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IN SEARCH OF THE ORIGINS OF SHAMANISM, COMMUNITY IDENTITY AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES: PREHISTORIC ROCK ART AND THE RELIGION OF NORTHERN PEOPLES

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INTRODUCTION

While looking at particular interpretations of rock art, I would suggest we need to first acknowledge that rock art was created prior to the historical and ethnographic sources we use to interpret rock art as representing the set of practices and beliefs we know today as shamanism. This means that we need to accept that rock art both influenced and played an active role in the development of shamanism as a historical process, rather than simply being a reflection of shamanism as an unchanging, ahistorical phenomenon.

Further, in order to understand the development of rock art as a creative process of embedding ideas into the rock surfaces, I suggest we need to accept that our interpretations, while being products of the present, are based on the material traces of a past that had its own reality (Janik 2011). The rock art carvings are understood here as representing both 'hard' and soft 'memory' (Janik 2012). Repeated acts of carving the rocks, hard memory, are a part of wider cultural and social acts of the constitution and reconstitution of the lives of the prehistoric communities in question. The acts of the creation of visual narrative alongside storytelling, soft memory, allowed these communities to reinterpret and readjust their ideas and concepts over time, and that is the reason why rock art is not a static and simple reflection of these past societies, because the imagery itself influenced the carvers and the way they expressed themselves.

The paper is divided into general sections. The first part focuses on shamanism and rock art, while the second part explores other interpretive possibilities in understanding prehistoric carvings. The aim of the later section is to contribute to both general and specific understandings of particular sets of carvings simultaneously. For this purpose,

similar rock art imagery has been used to illustrate their interpretive potential, an approach which is complementary to trying to understand symbolic and ritual visual narratives related to shamanism.

SHAMANISM: CURRENT UNDERSTANDINGS

The first historical sources for shamanism date to the 12th century, and the first descriptions of shamanic trances in English appeared in the 16th century (DuBois 2009). Shamanism is currently the focus of a very active field of research and is considered by many anthropologists to represent the 'oldest religion'. There are many definitions of the term. It has been recently categorised in archaeological and ethnographic contexts as a 'traditional religion', distinct from a 'world religion' (Hayden 2003) but, as Insoll (2004; 2005) has pointed out, such a categorisation is misleading and counterproductive. A recent comprehensive survey of early religion considers that the best definition of a shaman is: 'a social functionary who, with the help of guardian spirits, attains ecstasy in order to create a rapport with the supernatural world on behalf of his group members' (Hultkrantz 1973: 34, quoted in Hayden 2003: 46). Vitebsky adds that

'The Siberian shaman's soul is said to be able to leave the body and travel to other parts of the cosmos, particularly to an upper world in the sky and the lower world underground. A broader definition than this would include any kind of person who is in control of his or her state of trance, even if this does not involve a soul journey, as in Korea' (Vitebsky 2001: 10).

It is also argued that shamanism is not a technique used only in various religions practiced by

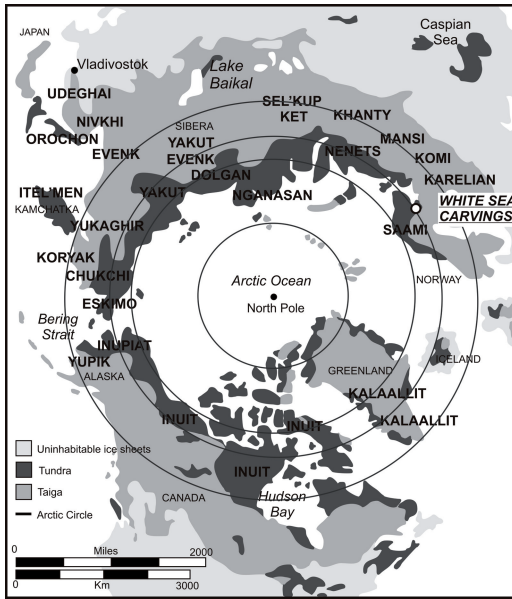


Fig. 1. White dot indicates the research area. Redrawn after Vitebsky 2001: 44 by M. Sapwell.

peoples of the Arctic and sub-Arctic, Amazonia and Siberia, but it is as well part of ‘other more mainstream or “world religions” in Mongolia, Tibet, Central Asia, Nepal, China, Japan, Korea aboriginal India and Indonesia’ (Vitebsky 2000: 56).

