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Between the Worlds. Rock Art, Landscape and Shamanism in Subneolithic Finland

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The Finnish rock paintings, dated to ca. 5000–1500 cal. BC, form a significant but so far relatively poorly known body of rock art in Northern Europe. The paintings are made with red ochre on steep cliffs rising at lakeshores and typically feature images of elks, men, boats, handprints and geometric designs. Traditional interpretations associate the art with shamanism. This interpretation, it is argued, finds additional support from the presence of a group of images that appear to portray experiences of metamorphosis, of falling in trance and of summoning zoomorphic spirit helper beings. Moreover, the location of the paintings can similarly be viewed in the light of a shamanistic cosmology. Ethnographic analogies are sought in aspects of Saami shamanism and the cult of the *sieidi*, rock formations worshipped as expressing a supernatural power.

THE ROCK ART OF FINLAND

Finland has the largest accumulation of prehistoric rock paintings in Northern Europe. More than one hundred[1] sites have been found to date, the first one of them in 1911 (Taskinen 2000). The paintings are made with red ochre on steep vertical surfaces of granitic rock, nearly always located at lakeshores, often rising straight from the water. Although a couple of sites are associated with small cavities, the majority of the paintings are in the open air. Their remarkable preservation in the harsh Finnish climate has been permitted by the formation of a thin, transparent silica skin on top of the red ochre paint (Taavitsainen & Kinnunen 1979).

The fact that the paintings are so intimately connected with the shoreline has enabled many of them to be dated with the shore-displacement method. The initial datings proposed during the 1960s and 70s gave a rather wide time-span for the rock art tradition, extending from the Early Neolithic to as late as AD 500 (Saarnisto 1969, Carpelan 1975, Taavitsainen & Kinnunen 1979). More recent datings (Jussila 1999), however, suggest that the vast majority – if not all – of Finnish rock paintings were made between 7000 and 3500 years ago. The age of the rock art thus falls mostly within the period of Comb Ware (*c.* 5100–3300 cal. BC), a phase of Subneolithic hunting-gathering-fishing culture.

Although the rock paintings are often located in striking or impressive natural settings, most of the paintings themselves are relatively modest, rarely having more than 10 identifiable images. And while the paint can sometimes be bright and the images well defined, many are faded, eroded and for the untrained eye difficult to detect. Three paintings – Astuvansalmi in eastern

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Finland, Värikallio in the north-east and Saraakallio on Lake Päijänne in central Finland – are exceptionally large 'mega-sites'. Of these, the paintings of Astuvansalmi and Värikallio have more than 60 images each, Saraakallio perhaps as many as a hundred. However, blurred contours and faded paint make counting difficult.

The majority of the rock paintings are found in the eastern Finnish Lake Region, particularly in the area of Lake Saimaa (Fig. 1), although a significant number of finds have been made in Central Finland also (Kivikäs 1995, 2001). A small but growing number of paintings lie clearly outside this main area of rock art. Four paintings have been discovered in the vicinity of Helsinki, two in northern Finland close to the eastern border, and another two paintings in the south-western part of the country. These finds suggest that the current distribution of sites may in part be a consequence of more active fieldwork in the Lake Region.

Although many of the best known sites had been found by the 1960s and 70s, new sites continue to be found on a yearly basis; however, more by chance than due to systematic surveys. Surveying specifically for rock art has been rare in Finland. In the spring of 2003, a small-scale survey project, with only two weeks of fieldwork, yielded six new rock art sites from the province of Päijät-Häme, where only one site was known previously (Poutiainen & Lahelma 2004). This suggests that many more may still be found in the future.

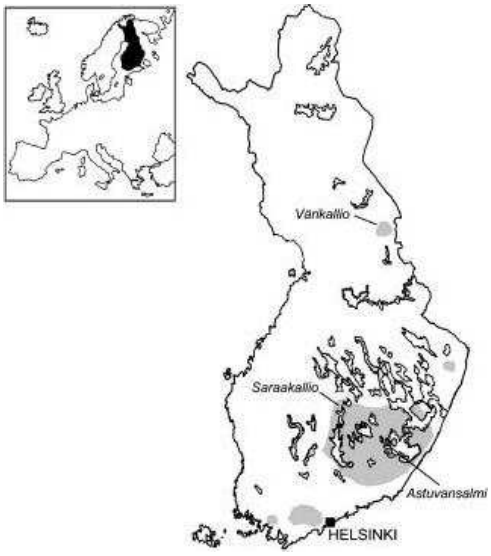

Fig. 1. *The main areas of rock paintings in Finland (grey areas), with the three largest sites shown.*

Contrary to the rock arts of neighbouring Sweden, Norway and Russian Karelia, Finnish rock art consists solely of rock paintings. No certain prehistoric carvings have been found so far, with the exception of simple cup-marks.[2] This lack of rock carvings is somewhat puzzling, given the plentiful smooth rock outcrops perfect for carving and the relatively close cultural contacts that parts of Finland enjoyed with areas where rock carving traditions flourished. It is thus commonly believed that carvings probably exist even in Finland, but simply have not been found yet. Cup-marked stones, found in the southern and central parts of the country, are an interesting exception to this rule (Tvauri 1995). The stones, which number in the hundreds, are often found in association with Iron Age remains and are thus generally dated no earlier than the Iron Age. However, in at least one instance cup-marks have been found in the bedrock under an Early Metal Period (1900 BC–300 AD) burial cairn (Pohjakallio 1978), giving a rough *terminus ante quem* to the advent of the cup-making tradition in Finland.

Relatively little has so far been published about Finnish rock art in languages other than Finnish or Swedish (see however Sarvas 1969, Taavitsainen 1977a, b, Siikala 1981, Núñez 1995, Ipsen 1995, Autio 1995, Kivikäs 2001, Kare 2001, 2002). On the whole, the subject has not received very much attention from Finnish archaeologists, but has, especially since the 1980s, been the realm of amateurs and non-archaeologists. The aim of this paper is thus in part to (re-)introduce the

material to an English-speaking audience. A second, complementary aim is to present a preliminary discussion of certain aspects of its location and iconography in relation to a shamanistic interpretation of the art. Several of the ideas presented in this article have been previously published in Finnish (Lahelma 2001, 2003).

THE SUBJECT MATTER

Finnish rock paintings share many of the characteristic features of North Eurasian hunter-gatherer rock-art, such as the predominance of large cervids, boats and stick-figure humans. There is an apparent lack of complex, narrative scenes: the images are static, sometimes superimposed, and the majority of motifs seem unrelated. In a word, they may be described as 'iconic' (cf. Klassen 1998). Some combinations, usually of two paired images, form interesting exceptions to this rule. The paintings resemble Swedish rock paintings (Janson et. al. 1989, Kivikäs 2003) in many respects, but certain idiosyncrasies give Finnish rock paintings their own character. Unlike in Sweden, the choice of motifs shows no signs of influence from agrarian or 'South Scandinavian' rock art.

