1220	Bommen 2009
Kobbehammerskleiva	Beta-88560	94x/198y, SV, feature A, layer 5	AMS	Charcoal coryllus (shell)	870±50	1040-1257	Anfinset 1996
Kobbehammerskleiva	Beta-88562	93x/199y, SØ, layer 15	AMS	Charcoal coryllus (shell)	920±50	1023-1214	Anfinset 1996
Vinjakvelven	T-5510	Test pit 1, 15 cm deep	Standard		280±90	1440-1880	Martinussen & Myhre 1985
Lok. 44 Ertenstein 1	T-9067	100x/100y, layer 4	Standard		830±95	1016-1384	Høgestøl 1995

**Figure 4.** C14-determinations from the medieval and early modern rockshelters. All calibrations have been performed with Oxcal 4.2 (Bronk Ramsey, 2014)

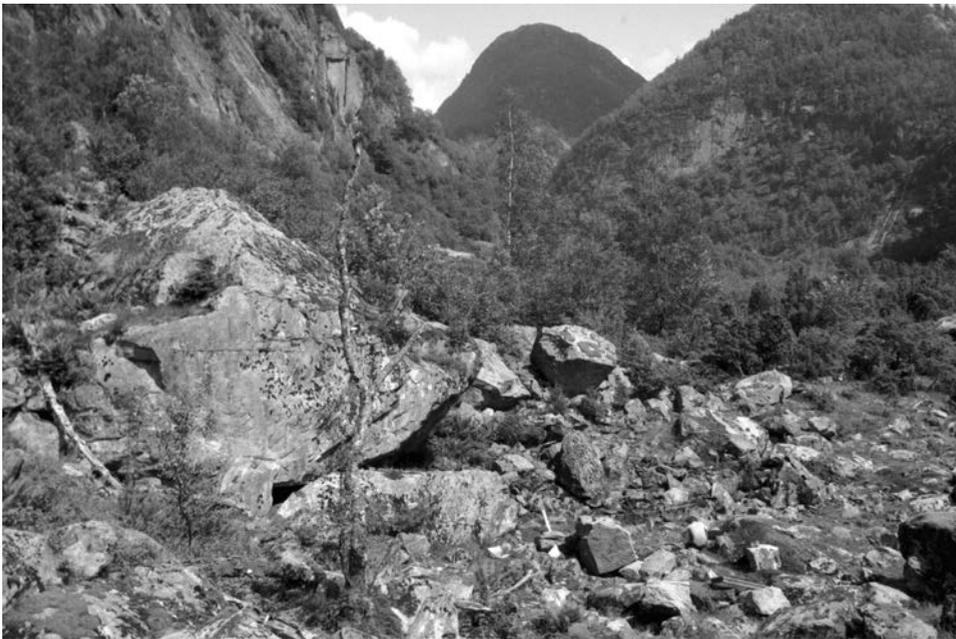
The shelter at *Brasehidleren* is situated by the fjord Høgsfjorden in pasture land in the outfield, c. 2,500 m from the agrarian settlement and at around 200 masl. Data on the size of the shelter is not available and there are no C14-dates from the site. It has been test-pit surveyed (Storvik 2011). A double composite antler or bone comb of type D3 (typology according to Wiberg 1977; Flodin 1989), places the activity safely within the high medieval period as judged against similar material from Bergen (Fig. 5). In addition to the comb, a square bronze fitting, a spindle whorl, and a whetstone were found. The whorl shows that spinning took place in the shelter, the hone points to miscellaneous production or maintenance of tools. The objects indicate that the users of the shelter had organised themselves for a stay of some duration. Spinning whorls and hones are common at excavated (surface) shieling-sites from the Viking Age and earlier periods as well (Bjørge et al. 1992, 305). In more recent history, spinning was also an important additional activity during the summer occupations of shielings (Reinton 1955, 315). Based on the sparse data, it may tentatively be suggested that the shelter mainly functioned as a short-term seasonally-used dwelling site, possibly a shieling where secondary activities such as spinning and tending to tools took place alongside tending to animals.



**Figure 5.** *Brasehidleren*. Medieval double composite bone/antler comb (S7863a) (Photo: ©Terje Tveit, Museum of Archaeology, University of Stavanger)

The rockshelter at *Juvvik* lies on the hillside above the Suldal lake (Hals 1938; Storvik 2011). It is located c. 60 m ‘as the crow flies’ from an agriculture settlement; however, it is sited in a rather steep and rugged terrain above the agricultural settlement. The shelter was found by non-professionals during the removal of large stones in 1936. No information on the size of the shelter is available and there are no C14-dates. The finders observed a fireplace with burned bones. Close to the fireplace they collected a steatite ladle, fragments of two leather shoes, a hone and a spindle whorl – the latter was made from a naturally dome-shaped stone (Hals 1938) and, thus, probably homemade. Typologically, the ladle and the shoes can be

dated broadly to the Middle Ages based on similar findings from medieval Bergen (cf. Larsen 1992; Vangstad 2003). The spindle whorl and hone show that miscellaneous production, such as the spinning of yarn and maintenance of tools, took place here. An assessment of the area's natural resources has not been made and it cannot be determined whether it is suitable, or has historically been used, for shieling or hunting purposes. The artefacts may suggest that stays here were planned to be of some duration or that they were repeated. Again, a reference should be made to the frequent occurrence of spindle whorls and hones at shieling sites. However, with the very rugged terrain and the rather short distance from the contemporary settlement in mind, we find the shelter a puzzling location for a shieling site. It is also possible that this was merely a hiding place or a place for storing artefacts, although it is difficult to see why there was a need for hiding hones and spindle whorls. Based on the very sparse data, the main function of the shelter is interpreted more broadly as a dwelling site where occupations of unknown lengths have taken place.



