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A study of bone remains and butchery patterns from medieval mass-hunting of reindeer in the South Norwegian mountain districts

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses butchery patterns and utilization of reindeer in the Roman Age and Medieval times at the northern part of the Hardangervidda mountain plateau, South Norway based on midden bones from seven excavation units at four hunting stations. The results are compared with two similar Viking Age and Early Medieval materials from the Dovrefjell region, some 200 km to the northeast. The analysis has revealed temporal and geographical differences with regards to bone element frequencies. In the Roman Age, the meat rich parts of the carcasses were transported away, while the majority of antlers were discarded at the site. In the Medieval assemblages from Hardangervidda only small antler fragments have been left. Ribs, humerus and scapula are low in numbers, while other skeletal elements have been found in high frequencies. This indicates that the carcasses were defleshed, and the bones left at the sites, while the meat was transported down from the mountains. At the Dovrefjell sites there are no clear patterns of missing bone elements, but a slight under-representation of antlers suggests that antlers may have been removed and utilized, i.e. in comb production. The differences observed may be due to different preferences to reindeer products as well as differences in distances to the consumption or market locations.

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1. Introduction

Only a few bones document the presence of reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) in the early and middle Weichsel in Norway (Hufthammer, 2001). From the Late Glacial two finds are known: a few bones from Blomvåg on the west coast of Norway, radiocarbon dated to ca 12,700–12,200 BP (Lie, 1986) and an antler from Egersund, on the south west coast, dated to 10,255 ± 80 BP (T-8821) (Osteological Archive, Natural History Collections, University of Bergen). It is not known if there was a continuous distribution of reindeer in Norway from the early and middle Weichsel to the Holocene, but it is assumed that most of the present day population of wild reindeer in Norway originate from the Late Glacial ancestral line.

By the 19th century, reindeer had a continuous range across the mountainous areas of south central Norway (Nellemann et al., 2001). Due to human activities and constructions of different kinds the present day population of wild reindeer is split into 23 more or less separate areas (Reimers and Colman, 2006). Since the 1960s, there has been a significant decrease in the number of animals, mainly due to overgrazing at the winter pastures, from 60,000 animals to a total of ca, 35,000 in the 1980s (Skogland, 1986).

A large number of archaeological sites from all prehistoric periods is present in the mountain districts of South Norway. The importance of reindeer hunting is illustrated by bone assemblages from archaeological sites as well as numerous hunting and trapping devices (Indrelid, 1978,1994; Johansen, 1978; Mikkelsen, 1994; Weber, 2007).

The current study focuses on the osteological evidence for mass-hunting and the subsequent use of reindeer products in southern Norway in the Iron Age and the Middle Ages. Reindeer bone assemblages from Dovrefjell and Hardangervidda, two geographically separated mountain regions in South Norway, are included in the study. Bone assemblages from nine archaeological excavation units are examined: seven are from the Hardangervidda mountain plateau: Austbu S(outh), Austbu N(orth), Vestbu S(outh), Sørbu, Krækkja N(orth), Krækkja S(outh) and Ørteren (Fig. 1). Two are from the Dovrefjell region; Tøftom and Vesle-Hjerkinn (Fig. 2).

2. Regional setting

2.1. The Hardangervidda mountain plateau

Hardangervidda is a. 8000 km^2 wide mountain plateau in the southern part of South Norway, at a mean altitude of 1200 m. The