Anthropomorphic figures are the most common element of the rock paintings. These are, as a rule, 'stick-figures', usually shown in frontal view (but a small number of human figures seen in profile are known also). The head may be a mere spot, a circle or sometimes a triangle (Fig. 2a). In a few cases there are what appear to be horns added to the head, and sometimes the head seems to have other animal features, such as a snout or a bird-like beak. Hands can be raised in the 'adorant' position, or they may be on the sides. Legs are usually bent from the knees inwards. Primary sexual characteristics normally have not been marked, but there are examples of unambiguous representations of the female sex (in two cases, both at the painting of Astuvansalmi on

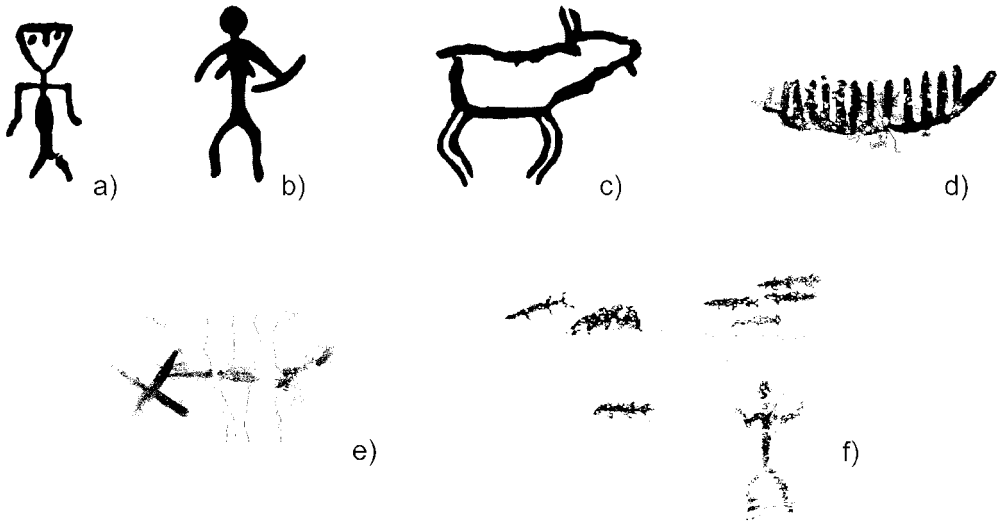

Fig. 2. *Figures from Finnish rock paintings: (a) a 'stick-figure' human with a triangular head, Värikallio; (b) the 'Artemis' of Astuvansalmi; (c) elk figure, Uittamonsalmi; (d) boat figure, Ruominkapia; (e) geometric figures (an oblique cross joined by a horizontal line), Astuvansalmi; (f) a shoal of fish surrounding a human figure, Kapasaari. Tracings by Jussi-Pekkka Taavitsainen (a & c), Pekka Sarvas (b), Pekka Kivikäs (d & e) and Timo Miettinen (f).*

Lake Yövesi, breasts have been depicted; see Fig. 2b) and somewhat more ambiguous images that may or may not be phallic males. Sometimes the figures have been painted upside down, as if diving, and sometimes they appear to form pairs of two stick figures.

Elks (Fig. 2c) are a second common group, although it is in fact often difficult to be sure whether many of the images depict elks or deer. Some paintings show a degree of realism (e.g. the running elk of Haukkavuori at Lake Konnivesi), but in most cases realism clearly hasn't been the objective. With three or four possible exceptions, horns are never marked, but it is not uncommon for the animals to have prominent beards. They might therefore perhaps be understood as males in their spring attire.

A third common but more problematic group is that which has been interpreted usually as *boats*, but by some writers (in particular Taavitsainen 1978) as *antlers* (Fig. 2d). They are usually curved and bowl-shaped (but sometimes flat) lines with short vertical strokes pointing up. The short strokes, which in a few cases are conical in shape, are normally interpreted as the crew of the boat. The motif seems clearly related to images of ships in the rock arts of Scandinavia and Russian Karelia, where they are generally more readily recognisable as boats. In Finland, the highly schematic shape of the motif often prevents definite recognition. Furthermore, in a few cases the images seem to incorporate elements of two categories: sometimes an elk's head appears to adorn the prow of the 'boat', and sometimes the 'boat' is attached to the forehead of an elk, so as to form the unrealistically huge horns of the animal. In two cases, both of them at Saraakallio, a ship-like figure has both the head *and* legs of an elk, making it impossible to interpret these figures as realistic depictions of boats adorned with sculpted elk heads. This fantastic element is further accentuated by the fact that one of these creatures has two heads. The same kind of ambiguity, and similar fantastic creatures, can be found also in the rock art of northern Sweden (Bolin 2000).

Other types of images include *hand- and paw-prints* (the latter possibly those of a bear) and in a few instances *fish*, *birds* and *snakes*. A number of images show animals other than the ones mentioned above, but these are frequently difficult to identify because of the schematic nature of the paintings and their sometimes poor state of preservation. Various *abstract symbols* have also been pictured (Fig. 2e), such as net-figures and zigzag lines, but their proper recognition often suffers from the same difficulties. Significantly, no certain representations of a bear are known, despite the prevalence of bears in contemporary portable art (Carpelan 1977) and its central position in Finno-Ugric mythology, as recorded in the historical period (Holmberg 1927).

Finally, a significant number of paintings have no recognisable figures whatsoever, only a blurred area of red paint. This problematic group probably includes paintings destroyed by the elements, and some that may be attributable to a natural accumulation of ochre seeping from the rock itself. However, it seems that in some cases a blotch of bright red colour was intentionally painted and never meant to include identifiable figures.

INTERPRETATION

Traditional interpretations given to Finnish rock art include hunting magic (Sarvas 1969) and shamanism (Siikala 1981); a totemistic theory has also been advanced by some writers (e.g. Autio 1995). The shamanistic interpretation, as proposed by the anthropologist Anna-Leena Siikala (1981), was based mainly on ethnographic analogies drawn from the nomadic cultures of the circumpolar north. Siikala connected the phenomenon of making rock art to 'animal ceremonialism', or the idea that a continued supply of a species of animal can be

guaranteed by returning a specific part of a hunted animal to the 'owner' spirit of that species. This 'owner' Siikala identified in the famous 'Artemis' image of Astuvansalmi (Fig. 2b), and the images of elks she interpreted as 'return pictures' in accordance with animal ceremonialism. In her view, rock paintings are to be understood as places where the shaman could contact the 'keeper' of the elk species. Images of birds and fish Siikala interpreted as the shaman's spirit helpers.

