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REFLECTIONS ON FINNISH ROCK ART AND ETHNOHISTORICAL DATA

Abstract

An interesting aspect of Finnish rock art is the possible connection with magico-religious traditions described in the 14th–19th century sources. There are similarities between the red ochre rock paintings and the red figures depicted on old Saami shaman drums and, furthermore, the kinds of sites used for prehistoric paintings correspond to those chosen by the historical Saami for their votive offerings. These and other parallels between rock art and ethnohistorical data point to the possibility of survival of local magico-religious traditions from the Stone Age to the historical period.

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Rock art is a fairly recent addition to Finnish prehistoric research. Most of Finland's rock paintings — over 50 localities — have been discovered during the last 25 years (Fig. 1). The known sites show an eastern distribution (Fig. 2) but it is not clear whether this reflects their prehistoric spread or the activity of ambitious amateur archaeologists.

The Finnish rock paintings are characterized by monochrome representations of mainly cervids and anthropomorphs made with red ochre on rock cliffs by lake and river shores (Fig. 3). It has been possible to date a few paintings on geological grounds; the oldest of them to c. 3000 BC, the youngest to c. 500 AD (Carpelan 1975; Saarnisto 1969; Sarvas & Taavitsainen 1976; Taavitsainen & Kinnunen 1979). This indicates that rock paintings were made in Finland for some 3500 years, but their chronological range may be wider than in Norway (Bakka 1975; Simonsen 1974).

Theme and style place the Finnish prehistoric paintings within the vast "hunters' art" complex of northern Eurasia. The most common motifs are cervids and anthropomorphs, each group about one-third of all representations. Some are naturalistically done, while others are more schematic. Many cervids have the heart marked with a circle (Fig. 3a). About one-tenth of the

anthropomorphs have "horns" (Fig. 3a, 3c). Since the headgear of Eurasian shamans was often horned (Jochelson 1926; Ozols 1974), horned anthropomorphs have been interpreted as shamans (Sarvas 1969; Sarvas & Taavitsainen 1976). However, Eero Autio (1995) has recently pointed out that there is no mention of Fennoscandian Lapp shamans wearing horns, arguing that horn-like markings denote high status. Other important elements of Finnish rock art are the so-called boats, hand/foot prints and geometric figures (Fig. 3, 6).

On the nature of rock art

Rock art holds very important information for the prehistorian. It may illustrate food-procurement methods or show how artifacts were used in the ancient past (Fig. 4–5). Even seemingly straightforward scenes are likely to hold a hidden symbolism unreadable to us. Those encoded messages were clear to the painters and, at least partially, to their contemporaries; but their meaning is very difficult to grasp by those from another era and culture.

Rock art may be interpreted with the help of semiotics, ethnoarchaeology and ethnohistoric

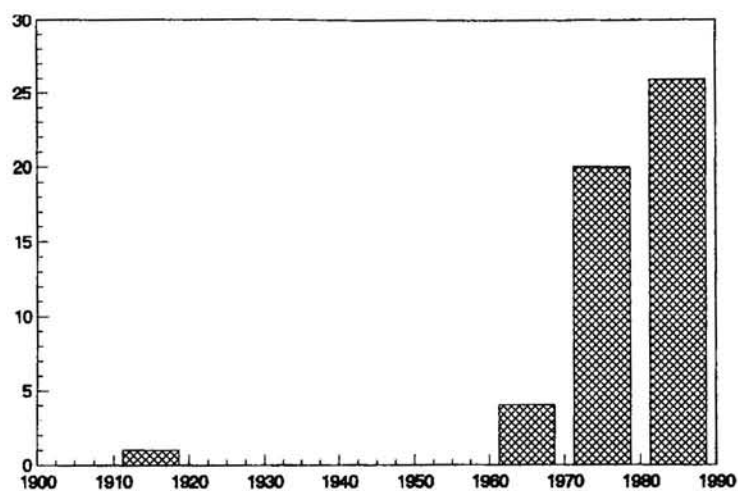


Fig. 1. The rock art sites discovered in Finland before 1990.



Fig. 2. The general area (shaded) where the Finnish prehistoric rock paintings occur.