Vitebsky argues that shamanism as a religion goes beyond trance as a method of communicating with the other world, and is based on a theology of transcendence and divine presence constant in the world (Vitebsky 2000). In this paper, a narrow geographical area will be considered, namely the area inhabited by the northern peoples, in particular the Sami (Campbell 1989; Vitebsky 2001; Hayden 2003) (Fig. 1).

Recently, some archaeologists have interpreted cave painting and rock carvings as expressions of shamanism (Lewis-Williams 2004), and many of the elements of what anthropologists and historians recognise as shamanism are thought to have appeared in the Palaeolithic, with the emergence of modern human beings (Mithen 1996; Clottes 2003). The most prominent of this type of study is that by Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988), who proposed a new interpretation of Palaeolithic cave art on the basis of ethnographical analogies between the creators of the cave art and Kung San communities of Africa and Shoshonean Coso

of the California Grand Basin. Subsequently, George Nash, discussing the mobile art of Mesolithic northern Europe, used Lewis-Williams and Dowson’s model to argue for the presence of shamanism in northern Europe (Nash 1998). More recently, Lahelma (2005) has proposed an interpretation of Finnish rock art in terms of shamanic trance.

SHAMANISM: CRITIQUE OF EXISTING INTERPRETATIONS

There is currently considerable variety in interpretations of rock art, many of which refer to shamanism (Layton 2000; Chippindale & Nash 2004; Sauvet et al. 2006). As we saw above, before we can make proper use of the term, we need to establish what we mean when we use it. I therefore focus here on two defining traits: communication between the world of people and the world of spirits, encapsulated in shamanic spiritual journeys; and a system of beliefs of which the spiritual journey is a part. Before I will discuss them further I shall provide short summary of their main points.

The neuropsychological model proposed by Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988) has been one of the most stimulating and controversial interpretations put forward in archaeology in recent years (see Lewis-Williams 2004, and cf. the discussion feature in the journal *Before Farming* 2006, issue 4). Lewis-Williams and Dowson argue that through taking hallucinogenic substances three particular stages of vision are induced, in turn affecting cave and rock art as well as influencing portable art. The first stage is related to the experience of seeing geometric shapes. In the second stage the geometric figures become familiar and take the shape of known things, for example a zigzag becomes a snake. The third stage, which follows entry to the vortex, involves transformation into a therianthrope figure, or any other entity such as animal, fish or plant, or one might take attributes of the other sex. In this stage the law of physics or gravity might not exist, and one can fly or swim like a fish.

A second influential model of shamanism has focused on the shamanic trance or journey. Lahelma (2005; 2007) at first links rock art with the neuropsychological model, however placing it strongly within the context of the mythology and beliefs of northern peoples:

‘[...] the Finnish rock art 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 spirit helpers, of changing one’s physical form, and of journeying to the Other-world.’ (Lahelma 2005: 42).

In a second article Lahelma (2007) argues the case further for such an understanding of shamanism and Finnish rock art, however without resorting to the neuropsychological model, by making relationships between the shamanic journey, elk antlers, boats and the mythology of the Sami.

Helskog (1999), on the other hand, in his interpretation of the rock art complex at Alta in northern Norway, makes a case for the existence of northern peoples’ mythological reality without mentioning the spiritual journey – although his study accepts *a priori* that the spiritual journey is part of their belief. He argues, without referring to explicitly to shamanism as a set of beliefs and rituals of northern peoples, for the belief in a Universe composed of three levels, where the bear is the linking thread, present in various places in the visual narrative of the rock carvings. He supports this through the implicit use of analogy with the mythology of northern peoples:

‘The three compositions from Alta appear to be an illustration of travels between the world of cosmos, with the bear as a central part entering into the underworld through a fissure/basin – where water collects – on the rock surface. The time sequence, spring-autumn, is of the human world, of nature, and the world of spirits. The compositions belong to the earliest groups of carvings in Alta, and appear not to have repeated (copied) during subsequent 3000 years. Yet, the compositions appear to illustrate the beliefs and rituals, and hunting as known in the ethnographic record from much later date’ (Helskog 1999: 92).

Although Lahelma and Helskog present different data and interpretations, they both base their studies on analogy with the same mythological reality, namely northern peoples’ mythology and beliefs. While their studies show that ideas about shamanism can be used to interpret archaeological data in a broader way than the neuropsychological model of shamanic trance, they do not address the

problems of how to understand the development of shamanism, or how rock art contributed to that development.

