

Heritage Alert: 6000-Year-Old Vingen Rock Art Area (Norway) and Pristine Surrounding Landscape Face Threat of Damage

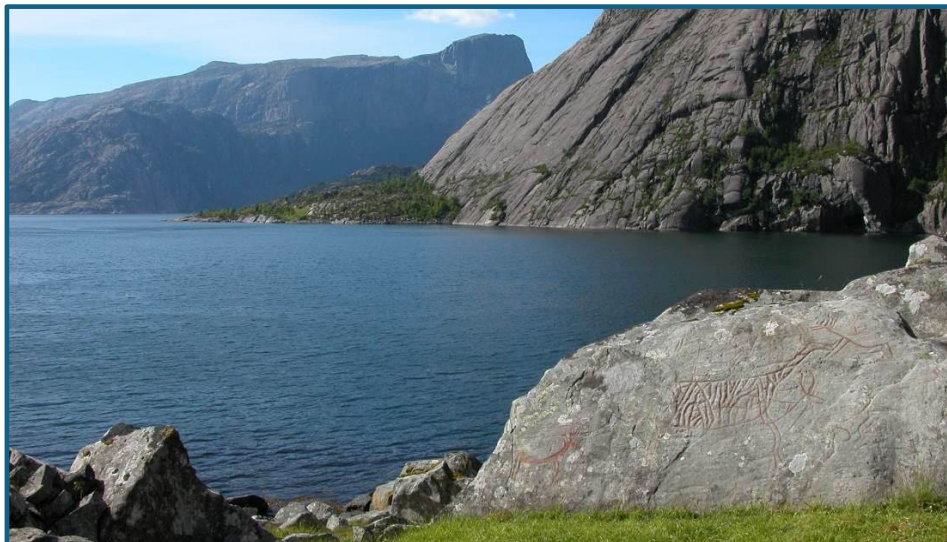


Figure 1. One of several hundred panels with rock art in the Vingen area, with red deer displayed in motion. In the background the peak Hornelen, Northern Europe's tallest sea cliff. The vegetated promontory Vingeneset in front of Hornelen is the location of 18 panels with rock art and approximately one hundred petroglyphs.

Background Information

The Vingen rock art area

The Vingen rock art area is one of the largest and best-preserved rock art concentrations in Northern Europe (**fig.1**). On large rock panels, big boulders and smaller stones surrounding the Vingen fjord in Bremanger, Western Norway, thousands of petroglyphs from the Stone Age can be found. The images display interactions between red deer, human skeletons, animal-headed staffs and sea mammals, and may be understood as a pictorial language, providing unique insight into past narratives. In addition, numerous archaeological traces and settlement sites are found here, also linked to the producers of the rock art. Many of these remain to be further investigated, but current research has revealed a rich archaeological source for future dating and decoding of the rock art. In addition, rock art is found at several smaller locations westwards along the Frøysjøen fjord, between the central Vingen area and Hennøya, where plans for a quarry and shipping port have now been approved.

The Vingen area can only be reached by boat, and the surrounding area remains one of the largest on the outer coast of Western Norway still maintaining a road-free gradient from fjord to mountains. Since 1980 the Vingen rock art and immediate surroundings have been part of a strictly regulated landscape protection area. However, it is the location within a much larger pristine landscape that sets Vingen apart from most European rock art areas. This landscape has remained almost unchanged since the rock art was made during the Stone Age, thousands of years ago. The area is also famous for the nearby mountain Hornelen, its steep, 860 metre rock face considered to be the highest sea cliff in Europe.

