

ICOMOS Norway: New National Committee: CULTURAL ROUTES

Introduction

ICOMOS has an International Scientific Committee for «Cultural Routes». This theme has become increasingly important, and the work on an International Charter on Cultural Routes has recently been concluded. Several member countries have established National Committees, and recently, at the ICOMOS Norway 2008 Board Meeting, the new National Committee on Cultural Routes was approved.

In the beginning, the work with «Cultural Routes» mainly focused on trade and cultural exchange. In this connection the work on such projects as the Silk Road and the Inka Routes has been important. Gradually the work has achieved a wider perspective, and the interaction with more general and dynamic processes integrating cultural landscape, nature, settlements, and economic factors, as well as the relationship between various ethnic groups have become focus areas. ICOMOS characterises this expanded interpretation of «Cultural Routes» as « a qualitative new approach to the knowledge of conservation of the cultural heritage» (5th Draft Charter 2008).

The new National Committee which now is established will have a comprehensive challenge, and the goals which are presented here aim to focus on the Norwegian contribution to the ICOMOS work on «Cultural Routes». It will be important to stress the country's unique cultural heritage in relationship to the ICOMOS definitions.

A short introduction to important «Cultural Routes» in Norway is outlined, as are the country's special advantages and the challenges in the international context. The conclusion contains an outline of the possible special responsibility Norway has, and this will be detailed.

Cultural Routes in Norway

With an exceptionally long and spectacular coastline, the sailing lane along the coast stands out as a unique feature of the country. Neither UNESCO nor ICOMOS have worked systematically with maritime «Cultural Routes» (sailing-lanes to any extent). In addition Norway has several other «Cultural Routes», the most prominent being:

- The Pilgrim route from Southern Sweden to Oslo and further north to the shrine of St. Olav in the cathedral in Nidaros (now Trondheim), Mid-Norway. This route, 500 km long, is now restored and accessible for walking the entire distance between Oslo and Trondheim.
- The trade routes from the Swedish mountain farms and small communities along the Norwegian border, down to the coast of Mid- and North Norway.
- The Sami reindeer transhumance migration routes along and across the border areas between Norway, Finland and Sweden, as well as in coastal areas in Northern Norway and the wider mountain areas further south.
- The routes across the «Central Highlands» in Southern Norway between the «East country» valleys and the «West country» fjords, for trade and barter.

These cultural routes are quite well documented, and have a national as well as a certain international interest and importance.

However, it is difficult to deny that the outstanding feature of our country is the sailing lane along our long coast, which provided contact southwards to Europe, northwards to the Arctic and eastwards to Northern Russia. The national importance of the sailing lane along the coast was for a long period also of importance for European seafarers, particularly English, German and Dutch ships sailing to the Lofoten Islands to purchase stockfish, to the Arctic for hunting or exploration, or to Arkangelsk for timber trade.

Two important arguments supporting this contention are:

- The coastal sailing lane has given the name to our country: NorWay (in old Norse / Norwegian: NorVegr, later transformed to modern Norwegian languages: Norge and Noreg). Norway is probably the only country in the world which has the name of the country directly linked to a «Cultural Route».
- The sailing lane required a knowledge system for traditional / indigenous navigation and has been a determining factor for the development of coastal settlements and for the utilisation of marine resources.

The work on maritime cultural routes will in many ways be pioneering task, and may be important for other parts of the world. The small Pacific island states have also recently started to explore their «maritime cultural routes».

The Development of Safe Coastal Navigation

The Norwegian coast is approximately 23 000 km long, but 84 000 km when the coasts of the islands and the fjords are added, and there may be more than 200 000 islands and skerries along the coast. Hardly any other country has a comparative coastline. There are few, if any other coastal states with such rich and varied marine resources so easily accessible along the coast. In other words, Norway has a unique coast, and the cultural routes along the coasts are special in the national as well as the international context.