Let us now turn to a case study that illustrates how rock art can contribute to our understanding of the development of shamanism, within the framework for interpretation introduced earlier, that places emphasis on the intentionality of the prehistoric artists. The study of rock art from River Vyg presented here demonstrates how detailed archaeological knowledge complements our current understanding of shamanism among the northern peoples, and is central to understanding how shamanism developed.

In this part of the paper I shall examine how the particular depictions relate to four observations that are important in current archaeological interpretations of religion and belief in prehistory, in particular traits associated with shamanism:

- Shamanism is based on techniques designed to allow communication between the world of people and the world of gods and spirits. Shamanism as a technique of communication is a part of religious beliefs that are different to those of shamanism of northern peoples. Examples include spiritual journeys made by priests in the contemporary world, in Korea, Japan, South America and the ‘new shamanism’ in North America. The idea of this shamanic communication through spiritual journeys underlies the neuropsychological model (henceforth abbreviated as NPM) to explain rock art depictions (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988; 1990; Lewis-Williams 2004).
- Scenes of hunting as part of a spiritual journey are often considered to represent the other-worldly journeys undertaken by shamans in their communication with the spirit world (Blacker 1975; Vitebsky 2000; 2001).
- Various types of scenes are depicted in rock art, and these are often interpreted as representing visual narratives communicating mythological stories and events relating to shamanism (Helskog 1999; Lahelma 2005; 2007).
- The rock surfaces upon which the rock art is created have been interpreted as representing the membrane-like surface that normally separated the world of people from the world of gods and

spirits. By depicting both people and gods and spirits in their visual narratives, the prehistoric artists created a material relationship between these two worlds (Lewis-Williams 2002).

ROCK ART

Over 2500 rock art depictions dating from around 6000 to 4000 years ago are known from the River Vyg area in Russian Karelia (Fig. 2). A variety of themes are depicted, including hunting, rituals, stars, animals and fighting. The rock art was created by the first known inhabitants of the region, ancestors of the so-called ‘northern peoples’ who occupied an extensive territory, including much of Russia, Siberia and northern Central Asia, across which shamanism is thought to have developed.

The examples from White Sea area rock carvings are used here to illustrate the paper alongside other rock art sites. The focus on White Sea carvings is linked with the wider understanding of these carvings as being closely related to the Scandinavian

sites. The difficulty of accessing them, both regarding scientific publications and physical visits to the site, is related to contemporary political divisions rather than affiliations in prehistory. The White Sea rock carvings are located on islands in the upper part of River Vyg, tributary to White Sea, and appear to have some relationship to the later, historically attested folklore of this region. The rock art is distributed across a series of recognised complexes including Besovy Sledki, Nameless Islands, Yerpín Pudas, and Old and New Zalavruga (Fig. 2).

Only after the construction of a hydroelectric dam in the 1950s has it been possible to appreciate the full range of depictions, as the dam has resulted in the marked lowering of water levels in the river. The petroglyphs were carved into rock surfaces using quartz tools over the span of around two and a half thousand years, with Yerpín Pudas III the first site to be carved in the beginning of sixth millennium BP while the lowest carvings of Zalavruga have been carved most latest in the middle of fourth millennium BP, a period labelled in this region as the Early Bronze Age (Janík 2010).

INTERPRETATION REVISITED

Shamanism as a technique for communicating between the world of people and the world of gods and spirits, and the three stage model/neuropsychological model in rock art depictions

Representations of shamanic techniques of communicating between the world of people and the world of gods and spirits can be detected in the archaeological record of rock art, as depictions of elements of a spiritual journey or trance, where either only a part of the journey was recorded by carving it into the rock surface, or the whole journey where all the events that happened to the shaman were depicted. The distinction between the whole journey and its elements depends on the methodological standpoint adopted by particular archaeologists (Wallis 2002; Lahelma 2005). There is no clear visual emphasis in the mythology of northern peoples on the three elements of the journey as presented by Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988). There are also no depictions in rock art that prove the applicability of their three stage model. This conclusion is supported by the argument made by Helvenston & Bahn that