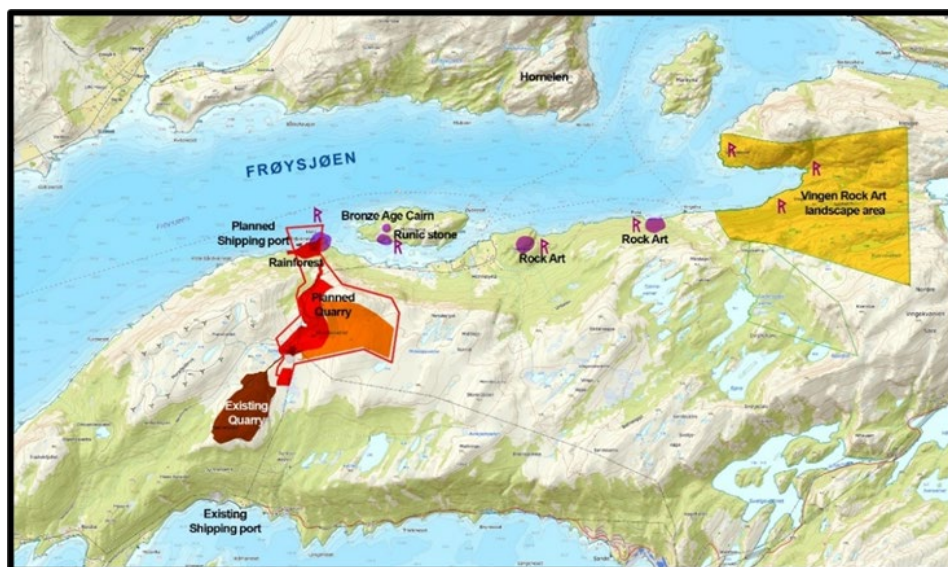


Figure 2. The Dyrstad peninsula, showing Vingen and Vingeneset to the east. The Vingen rock art area is surrounded by a landscape protection area. Outside the protected area, rock art has been found at Vingelven, Fura and Hennøystrenda (marked with "Rock Art"), but it is likely that Stone Age activity extended all the way to the planned shipping port. Several runic stones and a large Bronze Age cairn are located at the Hennøya island close to the planned shipping port. The Homelen sea cliff to the north.

Stone quarry and shipping port

On the Dyrstad peninsula (fig. 2, 5, 7), south and west of Vingen, the Municipal Council of Bremanger has recently approved establishment of a stone quarry on Aksla mountain, 590 masl. The planned industrial area covers 2393 daa¹, including a c. 850 daa²¹ area from which 130 m³ or 360 million tons of Devonian sandstone for European export will be extracted. The industrial area contains infrastructure, stone crushing facilities and a large shipping port at Inste Bårdvikneset on the northern side of the peninsula, approximately five kilometres westwards from the Vingen landscape protection area. A stone quarry is already in operation on the adjacent Sætreffjellet mountain, with an established shipping port located on the southern side of the peninsula (see figure 2). Both quarries are proposed and run by Beheersmij Fr. Bontrup BD, the Netherlands.

During the protracted planning period, these plans have been formally opposed by the Directorate for Cultural Heritage, The County Governor of Vestland, the Norwegian Environment Agency and the Ministry of Climate and Environment.

¹ 1 daa = 1000 square meters

²



Figure 3. The Hardbakken panel with more than 130 images of red deer and human skeletons. In the background the island of Hennøya, and the partly hidden Aksla mountain to its left.

The Directorate for Cultural Heritage maintains that the landscape surrounding Frøysjøen, including the Vingen rock art area and other cultural heritage sites, has significant national and international value (fig 3, 4). It is evidence to the way in which humans from the Stone Age until the present have adapted to the natural environment, the natural resources and transport on the waterways. The landscape is at present without notable modern interventions, and therefore its unique qualities remain visible. There are few such remaining areas in Norway or elsewhere.

The Aksla quarry development, particularly the shipping port towards Frøysjøen, will significantly alter this landscape. Industrial activity on land will only be partially visible from the Vingen area, but the Directorate has also raised concerns related to the effects of dust and sound pollution from industrial activity, particularly from shipping and loading in proximity to Vingen. The Directorate has concluded that the landscape and cultural heritage sites, with the intrinsic values linked to knowledge and experience, should be preserved.



Figure 4. One of the many red deer images from the Hardbakken panel



Figure 5. View from Vingeneset towards the Aksla mountain where the quarry and shipping port have been approved.

The County Governor of Vestland has similarly opposed the plans, arguing that they are not in accordance with approved overall area planning, that the impact analysis presented consistently under-evaluates negative effects, and that the shipping port will cause irreparable damage to nature and loss of red-listed species. This is supported by the Norwegian Environment Agency, who have expressed concerns that the shipping port will partly destroy and fragment one of the largest *Rich boreonemoral rainforests* in Norway (a red-listed nature type), including several red-listed species. It will puncture a roadless fjord landscape of great value (**fig. 6**), with an undisturbed gradient from fjord to mountain, and valuable assets such as the Vingen landscape protection area and the Hornelen sea cliff. The Agency also points to the lack of proper evaluation of alternative locations for the shipping port at Inste Bårdvikneset during the planning process.