Although Siikala's account could perhaps be criticised for relying rather uncritically on Siberian ethnography (an important body of material, but geographically far removed from Finland), it has long been regarded the most convincing attempt to interpret Finnish rock paintings. However, as studies in interpretation have been rare and irrefutable evidence of shamanism lacking, interpretations of Finnish rock art have tended towards a kind of 'compromise theory' that includes elements of all suggested interpretations (e.g. Miettinen 2000:33–45).

I have recently attempted to find fresh strands of evidence in support of the shamanistic interpretation by examining the landscape and location of the sites, by looking at combinations of two or more images (overlooked by Siikala), and by considering a 'neuropsychological' approach to the shamanistic interpretation (Lahelma 2001, 2003). A discussion concerning neuropsychology and shamanism has raged in rock art literature since the year 1988, when David Lewis-Williams and Thomas Dowson first published their theory of a neuropsychological interpretation of rock art (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988; for an updated review of arguments, see Lewis-Williams 2001). As a result, shamanism has become a topic of highly polarized views in archaeological research, with both adherents and critics of shamanistic interpretations sometimes appearing obsessive. Although some of the criticisms (see e.g. Bahn 2001, Helvenston & Bahn 2003) levelled at the neuropsychological model may be valid, most are not relevant from the point of view of this paper as they tend to centre on problems specific to the study of Upper Palaeolithic cave art, technical details relating to the 'strong' form of the neuropsychological model, or perceived excesses in applying the model. Moreover, many appear to be related to what Whitley and Keyser (2003) identify as an essentially 'defeatist' position to interpretation – a conviction that an archaeology of religion is impossible. Such a position seems fatal not only for rock art research but archaeology in general, for, as Insoll (2004) has recently argued, all material culture is potentially structured by religion.

A second controversy surrounding the concept of shamanism has to do with its definition and applicability (or lack thereof) outside the *locus classicus* of Siberia. Precisely what shamanism is and what the boundaries (geographical or otherwise) of the concept are has been debated for more than a hundred years (Hamayon 2001, Price 2001), and to enter that discussion would create a lengthy and probably pointless digression. The term 'shamanism' can be used in the context of Finnish prehistory simply because, as Price (2001:6) has correctly observed, 'shamanism has always been an externally imposed construction, and does not exist anywhere at all other than in the minds of its students'. Shamanism is thus an academic creation, but even its critics rarely deny its utility in describing certain patterns of religious behaviour and worldview, especially in the circumpolar region. No apologies are, therefore, made for using the term in this paper.

As I will attempt to demonstrate below, irrespective of their successes or failures in interpreting other prehistoric material, shamanism and the neuropsychological model appear to provide a best-fit explanation to many aspects of Finnish rock art that would otherwise be difficult to understand. For reasons of brevity, this discussion is limited

mainly to the presence of therianthropes and 'falling' and 'diving' anthropomorphs. Other examples could be cited, but I prefer to draw attention also to the location of the paintings, which can similarly be examined vis-à-vis trance experiences.

Furthermore, it must be emphasised that Finnish rock art has been quite firmly associated with shamanism well before the recent 'boom' in shamanistic interpretations of rock art. The student of Finnish rock art cannot completely ignore the fact that shamanism is a central element of both Finnish and Saami pre-Christian religion, and indeed is present in some form in the entire area populated by Finno-Ugric peoples, extending well into Siberia.[3] Finno-Ugric shamanism also seems to be of considerable antiquity. In historical sources, an accurate description of a Saami shamanistic séance – remarkably similar to those given by 17th and 18th century missionaries – is found already in the 12th century *Historia Norvegiae* (Tolley 1994). Based on historical linguistics and the wide geographical distribution of certain religious practices and elements of myth, historians of religion have argued for a Stone Age antiquity of shamanism among Finno-Ugric peoples (e.g. Siikala 1999). Such speculation should of course be viewed with a healthy dose of scepticism – but it does provide a useful framework for understanding past beliefs.

Archaeological material commonly cited as evidence for prehistoric shamanism in a Finno-Ugric context includes finds from the Mesolithic cemetery of Olenii Ostrov (Zvelebil 1997), Iron Age Permian bronze casts (Spitsyn 1906, Tallgren 1934) and a few finds of Saami shaman drum hammers and pointers from Late Iron Age contexts (e.g. Zachrisson 1991). However, it is in rock art that we find the most convincing archaeological evidence for prehistoric shamanism in northern Eurasia. In Siberia, the making of rock art continued well into historical times, and particularly the more recent panels can be confidently associated with shamanism (Okladnikov 1972, Hoppál 1998, Devlet 2001). Admittedly, the further back in time we go, the more ambiguous the evidence becomes. It is precisely for this reason that the neuropsychological model – a purely formal method – is embraced here. Where simple ethnographic analogy becomes unreliable, neuropsychology can provide additional evidence for the lack or presence of shamanism in prehistoric art.

IMAGES OF ECSTASY AND TRANCE

GEOMETRIC FIGURES

The neuropsychological model, as advocated by Lewis-Williams and others (e.g. Dronfield 1995, 1996, Whitley 2000), makes much use of simple geometric figures (such as zigzag lines, parallel lines, net figures and 'fortifications') known as entoptics, which are taken to indicate the presence of trance imagery. Examples of such imagery are occasionally found also in Finnish rock art, including the paintings Saraakallio, Kotojärvi, Astuvansalmi and Verla (see Kivikäs 1995:54, 211, 214–221, 237). At times, they appear to be manipulated according to the 'principles of perception' and 'three stages of trance-model' discussed by Lewis-Williams and Dowson. Thus for example at Saraakallio we find the zigzag-motif represented alone, combined into boat-figures and, finally, transformed into what look like 'zigzag-limbed' anthropomorphs (Lahelma 2001, Fig. 1). Geometric figures, however, are not very frequent or varied in Finnish rock paintings, and as such their usefulness in interpretation is limited. More fruitful evidence for trance imagery can be found in representational images.

THERIANTHROPIC FIGURES

Therianthropes, or creatures that combine features of both humans and animals, are particularly interesting from the point of view of the shamanistic interpretation of Finnish rock paintings, as some of them are

clearly 'unrealistic' images. In the light of the neuropsychological model, therianthropic figures portray the universal experience of metamorphosis or of a change in one's physical form, associated with deep trance (Chippindale *et al.* 2000). The therianthrope can be seen to portray an intermediate stage in this experience: a change from human to animal (or vice versa) has begun, but has not yet reached its climax.

