

# Landscape archaeology and Sámi ritual landscapes

Examples from Ukonsaari, Juuvaara and Taatsi

Tiina Äikäs

Archaeology, P.O. Box 1000, FI-90014 University of Oulu, Finland

## Abstract

*This article discusses landscape archaeology using as an example the spatial analysis of the Sámi ritual landscapes in Finnish Lapland. The concepts of comprehensiveness and temporality are taken into consideration within the cultural landscape. The location of the Sámi ritual landscapes is analysed with geographic information systems (GIS). My aim is to concentrate on the ritual places as part of a wider context – the landscape. My interest lies more in the nature of ritual places than in their classification. The sieidi should be viewed in connection with their environment.*

## Keywords:

landscape archaeology, ritual landscapes, *sieidi*, GIS, viewshed.

## Culture in landscapes and cultural landscapes

Landscape has been described as “a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolising surroundings” (Daniels & Cosgrove 1988: 1). This definition stems from cultural geography but can also be applied to archaeology. Landscape includes not only our material surroundings but also the meanings and values we attach to them.

In landscape archaeology, a certain area is observed in its entirety. Sites and artefacts are not seen as separate from each other, but as presenting different aspects of the lives of those who inhabited the area in the past (Tilley 1995, *passim*). Darvill argues that archaeologists’ interest towards landscape has mainly focused on physical and structural dimensions at the expense of metaphysical and social aspects. Nevertheless, the concept of landscape includes much broader themes connected with human relationships, thoughts, values, and world views (Darvill 1999: 104). Landscape archaeology focuses on how social process and cultural meaning are shaped by the landscape. These questions are raised above those focusing on single sites or settlements only. People’s perceptions of their surroundings are also considered important (Ucko & Layton 1999, p. I).

Landscape archaeology examines the spatial relations between archaeological residues in order to clarify the past use of landscape. The aim is to define archaeological landscapes within a specific span of time. Landscapes cannot be studied just as a network of single sites. People have used their whole surroundings as the field for their actions and experiences. Thus, there are normally no meaningless and empty spaces between sites. Therefore we cannot understand the archaeological record outside the framework of landscape archaeology. The landscape is seen as

a surface where the cultural and natural processes of a certain period leave traces. These traces constrain and influence the activities of future inhabitants in turn. This means that we cannot understand past societies without taking into account the preceding and succeeding use of the landscape (Beneš & Zvelebil 1999: 74).

The two main concepts in landscape archaeology are comprehensiveness and temporality. Landscape is studied as a whole both spatially and temporally. Sites and the areas between them are seen as equally interesting, as well as sites from different periods. Bradley notes that also people in ancient times realised that they lived in the middle of remnants of the past, and such places had a meaning for them. These places might have been reused or given a new meaning. Every element in the landscape was influenced by the relationship between the present and the past. The present grew out the ruins of the past (Bradley 2002, *passim*; also Gosden & Lock 1998: 2–6).

As mentioned above, not only did human actions influence the landscape, but the landscape also had an influence on human actions. Nevertheless, the landscape has been seen as an artefact, a human product, the evolution of which is visible in its material remains (Fairclough 1999: 120). Traditionally archaeologists have seen the landscape as a physical phenomenon that is essentially a human product. It is an object or artefact that can be measured, classified, and understood in terms of functionalist concepts. This has led to approaching the man-land relationship from a locational and economic point of view. The emphasis has been on the way in which people have individually and collectively shaped the physical appearance of the landscape (Darvill 1999: 105–106).

On the other hand, landscape has been seen as a subject. This involves reconstructing earlier stages of existence and picturing how the

landscape might have looked at a given point in time. However, these pictures and the feelings evoked by them have nothing to do with real life in the past. What is being experienced is part of the present and stems from our own socialisation and background (*ibidem*).

Studying landscape merely as an object or subject presents a problem. Sites and monuments are being emphasized instead of whole landscapes. So-called empty areas without archaeological remains escape our interest, but also these areas had a meaning. As mentioned above, people did not inhabit only certain sites; they used wider areas which had integrity, structure, and symbolic meaning.

