

Maps as situated and situating knowledge

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I listened recently to a presentation on rock art that was given in a session on mobility and dynamic landscape during a conference on landscape archaeology. The speaker - Dr Jan Magne Gjerde – discussed some of the 6,000 rock art pieces and their locations around **Alta** in North Norway.¹ In this region, aspects of the rock art – showing ships, fishing lines, human figures, reindeer, elk and fish – were discussed, revealing the significant interplays between the art and the micro-topographies of the rock faces themselves on which the art was inscribed. Jan's argument put an emphasis on the relationship between these representations and the real world. What was remarkable, besides the 7000 BP (before present) date of some of the rock art, was the way in which he recognised the coherence of the whole assemblage of rock art pieces on a single rock face. By examining their entanglement with the rock face's micro-topographies, he showed the way that undulations, cracks, and textures on the rock mimicked the world around, and when combined with an understanding of the rock art, revealing a map-like quality. Too often rock art is given a cosmological interpretation, understood as guiding the life-paths of a contemporary population through the symbolic representations of hunting and mythical creatures as they emerged through shamanic practices. But, so far as this can be known, these interpretation often fall short of what the rock art's expanded syntax might actually say - that it is not just form that's important, but how one reads the rock art and the rock itself together.

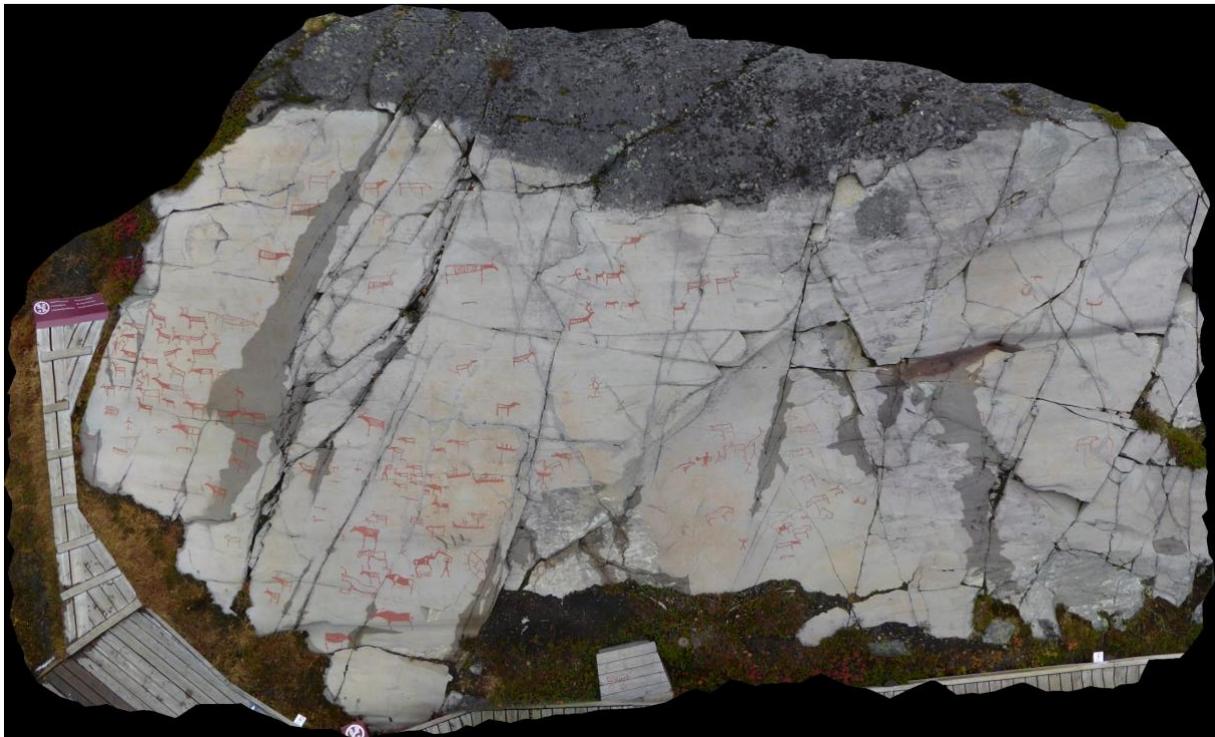


Figure 1. A landscape in stone: a vertical photograph of the rock face and rock 'art' at Bergbukten 4, Alta, N Norway (© Dr Jan Magne Gjerde).