Therianthropes have sometimes been explained as hunters clad in animal masks (Taavitsainen 1978:116, Kivikäs 2000:68, 80). However, as hunting scenes are never portrayed in Finnish rock paintings, the depiction of masked hunters seems unlikely. Furthermore, some images clearly do not fit into this explanation. Such an image is found for example in the rock painting of Kolmiköytisienvuori at Lake Ruovesi, where

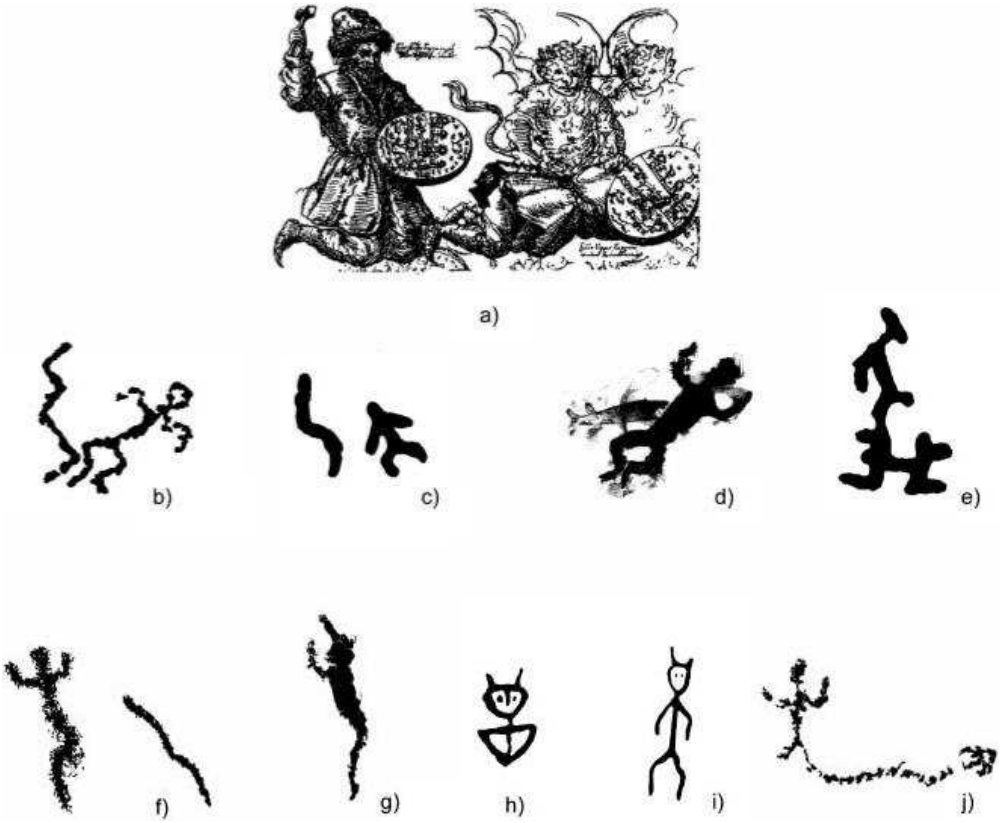

Fig. 3. *Trance experiences? (a) A 17th century drawing by Rheen, showing a Saami shaman drumming (on left) and fallen in trance (on right), with his soul escaping his body in the shape of a demon; (b) a 'falling' human juxtaposed with a snake (?), Iitti; (c) a 'falling' human juxtaposed with a snake (?), Enonkoski; (d) a 'falling' human juxtaposed with a fish (pike?), Juusjärvi; (e) a 'fallen' human, from whose head a deer (?) leaps upwards, Värikallio; (f) a 'snake-bodied' therianthrope juxtaposed with a snake, Kolmiköytisienvuori; (g) an therianthrope with a long snout, Saraakallio; (h) a horned anthropomorph, Uittamonsalmi; (i) a horned anthropomorph, Astuvansalmi; (j) an anthropomorph whose right leg is formed by a long, wriggling line, Voikoski. Tracings by Sinimarja Ojonen (b), Pekka Kivikäs (d & g), Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen (c, e, h), Pekka Sarvas (i) and Timo Miettinen (f & j).*

an anthropomorphic image has a lower body formed by a wriggling line (Fig. 3f). That this line should be interpreted as representing a snake appears to be confirmed by an anatomically correct image of a snake next to it. A similar 'snake-adorant' seems to be found in the painting of Juusjärvi near Helsinki, where one of the human figures in a group of four adorants has a lower body formed by a zigzag-line. A third example, perhaps also belonging to this group, is a figure from Voikoski, where the right leg of a human stick-figure forms a long, wriggling line (Fig. 3j). These images can best be understood as representing therianthropic beings that are half human, half snake.

Other types of possible therianthropes can be identified. A figure in the Juusjärvi painting has bird-like features, including a nose resembling a beak and hands lifted up like wings. Among the many images at the important painting site of Saraakallio can be found an anthropomorph with a strange, long snout, resembling perhaps that of a wolf or a dog (Fig. 3g). The most common and best known type belonging to this category are, however, the horned anthropomorphs, which may be found in a number of paintings, including Astuvansalmi, Värikallio and Verla (Figs. 3h, i). The horns are schematic lines, but without much doubt represent those of an elk, as is evidenced by certain images of elks, for example at Astuvansalmi. At Värikallio, furthermore, one of the elk figures appears to have the hind legs of a human being. All these images can be interpreted as images of shamanic metamorphosis: of taking the shape of a snake or an elk, possibly also of a bird and a wolf.

'FALLING' HUMANS ACCOMPANIED BY AN ANIMAL

A few rock paintings in Finland show a human figure painted in a 45-degree angle or lying flat, as if falling down. These images are always accompanied by an animal, so that the two images form a clear pair. At Juusjärvi, the falling human is accompanied by a fish; at Värikallio by an elk or a deer; and at the paintings of Haukkavuori (Enonkoski) and Mertakallio by a wriggling or zigzagging line, probably representing a snake (Figs. 3b–e).

In Saami shamanism of the historical period, the most dramatic and emblematic event of a shamanistic séance occurred when the shaman (*noaidi*) literally fell on the ground in trance. This starting point of the otherworldly journey was accompanied by the summoning of a spirit helper, which often appeared in the guise of an animal. If therianthropic figures represent a shaman taking the shape of an animal, then it does not seem far-fetched to understand these combinations of falling figures and animals as representing a shaman falling in trance, accompanied by the summoned spirit helper (cf. Núñez 1995:127, 128).