There is little exact knowledge of when the coast was populated and the society gradually specialised or of how the settlement pattern, economy and coastal transport developed. The sailing lane system has probably gradually developed, parallel to the development of the settlement pattern. Many rich archaeological sites are directly linked to the coast, and long-distance trade (with imported artefacts) seems to have developed during the Bronze Age. However, we can safely assume that as long as the coast has been settled in one form or another, there has been some kind of navigation system. It is only after written sources become available that this can be documented.

We have a main sailing lane – with several alternatives:

1. «The Tjod Lane» (Tjodleia) - (The All Men's Sailing Lane) which comprised the entire coast, dating back at least to Norse pre-Viking period, possibly older, related to the early formation of a common Norwegian maritime culture and identity.
2. «The Leidang Lane» (Leidangsleia), the early pre-Viking defence system, which had fixed locations for the exchange of crews with fixed daily distances, 36 n.m. – from the Swedish to the Russian border.
3. «The Lofoten Lane» (Lofotleia), for the fishermen in open boats sailing to the winter cod fishery in the Lofoten islands. Taking place in winter / spring, fishermen-farmers from vast stretches of the coast, from West Cape (Stad foreland) in the south-west, to North Cape participated in order to obtain grains and other necessary goods.
4. «The Jekt Lane» (Jekteleia) for the transportation of dried cod - stockfish, from Lofoten islands to Bergen. The stockfish was bartered for grain and consumer articles etc. for the return trip northwards. This lane basically follows the old «Leidang Lane» without the fixed stops. It was a summer sailing with larger ships in better weather and sunny nights.

«Tjodleia» and «Leidangs Lane» are connected to the old Norse and Norwegian society which developed in late Iron Age, and both these lane systems can be connected to the development of a Norwegian identity, legal practices and institutions, probably dating back to approximately 700 AD.

The «Lofoten Lane» and the «Jekt Lane» are directly related to the Lofoten fisheries, which must be very old. There is archeological evidence that it may date back to 5-600 AD. Until approx. 1000 AD it appears that the stockfish was not commercially exported, but used as (reserve) food supply in the local chieftains' households, which also comprised small private armies. Stockfish was also used as food supply on the Viking raids and other long-distance voyages, for example to Iceland. Commercial export of stockfish did not take place until approximately 1000-1100 AD, when the urban settlements of Northern and Central Europe required more food supplies than could be delivered locally.

From approx. 1200 until 1400 AD many Dutch, German and English ships sailed to Lofoten in the summer to buy the stockfish directly from the fishermen. However, when the Hanseatic League obtained the monopoly for this trade, this came to an end as no foreign ships were allowed to sail north of Bergen. The principal port of this export trade was Bergen which was under the control of the Hanseatic League until 1669. The Hansa "Kontor" in Bergen was solely established for the grain-stockfish trade. Mainly grain was imported in exchange, as Norway could not produce grain in sufficient quantities; the boundary for the ripening of barley is just north of Lofoten. Other consumer articles were also imported.

It is important to observe that as far as we know, the Lofoten fisheries have taken place every year for at least 1000 years, and consequently, every summer stockfish has been transported to Bergen. For a period of approximately 200 years during the 14th and 15th centuries stockfish from Lofoten was the only commodity Norway exported.

Finally, it should be made clear that the Lofoten fisheries and the stockfish transportation to Bergen, including the building of the «jekter», the organisation of the crews and the transportation in general, was for the most part an entirely indigenous operation, which was integrated in traditional culture as one of many operations required in order to utilise the marine resource and secure local economy.

Until approximately 14-1500 the old Norse Viking cargo-ships, «knarr», were used. The «Jekt» was a square-rigged cargo ship, or rather a large boat, developed around 1400 AD, being a strange combination of the bow part of a Viking ship and the stern of a typical North European (Hansa «Kugel») cargo ship. A single original «jekt» still survives.

Navigation Based on Coastscape Features and Bearings as a Knowledge System for a Coastlong Maritime «Cultural Route»

The coastal sailing lane (in Norwegian «kystleia» or just «leia») consists of a main lane, with network of alternative routes which were used, depending on local conditions, coastscape features (in the sea and on land), seasonal weather, wind, currents, vessel type and size, crew, seamanship – and the knowledge and experience of the coast itself and the sailing lane with the alternatives, which each skipper, pilot or fisherman had.

