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## IN SEARCH OF MESOLITHIC STORYTELLING PRACTICES: INTRODUCING THE INTERDISCIPLINARY 'ANTLER STORIES' PROJECT

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### INTRODUCTION

During the late 1950's, an ornamented artefact made of wild reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) antler was recovered as a stray find from the bottom of River Lepaanvirta, in Southwest Finland (Fig. 1; Ojanen 2002: 13; Mannermaa 2016: 22). The item is about 28 cm long, and overall follows the natural, curved shape of the antler (Fig. 2; Mannermaa 2016: 22). The artefact is decorated with geometric patterns typical for Mesolithic portable art (Figs. 2–3; Clark 1975; Oshibkina 1989; Nash 1998; Płonka 2003; Mannermaa 2016; Vang Petersen 2019), and a radiocarbon determination obtained in 2001<sup>1</sup> confirmed that the artefact indeed dates to the Late Mesolithic of Finland (Ojanen 2002: 13). As organic materials only rarely survive in the acidic soils of Finland, to date the Lepaa artefact is the only known (intact) example of a decorated antler item with a Mesolithic date from Finland.

In general, the shape of the artefact represents a waterfowl (Fig. 2a), an interpretation that is supported both by an eye-like engraving on the proximal end of the artefact and by a wing-like decoration on the pattern distal section of the item (Fig. 3; Mannermaa 2016: 22–25). However, when the artefact is turned around to the other side, the image of the water bird becomes more blurred and the natural shape of the proximal end suggests other images that might resemble other animals, or a combination of several animals (Fig. 2b; Ojanen 2002: 13; Mannermaa 2016: 25–26). In fact, even though many other decorated antler items roughly contemporary to the Lepaa artefact that also resemble animals such



Figure 1. The find location of the Lepaa item. (Map: Marja Ahola.)

as snakes and elks have been found outside the borders of Finland (e.g. Kabacinski et al. 2011; Jonuks 2013), no other item representing several animal forms is known.

Since no clear parallels for the item are known, the function of the object has been debated, and several different explanations – such as a snow beater (Ojanen 2002: 13), a drum hammer,

Figure 2. The Lepaa artefact, viewed from two sides. A) The side representing a waterfowl. Note the geometrical ornamentation on the distal section of the item, and the eye-like engraving on the proximal end of the artefact. B) The side representing other animals, or a combination of several animals. Note an eye-like engraving also situated on the distal section of this side of the item. (Photos: Markku Haverinen / Finnish Heritage Agency.)



Figure 3. A detail picture of the ornamentation of the item. Note the wing-like motif made with three thick lines and several smaller, horizontal line ornamentations. (Photo: Katri Lassila.)



Figure 4. A snow beater of made of a split deer antler with a length of c. 33 cm. Collected from the indigenous Chukchi peoples of northeastern Siberia during the early 20th century. (Photo: Unknown photographer/ Finnish Heritage Agency.)

or a storytelling device (Mannermaa 2016: 27) – have been suggested. However, none of these explanations can be fully supported. Indeed, even though the item does resemble the snow beaters – items used to clear snow off garments and to give protection from bad spirits (Bogoras 1904) – of indigenous peoples of the Arctic region in northeastern Siberia (Fig. 4), the Lepaa artefact dates to the Holocene thermal maximum, and specifically to the period when the highest winter temperatures occurred in Fennoscandia (Borzenkova et al. 2015). Accordingly, specialized artefacts for snow cutting or beating might not have been as important as they were in regions with cold and harsh winters. It must be noted, however, that the item does show some polishing on the lower edge of the distal section of the artefact, which could suggest contact with soft material (Mannermaa 2016: 27). Without further analysis, however, it is impossible to determine what action caused this wear.

The possible identification of the item as a drum hammer is also plausible, as drum-like images are known from contemporary rock art imagery e.g., from Norway (Herva & Lahelma 2020: 78–79). However, even though rock art imagery portrays drums, drum hammers themselves are not as clearly visible in the art, suggesting that the drums could also have been played by hand. As the artefact does not resemble any known ethnographic examples of drum

hammers, this explanation cannot be accepted without a doubt either.