Turning again to the rock painting of Värikallio, we find there a scene in which an elk or a deer appears to leap up from the head of a fallen-down human figure (Fig. 3e). This scene may be compared to a drawing (Fig. 3a) of a Saami *noaidi*, made in the 17th century by the Swedish priest Samuel Rheen (d. 1680), an active missionary in Lapland and thoroughly acquainted with Saami culture. The drawing shows the shaman drumming (on left) and fallen in trance (on the right), with his soul escaping his body in the shape of a demon. It is almost as if Rheen and the Stone Age painter of Värikallio had been describing the same event – each, of course, through their respective interpretative lenses.

ZOOMORPHIC SPIRIT HELPERS IN FINNISH AND SAAMI TRADITIONAL BELIEFS

The use of ethnographic analogies drawn from Saami religion in interpreting rock art is by no means a new idea – in Finnish rock art research, it was first done by Ville Luho in the early 1970s (Luho 1971). However,

today the idea gains increased weight from the wide-ranging consensus among scholars of different fields that the population history of Finland has not seen significant breaks in prehistory (Fogelberg 1999). Both Finns and Saami are believed to descend from the Subneolithic Comb Ware populations responsible for making Finnish rock paintings. The pre-Christian religious traditions of both groups can, therefore, potentially contain elements relevant to understanding Finnish rock art. One might even argue that Saami ethnography approaches what Taçon and Chippindale (1998) call an 'informed' method of interpretation.

Certainly, the information concerning spirit helpers in both Saami shamanistic practices and Finnish traditional epic poetry seems highly relevant. Even the animal species appearing in traditions of the historical period seem to be the same as in prehistoric rock art. The most important spirit helpers (*noides-woeigni*) of a Saami shaman in his journey to the otherworld were the deer of the otherworld (*sáiva sarva*), his 'alter ego'; a supernatural fish or snake (*sáiva guelie*), who assisted the shaman in his journeys to the world below; and *sáiva leddie*, a supernatural bird who accompanied him in journeys to the upper world (Bäckman 1975). What is more, these beings were, according to many sources, thought to live in holy mountains (*passevare*). Indeed, in some sources (such as the accounts of 18th century missionaries Jens and Sigvard Kildal) the *sáiva*-prefix attributed to the spirit helpers has been replaced with *passevare* (e.g. *passevare guelie*, 'the fish of the holy mountain'). This seems to offer us a further clue in support of the idea that zoomorphic spirit helpers were portrayed in rock paintings.

The pre-Christian Finnish religious tradition similarly includes references to zoomorphic spirit helpers, especially in relation to the institution of 'wise men' (*tietäjä*) and certain themes of epic folk poetry. The Finnish tradition is historically more stratified, but here, too, it is possible to distinguish the characteristic spirit helpers of an archaic hunting-and-gathering culture: the elk (or deer) associated with the middle world, the bird associated with the upper world, and the snake (or fish) associated with the lower world (Siikala 2002:234, 235). A good example can be found in the poem *Väinämöinen's trip to Tuonela*, considered by Siikala (2002:302) to be one of the most shamanistic and archaic of all *Kalevala* poetry.[4] In the poem, the 'eternal sage' Väinämöinen is building a boat but does not have the correct magic words to complete the task. He sets out to Tuonela, the Land of Death, in search of the words and crosses the River of Death in a boat. After failing to acquire the words, he barely escapes the Land of Death by changing himself into a snake in order to swim through the nets in the grim river.

LOCATION

A growing amount of rock art studies approach the art from the point of view of its location in the physical and social landscape (e.g. Sognnes 1994, Bradley 1997, Whitley 1998, Helskog 1999, Nash & Chippindale 2002, Chippindale & Nash 2004). Traditional archaeology has studied the location of sites in the context of an abstract space, in which the small-scale, specific and experiential characteristics of places are lost at the expense of distribution maps and contour lines (Tilley 1994). In doing so, archaeology has lost sight of what prehistoric people may have perceived as the most significant elements of landscape. Numerous ethnographic examples highlight the manner in which, among hunter-gatherers, specific topographic features – such as mountains, boulders, rapids or springs – have acquired mythical and sacred connotations, or have been viewed as living beings. As Ingold (2000) has emphasised, hunter-gatherer societies rarely make a strict distinction between animate and inanimate entities, but various features of the physical

environment can be perceived as 'persons' and as potent actors in human-environment relations. Not infrequently, such features are associated with rock art. The most famous and best-documented examples of this come from Aboriginal Australia, but as Bradley (2000:13, 14) notes, in order to understand the role of unaltered natural features in European prehistory, the ethnography of Siberia and Europe's arctic north is of much more relevance. Peter Jordan's recent ethno-archaeological research among the Siberian Khanty is a prime example of this (Jordan 2003a).

Well-documented examples of sacred topography can be found in northern Fennoscandia. In an important study, Manker (1957) has given detailed descriptions of more than 500 sacred sites of the Saami. Although here no oral tradition or cult associating sacred sites with rock art is known to exist, some examples of historical period rock art probably related to the Saami have been found (Shumkin 1990:66, Bayliss-Smith & Mulk 1999, Simonsen 2001:48). In spite of their rarity, these discoveries suggest that the tradition of making rock art survived in some parts of northern Scandinavia until relatively recent times, and that the reasons for making it were forgotten perhaps only some centuries ago.

Finnish landscape is typically flat or hilly, dotted with a great number of lakes that often form extensive systems of labyrinthine waterways. The rock paintings are usually located in some of the most obvious topographic landmarks along these waterways: impressive, light-coloured rocky cliffs rising on lakeshores (Fig. 4). Most are made on outcrops of bedrock, but seven sites are

Fig. 4. *The site of Mertavuori in the municipality of Iitti is in many ways typical of Finnish rock paintings: a bare rock cliff rising on a lakeshore. Seen from certain viewpoints, the shapes of the rock are strongly reminiscent of a human face in profile (see Taavitsainen 1981, Fig. 3). Photo: Antti Lahelma.*

located on large boulders. A few are associated with rapids, and some are inside or nearby small cavities. As the cliffs with paintings are bare of the all-encompassing forest vegetation, they are usually well visible from afar to anyone travelling by water. Aside from being nearly always directly at water's edge, locations of the rocks vary. Frequently, they are situated in narrow straits in a lake or between two lakes, but a location in an island, a peninsula or the end of a small bay is not uncommon. Some sites lie in almost 'hidden' locations, far from any obvious water or land routes.