The Ministry of Climate and Environment supports the viewpoints of the above agencies, and states that the plans threaten national environmental interests. The planned shipping port and infrastructure at Inste Bårdvikneset will cause severe damage to a nationally important locality with



Figure 6. Aerial view above the Aksla mountain towards Vingen.



Figure 7. The existing quarry at Sætreffjellet to the left (south). Outlined in red is the plan boundary of the Aksla quarry with the extraction area in yellow, and stone crushing plants, industrial area and a shipping port to the north. Note that the steep mountain side is partly hidden in shadow.

a red-listed nature type and endangered species. The intact and roadless landscape surrounding Frøysjøen, its historical and visual qualities including Hornelen, the Vingen rock art area and other cultural heritage sites, is of natural and cultural significance on a national level. A sufficient evaluation of alternative quarry and shipping port areas has not been carried out. The Ministry concludes that the economic value of quarry development for the Municipality of Bremanger is too small to justify the significant damage that will be caused to the natural and cultural landscape, and to environmental values of national importance (**fig. 8**).

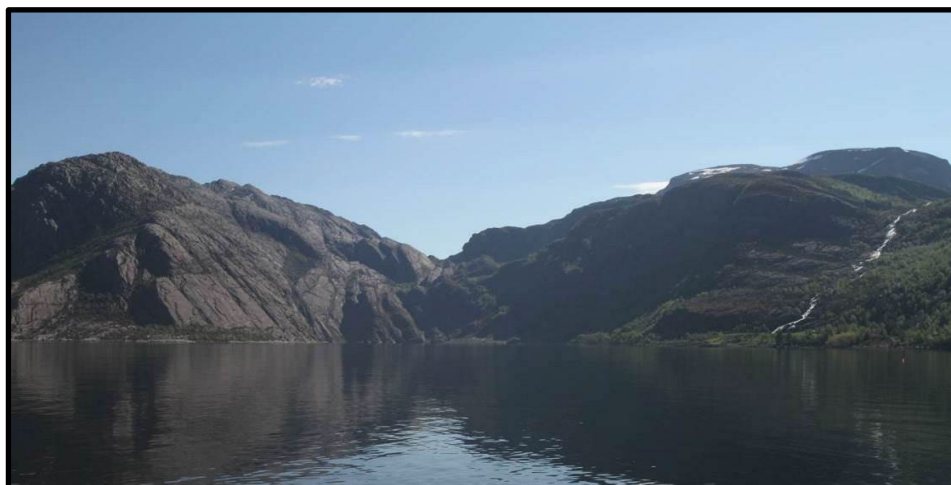


Figure 8. Approaching Vingen from the west.

As the Municipal Council of Bremanger has chosen to move forward with its plans despite the above opposition, the case has been finally reviewed by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, in accordance with the Planning and building act. The Ministry notes that it is the shipping port with its related activities and marine traffic, that will have the greatest negative effect on both cultural heritage and natural environment at Frøysjøen. However, it is argued that the quarry and shipping port cannot be considered separately. In February 2024 the Ministry finally approved the quarry development, stating that the positive economic effects for the local community outweigh the negative effects for the natural and cultural environment. Following this decision, several questions have been raised in the Norwegian Parliament concerning the quality of knowledge and information on which the Ministry has based its conclusions. It has been revealed

that the Municipal Council of Bremanger has supplied the Ministry with erroneous information concerning environmental values.



Figure 9. Vingen: The Brattebakken panel to the left.



Figure 10. A selection of rock art images from the Brattebakken panel.

ICOMOS Norway therefore believes that this decision will irreparably damage the pristine historic landscape at Frøysjøen and expose the Vingen rock art area to severely negative visual impact from industrial activity, as well as sound and dust contamination (**fig 9,10**). The visual scarring of the surrounding landscape will change the Vingen area permanently. Cultural heritage sites in vicinity of the planned shipping port, including several other rock art sites, runic stones, gravemounds and a large Bronze age cairn will also have their surroundings heavily impacted, or be fully destroyed.

1-0 Identity of Building/Artefact/Object/Place

1-1 Current name and original name.*
The Vingen rock art area.