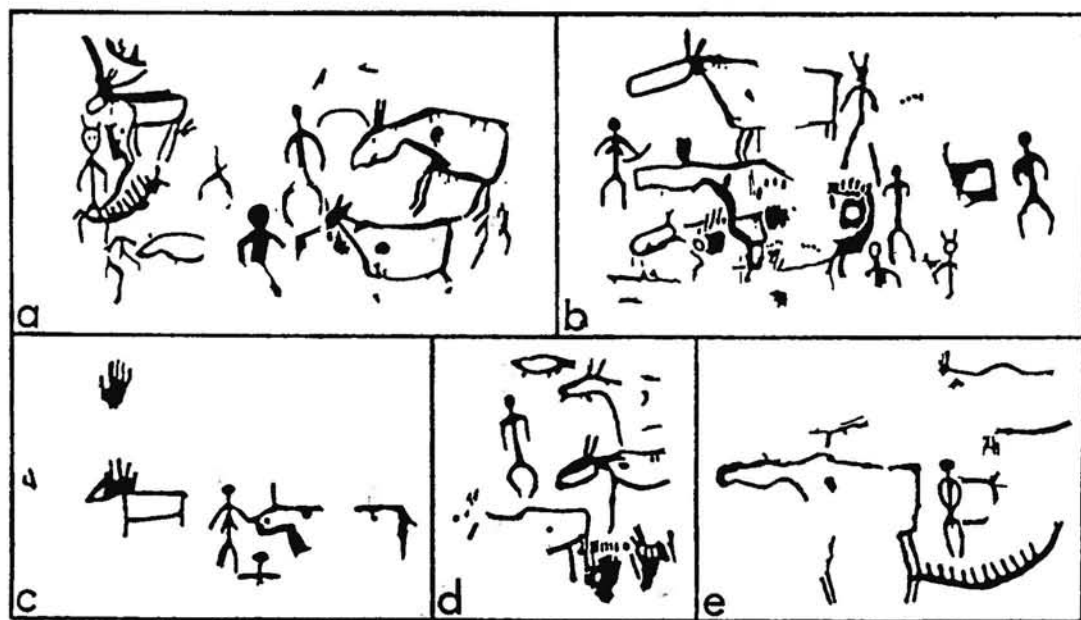


Fig. 3. Typical motifs of Finnish rock art: anthropomorphs (a-e); some with female attributes (b, c); other horned (a, b); cervids (a-e), most of them with their heart marked; handprints (b, c); and boats (a, e). All these representations come from the Astuvansalmi site (Núñez 1983; Šarvas 1969).

data (Ernits & Poikalainen 1990; Gould 1990; Miettinen 1990; Okladnikov 1970; 1972; Siikala 1980; Thackeray 1990). But the task is not easy. Ethnoarchaeological studies among the Australian aborigines show that in some societies one motif may have several meanings, whereas amongst others different motifs may have the same meaning. Franz Boas (1940) came to the same conclusions when studying the decorative art of North American Indians 90 years ago.

Having issued this final warning about the problems of interpreting the meaning of rock art representations, I will now describe some ethnographic parallels that may shed some light on the nature of Finnish rock art.

Ethnographic parallels

Richard Gould (1990) observed that certain motifs of Australian rock art are duplicated in Aborigine body paint. Obviously we cannot know if and how Finland's prehistoric inhabitants decorated their bodies, but we do have several Stone Age anthropomorphic clay figurines with incised decoration that resemble garments and body paint or tattoos

(Edgren 1992; Huurre 1979; Núñez 1986a). Interestingly, some of these incised designs have counterparts in Fennoscandian rock art (Fig. 6; Núñez 1981; 1983; 1986; 1987a).

Anna-Leena Siikala (1980) has suggested that the cervid-anthropomorph scenes so common in the Finnish paintings may represent shamans asking the Earth-Owner or Ancestress for hunting luck. A shaman called Nelbosh described a similar event among the reindeer-hunting Yukaghir 100 years ago (Jochelson 1926). The ritual began in the same manner as if treating the sick and, after a while, the shaman fell down unconscious. But instead of travelling to the kingdom of shadows, his soul visited one of the deities that controlled the game.