‘there are some 70 different forms of trance

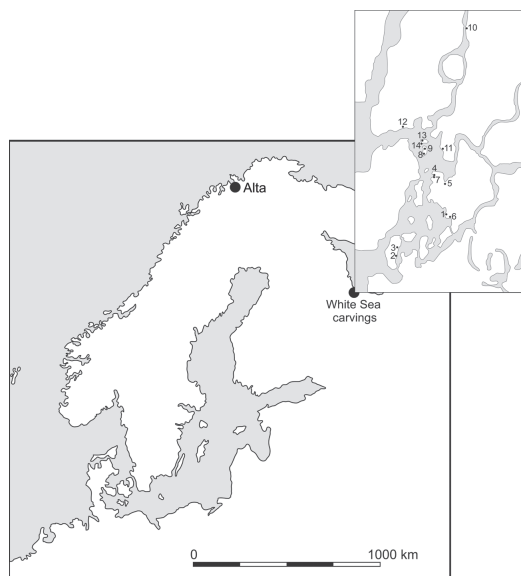


Fig. 2. Locations of rock art sites in the White Sea region. 1 – Yerpín Pudas III; 2 – Besovy Sledki South (S); 3 – Besovy Sledki North (N); 4 – Yerpín Pudas IV (N); 5 – Yerpín Pudas II; 6 – Yerpín Pudas I; 7 – Yerpín Pudas IV (S); 8 – Nameless Islands IV; 9 – Nameless Islands III; 10 – Zalavruga; 11 – Nameless Islands I; 12 – Zolotets I; 13 – Nameless Islands II North (N), 14 – Nameless Islands II South (S). After Janík 2010.



Fig. 3. Yerpin Pudas, 'fusion' figure with the attached to it marine mammal on the left has been outlined with the chalk, the birch leaf serves as scale. Photo: L. Janik.

induction, producing a huge variety of trance experiences, but only those induced by mescaline, LSD or psilocybin conformed to the three stages of trance proposed by the NPM. We had also considered the possibility that some European hallucinogens such as *Datura*, Henbane, and from about AD 200 *Amanita muscaria* (or Fly Agaric) might have induced hallucinations. However – and this was our point – if these other substances or techniques were used, they would not produce the pattern of the three-stage trace as required by the NPM' (Helvenston & Bahn 2003; 2007: 2).

Helvenston and Bahn further point out that trance can be induced by other means than the mescaline, LSD or psilocybin described in the neuropsychological model, which in turn would produce other visions than those proposed by the Lewis-Williams and Dowson. This might be the reason we do not have any evidence for the three stage trance in North European rock art, while the shamanic trance *per se* is represented. Therefore belief in the shamanic journey can be inferred through Lahelma's link between the boat, elk and shamanic journey without reference to the NPM model (Lahelma 2007).

Elements of the visions described in the third and final stage of the NPM model, even without clear depictions of the first two elements, are found in the carvings at Yerpin Pudas, where we see a fusion between a fish and a human (Fig. 3). This image alone, however, cannot be a sign of the neuropsychological model being expressed in rock art without any other indicators. The same can be argued for the figures of humans falling down, as

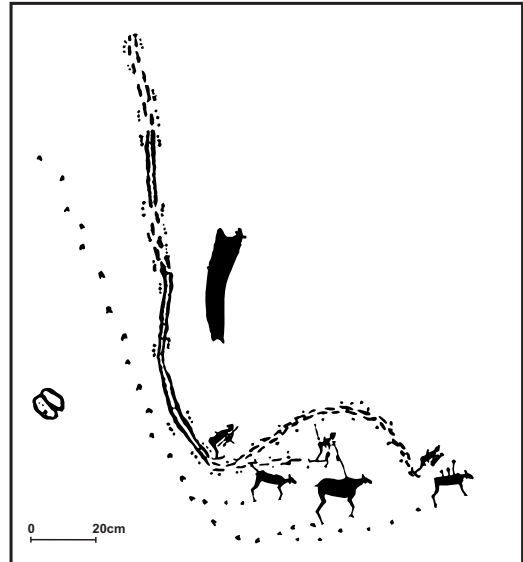


Fig. 4. Zalavruga, carvings of the elk hunting, fragment of Group IV, redrawn and amended after Savvateyev 1970: Fig. 35.

discussed by Lahelma (2005) in the case of Finnish prehistoric rock paintings. As in the previous case, however, this does not negate the visual expression of the shamanic journey itself.

Scenes of hunting as part of a spiritual journey

Scenes of hunting as part of a spiritual journey can be understood by employing the already developed methodology of interpreting the sequences of seeing. By looking at the rock art we can enter the stories that inspired Northern Shamanism, in the same way that Vitebsky (2000; 2001: 11) proposes that hunting is real but 'not from this world at the same time'.