The situation is quite similar with the third suggested explanation – the use of the artefact as a storytelling device. Indeed, even though storytelling probably played a key role in, e.g., transmitting the knowledge of Mesolithic peoples pertaining to worldview and myths, it is largely unknown how this tradition functioned and what material remains it left behind. However, by taking the ambiguous, zoomorphic shape of the artefact as her point of departure, Kristiina Mannermaa (2016) has nonetheless suggested that the item might have been used in storytelling, as a means to visualize the storyline. According to Mannermaa (2016: 27), the storyteller could have rotated the item while telling the story, and thus make the various animals depicted in the artefact appear and disappear to fit with the storyline.

Although Mannermaa's (2016) interpretation is intriguing, it was left at the level of a hypothesis and not explored further. However, the proposed interpretation nevertheless paves the way for a new line of research concerning the lifeways of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. Indeed, alongside everyday tasks such as hunting, gathering, and tool making, the telling of stories, their production, and consumption are also central parts of people's lives. It can even be said that storytelling is at the very heart of humanity, as no other animal gathers together to listen to or tell stories as humans do. Although the oral tradition of the Stone Age has disappeared, it is clear that stories were as relevant to these peoples as to any other (e.g. Boyd 2009). Indeed, aside from the purpose of entertainment, stories could also be used to convey practical information about, e.g., hunting habits, plants suitable for collection, or what to do if food is not available (Minc 1986; Tomasello 1999; Sobel & Bettles 2000). In other words, storytelling played a central role in the transmission of collective memory.

Since the ornamentation of the Lepaa artefact represents various chronological phases of carving and re-carving, the item might have been circulated from one person to another (Mannermaa 2016: 22–23) or the decoration developed by single user during the course of time. Although the time of use of the item is can only be vaguely determined, the phenomenon suggests that

the artefact could have been in circulation even from a generation to another, and accordingly could have worked as a mnemonic device for these people. Although not connecting the item directly to storytelling, the chronological phases of the carving do seem to suggest that the item was important enough to be used and reused over and over again. In this sense, it is also interesting that the reconstruction of the ancient shoreline suggests that the artefact was placed in the water already during the Mesolithic (Ojanen 2002: 13), and accordingly represents a likely votive deposit (Mannermaa 2016: 22–23). In this respect, the artefact was most probably a valued object that required special treatment before it could be removed from circulation in living society.

### SEARCHING FOR MESOLITHIC STORYTELLING PRACTICES

In early 2021, a novel project, funded by Kone Foundation, was launched to further investigate the enigmatic Lepaa artefact. The project, entitled “*Antler Stories – Combining 3D-Technologies, Artistic Research and Archaeology to Bring Mesolithic Storytelling Practices Back to Life*” aims to explore Mannermaa’s (2016) storytelling hypothesis by investigating the performative attributes of the Lepaa artefact. Differing from Mannermaa’s approach, this novel project hypothesises that an intentional use of light and darkness – known to be especially related to the rock art tradition (e.g. Azéma & Rivère 2012; Pettitt 2016; Nyland & Stebergløkken 2020) – could have played a pivotal role in the use of the artefact.

Indeed, it seemed that if the ambiguously zoomorphic antler artefact were to be rotated against a light source, it may have been capable of casting shadowy forms of different animals. Compared to an approach focusing only on the physical characteristics of the artefact itself, exploring a storytelling performance playing with light and shadow suggests that the object was associated with a stronger and a more multi-sensory experience. Furthermore, by manipulating the shadows, the animals depicted on the object could be moved, merged together to produce a sense of metamorphosis, or even accompanied by shadow-forms produced by other objects or