The shaman's soul, aided by his guardian spirits, approaches the abode of the Earth-Owner, half-opens the door, but does not enter... The shaman says: "Earth-Owner, your children sent me to you for some food for the future." If the Owner loves the shaman, he gives him the soul of a doe, if not, he gives him that of a bull. The shaman takes the soul, comes to and rises. He beats his drum, dances with joy and sings to his spirit-protectors. Then he approaches the chief

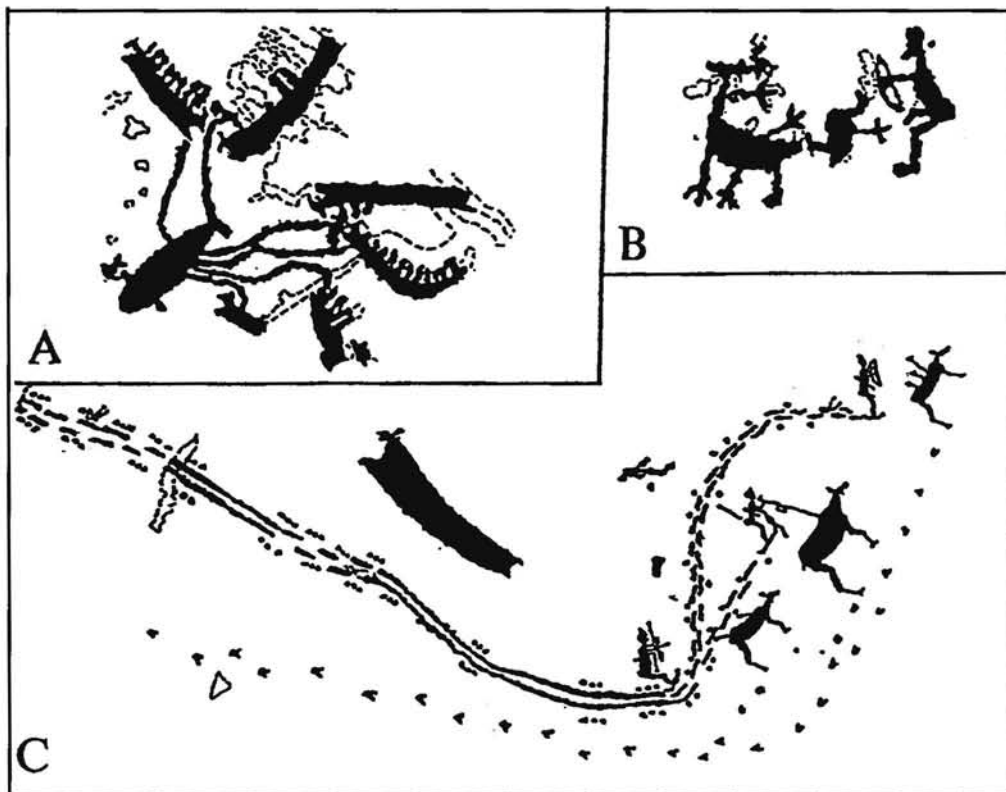


Fig. 4. Selected hunting scenes from the rock art of neighbouring Northwest Russia: A) whale hunt from six boats; B) bird-hunting archer; C) skiers chasing with arrow and spear. (Savvateev 1970).

hunter and ties the invisible reindeer soul on the hunter's head with an invisible band. He says: "Go to the right bank of the river and you will find the reindeer." There the hunter will kill a reindeer. If the Earth-Owner had given the shadow of a doe it will be a doe and the hunters will have luck through the entire season. If the Earth-Owner gave a bull, he will only kill that bull and there will be no more game (Jochelson 1926, 211–212).

Okladnikov (1972) described a somewhat similar ritual among the Evenks, a tradition told by old Kaltakan who as a young man had taken part in the annual magic hunting rites. They were celebrated at one of the sacred tribal places, a *bugady*, which could be a boulder, an outcrop or a tree. The hunters, clad in elk skins and antlers, performed a magic dance to insure the availability of game in the coming year. They enacted the reproduction of elk, the birth of a calf, symbolizing the renovation

of life in the taiga, and a hunting scene with the killing of an elk. Finally the shaman would go to the abode of the elk deity, or Ancestress, to beg for hunting luck. This deity was supposed to dwell within a special *bugady*, a rock with a shape reminiscent of a giant elk head. According to Okladnikov, it was on these occasions that the shaman drew magic tracings with red ochre on that rock: "Die Überlieferung sagt, dass die Schamanen auf solchen geheiligten Felsen mit rotem Ocker geheiligte Bilder zeichneten" (Okladnikov 1972, 41).