The term «leia» is related to a common Norwegian and English word: to «lead», and the English term «lane» is probably also related to «to lead».

In order to understand the «Leia» as a «Cultural Heritage», it is necessary to obtain an overview of the basic elements this knowledge system is built upon;

The basis consists of knowledge and skills in identifying natural features or formations. Later some cultural formations or elements were also included:

For example **1**- a distant mountain peak over **2**- a nearer Viking period grave mound on a skerry – in a sight-line: a bearing; gives the safe course. This «couple» of such pre-defined formations giving a safe course, is termed a «**méd**» (Norwegian plural: «**méder**»).

The entire coastline therefore consists of a network of such «méder». In addition there was a «side-system» which was used to determine the location when changing the course onto another safe lane. In general, the course was the shortest possible route along the coast. The boats or ships were able to navigate quite shallow and narrow waters, between islands and skerries, so the early navigators had a very detailed knowledge of the lane environment.

In addition to the «méder» necessary for sailing along the coast, there were also more detailed «méder» for navigating into harbours or safe anchorages when required to make a stop or seek safe anchorage in bad weather. There were also aural méder for sailing in bad weather or at night-time where the sound of breaking waves identified the dangerous points, and one could navigate to the next skerry with breaking waves... However, this technique was only used in limited areas.

This navigation system is not unique for Norway, but is a common navigational principle; «Pilotage» in coastal waters where the coastscape is sufficiently conspicuous to give such sightlines or bearings of two landscape or man-made features. However, nowhere else was this navigation system the only one used in such a complex environment over such long period and distances.

In areas where the distance is too long to establish a visual contact, the technique of «dead reckoning» is developed to get closer to the next reference point. However, there are few such stretches along the Norwegian coast, as ships are within view of the mainland, islands or skerries almost all the way.

The coastal sailing lane system may be compared to a necklace with strands of pearls or beads, where each pearl has its defined position, and if one «méd» or pearl is missing, a critical situation may arise.

There existed a similar system of such «méder» for fisheries, which was based on a cross-bearing of two such sight-lines or méd-lines, to identify the particular fishing ground. These have a completely different status, as they were treated as «secret» maybe also in a «taboo» context. This knowledge system was an important heritage from one generation to the next: a closed system. The sailing lanes and the «méder» for navigation along the coast were an open knowledge system, accessible for all, a common property that all had access to and needed to expand.

The Sami issue may need further attention. Although most Sami people have their main culture based on reindeer transhumance economy and lifestyle in Northern Norway, there are many Sami coastal communities along the entire North Norwegian coast, where men took part in the main fisheries and long-distance sailing. The Sami were also regarded as excellent boat-builders, even dating back to Viking-ship building. Therefore there is also an urgent need to record and revitalise the Sami coastal navigation system. However, most of this tradition is related to areas north of Lofoten.

Long-distance travel was dominated by men, while the coastal women might be dependent on the knowledge of local méder, for example in order to utilise the coast for summertime dairy farming or sheep grazing, sea-bird egg and eiderdown collection, gathering of wild berries, «home fisheries», visit to neighbours and families etc.

Ever since the Viking period a category of professional pilots has existed; «Leidsogemadr» («the man who has the knowledge of the «Leia» - with fixed daily pay in silver). This profession dwindled during the period of Danish rule (1450-1814), and barely survived this period. The number of professional pilots did not increase until large-scale timber exports and other commercial shipping developed in South-East Norway as late as approximately 1850. In the coastal areas of Western and Northern Norway each man was his own pilot.

Many skippers on the stockfish transporting «jekter» from Lofoten to Bergen made written notes on the «mèder» and courses. Some of these hand-written notebooks have been collected, but the number is quite small.

The sum of all the «mèder» for sailing was created on the basis of experience and used over very long time. Adding them together, we have the «Leia», the coastal sailing lane, a collective term for various alternative routes under various conditions. This cultural heritage is a unique combination of «tangible» and «non-tangible» culture and is an interaction between «natural» and «cultural landscape», which, integrated, constitutes the Norwegian coastscape. All this knowledge was set in a single system for safe navigation throughout the year and under different weather conditions.