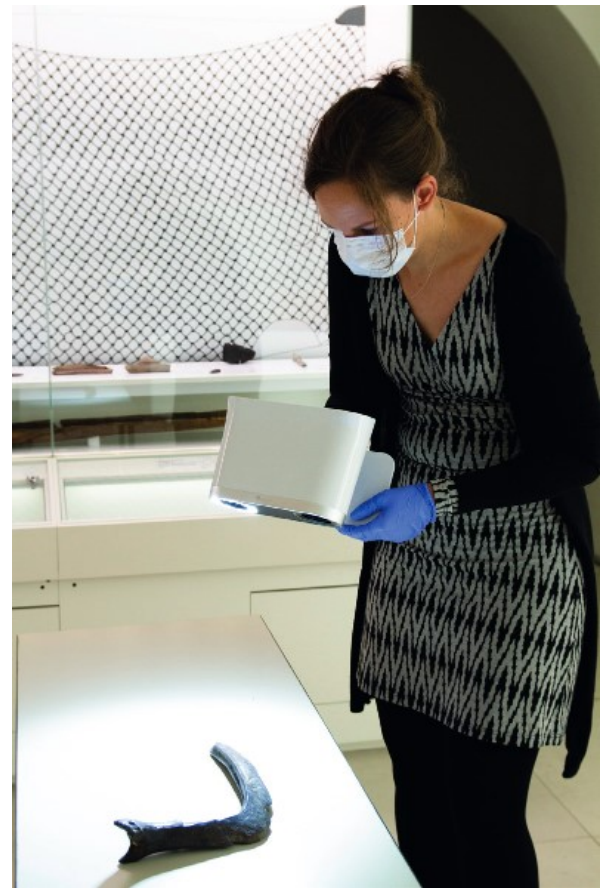


Figure 5. Marja Ahola scanning the Lepaa artefact at the premises of the National Museum of Finland in Helsinki. (Photo: Katri Lassila.)

creatures. In this sense, the performance would have resembled traditional shadow theatre.

In order to explore whether the Lepaa artefact indeed had such performative attributes, the core members of the project – archaeologist Marja Ahola (University of Helsinki), photography and video artist Katri Lassila (Aalto University), and shadow puppetry artist Elviira Davidow – combined the traditions of experimental archaeology and artistic research to test the hypothesis. In practice, this meant that the team aimed to produce and document a shadow theatre performance that was made with the Lepaa artefact by using light sources that were available to the Mesolithic peoples. Needless to say, the original Lepaa artefact – on display at the National Museum of Finland – could not be used in the performance. Hence, the project started with the production of a three-dimensional copy of the artefact. Accordingly, the original artefact was scanned with an Artek LEO handheld scanner



*Figure 6. Elviira Davidow exploring the shadows produced in sunlight by the three-dimensional print of the Lepaa artefact. (Photo: Katri Lassila.)*

(Fig. 5); a 3D model was then produced with Artek Studio 15 software,<sup>2</sup> and a print of the model was manufactured at the Aalto University Media Lab. However, due to the lack of HD quality in the Artek LEO software, the three-dimensional copy could not portray the detailed aspects of the use-wear or decoration of the artefact. Nevertheless, since the project emphasizes the overall shape and performative attributes of the artefact over the details of the decoration, the quality of Artek LEO made scans were nonetheless acceptable.

In the second phase of the project, the 3D replica of the Lepaa artefact was given to Elviira Davidow, a professional shadow play artist, who explored the item by creating her own art. As artistic research emphasizes the personal process of the practicing artist, manifested through the creative process of art-making in knowledge production (e.g., Hannula et al. 2005; Borgdorf 2012; Kaila et al. 2017), Marja Ahola interviewed Davidow during the course of her experiments

with the artefact replica. Simultaneously, Katri Lassila documented Davidow's work with photographs (Fig. 6) and videos – work that will also produce its own photographic and video art. Other project collaborators, composer and sound designer Viljami Lehtonen and linguist Sampsa Holopainen, will also support the artistic work by creating soundscapes for both the shadow theatre performance and the video art.

## CONCLUSIONS

The 'Antler Stories' project is still in process, and the first results will likely be published in 2022. However, even at this point it can rather comfortably be stated that the combination of digital modelling, archaeology, and artistic research has allowed us to explore prehistoric storytelling performance from an entirely new angle. Indeed, the interdisciplinary approach has not only enabled us to experiment with the art of shadow play – while safeguarding the unique Mesolithic

object itself – it has also given us tools to understand how an ancient performance might have taken place. Simultaneously, archaeology has here served as an inspiration for several works of art, ranging from shadow theatre to music and from photography to video art. Considering all of the above, the ‘Antler Stories’ project has shown that 3D-technology and artistic research have a lot to offer to archaeology while archaeological research can also create new openings to the field of art.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> (Hela-516) 7420±75 BP or 6434–6099 cal BC at 95.4% (Ojanen 2001: 13; Mannermaa 2016: 22).

<sup>2</sup> The 3D-model is available here: <https://skfb.ly/6W6qE>.

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