What is most interesting in Okladnikov's account is the link between shamans and rock paintings. There are other Siberian traditions about rock-painting shamans. One of them tells about an old female shaman that drew two large elk on a cliff near the Toyon-Aryy village after having defeated the small pox spirit (Okladnikov 1970, 102).

Can such ethnographic parallels be found also



Fig. 5. Prehistoric zoomorphic effigies in artifacts and rock art: A) A horse-like effigy from the Mesolithic of Russian Karelia (length 45 cm), possibly meant for attachment to a staff as depicted in B. C-D) Scandinavian (C) and Northwest Russian (D) representations of staffs topped with zoomorphic effigies like the perforated stone elk head E (length 16 cm) from a Finnish Mesolithic site radiocarbon-dated to c. 5200 BC. F) Northwest Russian rock carvings of boats with zoomorphic effigies like the wooden elk head G (length 40 cm) from northern Finland, radiocarbon-dated to c. 5800 BC. H) A staff/musical instrument of a Siberian shaman. (Carpelan 1977; Erä-Esko 1958; Lommel 1967.)

in Finland? The archaeological material suggests that there have been no settlement breaks since the Stone Age (Carpelan 1979b; Meinander 1984; Núñez 1987; 1989; Núñez & Taavitsainen 1993). If this interpretation is correct, then it may be possible to find parallels in local Lapp magico-religious traditions.

Some authors have noticed analogies between rock art representations and the figures depicted on the Lapp shaman drums (Luhio 1971; Manker 1950; Núñez 1981; Siikala 1980). Besides similarities in motifs and style, the drum pictures are always done in red (Fig. 7).

Another possible connection is the combination of an anthropomorph and a fish or a snake-like figure — a motif often observed in Fennoscandian rock art. Sometimes one gets the impression that the anthropomorph is falling or fallen. There are at

least three man-snake and one analogous man-fish representations from Finland, and similar scenes occur in neighbouring Scandinavia, Karelia, Kola and on the Lapp shaman drums (Fig. 8; Núñez 1981; V. Ja. Shumkin, personal communication).

Interestingly, the Lapp drum picture in Fig. 8f has been described as a snake and a soul travelling to Hades; a second interpretation is the path of the dead and a dead man, both flanked by Hades, and a shaman on his way to Hades (Itkonen 1955; Manker 1950). A certain correspondence may be found in the Lapp shaman rituals. The Lapp shamans or *noita* were supposed to fall into trance when they or their soul travelled to the spiritual world (Fig. 9). They were helped in these occasions by guardian spirits that appeared in animal form, mainly as fish or snakes.