This association with water has usually been explained in functional terms, mainly as being somehow connected to strategies of hunting elk (Taavitsainen 1978, Siikala 1981:89–91). However, as this explanation fails to account for many of the recurring aspects of rock painting location, alternative – or rather, complementary – 'symbolic' explanations must be sought. Here it is interesting to note the apparent anthropomorphic features of some of the painted rocks. Many modern observers have been powerfully struck by the human likeness of the natural features of certain rock painting sites (Taavitsainen 1981, Kivikäs 1995:51, 260, Miettinen 2000:86, 87, Pentikäinen & Miettinen 2003). Examples include the paintings of Mertavuori, Valkeisaari, Ilmuksenvuori, Astuvansalmi and Lakiasuonvuori. Such observations are, of course, highly problematic in that it is impossible for us to know if Stone Age hunter-gatherers recognised such features also. Some validity to this phenomenon is, however, given by ethnographic information relating to cults associated with distinctly shaped stones in northern Eurasia. The Saami cult of the *sieidi*, or rock formations[5] worshipped as expressing a supernatural power, is of particular relevance here. In the 1930s, a Finnish ethnographer, Samuli Paulaharju, wrote of the Saami attitude towards *sieidi*:

> Only peculiar, unusually large or strange cliffs, stone pillars or boulders attracted [the Saami's] attention. The lonesome, imposing pillar on a barren slope of a fell, a lone boulder on a heath or a huge block standing alone by a lake, a strange rock with a hole in a rapid, an ugly, water-worn bench of rock – these were surely so odd that they concealed some secret power, to which one could turn to. A white block of rock visible from afar was considered more wondrous than others and well deserved to be worshipped. A great power could also live in a brown outcrop of rock, the worn shape of which resembled that of a human face or of an animal. Equally well, such power might be present in rocks that in their entirety reminded one of a human being, or rested on their foundations like a large tent of the Lapps (Paulaharju 1932:5, 6; my translation).

The site of the *sieidi*, and sometimes its entire surroundings such as a particular fell or lake on which it stood, were considered sacred (*passe*). The *sieidi* were thought to be able to bestow hunting or fishing luck or, if ignored or offended, deprive the hunter of his catch. Small sacrificial offerings such as coins, reindeer antlers or fish heads were given to the *sieidi* and their 'faces' were smeared with the fat or blood of a hunted animal. In addition to being the focus of a sacrificial cult, Paulaharju (1932:16) mentions that the 'great Lapp witches of old' had sung *joik*s[6] at a *sieidi* and fallen into trance in order to summon game animals.

Although the locations of many of the *sieidi* known to us are somewhat incongruent with rock paintings, the phenomenological similarities between the two are considerable, as pointed out already by Taavitsainen (1981). Mircea Eliade, the Romanian-born historian of religion, has argued that people in pre-industrial societies experience breaks in the homogeneity of space – places that are qualitatively different from the surrounding space and hence regarded sacred (Eliade 1987). The sacred, according to Eliade, manifests in 'hierophanies', such as anomalous and unusual aspects of the landscape. The universalising theories and sweeping generalizations characteristic of Eliade's work find few uncritical supporters in

today's academia, but the concept of hierophany does appear to have definite utility. Certainly in the case of both the Finnish rock paintings and the Saami *sieidi* a pattern of anomalous topography is obvious. Natural landmarks, outstanding formations of landscape, anthropomorphic shapes of the rock, rapids and semi-caves – these are all excellent examples of natural anomalies.

Okladnikov (1972:41) has passed to us a fascinating fragment of information concerning the making of rock art among the Siberian Evenks. He describes hunting rites held each year at a *bugady*, a sacred rock or tree, in association with which Evenk shamans drew red ochre paintings the rock. These *bugady* commonly were of a zoomorphic shape, resembling the head an elk head, and were believed to be inhabited by an elk deity who could bestow hunting luck. Thus, just as with the Saami, we see an association with shamans and sacred, distinctly shaped rocks – but what is more, here the making of red ochre rock paintings is also present.

PICTURES IN BETWEEN THE WORLDS

Knut Helskog has discussed the 'shore connection' of rock carvings in Northern Europe and its relevance to our attempts to understand their meaning, emphasising that as the carvings are associated with water, 'water should therefore be part of the explanation' (Helskog 1999:74). The same is true of most North European rock paintings. In Finland, it is not uncommon that at a rock painting site, the most imposing rock formations can be found on dry land some tens of metres away from the lakeshore, but the paintings have been made on more humble rocks immediately at water's front. It seems, then, that the most crucial element in rock painting location is not the size or visibility of the rock, but its physical connectedness with water. The setting for rock paintings is carefully selected: they are situated on the *limes* of a symbolic vertical axis, formed by the rock (sometimes tens of metres high) that reaches towards the sky and the deep, dark water reaching down below. They lie in the point where three elements meet: earth, water and sky (Fig. 5).

This seems to recall the conception of a 'world mountain' that unites the different levels of cosmos, common among Finno-Ugric and Altaic peoples (Holmberg 1927). As is well known, a characteristic feature of shamanistic cosmology is a tiered conception of the universe, which in the circumpolar region is commonly divided in three levels. This vertical division of the cosmos is commonly shown in Saami shaman drums – a famous example, Manker's (1938) catalogue number 43, comes from Finnish Lapland. The middle world is inhabited by human beings, while the upper and lower worlds are the abode of gods and spirits. These three levels of cosmos are connected by a vertical *axis mundi*, through which the shaman can move between ordinary and supranormal reality. The *axis mundi* is typically imagined as a tree, mountain or pillar, but among the nomadic peoples of northern Eurasia, the lower world is commonly accessed also through water. The Saami, for example, believed that certain lakes were *sáiva*-lakes, through the bottom of which the lower world could be reached (Pentikäinen 1995:146–149).