A signifier for this might be the hunting scene from the Group IV at Zalavruga where the hunter is naked during the winter, as if no physiological constraints existed on being unclothed in the very cold environment (Janik et al. 2007). The answer to the question of whether the hunt was part of the journey or if what was being hunted was part of the spirit world, depends on our interpretation rather than the image itself. The same carvings which are thought of as supporting the spirit journey interpretation can be used to look for

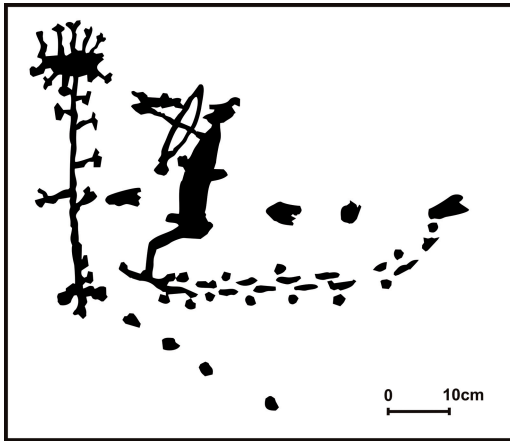


Fig. 5. A rock carving showing of a human on skis pointing the bow and arrow towards an unknown creature on the top of a tree, with a number of arrows embedded in its body. Part of Group IV at Zalavruga, redrawn after Savvateyev 1970: Fig. 35.

alternative interpretations within a shamanistic understanding of rock art.

Among the White Sea carvings, in particular the New Zalavruga complex, we can see different types of individual hunting, including for elk, bear, whale and birds. These hunts are usually linked with a man wearing a particular head decoration, as if totemic links are being forged between the hunter and the hunted or/and the head decoration is an element of hunting magic. I suggest, following Vitebsky, some of the hunting scenes are real but ‘not from this world’ (Fig. 4). They take place in the winter, but the hunters, or at least one them, is undressed. Further, the carved rock mimics a real landscape through which the carver has skied (Janik et al. 2007).

Other scenes of hunting, including one of a man hunting an unknown creature in the winter, follow a similar pattern. The hunter is undressed even though he is skiing. The creature is pierced so many times by the arrows that it is not possible to recognise what animal it is. Excessive numbers of arrows are used to indicate that this is not a simple kill (Janik 2012) (Fig. 5).

As we can see these scenes fall into the category of real/’not from this world’, indicating the possibility of carvings depicting hunting during shamanic journeys to the other world.

Rock surfaces as a surface/membrane between the world of people and the world of gods and spirits, in which they are illustrated as visual narrative

Understanding the perception of the rock surface as a surface or membrane between the world of people and the world of gods and spirits (Lewis-Williams 2004) can be defined archaeologically in rock art depictions that suggest the process of crossing between these worlds in which only part of an animal is visible since it has already partially crossed the membrane, or vice versa. The signifier of this phenomenon of crossing between worlds is the image of part of an animal or part of a human carved to look as if it is going in or out through the rock surface.

Such an interpretation can be supported by the carvings at Yerpín Pudas I (Fig. 6). This might also, however, be a case of the rock surfaces being damaged or destroyed so that part of the carving is missing. At the Kåfjord panel at Alta, northern Norway, the presence of ‘unfinished’ depictions of animals is apparent, and I suggest that these were intentionally depicted in this way, possibly indicating the membrane quality of this particular rock surface (see e.g. Helskog 1988: 55, 105, 125). The animistic quality of the rock does not negate the membrane quality of the rock, and provides a broader understanding of the importance of the rock as a carving medium to prehistoric communities.

Scenes in rock art as visual narratives communicating mythological events and stories

Scenes on rock art representing visual narratives for communicating mythological events and stories can be defined archaeologically in rock art depictions. The archaeological signifiers can be represented by a variety of depictions, as in a sequence of snapshots or a cartoon of a group of individuals, or individuals performing tasks, getting together, or animals walking towards a particular destination. Parts of this narrative could have been incorporated into the traditional mythologies of northern peoples, and this can be further investigated by looking at the relationship between the scenes depicted in the visual narratives of rock art and what we can find in the historical and ethnographic records (Helskog

1999; Lahelma 2005; 2007; McNeil 2005; Mulk & Bayliss-Smith 2006).

Helskog (1999) has presented just such a relationship by linking rock art compositions at the panels of Kåfjord and Bergbukten I at Alta (northern Norway) with the mythological dimension of three vertical worlds – middle, upper and lower – where the visual narrative is guided by the bear. The bear is also one of the main elements in the interpretation of rock art in southern Siberia by McNeil (2005). She makes connections with Upper Palaeolithic rock art, where the visual narrative is linked with the cycle of Evenki mythology where the bear ascends ‘to the upper world by way of the clan tree (*туру*) in the autumn and its re-emergence into the human world in the spring, leading a herd of game animals’ (McNeil 2005: 11).