The shamans were assisted by several guardian

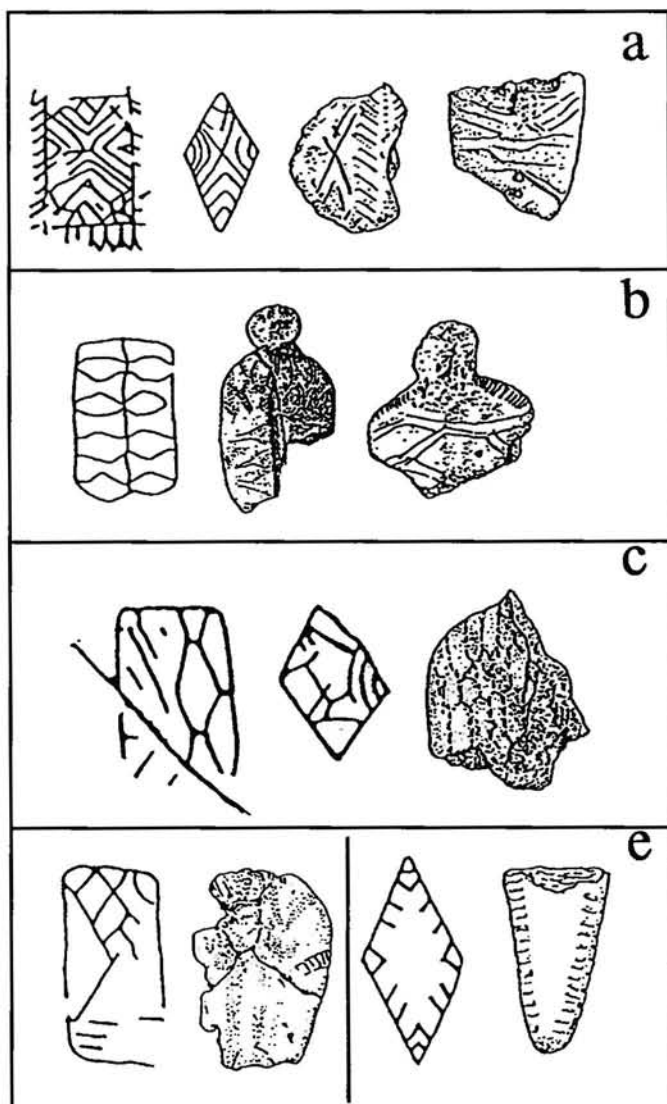


Fig. 6. Blazons from Finnish (a; far left) and Scandinavian (rest) prehistoric rock art that have counterparts in the incised patterns of six anthropomorphic figurines from Finland. The clay figurines are from the 3rd and 4th millennia BC; rock art dates are unclear but broadly contemporaneous. (Núñez 1981; 1983; 1986.)

spirits, some had three, others had four or five, up to nine sometimes. They appeared in the guise of birds, snakes or fish. When asked to cure a sick person the shaman ordered the sacrifice of the biggest reindeer. After the sacrifice he began to beat his drum and did so until he fell to the ground stiff as a stone (Krohn 1894, 116).

The Lapp word *guelle*... means fish but also snake. The particular task of the *saivo*-fish or -snake is to preserve or take care of the shaman's soul when he is about to make a journey to Hades, *Jabmeaimo*, for the purpose of bring-

ing up the soul of a sick person ... It was during this dangerous journey that he ... needed the help of the *saivo-guelle*, the mysterious fish or snake, the mission of which was to protect him and help him to reach his destination. (Karstén 1955, 86-89).

There are still other features that link the Finnish prehistoric paintings with the supernatural beliefs of the historical Lapps. The *seid* were the abode of minor deities or local spirits to whom the Lapps made votive offerings and even sacrifices. These local spirits could reside in a variety of places:

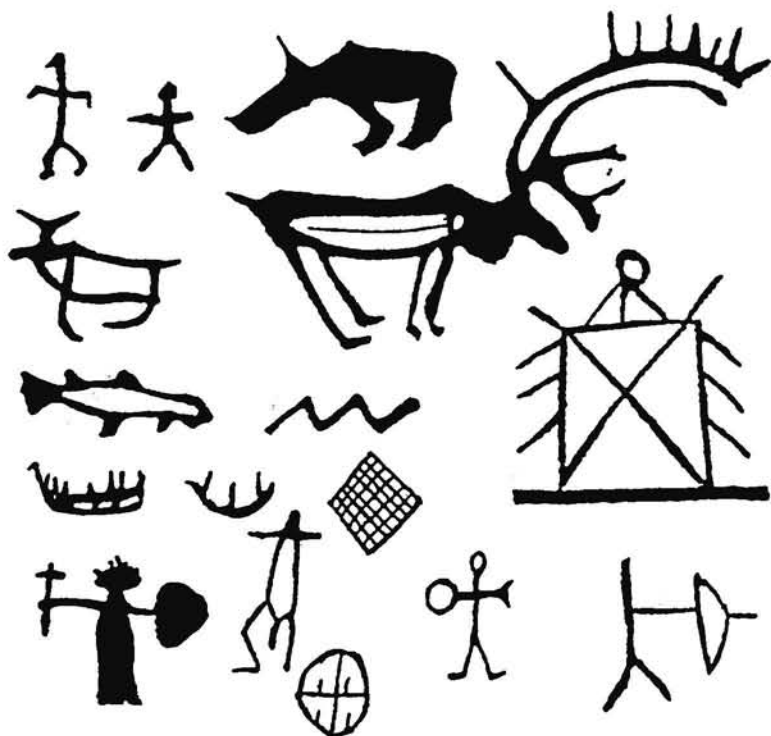


Fig. 7. Motifs from Lapp shaman drums, including anthropomorphs, a bear, cervids, a fish, a snake, boats, a blazon-like representation (cf. Fig. 6a) said to represent a sacrificial altar, and anthropomorphs (Luho 1971; Núñez 1981).

