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# Portable soapstone animal figures in Mesolithic western Norway

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## Abstract

During the last few years, soapstone figures have been found during excavations of Mesolithic sites in western Norway. Four of the figures are of birds, and a fifth figure represents a porpoise or possibly a killer whale. They are 3-5 cm long and naturalistically shaped. The figures have been found in the middens or in floor layers of ordinary residential sites at the outer coast, which are dated to between 5300 and 4000 cal BC. An important aspect of the figures is that they all represent marine animals or birds. This stands in contrast to the contemporary stationary rock art figures in this region, which mainly represent terrestrial animals, mainly red deer. The paper will first present the figures themselves, the sites and the dates. We will also look at contemporary portable artifacts made of soapstone (line sinkers and shafthole hatchets) in western Norway. Thereafter an attempt will be made at contextualizing the figures in terms of their significance to subsistence-settlement patterns and to regional cosmologies, where the relationship between terrestrial and marine domains would have been crucial. Finally, we will apply a comparative perspective, where similar bird and animal figures in adjacent regions (Southern Scandinavia and Russia) are drawn into the discussion.

**Keywords:** Portable art, soapstone figures, marine birds and mammals, symbolic expressions, coastal sites

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