

The wonderful soapstone

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The bedrock of Norway is predominantly composed of hard and crystalline rocks, difficult to use for our ancestors. But soapstone became the exception. Fairly evenly distributed throughout the country, soapstone resources were available to most Norwegians. And they used it. For everyday utensils, the small things needed in a household. Fishing hooks and weights, loom weights, spinning wheels and oil lamps. But also other types of items were produced, including ceremonial club or mace heads from the Mesolithic and Neolithic figurines of animals. Since soapstone is both heat resistant and easy to carve, it became the preferred material from the Bronze Age onwards for making moulds for casting metals. These properties were also key in the evolution of one of the most peculiar outfield industries in Norway: producing cooking vessels from soapstone, lasting more than 2000 years, from 500 BCE. Soapstone vessels became widely used and obviously popular among the rich as the poor. There are hundreds of quarries in Norway carrying the typical signatures from the extraction of cooking pot blanks: circular depressions in the rock face from where the blanks were extracted. Some places half-finished blanks still remains, like a bulge on the rock.

When Christianity came to Norway in the 11th Century, the Norwegians had to learn something new, namely to construct elaborate stone buildings, preferably churches. In several parts of Norway, soapstone became the main stone material in the construction of churches and monasteries. In spite of its softness, the rock proved to be both durable and strong, and did not crack in a fire.

The medieval builders represent the heydays of stone-made crafts in Norway. Stone masons travelled through Europe, offering their skills, and some made the foundation for a rich Norwegian stone-building tradition. Many known soapstone quarries were transformed to industrial scaled production sites of blocks for ashlar, columns and sculptures.

After the black death in the mid-14th Century, stone crafting skills deteriorated. The reformation in 1537 made the medieval churches targets for greedy noblemen who needed stones for their castles and homes. However, a new tradition of using soapstone gradually grew, this time for using the stone for fire places and chimneys. Old quarries were re-employed for the new purpose. This tradition has actually lasted until the present time, and modern Norwegians highly appreciate the quality and energy efficiency of well-crafted ovens and fire places. The green economy may find further needs for soapstone. For instance, the excellent heat storage capacities can be interesting for energy-efficient housing.