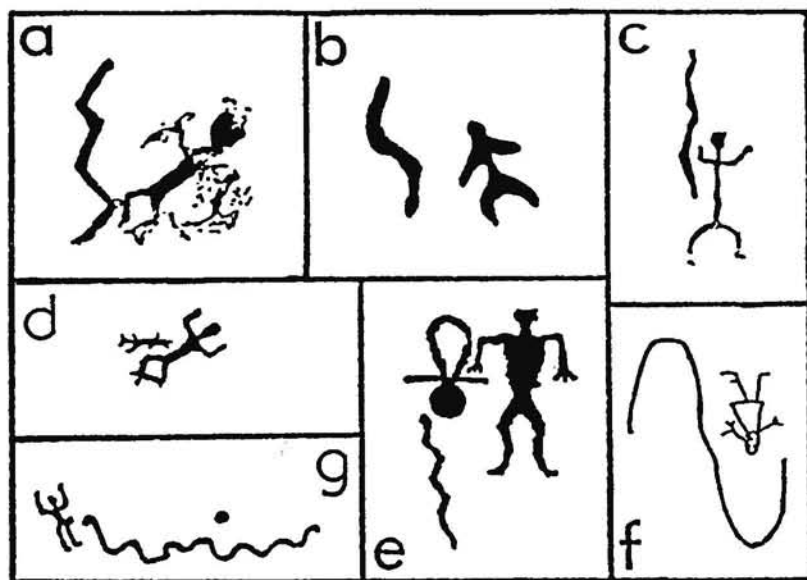


Fig. 8. Anthropomorph-snake/fish scenes from Finland (a-d), Northwest Russia (e), Scandinavia (g), and a Saami shaman drum (f). The latter was described as a snake and a soul travelling to the spiritual world. (Manker 1950; Núñez 1981; 1983; Raudonikas 1936.)

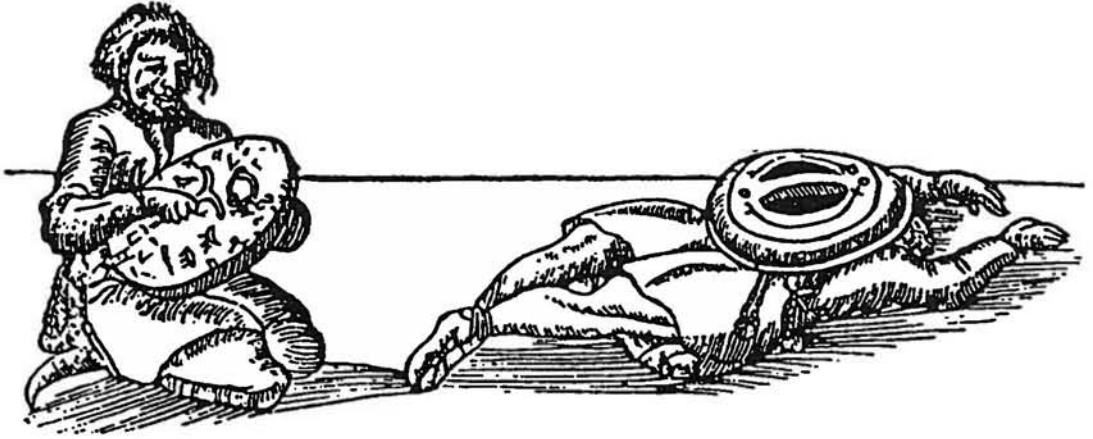


Fig. 9. A 17th century drawing of *noid* or Lapp shamans beating a drum and fallen to the ground in trance while his soul travels to the spiritual world (Schefferus 1673).

Big stones and peculiar boulders were also used as sacrificial altars. Sacrifices could also be made in grottoes or rocky caves, on cliffs, beneath or on the summit of fjells, in fens, beside waterfalls, in lakes and springs or at a tree (Manker 1968, 86).

At least some of these locations correspond to tho-

se sites where the Finnish rock paintings are found. Schefferus (1673) depicted a *seid* as a bone-ringed anthropomorphic boulder at the edge of a rock cliff by a river or lake — a situation typical of all the known Finnish rock art sites (Fig. 10).

It is not clear whether Finland's prehistoric inhabitants made offerings at their rock art sites. No systematic excavations have been carried out so



Fig. 10. A 17th century drawing of a *seid* where the Saami made votive offerings (Schefferus 1673). The revered anthropomorphic stone, surrounded by the antlers of sacrificed reindeer, was located on a cliff by a river/lake. Such location on a waterside rock cliff corresponds to that of most Finnish prehistoric rock paintings.