**Figure 6.** The rockshelter *Storsethelleren* is situated under the large boulder in front. The valley *Matresdalen* is in the background (Photo: Bjørn Ringstad. ©University Museum of Bergen)

*Storsethilleren* lies along the *Matre* river about 2,400 m from the nearest agricultural settlement at *Masfjorden* (Fig. 6). The floor area of the shelter covers about 30 m<sup>2</sup> (Ringstad 1985, 1). The site has been modified with stone walls built to accentuate the natural ‘rooms’ of the shelter. Presumably, this was done to prevent drafts and to make more adequate use of the different areas of shelter. The date for the modifications is, however, unknown. The shelter has been excavated twice (Bjørn 1915; Ringstad 1985). Data was collected during an excavation in 1914 (7 m<sup>2</sup>) where only about 10 finds were collected, and during excavation in 1985 (4 m<sup>2</sup>) when some 70 artefacts were retrieved, in addition to 1,650 bone fragments

(Ringstad 1985). The excavator of the latter investigation expressed his concern that as a consequence of the 1914 campaign, some of the finds from the 1985 campaign may have come from mixed contexts (medieval as well as older material) and, therefore, the finds are not correlated into phases in the report from the 1985 excavation. Two C14-dates indicate that activities took place during the high, as well as during the late Middle Ages /early modern periods. Artefacts that can be dated by typology confirm this: two spindle whorls of dark green serpentine/diabase (type as Hansen 2005, Fig. 52), that date to the 12th-14th centuries in Bergen (data from original documentation from the Bryggen site, BRM 0) confirm that activities took place in the high Middle Ages. Three shards of a stoneware beaker, most probably of Raeren ware (Dunlop cited in Ringstad 1985), dated to c. 1500 (Lüdtke 1989, 33), confirm that activities also took place during the late medieval/early modern period (Fig. 7). Archaeological finds from the shelter comprise spindle whorls, one or two pairs of scissors, knife-fragments, hones, bronze and iron fragments, pottery and a soapstone vessel, as well as personal accessories such as buttons (one of leather, one in copper alloy), a silver fitting and a belt buckle in copper alloy. Analysis of the bone remains show that most of the mammals were domesticated animals (mainly sheep/goat), although red deer and a few fur-bearing animals were also found. The site occupants had also consumed fresh water fish, presumably from the nearby river (salmon and trout), as well as a number of marine species: seal, cod, haddock, redfish, and saithe (Brinkmann in Bjørn 1915; Lathipariä in Ringstad 1985).



**Figure 7.** Three shards of a stone ware beaker and two dark green serpentine diabase spindle whorls from Storsetehilleren (B13948/3, 7, 12 and 21, B6577) (Photo: S. Skare, ©University Museum of Bergen)

Archaeologist Bjørn Ringstad interprets the shelter as a short-term dwelling site, probably a shieling, connected to the local farm, from which the tending of sheep/goats and cattle was carried out and hunting and fishing expeditions were organised (Ringstad 1985). The inventory shows that miscellaneous productive activities took place at Storsetehilleren, among other yarn was spun. The presence of crafting and maintenance tools, as well as pottery and

a soapstone vessel, and the varied diet demonstrated by the faunal remains indicate that the shelter dwellers stayed at the site for longer periods than just a single day. The bone remains also show that the users had contact with, or were part of a community that practiced husbandry for meat and dairy products and utilised marine resources. In recent history, built shielings were composed of many units/houses and, for example, dairy products were stored in cool buildings that were separate from the heated dwelling units (Sandvig 1942, 121). Perhaps the modification of the Storsetehilleren shelter's natural rooms may reflect a division of space into cool and heated areas? Based on the available data, it seems reasonable to assume that the shelter mainly functioned as a shieling and that secondary activities such as spinning and maintenance of tools took place there.

*Kobbehammerskleiva* is situated at 4.5 masl on the coast of the island Spissøy, and some 1,200 m from the nearest agricultural settlement. The shelter covers c. 24 m<sup>2</sup> under the dripline. In 1995-1996, 15 m<sup>2</sup> were excavated. Fishing is considered to be excellent in the sea close to Spissøy (Anfinset 1995; 1996; Bommen 2009). Four C14-dates indicate that the upper layers of the site were deposited in the early or high Middle Ages. The excavations uncovered artefacts and faunal data. No datable artefacts were found. A possible iron key and a bone needle were retrieved. Slag was also present at the site as well as flint – probably for lighting fires. Shells and bone material occurred in large quantities in the medieval layers. The faunal data consisted of a variety of wild as well as domesticated mammals, marine birds and different fish species.