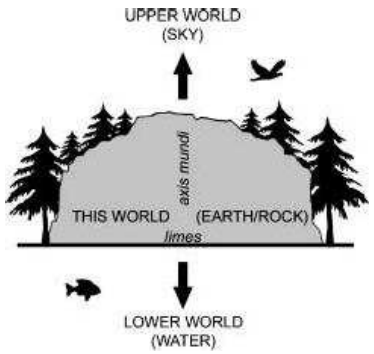

Fig. 5. *The rock painting site as a reflection of the cosmic order.*

This interpretation of Finnish rock painting sites being symbolic of the *axis mundi* and of the world mountain may find additional support from neuropsychological research concerning altered states of consciousness (ASC). An ASC involves not only visual hallucinations, but certain somatic experiences and shared sensations also derive from the central nervous system and consequently have a universal character (see Chippindale et. al. 2000:72–74). Among the most common somatic phenomena associated with ASC are experiences of weightlessness, breathlessness and the mental perception of departing from the physical body. Interpretations given to these experiences are culturally determined, but are almost universally described as being akin to flying and diving, and are in shamanistic traditions usually interpreted as such. That such experiences can have inspired some of the paintings is suggested by the occasional human figures that are painted upside-down, as if diving into the lake below the

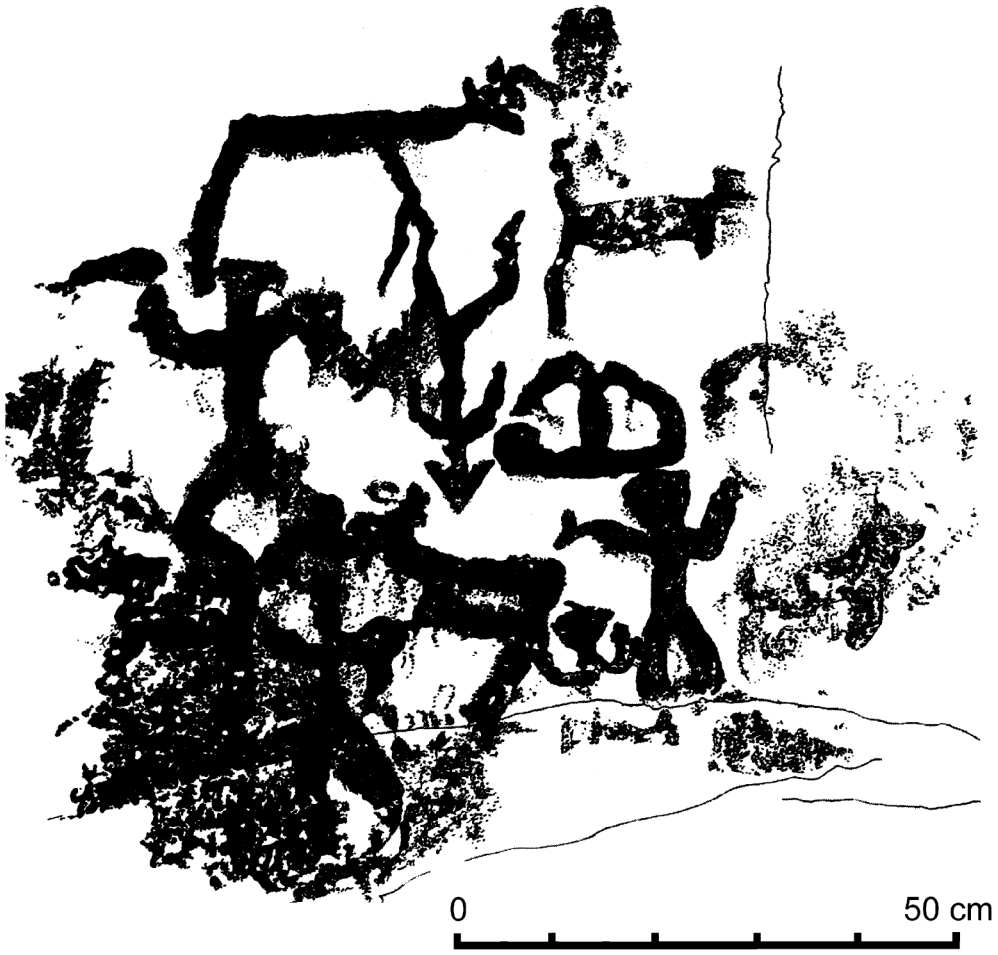

Fig. 6. *The rock painting of Hahlavuori in the municipality of Hirvensalmi. Note the 'diving' anthropomorph with an arrow-shaped head in the middle. Tracing by Pekka Kivikäs (2000).*

painting (Fig. 6). Images of fish (or of snakes), particularly when accompanied by a 'falling' human (Fig. 3d), may similarly relate to experiences of diving to the lower world. An interesting and highly suggestive scene related to this theme can be found in the rock painting of Kapasaari (Fig. 2e). The painting shows a human figure accompanied by a shoal of fish, possibly portraying the subaquatic experience of trance. Viewed together, these three scenes can be thought of as a sequence, showing the shaman (1) falling into trance (accompanied by a fish-shaped spirit helper), (2) diving to the watery underworld, and (3) swimming under water. One is reminded of the subaquatic trance journey described in the 12th century account of *Historia Norvegiae* (Tolley 1994), mentioned earlier.

Finally, images of birds, rare though they are, might be understood as portraying bird-shaped spirit helpers and thus referring to journeys to the upper world. At three sites (Värikallio, Pakanavuori and Juusjärvi; Kivikäs 2000:28, 29, 68, 69), we find enigmatic series of figures showing both men and animals, arranged in rows that seem to be rising upwards. It would be tempting to see these as portraying celestial journeys, but the poor preservation of the figures makes the interpretation shaky at best. Admittedly, this kind of imagery seems more difficult to find than images seemingly describing journeys to the world below. Here it should be mentioned that while the Saami certainly believed in the existence of an upper world, the trance journeys of the *noaidi* appear to have been limited to the underworld (Kasten 1989:119). This, of course, need not have been true of the Stone Age makers of rock paintings – but if it was, it might explain the small number of images (such as birds) that can be associated with heavenly journeys.

CONCLUSIONS

To summarise the argument presented above, the Finnish rock paintings can be interpreted as an expression of a shamanistic system of beliefs. Their iconography appears to reflect experiences of falling into trance, of summoning sprit helpers, of changing one's physical form, and of journeying to the Otherworld. The elk, we may suggest, is pictured not as prey but as a spirit helper or a soul animal of special importance – perhaps not altogether unlike the *sáiva sarva* of the Saami shaman. As Layton (2000:181–182) has argued, in the context of shamanistic art, the animal species portrayed with the highest frequency is likely to represent such a being – a species particularly charged with power.

Furthermore, it is suggested that shamanistic ideas and cosmology are reflected not only in iconography of the paintings, but also in their location in the landscape, which in many respects resembles that of a Saami sacred site (*sieidi*). The most common type of rock painting site, an imposing rocky precipice rising on the lakeshore, can be seen to reflect aspirations of accessing both the upper world (by climbing or flying up the rock) and the lower world (by diving down to the bottom of a lake), through a symbolic axis (world mountain). To use Eliade's (1987) terminology, the rock painting site emerges as an *imago mundi* – a reflection of the cosmic order.

On the basis of the present discussion, it would certainly be premature to attribute *all* of Finnish rock art to shamanism and trance experiences, especially as several important categories of motifs (such as boat figures) were left outside of the discussion. While shamanism seems to provide answers to many aspects of Finnish rock art, there can have been several different reasons for painting images, and some sites can have served different purposes than others. More research is needed to address these issues.