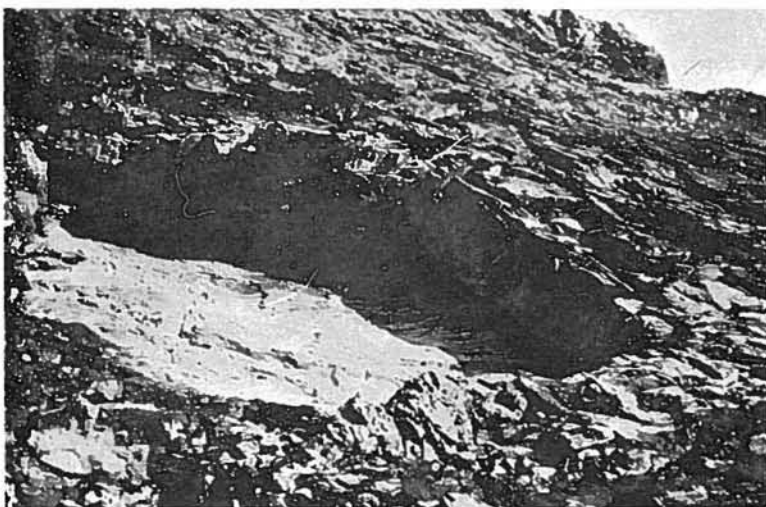


Fig. 11. A Lapp *seid* associated with a rock cavity that was still in use 100 years ago (Man-ker 1968).



Fig. 12. A rock painting site associated with a rock cavity (Rauhala 1976).



Fig. 13. A Lapp *seid* at the edge of a waterside anthropomorphic cliff that was still in use in the 19th century (Manker 1968).

far, but the finds from the two tested rock art sites could have served as votive offerings. Cranial and metatarsal bones of an elk yearling were found at the lake bottom below the Kotojärvi rock painting (Ojonen 1974). Two arrowheads were recovered at the base of the Astuvansalmi cliff in the 1960's and more recently the same site has yielded unusual amber objects (Edgren 1992, 99–100; Grönhagen 1991; Sarvas 1969). Particularly arrowheads and exotic imported goods are common finds at the excavated *seid* sites (Hallström 1932).

Finally let us compare some Fennoscandian *seid* sites with those of Finnish prehistoric paintings. It was mentioned earlier that, like rock paintings, the *seid* are often situated on rocky cliffs by lake/river shores (Fig. 10–16). Many *seid* are also found in association with rock cavities (Fig. 11) and so are some of the known Finnish rock paintings (Fig. 12–13). Another common feature associated with both *seid* and prehistoric rock paintings are peculiarly shaped, particularly anthropomorphic rocks (Fig. 10, 13–15).