The artefact material shows that various productive/craft activities took place in the Kobberhammerskleiva shelter; the bone needle may have been used for sowing or mending. Several pieces of slag have a glossy surface that may stem from the addition of fluxing material whilst forging artefacts. Other slag pieces may perhaps be the result of raw iron refinement (primary forging). If this interpretation is correct, both raw iron cleansing and object forging may have taken place here. The shelter's location close to the shoreline, and the large amount of fish bones retrieved in the cultural layers may also indicate that the site was used for the procurement of marine resources in the Bømlo archipelagos. The variety of faunal material may indicate that the occupants stayed there long enough to have brought food with them that would last for a while. The site is interpreted as a combined smithy and a short-term station for coastal hunting and fishing. The main function cannot be determined and it is certainly possible that both functions define the shelter's use. The site may thus have been a smithy where the smith partly provided his own food through fishing. Alternatively, the site was used as a hunting/fishing station independent of the smith's activities there.

Also in the lowland, and also at some distance from contemporary farmsteads, are the rockshelters at *Rønset*, *Kvitafjell* and *Lok. 44 Ertenstein 1*. These are all in the close vicinity of stone quarries.

The rockshelter at *Rønset* is situated at the coast by the village of Hyllestad. The shelter is located in the midst of an area with large quernstone quarries (mica schist). It covers an area of c. 70 m<sup>2</sup> (our calculation is based on Baug 2013, Fig. 5.18) and was adjusted to meet the needs of the users by the addition of upright slabs for stone walls (date unknown). The shelter has been test-pitted and three C14-samples date activity broadly to the early and high Middle Ages. The archaeological deposits consisted of quernstone production waste, layers of charcoal, and some slag from forging. Archaeologist Irene Baug interprets the site as a workshop for

the quarry site, primarily for the forging and resharpening of iron tools, although small-scale quernstone production was also carried out (Baug 2013, 93-101). In accordance with this, the main function of the shelter was to serve as a quarry workshop in connection with the adjacent stone industry.

The *Kvitafjell* shelter is located by lake Kvitbergvatn in Kvinnherad, close to several bakestone quarries (of talc containing green schist). It has been investigated twice by test-pitting (Weber 1984; Baug 2013). It covers c. 60 m<sup>2</sup> under the dripline (our calculation is based on information in Baug 2013, 195-196). Four C14-determinations date the activities to the early and high Middle Ages (Baug 2013, 198). Unfinished bakestones were found at the surface of the shelter and in the excavated trenches and test pits. The deposits also consisted of large amounts of schist flakes from bakestone production (thinning). Furthermore, a tuyère and c. 20 kg slag have been found at the site (Weber 1984). Baug convincingly argues that *Kvitafjell* was primarily a workshop for thinning bakestone, although the forging and sharpening of iron tools also took place here (Baug 2013, 95). In accordance with this, the shelter is classified as a quarry workshop in connection with the stone industry.

The shelter *Lok. 44 Ertenstein 1* is located by the coast close to the shoreline of the island Rennesøy, c. 50 m from a stone quarry characterised as a 'soapstone' quarry in the Directorate of Cultural Heritage's database, 'Askeladden' (Id 60924). The quarry is today identified as a carbonate containing green schist (Jansen 2013, 78). Building stone for medieval churches was quarried here (Høgestøl 1995, 203-206), as well as baking stones (Baug 2013, 15). The shelter covers about 5 m<sup>2</sup> under the dripline, but an area of about 80 m<sup>2</sup> outside the shelter was characterised by culture layers, and five hearths were also documented here. Altogether 15 m<sup>2</sup> were excavated and 14C-samples date activity broadly to the early/high Middle Ages (Høgestøl 1995, 203-206). One of the medieval deposits outside the shelter is described as a 'soapstone' (probably green schist flakes) layer with charcoal and a thickness of up to 10 cm. Fragments of unfinished bakestones (a common product made of green schist) were also found as well as a possible tuyère, slag, and a possible grinding stone. The excavators suggest that the site was used as place where stoneworkers rested and carried out maintenance of iron tools (Høgestøl 1995, 206). This seems plausible. However, considering the amount of stone production waste in the culture layers, it should be specified that the main function of the shelter, as well as the area immediately outside, was as a quarry workshop. Other activities were probably secondary.

The last four sites are situated at the infield, or within easy walking distance of contemporary farmsteads. The shelters are *Hallgrimshelleren*, *Storabergshelleren*, *Holmefjordshelleren* and *Smiehelleren*.

*Hallgrimshelleren* is situated close to the shore of the fjord Samlafjorden in the village Herand (Fig. 8). It covers c. 70-80 m<sup>2</sup> under the dripline and lies c. 100 m from the existing houses of Sævarhagen farm, which was also occupied during the medieval period (Losnegård 2006, 100). An area of 3 m<sup>2</sup> has been excavated (Bergsvik et al. 2014). Occupational layers were found and two phases were C14-dated to the early/high Middle Ages and the late Middle Age/early modern period. The latter date can be narrowed down to the early modern period by pottery of early modern red ware types (Fig. 9).