1-2 Location Town, Country, Street
Vingen, Municipality of Bremanger, Vestland County, Norway



Figure 11. Reoccurring wind phenomenon at the Vingen fjord adding to the dramatic nature in the area

1-3 Classification/ Type of place

Extensive rock art area, including other archaeological sites which at present are not fully documented. Located on the coast of western Norway, surrounded by steep mountains to the south, east and north, exposing the area to harsh sea, wind, and weather conditions. Cascading waterfalls, circular winds, sea currents and tidal conditions place the rock art within a dramatic landscape context (**fig 8,11**). The enclosed rock art area and surrounding steep mountains create a natural cathedral, enhanced during winter and late autumn when the surrounding peaks prevent

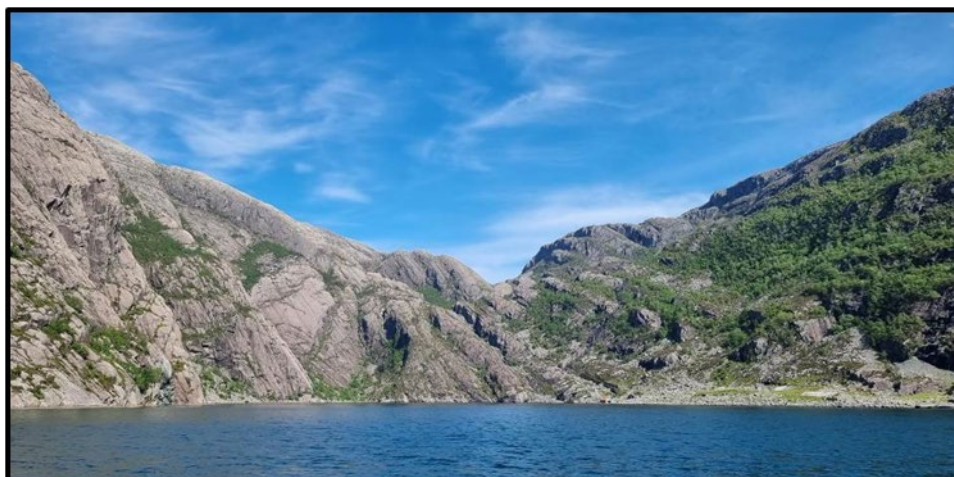


Figure 12. The head of the Vingen fjord with the densest concentration of rock art to the right, more than 2000 individual images on 300 panels.



Figure 13. Hornelen and the promontory Vingeneset, where more than 18 panels with rock art are located.

sun from reaching the area. Prevailing winds from the west are also known to carry sounds over long distances into this enclosed area. The view from Vingen towards Hornelen mountain and westwards along the Frøysjøen fjord, is currently unspoiled by modern interventions.

1-4 Current Heritage Protection Status

A protected landscape area surrounding the rock art was established in 1980 through the Nature Diversity Act.

The rock art and other archaeological sites are all automatically protected through the Cultural Heritage Act, with additional protection placed on a larger surrounding area through declaration as a protected cultural heritage area in 2001.

2-0 Statement of Significance and History

2-1 Statement of Significance

The area is unique, being one of the most authentic rock art areas in Northern Europe, set within a landscape with hardly any modern impact. In addition to more than 300 rock art panels, and at least 2200 petroglyphs, the area also contains registered as well as likely unrecorded archaeological remains left by the producers of the rock art.

2-2 History of place

The rock art was produced at the end of the Late Mesolithic period, a subclassification of the Stone Age. Archaeological excavations in the vicinity of rock art panels and independent scientific investigations have dated the rock art production to between 6900-6200 Cal BP. In addition to the rock art, extensive amounts of archaeological remains beneath vegetated surfaces are still preserved in their original location. Minor excavations have provided valuable information from these sources – but they are far from fully prospected or documented. Amongst the retrieved remains are tools for production of rock art and smaller slabs and rocks with petroglyphs. The latter can be understood as portable rock art. In addition, several dwelling depressions can be found, most likely constructed and occupied by the producers of the rock art.

The earliest discovery of rock art became publicly known in 1912 when the first paper on Vingen was published by the lawyer, amateur archaeologist, and mountain explorer Kristian Bing. Since then, numerous papers and books have been published. There are also remains of pre-modern occupation and agricultural activity in the area, adding to the value of the cultural landscape.



Figure 14. Depictions of red deer and animal headed staffs.