We can interpret the composition of the rock art of Group IV at Zalavruga (Fig. 4) using an alternative interpretation which sees it as depicting a mythological event, relating the birth of major star constellations. The mythological narrative of the creation of Ursa Major, the Milky Way, and Orion’s Belt as constellations of stars in the mythologies of the Evenk, Ket and Sel’kup involves three hunters who, during the hunt, are pursuing two elks, one representing Ursa Major and the other Ursa Minor. In some myths one of the elks is a female and the other her cub (Koško 1990: 72–5). In the carving there are three elks and three hunters. The hunters are carved in a highly realistic fashion, thanks to which we can see that one of the hunters is definitely undressed, despite it being winter. Such a disjunction suggests that what is being represented is part of the ‘other world’. We can see discrepancies between the mythological explanation and visual narrative.

A second example of the visualisation of the mythological realm that can be alternatively interpreted to this presented above comes from Yerpín Pudas, where the union of a human and a fish is depicted (Fig. 3). Such fusion can be perceived as an illustration representing the spirits of shamans’ ancestors that live in the lower world and are part of the Evenki mythology, for example the case of Lord Hergi (Koško 1990: 72–5).

The last two examples were already used in illustrating different aspects of shamanism, first in the ‘not-from-this-world’ hunt part of the shamanic journey and second as an illustration of the third stage of the NPM model during a shamanic



Fig. 6. *Yerpín Pudas I*, rock carvings outlined with the chalk. Photo: L. Janik.

journey. The two interpretations are not mutually exclusive, but do reflect the relative priorities of their proponents. The carvings discussed above were created prior to the historical and ethnographic records we use in interpreting rock art. I suggest that the interpretation of the past narrative captured in the carvings has almost certainly been altered by subsequent communities who saw them, including us.

The previous four themes have already been explored in the literature on shamanism and rock art. In what follows, however, I turn to two themes that have not yet received such explicit attention.

BEYOND SHAMANISM, COMMUNAL AND PERSONAL ACTS AND EXPERIENCES

While considering intentionality in the process of visual communication of what was carved into the rock that might be a part of religious beliefs and rituals, but also might go beyond such, I suggest the same images could contribute to at least two different levels of our understanding of prehistoric communities. First, as an expression of time demarcation in the seasonal calendar of the community, and second as an expression of the individual members of those communities who in turn generated the community with its unique historical characteristics.

Time demarcation in the seasonal calendar of the community

The way the passing of time was depicted in the rock art of northern peoples differs from case to case, but what unites the images is the focus on

demarcation of a year through the performance of various seasonal activities. As shown above, McNeil (2005) explicitly argues that the rock art reflects mythological happenings that the spring emergence of animals from the underworld and their autumn ascendance into the upper world. The time is demarcated by what is happening in both the mythological and real realms of life, with emphasis on the mythological. We witness mythological birth and death: birth taking place in spring, death in autumn. Some of the interpretative examples used in Helskog's (1999) work implicitly indicate mythological goings-on by the bear who seasonally travels between worlds, while at the same time explicitly indicating events signifying the changing of seasons. Despite differences in interpretation, McNeil and Helskog both agree that some aspects of the rock art visualise, celebrate and signify mythological events and other natural processes and rituals.

I suggest that intentionality in creating distinctions between the seasons in the rock art is not only mythological but also is linked with other activities demarcating time through the calendar year of prehistoric communities. The visualisation of seasonal and ritual activities in rock art can be seen from a more 'secular' perspective, and such expression can be understood as a part of being human where all communities celebrate the passing of time and different attributes related to particular calendar seasons. This can be illustrated by interpreting carvings from Alta and Zalavrugá. The examples from Alta, however, go beyond Helskog's understanding, and concentrate on the horizontal axis indicating seasonal changes,

rather than the vertical axis, which indicates the cosmological travel between the three levels of the Universe by the bear (Figs. 7 & 8).

Helskog has pointed out that the Sun and Moon are indicators of the changing seasons, and the bear that moves between the cosmic levels is a visual signifier of those changes. I suggest that the two celestial bodies, along with the bear, humans, and other animals and activities being performed, imply that the visual narrative is representing a sequence of calendrical activity, acting as a memory of the passing of time or the seasons by recording events that define time. To illustrate this I have created tables of one of the examples presented by Helskog, which allow us to see how time is visualised in the carvings.

