Ski and the Stone Age

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At Hoting, in the district of Angermannland (Sweden) a ski has been found, which, by examination of the creek at the place where it was found, is estimated to be at least 4,200 years old. This is hitherto the oldest discovery, but several other discoveries, almost equally ancient, have been made. For instance at Kalvtrask, in Vasterbotn, a pair of skis with a stick were found, which likewise proved by examination and with absolute certainty to date back to the Stone Age. These Swedish marsh-findings are supported by Norwegian findings of petroglyphs at Rodoy in Helgeland. They were discovered by Olaf Karlsen in 1929, and more closely examined by Guttorm Giessing, who in October, 1933, gave a provisional report thereof to the press, accompanied by a delineation. These rock carvings depicted an elk and a small whale together with at least two skiers, both of whom are on skis, that are of the same length and rather long in proportion to the men. The skis are of such dimensions that one is forced to think of the type of ski characteristic of the districts of Salten, Ranen and Vefsen (North Norway). The one skier’s helmet is furnished with horns and he is holding an axe with both hands. His hands hold the helve almost at the height of the shoulders with the blade pointing downwards as though he, at full speed, was trying to strike the hind legs of an elk.

These rock carvings can hardly be older than 4,000 years, as it is not likely that there were elk so far north as Rodoy before that time. The big glacier was not broken through earlier than 8,700 years ago, but on the other hand, the carvings can hardly be less than 2,000 years old, as the severity of the climate during the earlier Stone Age must have driven the elk as well as the flora they lived on from the neighbourhood of Svartisen and the arctic zone. Rodoy is situated north of the polar circle. The Swedish marsh-findings and the Norwegian rock carvings, however, have this in common, that they both tend to furnish proof to the effect that the trappers who followed the glacier, together with the game, during its retreat inwards towards the mountains and northwards to the Swedish lakes and rivers, were able to invent, to furnish them with helve-holes, could have had no difficulty in finding out how to face the problems presented by the deep snow of winter. They did not need to be instructed in this matter by a less inventive people. Both the harpoon and the bow are greater inventions than the ski, yet explorers have hardly ever met any people so primitive that they did not know the use of the bow. That the use of skis, before the Norwegians made it an international sport, was so little known is due to the fact that quite extraordinary conditions must exist before the use of skis becomes an absolute necessity. First a winter-frost of fairly long and steady duration and secondly, what is more important, a heavy snowfall. Even in places with deep snow, one is able to get through one’s daily work without skis. It is only when one has to cover great distances through woods, or in the mountains, that skis become necessary, if one does not have pack animals instead, as among the various polar tribes such as the Eskimos and the Lapps. In Telemark, the mountain districts of Agder, Buskerud, Opland, Hedmark, Trondelag and Northern Norway, the neighbouring regions of Sweden and in the north of Finland, the use of skis was found absolutely necessary in the pursuits of trapping and hunting, and later on in the work in the woods. For this reason the use of skis in these regions continued, even after the trappers and hunters started to keep domestic animals and to cultivate the land. The rest of Scandinavia and Central Europe ceased to use skis as soon as they were no longer necessary in their daily work.

Therefore the Norwegians, headed by the Telemarks, have had to teach Central Europe what their ancestors thousands of years ago already knew, but which they forgot. It is heavily snow-laden Telemark and Trysil which have best conserved and developed these traditions dating back to the primeval age of our race. If then new discoveries in Central Europe and Northern Germany, or rock carvings, should prove that the ski is as old as the lance or the spear, it should not surprise us.