In the older of the two phases, culture layers are characterised by a large amount of charcoal, slag and bone. Pieces of iron slag with a glossy surface were found as well as scrap iron: one



**Figure 8.** The rockshelter Hallgrimshelleren at the Sævarhagen farm in the village Herand (Photo: K. A. Bergsvik)



**Figure 9.** Hallgrimshelleren. Early modern period red ware pottery (Photo: Svein Skare. ©University Museum of Bergen)

iron nail and a few iron fragments. In the earliest phase, culture layers are also characterised by a large amount of charcoal, slag, some shell and bone. Compared to the oldest phase, large amounts of iron slag were retrieved. Other artefacts were bead-shaped hammerscales and several iron tools: a hammer-head, two chisels, a possible knife, a 'possible tool' and a hone (Figure 10). A relatively large number of undetermined pieces of iron and a few pieces of bronze/copper – a small bar (1.4 g) and small pieces of sheet metal – were also found. Finally, shards of pottery with traces of charcoal on the outside, a soapstone vessel, as well as one piece of red deer antler production waste were retrieved. The antler piece was a shed burr and may well have been from a red deer hunted locally.



**Figure 10.** *Hallgrimshelleren. Early modern period metal artefacts: 1. Iron point. 2. Iron hook. 3. Bended piece of iron 4. Iron hammer-head. 5. Bar of copper (Photo: Svein Skare. ©University Museum of Bergen)*

With respect to the early/high medieval phase, the glossy slag may represent forging involving the use of flux. Together with the bead-shaped hammerscales, this indicates that artefact production has taken place (cf. Narmo 1997, 153). The shelter was thus used as a smithy. In the late medieval/early modern phase, some of the slag is interpreted as waste from raw iron cleansing due to its large dimensions and high iron content. The iron tools may well be associated with smithing. The pottery and soapstone vessel may have been used in connection with drinking or eating, but in this context may also have been containers that were (re-)used in connection with crafts and production. The antler fragment shows that other small-scale crafting activities, probably exploiting local resources, were also carried out here. The copper alloy waste may be the remains of small-scale non-ferrous metal working, although this is not so well substantiated. Given the predominance of slag and metal objects, the shelter is

interpreted mainly as a smithy in both the early and the late phases. In the early modern period, the shelter also hosted secondary activities such as antler working and, as such, was a multi-purpose workshop. Given the location of the shelter in the infield area of the medieval settlement, the workshop is interpreted as somehow connected to Sævarhagen farm, in both the early and the late phases.

*Storabergshelleren* is situated close to lake Herandsvatnet, also in the of village Herand. It covers an area of c. 25 m<sup>2</sup> under the dripline and lies around 200 m from the existing houses of Bakke farm, which was also occupied during the medieval period (Losnegård 2006, 100). Three test pits were excavated (Bergsvik 2014). The relevant layer was radiocarbon dated to the late medieval/early modern period.

Pieces of slag were found as well as burned clay, bronze/copper sheet metal and a hone. Several of the slag pieces are glossy and may stem from the use of flux during forging (Narmo 1997, 153). It is thus likely that artefacts were forged and the copper alloy fragments may be the remains of copper alloy working, but this is not well substantiated. The hone suggests the miscellaneous maintenance of tools. The site is classified as mainly a smithy that was somehow connected to the nearby agrarian settlement at Bakke.

*Holmefjordhelleren* lies relatively close to the shore of the fjord Ådlandsfjorden in Fusa, Hordaland. It covers an area of about 51 m<sup>2</sup>. It is situated in the vicinity of existing farmhouses and is no more than 250 m from farmhouses that were occupied during the medieval period. An area of 4 m<sup>2</sup> was excavated (Bjerck 1986). No C14-dates are available, however, in a Norwegian context, baking stones are characteristic of the Middle Ages (e.g. Baug 2013, 36 with references) and date the activity broadly to this period. Significant amounts of slag were found in addition to iron rivets, hones, bronze/copper sheet metal and the baking stones. Bjerck suggests that the shelter was a combined *eldhus* (multi-purpose workshop where fire-related activities are carried out) and smithy for the local agrarian community (Bjerck 1986). Based on the predominance of metal-working related finds, it is plausible to characterise the shelter as mainly a smithy where secondary activities such as baking or heating of food-stuffs took place.

*Smiehelleren* lies by the shore of the river Rauma. It is situated underneath a large boulder and no more than 200 m from contemporary farmhouses. The shelter covers an area of c. 24 m<sup>2</sup>, all of which was excavated. In addition, an area of around 30 m<sup>2</sup> outside the shelter was excavated. Inside the shelter, stone walls (of unknown date) have been constructed in order to ensure adequate use. A C14-date from the hearth in a house just outside the shelter is dated to late the Middle Ages/early modern period (Sauvage 2005b). The artefact material – pottery and clay pipe fragments – narrows the date down to the early modern period. In addition to these artefact-types, large amounts of charcoal and slag were found. The latter is interpreted by the excavators as the remains of raw iron cleansing as well as artefact production. Scrap iron, fragments of copper alloy waste, moulds for casting, non-ferrous metals and unfinished buttons of pewter were also among the finds. The site was termed ‘Smiehelleren’ (the smith’s rockshelter) in a contract from 1847. The archaeological data shows that smithing activities, which gave the name to the shelter in recent history, go back, at least, to the early modern period and perhaps even into the Middle Ages (Haug 2012). Smiehelleren is classified as mainly a smithy where iron-working as well as other metal working took place

Figure 11 provides a summary of the main functions of the 13 medieval rockshelter sites studied. Most of them are relatively spacious behind the dripline, and the mean shelter-size is c. 40 m<sup>2</sup>. Their main functions were:

- Mountain hunting-fishing stations/shielings
- Lowland hunting-fishing stations/shielings
- Lowland quarry workshops
- Lowland metal-working smith's workshops

As is evident from the above, the range of uses of the shelters and their locations are more varied than initially expected.