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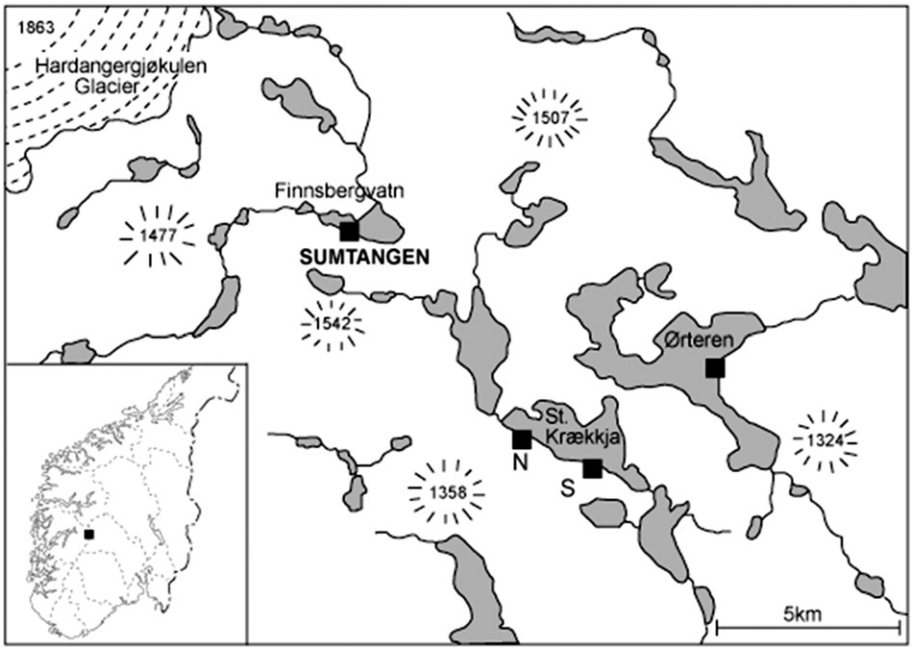

Fig. 1. The Study area at the Hardangervidda mountain plateau with the sites Sumtangen (including the archaeological units Austbu, Vestbu and Sørbu), Krækkja N, Krækkja S and Ørteren. (Illustration: Ellinor Hoff).

area is known to hold the largest population of wild reindeer in Europe. From 1955 to 1990, the population size fluctuated between 7000 and 32,000 individuals, with an average of 15,000 (Skogland, 1990).

Archaeological investigations have shown that this area has been in extensive use as a hunting ground for wild reindeer throughout the Holocene (i.e. Blehr, 1972; Bakke, 1984; Indrelid, 1994). In addition to numerous finds of stone and iron arrowheads, several types of traps have been found. These include stone bricked pitfalls occurring singly or in small groups, as well as devices for mass-hunting. In the northern part of the area the latter consists of drift fences made up by rows of cairns or wooden poles.

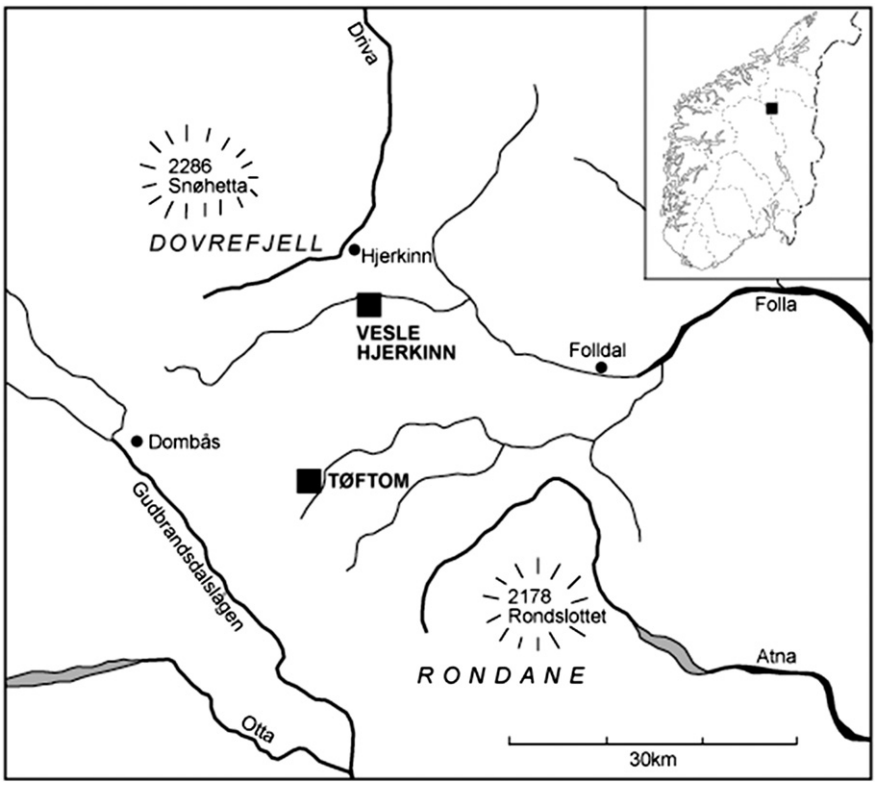

Fig. 2. The study area in the Dovrefjell region with the sites Tøftom and Vesle-Hjerkinn. (Illustration: Ellinor Hoff).

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