In Kåfjord the description of passing time is based on the movements within the visual narrative of the composition. The calendrical significance of the rock art is defined by the presence of celestial bodies as elements demarcating time, where the movement in the visual narrative follows the depictions of solar and lunar bodies on the rock surface and by the presence or absence in particular parts of the composition of the bear or its paw prints, other animals and human figures.

The main astronomical objects in such a narrative become celestial bodies and reflect the mythological reality of the three levels of the Universe. The movements of the bear as presented by Helskog, from the area of the Moon and Sun/upper world into the middle world/where humans live and the carvings of the bear prints lead to upper/ right – underworld/left toward the water – winter while the bear is asleep during hiberna-

Time as defined on rock surface	
Spring	Autumn
'two round figures represent moon and sun..., sun and light dominate over the moon at the time when the bear is leaving the den "early spring" (late April-early May)' (Helskog 1999: 84)	'both the bear and the reindeer corral place events in the right-hand part of the composition in the autumn.' (Helskog 1999: 85)
bear leaving its den has thin body and its paws are not visible seasonal gathering scenes (human or spirits) possibly both sexes represented (figure with penis, valve, breasts and swollen stomach/pregnancy)	bear in its den located in the corral has stockier body and paws visible hunting scenes in the corral for reindeer and possibly elk
Summer	
'Slightly to the right in the upper composition is another 12-fringed segmented figure. This one has six internal segments. (Or, there are no segments-only lines ..).... this figure can be interpreted as another sun later in the year, alone and without the moon – as during midsummer when the moon is difficult to see.' (Helskog 1999: 85)	
Spring	Autumn
three reindeers adult male, female and calf facing right toward autumn, while being carved in the spring part of the composition	four reindeers facing left (toward spring) with stockier/different bodies

Fig. 7. Kåfjord, images carved that signify particular events at specific time of the year.

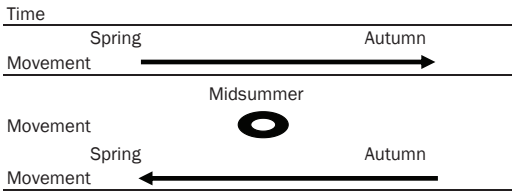


Fig. 8. Trajectories of time in the visual narrative at Kåffjord.

tion. Going beyond mythological interpretations involving the Moon and Sun demarcates the real time, indicating activities and celebrations that constitute the reality of everyday life for the prehistoric fisher-gatherer-hunter communities who created this rock art. Carving a bear in this interpretation has a dual implicit meaning: it is both a celestial creature and a real animal that lives in the surrounding natural environment, representing possible food. Bergbukten I can be interpreted in a similar way. In this case the focus is on the act of bear hunting without any explicit reference to mythological reality (Helskog 1999). The division of the seasons is not expressed explicitly through the depiction of the celestial bodies, but is understood implicitly by the demarcation of time centred on the hunted bears. The presence of the den to the right of the bears indicates winter, while the corral where the reindeer are gathered together ready to be killed, shown on the left, indicates the autumn.

Communal hunting of the bears indicates that communal activities were seasonal activities demarcating particular events as in the Norwegian cases. The same can be said about some of the carvings from Zalavruga. Communal hunting can be performed by a number of community members acting together, or hunting can be carried out by individuals who by their action embody the more general hunt, demarcating the season of hunting, for instance for water birds. These individuals are often signified among other humans in rock art by having their head adorned with a headdress (Fig. 9). The same can be said about hunting beluga whale, for which both group and individual hunting are illustrated in the Zalavruga carvings.

Images carved into the rock go beyond shamanism, while at the same time might include them as a part of the visual narrative where different aspects of life are shown. The rock art of various



Fig. 9. Zalavruga, carving of an individual hunting for the birds. Illustration: L. Janik.

locations emphasise the unity of human experiences and activities that are part of the passing time. The intentionality of carving incorporates communal life, the time and space that define what has been important for prehistoric groups and the artist who visualised it in the carvings.

Personal experiences of the prehistoric artists

The aspects of individuals or members of the communities whose influences was depicted is also part of the visual narrative. As argued above, at Zalavruga the role of the individual performing particular activities, along with the activities themselves, is very important and sets these carvings in a distinct and independent context. What makes the White Sea carvings unique is that we are able to recognise the physiognomy of a number of carved individuals, giving us an insight into the role of the artist and those who were carved in the symbolic life of past communities. In contrast to other Scandinavian and Siberian carvings, the River Vyg depictions of humans reflect specific individuals rather than generic representations of the human being. A participant in ritual or symbolic group activities who can be recognised gives a different dimension into looking at the role or experience of an individual person while discussing shamanism within archaeology. By being carved these people become 'preserved' in the carvings for future

generations to see the events and to tell the stories. They become the heroes, ancestors or local saints about whom the stories were told, and through whom the mythological reality was created.