The discussions of the individual shelters show that the primary functions of some shelters are sometimes difficult to determine. The functions of hunting-fishing stations and shielings are combined into one category because, in reality, these two functions are not easily distinguished from the sparse data available. Often, a variety of secondary activities also took place and in this respect, most of the shelters may actually be characterised as multi-purpose sites.

Figure 11 also shows the main functions of the shelter sites correlated to the sub-periods. It is interesting to note that the quarry workshop-shelters were only used in the early and high Middle Ages. The lack of use during the late middle Ages and early modern period should, however, in all likelihood be explained by the general decline in activity in the nearby quarries during these periods (cf. Baug 2013). Although there are individual differences which may have been important at a local level, the remaining functions of the rockshelters appear to have continued throughout the period.

### ***Shelter-functions: a discussion***

How does the image of shelter-use provided by the archaeological and written evidence coincide? On the basis of the above survey of archaeological sources, it seems clear that the medieval rockshelters were used in connection with many aspects of work and daily life in rural Western Norway. They may generally have been perceived as 'convenient cavities' (e.g. Straus 1997); practical places to be used for a number of purposes. However, whilst archaeology shows variability in the use of shelters, the historical sources are less diverse in their scope of functions. According to the survey of the texts, the caves and rockshelters were clearly a part of people's consciousness, but they were mainly referred to as hiding places or temporary storage facilities.

Such places might, theoretically, be possible to identify archaeologically. One problem, however, is that it would be difficult to distinguish a 'short-term hide out' from other sporadic dwelling or storage sites, even if one had a rich data set. One may, therefore, argue that a comparison is deemed to be fruitless. On the other hand, even if the main functions of the shelters identified in the archaeological sources are not readily compatible with a theory of the sites as hideouts (cf. Fig. 11), it can be argued that the location of some of the shelters in the archaeological survey have made them suitable as such. This interpretation is relevant for the sites of Karaldevatn, Vinjakvelven, Brasehidleren and Juvvik, which are situated at some distance from agricultural settlements and partly in rugged terrain. However, since all of these shelters (perhaps with the exception of Juvvik) are also situated in areas fit for hunting, fishing,

Site name	Mountain hunting/ fishing station/shieling				Lowland hunting/ fishing station/shieling				Lowland Quarry workshop				Lowland Metal smith's workshop			
	EMA	HMA	LMA	EM	EMA	HMA	LMA	EM	EMA	HMA	LMA	EM	EMA	HMA	LMA	EM
Karaldevatn																
Vinjakvelven																
Storsethilleren																
Kobbekammerskleiva																
Juvvik rockshelter																
Brasehilleren																
Rønset rockshelter																
Kvitafjell rockshelter																
Lok. 44. Ertenstein 1																
Smiehelleren																
Hallgrimshelleren																
Storaberg helleren																
Holmefjord helleren																

**Figure 11.** Summary of the main functions of the medieval and early modern rockshelters in western Norway. Abbreviated sub-periods: EMA: Early medieval (c. 1030-1150), HMA: High medieval (c. 1150-1350), LMA: Late medieval (c. 1350-1537), EM: Early modern (c. 1537-1650)

and/or husbandry, perhaps a more relevant interpretation is that these sites were shielings or hunting-fishing stations. The remaining shelters are unlikely to have functioned well as hideouts. They all lie in the lowland, in relatively close proximity to agricultural settlements, and are also easily accessible from these settlements or from routes of communication. Furthermore, the archaeological data from these sites clearly indicates workshop activities and, accordingly, do not fit with a theory of people on the run.

The apparent lack of overlap in the functions indicated by each of the two source categories should not be seen as problematic; they represent different aspects of reality and their value as sources should, therefore, be seen as complementary rather than competing. The limited functional range from the written sources has to be understood in the light of the purpose of these texts. Here, stories about dramatic events are at the core and everyday prosaic undertakings are mentioned only in passing. For example, activities with major economic importance in medieval Norway, such as quernstone quarrying or iron extraction, although well documented in archaeological sources, are hardly to be found in medieval written sources (e.g. Larsen 2009, 12; Baug 2013). Thus, the discrepancy between information based on archaeology on the one hand, and written sources on the other, is not surprising.

## Social identities

In terms of the social identities of the shelter-users, there are discrepancies here too between the information provided by the sagas and the archaeological data. It was initially asked whether the rockshelters were used only by people in the lower strata of the society. This is contradicted by the written sources, even if most of them use these places involuntarily or by chance. The people who appear in these texts belong to the middle, and sometimes also to the higher levels of the social hierarchy. Again, these sources probably do not reflect the diversity of the uses of these places. Below, we will discuss the issue of the social identities of the shelter-users, based mainly on the archaeological data. First, we discuss the presence of women and men, and we then proceed to consider their status in the social hierarchy.