In the preceding paragraphs, the importance of the shoreline to any attempt at understanding Finnish rock paintings was emphasised. Here it would seem, however, that problems arise with the assertion as soon we broaden our view to include the

rock paintings of Northern Sweden. The pattern of location of the Swedish rock paintings seems to be more varied than in Finland, including a few sites (most famously Flatruet in Härjedalen) that have no connection to water whatsoever (Janson *et al.* 1989, Kivikäs 2003). These sites are otherwise so similar to Finnish rock paintings that it would be disingenuous to ignore them simply because they lie on the other side of the Gulf of Bothnia and the Swedish–Finnish national frontier. How, then, does one accommodate Flatruet with the 'shore connection' (Helskog 1999) of North European hunter-gatherer rock art?

Perhaps the answer can, again, be sought by way of an analogy with the Saami *sieidi*. Three types of *sieidi* are distinguished in the ethnographic record: fish, deer and reindeer *sieidi*, providing livelihood for fishermen, hunters and reindeer herders respectively. This economic association is reflected in their location. Fish *sieidi*, considered by Hultkrantz (1985:25–26) the most ancient type, are always located along the fishing waters, whereas deer and reindeer *sieidi* lie along the migratory paths of the animals, often up in the mountains. If this economic logic is transferred to prehistoric rock paintings, it seems only natural that in the Finnish Lake Region (rich in aquatic resources) paintings are associated with fishing waters, while in the inland regions of Swedish Norrland (home to large herds of game animals) they can also be found up in the mountains. But in neither case is the location dictated by economic factors alone. Thus, just as the Finnish sites are located at the *limes* of water and earth, the site of Flatruet lies at the threshold between two different kinds of territories, the forest plain and the open mountain area (Lars Forsberg, personal communication). 'Functional' and 'symbolic' reasons appear to intertwine in determining the location of rock paintings – an observation that holds true with the Saami *sieidi* also. As Brück (1999) has convincingly argued, we cannot expect to find a dichotomy of ritual and practical activity in prehistoric societies. The key to rock painting location is therefore not simply the shoreline or 'liminality', but appears to be found in the close coinciding of anomalous or liminal places with places important from the point of view of economic exploitation. Like the *sieidi*, such sites were the foci of rituals and worship, but were also intimately involved in the practicalities of daily life, particularly with food production.

Any study of prehistoric rock art that makes use of ethnographic analogy should be careful not to view the peoples described in ethnographic records as lacking history. In response to this, Peter Jordan (2003b) urges archaeologists to engage with the specificity of particular archaeological datasets. In using ethnographic analogy, we should have an eye for differences as well as similarities – that is, instead of assuming that nothing has changed, we should look for what *has* changed and *how*. That Saami religion has undergone a number of changes during the historical period is a well-established fact (Hultkrantz 1985, Kasten 1989), and it is likely to have done so in prehistory also. Even if one accepts the hypothesis that the stone *sieidi* and prehistoric rock paintings are related, at least three glaring differences are immediately obvious to anyone comparing the two. The first and most obvious is the use of paint: the *sieidi* are unaltered natural places (Bradley 2000), where as rock painting sites have been marked with man-made, painted symbols. Second, many of the *sieidi* are large or medium-sized boulders, while most of the paintings have been made on outcrops of bedrock. And third, nearly all rock paintings are associated with water, whereas the *sieidi* can be located in a wide variety of places, not always associated with the shoreline (Manker 1957). It would clearly be a mistake, then, to maintain that rock paintings and the *sieidi* had identical functions.

This being said, the striking similarities between the two phenomena are difficult to

ignore. In fact, many aspects of rock art seem to find such close parallels in Saami ethnography that the prospect of a 'direct historical analogy' in interpreting North European hunter-gatherer rock art should be taken seriously – a point raised also by Jordan (2003b) and Zvelebil (1997) while discussing Siberian ethnography. In particular, there can be little doubt that this material is highly relevant to our understanding of Finnish rock paintings. The challenge lies in developing commonly accepted and theoretically well-informed guidelines on how ethnographic analogy should be used.

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NOTES

[1] Because of highly varying levels of documentation, it is difficult to give an exact number. If all reports of possible prehistoric rock paintings in Finland are counted together, the number is 130 at the time of writing (21 January 2005). Of these, at least four but possibly as many as 15 are likely to be either fabrications or natural accumulations of red ochre, and many more are probably genuine rock paintings but have no identifiable figures. The number of paintings with clearly identifiable figures, unquestionably of prehistoric date, is 89.

[2] A carving was found in 1935 at Marraskoski rapids in northern Finland. The site has subsequently been destroyed and its age remains unknown. Judging by the photographs and tracings (see Taskinen 2000, Fig. 3), it did not resemble any known prehistoric carvings and may thus have been from the historical period. A second 'carving' from Hiidenvuori in central Finland, reported some years ago by Haarmann (1996) in a well-known journal, was in fact a natural rock formation (Miettinen 1999).

[3] The Finnish scholar M. A. Castrén identified shamanism in traditional Finnish folk poetry as early as the mid-19th century (Castrén 1853). Siikala 2002 is a comprehensive, well-argued treatise on the presence of shamanistic elements in pre-Christian Finnish religion. Unfortunately, many other central works on the subject have not been translated into English, but see e.g. Pentikäinen 1999 on Finnish mythology, Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978 on Saami shamanism and Holmberg's (1927) old but still very useful work on Finno-Ugric religions in general.

[4] The Finnish national epic *Kalevala* is a work of 19th century romanticism, composed by the district physician and humanist Elias Lönnrot (1802–1884) in imitation of Homeric epics and *The Poems of Ossian*. The *runes* of the epic are based on traditional Finnish oral poetry, collected by Lönnrot and others during the early 19th century, but are published in a rather heavily edited form. *Väinämöinen's trip to Tuonela* forms a part of the XVI rune of the Kalevala. In their original form, the folk poems that lie behind it may be found in English translation in *Finnish Folk Poetry: Epic* (Kuusi *et al.* 1977).

[5] Historical accounts speak of wooden *sieidi* also, but although wooden 'idols' were undoubtedly worshipped by the Saami, it is unclear if the Saami in fact called them *sieidi* or not (Manker 1957:303).

[6] A *joik* is an improvised Saami song, but one that is distinguished from the Western notion of singing in a number of ways. As a consequence, the term cannot be properly translated. At best, it might be characterised as a kind of shamanistic chanting, but this, too, is a wholly inadequate definition.

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