These lane systems are reasonably well documented, but we have hardly any knowledge how the sailors navigated; which landscape features – which mèder - were selected in order to identify the safe lanes and courses along the coast.

Modern Navigation

Today's navigation is based on advanced digital technology, but it was the magnetic compass which introduced modern navigation, commonly in use from around 1850, and the first modern Norwegian sea-charts are not older than approximately 100 years. Parallel to this development, the systematic construction of lighthouses, buoys and other fixed navigational aids took place at great speed.

The first printed «course-books» or «pilot-books» (for the sailing lanes) were also available at this period - coinciding with the common use of the compass and the construction of lighthouses. Altogether, the whole navigation system was transformed. The printed navigational aids, published around 1850-1900, contain some reference to the old «mèder», but also compass courses and information on the lighthouse sectors and colours and other technical navigational information and instructions. Quite soon the coursebooks also included information on the «modern lanes».

When the steamships were introduced for coastal transport, a new communication system developed. While the old fishing boats and «jekter» had a port of departure and a port of arrival – and sailed this distance as fast and as well as they could, the new steamships, particularly «the Coastal Express» established in 1893, had a fixed route - a completely new concept in coastal transportation: fixed ports of call according to a fixed, daily time-table, from port to port along the coast. In this way a kind of new sailing lane was established: «the port-of-call lane», in «loops» along the coast.

The new ships were larger, and could not navigate in shallow waters as the sailing boats could, but neither were they dependent on local currents or wind conditions. Therefore there is quite a difference between the old «sailing lane» and the new «engine lane»

The old knowledge has gradually become obsolete. Now there are few, if any sailors or fishermen any more who know the old system – or use the remaining knowledge in their daily work. Probably, there is only a small group of old sailors and fishermen who still may remember the «mèder» and lanes along the coast.

If the «Leia» as a knowledge system and as the most conspicuous «Cultural Route» of the country is to become part of the Norwegian and international cultural heritage, a rescue operation is urgently needed to record and document all remaining knowledge before it is too late.

Challenges for the Work in the «Cultural Routes» Committee

Hardly any systematic research has been carried out on «mèder» and lanes over longer distances. Some relevant, but limited research has been done on «mèder» for the fisheries.

In order to strengthen the understanding and appreciation of «Leia» as a Cultural Route, systematic and appropriate methods, concepts and coastscape / feature analysis must be

developed, for documentation purposes and made relevant for new and future practical applications. This must be done in accordance with modern requirements of «value-creation», in close cooperation with the coastal population as the sources of knowledge and traditions and as potential future users for new applications.

It is important to contribute to the formation of national and international interest for this work, particularly in relationship to the activities of UNESCO. In this context the Lofoten-Bergen transportation lane for stockfish is particularly interesting; connecting Lofoten, which is on the Tentative List, to Bergen which already has World Heritage Site status – as a most appropriate priority. The further connections to Europe and other parts of the world are also well documented over a long period.

The chairman of the Norwegian «Cultural Routes» committee has taken the initiative to the planning of a project to investigate the «Jekteleia» from Lofoten to Bergen, and the «méd»-system for the navigation of the stockfish transportation on the «jekter». This work is established as a partnership with Salten Museum in Bodø, and a range of other institutions are also involved: The State Antiquarian, The Coastal Directorate, The Norwegian Research Council, Nordland County Council, The University in Tromsø, The University College in Bodø and the «Coastal Association». In addition, several municipalities and individuals have expressed interest in taking part in the project.

Establishing this activity and giving priority to the work with reestablishing the old knowledge system og «Leia» and «Médene» as the basis for a maritime «Cultural Route» programme as sketched here, will be a new focus for cultural research, which we expect will be met with national and international interest.

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24.09.2008 / rev. 15.02.09

This document is a slightly expanded and translated version of the proposal which was accepted by the ICOMOS Norway Board Meeting 2008 as the basis for a new National Committee on «Cultural Routes».