The sagas only mention male users of the rockshelters. The archaeological data from several of the caves also indicate male presence. Smithing is documented in eight of our shelters. In the Viking period, only male graves are furnished with smith's tools (Solberg 2012, 238). It is commonly assumed that in the Middle Ages also, smithing was a male activity, and this assumption is supported by, for instance Sigurd Grieg's survey of medieval written sources and seals, where only male names came up in association with the term *smidr* (Grieg 1936, 200-201). Hunting and fishing are also activities that can be associated with the shelters, and these too were mainly male tasks (e.g. Øye 2002, 403-404). In his overview of the written sources, Grieg found that only male masons were mentioned by name (Grieg 1936, 75-81). However, it is somewhat more uncertain whether stone quarrying and the further refinement of baking stones and quernstones were only performed by men, or if women and youngsters were also involved (Baug 2015, 243). The spindle whorls found in Storsetehelleren, Brasehidleren, and in the rockshelter at Juvvik clearly indicate spinning, which is considered to have been a female task during the period under study here (Øye 2002, 403-404). The presence of women among the shelter users is thus well documented. Baking is also traditionally associated with women in the Middle Ages (Hansen 2006, 309) and baking stones such as those found in Holmefjordhelleren, which show that heating of foodstuffs has taken place, may also indicate

the presence of women. In any case, the variability in activities performed in the shelters shows that they were used by both sexes.

A question is how these men and women were placed in the social hierarchy. This can be studied in terms of the activities identified in the shelters as well as in the material artefacts.

Three of the shelters are characterised mainly as workshops connected to stone quarries. The question of the social statuses of those who worked at the quarries in Hyllestad and Ølve is discussed by Irene Baug (2015). She points out that the quarries were owned by local magnates or freeholders in the Viking age/early medieval period and later by ecclesiastical institutions or the king. She suggests that in the earliest period, the owners themselves may have been directly involved in production and that it was taken over by tenants in the later period. From the sources, it is difficult to infer much about the specific actors who were working in the quarries. She suggests that the quarrying took place in the wintertime when there was less to do on the farms and that it was carried out by people from diverse backgrounds and positions. It was, perhaps, not the owners themselves who undertook this physical work and farmers, tenants, as well as thralls (in the earliest period), may have been involved in the quarrying (Baug 2015, 243).

Smithing has taken place in eight of the shelters and in five of them, this seems to have been a primary activity. Different aspects of the social identities of smiths in the early and high middle ages have been discussed by others (e.g. Grieg 1936, 51; Narmo 2003). One question concerns the problem of permanency vs. itinerancy, that is, whether the smiths were part of the local community or if they were itinerant craftspeople who served the local communities at intervals. In the early medieval period itinerant smiths, in particular, are implied from data on urban sites (Hansen 2005, 157-205). In terms of the question posed here, however, the data do not clearly support either of the alternatives - permanent or itinerant. One argument in favour of some of the smiths in the rockshelters being permanent is the fact that there are as many as two rockshelters with medieval smithies in the small village of Herand (Hallgrimshelleren and Storaberghelleren). This could imply that each of these were the 'farm smithies' of the local farms at Sævarhelleren and Bakke. If this was the case, however, it is strange that these smithies are located in rockshelters at some distance (100-200 m) from the farms. Why were they not placed in constructed timber workshops closer to the settlements?

Here, practical reasons should probably be taken into account. As pointed out above, the shelters were highly convenient for a number of reasons. They provided ready-made spaces which needed little maintenance and which were relatively large, dry, cool, fire-proof, and where daylight was easy to control. Indoor smithies can be extremely hot and the open rockshelters may have solved this problem. Also relevant here is the fact that, due to the fire hazard, smiths in high medieval towns were supposed to have their workshops on the outskirts of the built-up areas (Helle 1982, 282). It would, therefore, also make perfect sense in rural milieus to establish the smithies at some distance from the timber-built environment. Nevertheless, the fact that the workshop-shelters in the current study were somewhat removed from the central areas of the farming community may also have been conveniently neutral for an itinerant smith; customers from a larger area could come to the smithy and the craftsman could execute orders. Supporting such a hypothesis is the fact that several of our shelters are well located in terms of communications over sea and land. Smiehelleren lies close to the

Rauma river in the Romsdal valley, which is a major transportation route between western and eastern Norway. The sites Hallgrimshelleren, Holmefjordhelleren, and Kobbhammerskleiva lie near the shoreline of the sea, close to main sailing routes and with favourable harbour conditions. A case in point is Kobbhammerskleiva, which lies further away from agricultural settlements than any of the others mentioned above (1,200 m), and very close to the contemporary shoreline. At this site, the varied artefact material and faunal material show that fishing activities took place at the site, not only smithing. This could suggest that an itinerant smith lived here for a period of time and that he partly provided his own food through fishing.