3-0 Description (history and technology)

3-1 Physical description

The Vingen rock art area covers an area of approximately 2 square kilometres, covered and surrounded by a landscape protection area of 5 square kilometres.

3-2 Social and cultural context and value

The rock art, dwelling depressions, production tools for making rock art and archaeological sites with remains from numerous other tasks and activity – are all set in a landscape that has remained unchanged since the rock art was produced, thus beyond estimation in terms of value.

The site has been central to many projects and programmes directed towards the protection of rock art. Since the beginning of the 1990s more than 100 million NOK have been invested through public funding by the Directorate for Cultural Heritage, The Norwegian Environment Agency, Vestland County Council, the County Governor of Vestland, the University of Bergen and the University Museum of Bergen.

3-3 Materials/fabric/form/function

The rock art has been pecked into Devonian sandstone using an indirect pecking technique. The archaeological sources represent a number of different material categories, mostly different lithic artefacts. Apart from charcoal and charred hazel nut shells, archaeological organic material is rare.

The distribution of rock art images clearly indicates that both micro and macro landscapes were integrated into the narrative, and intentionally used to produce a meaningfully structured iconography.

3-4 Aesthetic value

The area has outstanding aesthetic qualities and unspoilt natural beauty. The aesthetic and visual properties are underlined by the intentional and meaningful use of the landscape.

The larger landscape around the Vingen area has hardly any modern impact. The rock art with its impressive and unspoilt landscape setting, has great aesthetic and experiential value.

4 Letters of support for Heritage Alert action, newspaper articles, etc.

Since approval of the planned stone quarry and a shipping port by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development on February 5th 2024, there have been a number of national and international reactions. Amongst other from the President of the ICOMOS-CAR committee, other rock art specialists, and the Bradshaw Foundation. The decision and resulting reactions have received large media attention, in local newspapers, regional and national media, such as www.nrk.no. Lately international media has given the case attention, amongst others The Guardian (The Observer), NRC, the Netherlands, French Radio. Several chronicles questioning the decision have been published in national newspapers such as Aftenposten, and regional newspapers such Fjordenes Tidende and Firdaposten.

An ongoing petition has collected more than 5000 signatures since February 8th and is gaining large numbers of signatures daily.

https://www.petitions.net/stopp_steinbruddet_i_bremanger_stop_the_building_of_a_quarry_in_bremanger_norway

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Virtual access

The web portal Virtuelle Vingen (*Virtual Vingen*) www.virtuellevingen.no (fig.14) provide access to the Vingen rock in its natural landscape, enabling independent online research opportunities, exploration of photogrammetry of the rock art panels and access to analogue documentation, images, videos and literature of relevance for the Vingen rock area.

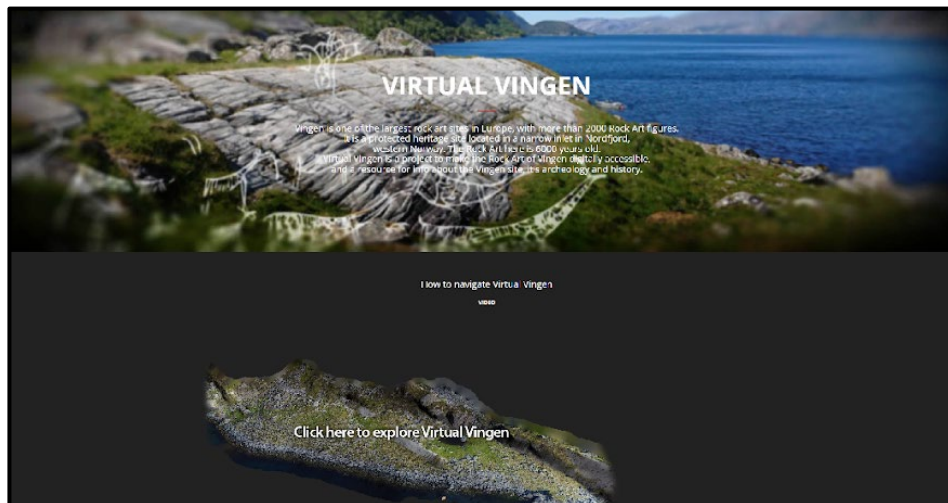


Figure 14. Screen shot of the Virtual Vingen (*Virtuelle Vingen*) portal providing online access to digital documentation of the rock art in the natural landscape; www.virtuellevingen.no