Group IV at Zalavruga (Fig. 4) shows how the artists' own experiences are shown in the rock art, experiences which are as a result shared with the rest of the community. At Group IV this is based on parallels between the natural landscape and rock morphology. The carver treated the particular humps and bumps of the rock surface like the actual hills and slopes in the surrounding landscape, signified by carvings of ski tracks on the snow that mimicked skiing in real life on slopes that were similar in shape to the uneven rock surfaces chosen for carving. Such parallels could only be achieved when the artist translated his or her personal experience of skiing in a real landscape (Janik et al. 2007).

The artist, although depicting his or her own experience, had been carving someone else, by carving the profile silhouettes of faces and bodies. These profile images imply a lack of portraiture: there is only one frontal depiction of a human known from Zalavruga, the so-called stick figure (Ravdonikas 1938). The rest are carved in profile view. The absence of mirrors in this period in prehistory means that there was nothing to which the artists could immediately refer when creating images of their own face and body. The use of water is unsatisfactory since it creates visual distortion of lengthening and shortening other parts of the body, and it does not create a profile portrait at all. I suggest what we see here is expression of self by recreating the activity itself and creating images of others participating in those activities.

Putting this into a shamanistic context, our understanding of the carvings becomes more intricate than just saying the artist was a shaman and therefore he or she was hunting during the shamanic journey, and that therefore experiences of that hunt and the journey were captured in the carvings. The 'out of this world' elements of Group IV have been argued for above in this article, and would support such premise. The prehistoric artists were intentionally representing aspects of their own experiences, exercising choice in what they depicted, and influencing later generations of viewers, thus contributing to the development of shamanistic ideas, beliefs and beyond.

Examples presented above show how one image can be used in supporting different interpretations

within one general understanding of rock art as a reflection of shamanism. The use of the same images in the different interpretative contexts has been deliberate to show how ethnographic and historical records can be superimposed on rock art in supporting the argument. It is very difficult to establish the tangible relationship between rock art and shamanism, we can however argue that the images influenced the communities which in historical period shared the religion of northern peoples.

Further, looking at the calendrical demarcation of time expressed by the activities and the personal experiences of community members who created the rock art gives us an extra dimension into understanding of the rock art which in turn allows us to reach to the past and the people who created rock art in a more successful way and where the context plays much more important role. In such way we start to understand the historically independent context of local communities' lives, where the differences captured in intentionality of rock art creation take a leading role over analogies based on the ethnographic and historical records.

CONCLUSIONS

In trying to interpret rock art I would argue that we can reveal relationships between motifs we find in the prehistoric rock art of the River Vyg, and other prehistoric rock art, for instance from Alta and Siberia, and the development of what we now recognise as shamanism. This relationship is not, however, as is often either explicitly or implicitly suggested, straightforward or direct.

The archaeological data outlined above could support the idea that the iconographic depictions in rock art arise from beliefs involving shamanism as a technique of communicating between the world of people and the world of gods and spirits, but the art shows little evidence of the three stage neuropsychological model.

Scenes of hunting might be interpreted as representing a part of a spiritual journey, encountering a variety of mammals and birds. However, this journey has an individual dimension as being 'out of this world'. Further, some aspects of certain rock art scenes represent visual narratives communicating mythological events and stories, but not in their entirety as reported in ethnographic or historical accounts. Those elements within the prehistoric rock art do relate to the development of aspects of northern peoples' mythology and shamanic ritual,

indicating the potential rock art as a hard memory has in contributing to the understanding of the phenomenon of shamanism, long regarded as the 'oldest religion'.

In addition, I have proposed that some aspects of rock art represent seasonal demarcations of the calendar year based on the performance of particular activities, as well as the incorporation of personal experiences of the carvers into the visual narrative. I suggest that such ways of interpreting rock art not only enrich our understanding of past communities and personal experiences of the prehistoric carvers, but also creates a contextual approach to the understanding of the oldest religion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude goes to N. Lobanova and K. Heliskog who introduced me to the White Sea rock art, S. Kaner for his useful comments and M. Sapwell who was very helpful in preparing of the illustrations. This research was sponsored by the Templeton Foundation and McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research.

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