With regard to the smiths' position in the social hierarchy, there is agreement that some smiths were held in high esteem in the early medieval period (e.g. Grieg 1936, 51; Narmo 2003). One question, however, is whether all types of smiths were equally regarded. As is pointed out by Sauvage (2005a, 76), there is likely to have been differences in status between smiths who produced jewelry or armory for the king and those who took care of the daily production and maintenance of iron tools in rural agrarian communities. The smiths operating in the rockshelters of the current study were, most probably, of the latter kind.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that throughout the period under study even rural smiths must have had a certain status in the communities they served. This would be the case regardless of whether they were permanently settled members of the local community or had a looser connection. First, in order to carry out their craft they needed to possess 'know-how' or skills that were not easily accessible. These skills had to be learned by way of a tutor-apprentice relationship and were, perhaps, unlikely to be held by all people in a local community. Second, the smith needed a certain infrastructure at his disposal: a convenient fire-proof place to work, a furnace, anvil, a pair of bellows and a number of specialist iron tools. It is perhaps unlikely that a person with such skills and with access to such infrastructure would have had a particularly low social status. Grieg's assessment of written sources from the 12th-13th century points in the same direction and he concludes that rural smiths during these periods seem to have had a relatively independent status compared to other rural crafts people (Grieg 1936, 51). Regarding the late medieval and early modern phases, the smiths' status has not been the subject of much recent research. If we turn again to Grieg, however, he points out that during the 14th-15th centuries, rural smiths (Norse: *smidr*) are mentioned as landowners in several instances in the written sources. The term *smidr* may cover both metal-working smiths and wood-working smiths and it is not always possible to decide which kind of *smidr* the text is referring to. Still, the relatively frequent mention of *smidr* implies that many metal-working smiths must have been landowners (Grieg 1936, 201). Grieg also provides several examples of mid-14th century landowner's seals that carry smiths' tools, such as thongs and hammers (Grieg 1936, 200, 234). Even if the presence of smith's tools on a seal may not directly reflect the owner's trade, we may still argue that their presence implies a positive association with the smith's craft. Grieg's observations may thus suggest that in the late medieval period, smithing was not considered a low status craft and, consequently, that rural smiths probably enjoyed relatively high status. All considered, we find it likely that in the periods covered by the current study, rural metal working smiths did not belong to society's lowest classes.

An assessment of the nature of some of the objects found in the shelters may also provide a broad impression of the dwellers' positions in the social hierarchies. In studies that take their point of reference from the archaeological data, an inherent problem is that the very poor are

difficult to identify simply because they did not have many belongings to leave behind for the archaeologists to find (cf. Utne 2008). Our shelter users did, however, leave some objects behind that shed a dim light on the question of their social status.

Judging against similar materials from Bergen, Trondheim and Oslo, the comb found in Brasehidleren shelter was almost certainly made professionally. It was, therefore, a comb that had been bought and not homemade. However, the rather poor craftsmanship of this piece (the rivets that hold the comb together are placed unevenly and the engraved profiles at the connection plates are made in a sloppy manner), classifies it as a comb of relatively low quality (cf. Hansen 2015). Nevertheless, it is an example of an object, the style of which was completely in accordance with those used among ordinary people in contemporary society at large (cf. Wiberg 1977; Flodin 1989). The two spindle whorls from the shelter at Storsetehelleren, made of dark-green serpentine diabase, are of the same category; they, also, were likely to have been bought rather than homemade and they represent an object-type that is very common among ordinary consumers in early and high medieval Bergen (Hansen 2005, 195). Furthermore, in Storsetehelleren, Hallgrimshelleren and Smiehelleren, imported pottery was found, and in Smiehelleren, fragments of a clay pipe also turned up in the latest phase. Together, this material shows that the occupants of the above shelters surrounded themselves with material culture comparable to that of the contemporary urban milieu; they apparently had clear insight into trends and styles among ordinary people and had access to objects that were traded at central markets such as Bergen, or distributed in other ways. This makes it highly unlikely that they belonged to society's lowest social classes.

Clearly, these examples have some bearing on our general understanding of the social positions of the people who occupied the rockshelters. Although we cannot exclude the possibility that they were used by the poorest in society, or for that matter the richest, we may safely conclude that they were occupied by individuals who belonged to segments of society that had access to mainstream material culture.

## **Quantitative changes**

Considering the broad range of functions of the shelters and the 'middle level' social status of their users, it is all the more surprising then, that only 13 medieval rockshelters were identified by the current archaeological survey; if they really were that convenient, why were they not more commonly used? As pointed out initially, altogether 260 caves and rockshelters have traces of human use in Western Norway. Among these, as many as 49 sites have layers securely dated to the Roman and Migration periods (the early Iron Age) (Bergsvik in press), which roughly cover the same length of time as the period considered here, and where there were many similarities in the basic rural economy which would, in theory, lead to a similar need for shelter sites. We may add here, that in terms of artefact identification and dating, the early Iron Age and the medieval periods also have a fairly similar archaeological 'visibility'. This means that the quantitative difference between the two periods, in all likelihood represents a real difference in the use of this site-type.