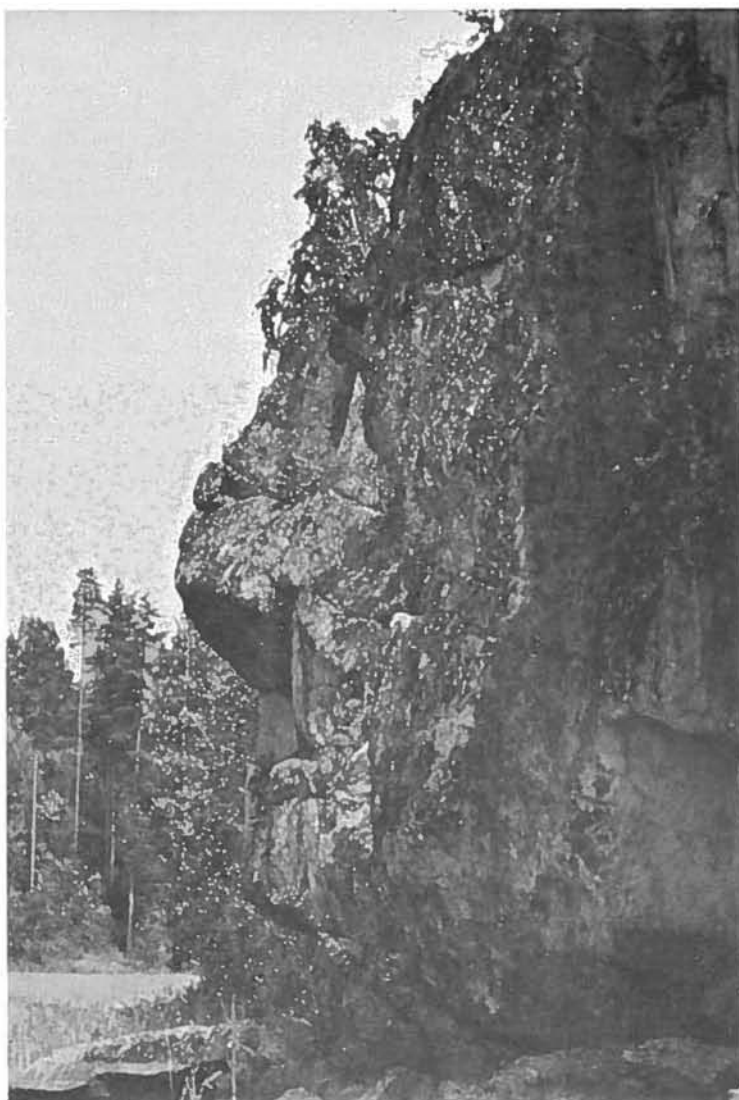


Fig. 14. The anthropomorphic rock of the Märkjärvi rock art site (Taavitsainen 1981).

Final Remarks

All the described parallels may be coincidental, but the fact that they exist calls for closer examination. We should perhaps begin to study the topographic characteristics of both rock art and *seid* sites to determine whether or not a true correspondence exists. Another important approach would be the systematic investigation of the lake bottom below the known prehistoric rock paintings. This may provide information on the chronology and utilization of the Finnish rock art sites.

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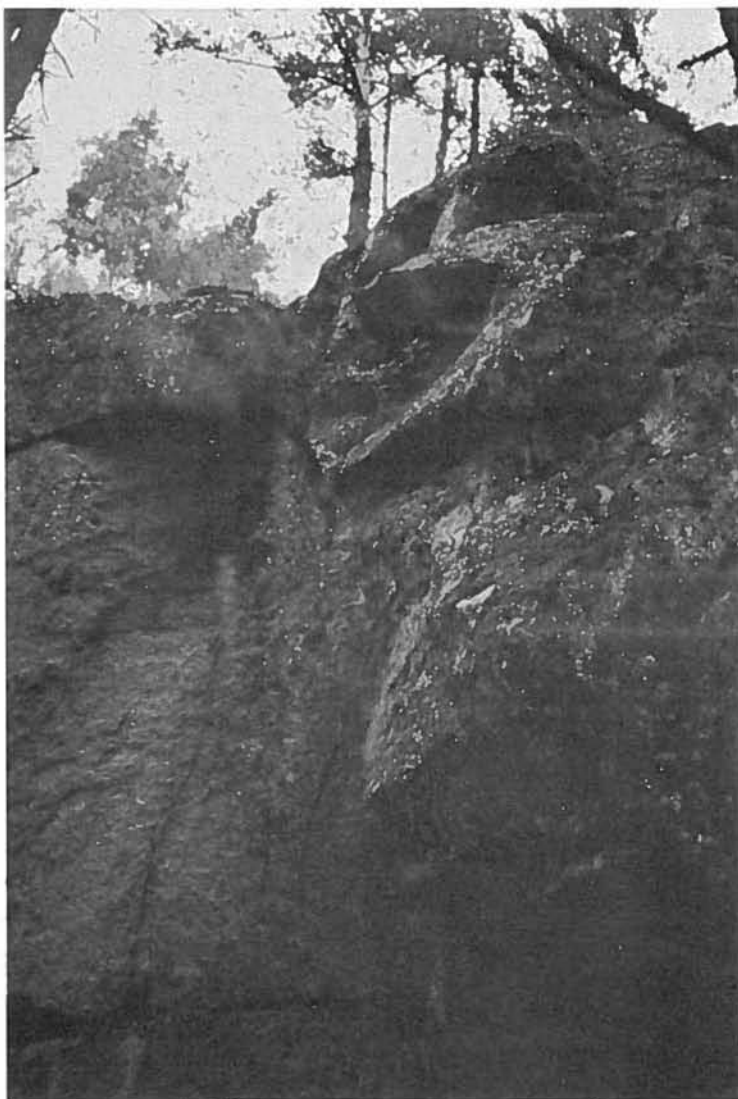


Fig. 15. The anthropomorphic cliff of the Valkeasääri rock art site (Taavitsainen 1981).

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