Jan was able to demonstrate, rather convincingly I might add, that the rock art at one location, Bergbukten 4 in Alta, exhibited a kind of practical magic. That is to say, the spatial (sic geographical) arrangement of the art figures could be understood in conjunction with the micro-topographies of the rock face itself, with the undulating features and cracks in the rock, in which different textures represented the world around. Without an understanding of this arrangement, the rock art will be understood as a form of cosmological art, rather than a representational form through which people learnt about hunting practices that took place the real world. But in another way, the inscription on the rock itself was also connected with releasing the animals that lived in the rock so that they might feature in future hunts. With this double temporality – of representing past and future events, and a heady realisation that people in the distant past were thinking spatially and creating map-like representations that were both practical and cosmological, one can consider alternative ways in which maps are made.

As David Turnbull suggests, ‘knowledge is not simply local, it is located. It is both situated and situating. It has place and creates a space.’² Thus, maps in this sense are assemblages that are made up of ‘linked sites, people, and activities’ in which the creation of a map is not only a representational referent but can also be the creation of an actual knowledge space; spaces that are themselves mutable and capable of providing many different meanings and interpretations within a real-world, dynamic context.



Figure 2. ‘Ghosts’: graffiti at Pollphail in Strathclyde, W Scotland (© Crown Copyright: HES).

A more contemporary moment of this form of located or situated knowledge occurred when working for Historic Environment Scotland. One of my survey colleagues – Dr Alex Hale –

was investigating the contemporary graffiti created by the artist collective **Agents of Change** (@wearetheaoc) in 2009 over a three-day intervention at the industrial village, Pollphail in Strathclyde, W Scotland. The graffiti was created in response to the village itself, its ruination and decay. The entire village was built for oil industry workers between 1975 and 1977, but it was never occupied. In a way, the graffiti and the figures that were created came to stand in for absent population. And the positioning of the figures amongst the ruins created a kind of dynamic movement through the village, signposting to particular spaces inside and amongst the buildings. And like the rock art in Alta, the graffiti used the textures and spaces of the village to create a kind of map for people moving through the village, to find spaces which held significant meaning to the artists working there. In some instances, the location was presented more obviously. For example, a speech bubble on one of the figures showed a string of numbers, which were co-ordinates of the location of the art inside the village. After a brief documentation process through site survey and photographs,³ the village was demolished and it is currently being re-developed.

In these two examples, I have explored the potential reworking of what a map is, seeing it not just a canvas that is printed with ink, but as something that exists out there, in the real-world, entangled and unseparated, as opposed to distinct and externalised from it. And in a way, the creation of actual knowledge spaces, after Turnbull and in light of these two examples above, can also be potential places and spaces of resistance. They resist easy correspondence, they might employ difficult symbologies and classifications, and while appearing to be trustworthy and have authority, they are also lies, concealing hidden labour and social orders. This is true whether fixed in the landscape, say through rock art or graffiti, or framed within a conventional map.

¹ see also Gjerde, J. 2013. Stone Age rock art and Beluga landscapes at River Vyg, North-Western Russia. *Fennoscandia archaeologica* XXX (2013), p 37-54; Gjerde, J. 2015. A Stone Age rock art map at Nämforsen, Northern Sweden. *Andoranten* (2015), p 74-91.

² Turnbull, D. 2000. *Masons, Tricksters and Cartographies*. London: Routledge, p 10. See also Aldred, O. and Lucas, G. 2018. The Map as Assemblage, in Gillings, M. *et al.* (eds.) 2018. *Re-Mapping Archaeology. Critical Perspectives, Alternative Mappings*. London: Routledge. Pp. 18-36.

³ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/29112/pollphail-village>