Another important difference between the shelters studied here and their older counterparts, is that as many as 7-8 of the current shelters are workshop sites, whilst only 5-6 were used as dwellings (hunting/fishing stations or shielings). In addition to the above differences in quantity, this also represents a proportionate difference when compared to the data from the

early Iron Age where the main function as workshops is much less common. In the early Iron Age, productive activities such as forging also took place in the shelters but at these sites these tasks were nearly always secondary activities, which can mainly be classified as hunting/fishing stations or sites for tending animals (Bergsvik in press). The marked difference in the number of workshop sites in the Middle Ages and early modern period is probably related to a general growth in stone quarrying and iron production from the early Middle Ages and a subsequent need for smiths and quarry workers (Øye 2002, 384-387). From the current data, it appears that rockshelters were sometimes appropriate for such specialist activities.

When compared to the data from the early Iron Age, the low number of medieval dwelling-rockshelters (hunting/fishing stations or shielings) is particularly puzzling and we can only speculate as to why there were so few of these sites. One possibility is that, contrary to the previous periods, timber architecture and buildings were now preferred in the medieval period; they were more flexible in terms of size as well as function (Øye 2002, 281-283). This may have meant that although rockshelters were accessible and convenient in the lowland and mountain environments, in terms of dwellings/shielings it was more practical and more convenient, perhaps also more comfortable, to stay in timber houses. Contrary to the spatially fixed rockshelters, timber houses could also be built in the most strategic locations in the terrain and could be moved and extended. Another possible answer may also be found in the general attitude expressed by the historical sources. The people who played the leading roles in the sagas belonged to the middle or upper strata in society and the negative perception of the caves and rockshelters, as expressed by some of the saga writers, may, therefore, be interpreted as the opinions of the elite. If there was a general attitude among the elite that caves and rockshelters were, in general, inhospitable places and not fit for human occupation, this attitude may have rubbed off on the population at large and resulted in a general avoidance of these sites for dwelling purposes.

## **Conclusions and perspectives**

With the exception of Ingvild Øye's contribution, caves and rockshelters have, until now, received little attention in research on the medieval period. For example, when going through the indexes of historical or archaeological overviews, the entries 'rockshelter' or 'cave' are seldom found. In an effort to address this situation, saga texts as well as archaeological site data from Western Norway were surveyed in order to document shelter-use. The main research questions were first, whether the rockshelters were used by fugitives or people on the lower rungs of the social ladder, and second, if they were primarily used as hunting stations in the forests and in the mountains, far away from the built environment.

The survey of the text sources indicates that the documented range of shelter functions is limited to hideouts or places for storage and, as such, they may confirm some of the expectations. This is not the case, however, for the 13 archaeological sites with traces of medieval use. Although some of these shelters are situated in the mountains, the majority of the rockshelters are found in the lowlands, many in close proximity to the contemporary agricultural settlements. In addition to hunting stations, they were used for a variety of purposes such as shielings and quarry workshops, metal smith's workshops and, in many cases, as multi-purpose workshops. Data also indicate that the people who used the shelters were not social outcasts nor particularly poor. The artefacts found in the rockshelters show that people had access to material culture that was common among ordinary people in urban and rural communities during this period.

Furthermore, several of the rockshelters were primarily used as smithies, and many smiths enjoyed high status in medieval society.

The variability in functions notwithstanding, the quantitative patterns clearly show that the shelters were not particularly attractive as dwellings in the medieval and early modern period; relatively few could be classified as hunting/fishing stations or shielings. This is a marked contrast to how rockshelters were used during the preceding early Iron Age. This represents a significant cultural change and it is suggested here that it may partly be a result of architectural developments during the late Iron Age/early medieval period, partly a consequence of changed attitudes towards these places. These changes in the use of rockshelters need, however, more attention in order to be fully understood. This brief contribution should, therefore, only be seen as a first attempt to explore this intriguing topic. Based on the above survey, several avenues of research are feasible and these are outlined below.

- The above discussions have focused on the practical function of the caves and the social identities of the people who used them. However, other aspects of the rockshelters, in particular, religious symbolic perceptions and rituals, are also relevant. Such issues have been documented and discussed by others (e.g. Hommedal 1997; Mundal 1997; Steinsland 1997; Lie 2008; Barndon 2009; Heide 2014). In future research these aspects need to be integrated with the utilitarian approach in order to have a 'thicker' understanding of the significance of the late prehistoric and early historic caves and rockshelters of Western Norway.
- It appears from the above that the rockshelters situated close to contemporary farms were attractive as workshops. Based on current insights, it is likely that surveys aimed at identifying shelters of this kind may reveal many more sites. Without doubt, such sites also offer good opportunities for detailed studies of early historic technologies. In the case of forging, metal-working smiths' workshops have been identified and excavated in urban milieus but they are not often found or excavated in rural communities. For example, the rockshelter Hallgrimshelleren has only been subject to small-scale investigation. If more fully excavated, this site has major potential for providing a deeper understanding of medieval and early modern metal work.
- Contrary to many medieval settlements where human deposits or cultural layers are destroyed because of later occupations or cultivation (e.g. plowing), such deposits and layers are well preserved in the shelters. In effect, they are examples of rare sites where one has access to good contextual data from many rural communities. Furthermore, due to the dry environment inside the rockshelters, they also often have excellent preservation conditions for faunal material. This means that they offer good opportunities for the study of early historic subsistence, for example, on the relationship between wild and domesticated species in subsistence, slaughter practices, and bone technology.

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