Also, if only physical – especially visual – aspects of the landscape are studied, we neglect the information offered by our other senses. In perceiving the landscape, also our other senses and the feelings they generate are important: smells, sounds, textures, tastes, and atmosphere. Mental models are much more important than is usually realised. These models may be created by memories of real experiences and secondary perceptions or by the transformation of received images (Darvill 1999: 106–107). Space forms part of the personal experience which creates the basis for an individual's personality. The colours, smells, sights, and sounds that defined space in our childhood become part of us. The terms **place** and **landscape** refer to this subjective and sensorial perception of space (Hernando Gonzalo 1999: 258). In other words, space is not an object, but it is unconsciously or consciously created by an individual and it originates from his or her own experiences.

If the landscape is studied as an object or subject, the social context of the landscape is missed. Landscape is one of many systems through which social and political values are communicated (Mulk & Bayliss-Smith 1999: 369). Landscapes are especially social – not



physical – constructions. It is often thought that the normal state of a landscape is stable. On the contrary, it can be argued that change is more commonplace. Change occurs at many different rates and levels. Because of this, two similar experiences of the world never exist. Something has always changed. Due to social structures, however, we tend to be blind to the changes (Darvill 1999: 106–107).

Another concept that is important in landscape studies is **layers and zones**.

In the location of archaeological remains in the landscape, three layers can be seen:

- The geographical, physical area within which the remains are located;
- The area from which the archaeological remains can be seen or experienced;
- An even broader area is the third layer. There the remains are present in a less direct way: for example, they are seen at a long distance (Fairclough 1999: 132).

The idea of a three-layered system can also be applied to cultural landscape. Far too often the concept of a cultural landscape is attached only to a landscape in which humans have left their traces by means of agriculture. Only agriculture is believed to leave imprints strong enough to create a cultural landscape. Human action is thought to make a landscape less “natural” and hence more “cultural”. However, vegetation, land use, settlement, etc. do not provide a full picture of the **cultural landscape**.

Cultural landscape can also be experienced on three different levels (Mulik & Bayliss-Smith 1999: 361–364):

- The environment that is continuously modified by the cumulative effect of human actions;
- The landscape that has been produced by a particular culture at a certain point in time and in which remains of the human activity are now present;

- Cultural meanings that are attached to the landscape and metaphors, symbols, and artefacts through which these meanings are expressed.

## What we look at is not what we see

There are no two human beings who could look at the same physical landscape and see it in exactly the same way. What we see is influenced by our experiences, knowledge, self-concept, and personal history. The reading of landscape is in the eye of the beholder. Our place in the surrounding world is established by seeing.

However, we can never quite reconcile what we see and what we know. The way we see things is affected by what we know and believe (Berger 1972: 7–8). There are various ways in which people in different situations in life can comprehend their surroundings. The way of life, age, and gender all have an effect on how individuals perceive their surroundings (Bender 1993: 2). When looking at a meadow, a biologist might see the biodiversity of species, a farmer a potential piece of arable land, and an archaeologist an old cultural landscape – here I might even say: an archaeologist with a certain impression of “cultural”.

Barbara Bender (1999: 31) has used the term “western gaze” to describe a particular, historically constituted way of understanding and experiencing the world. She describes it as a gaze that skims the surface, observes the land from an egocentric viewpoint and separates an active observer (the subject) and a passive land (the object). This active observer is equated with culture and the land with nature. In other words the “western gaze” is about control.

But how could a researcher be free of the burden of the western gaze? How could we avoid seeing everything through our own culture?

Gabriel Cooney’s (1999: 47) answer is: “We cannot hope to think like a prehistoric person did about their landscape but we can reconstruct an overview of what the elements of that landscape may have been and then try to understand what they meant for the people who were carrying this landscape round in their heads.”

## The Sámi ritual landscapes as cultural landscapes

There are numerous types of Sámi ritual sites. They can be divided broadly into three groups:

- terrain formations,
- natural objects,
- structures.

A common feature of the two first-mentioned categories is that the past ritual activity has not left easily detectable signs or remains. In written sources, the most well-known example of natural objects as ritual sites are perhaps the *sieidi* stones or rocks. These are natural formations of an extraordinary shape. The unworked rocks and stones have been used for offering rituals. There are also many fell tops, islands, and lakes which have been regarded as sacred places by Sámi societies. On the other hand, carved stubs, wooden structures, or erected stones, for example can be categorized as structures (e.g. Carpelan 2003: 77–78).

As previously mentioned, the concept of cultural landscape has been used mainly in connection with agriculture. Mulk and Bayliss-Smith (1999: 363) note:

“In accounts such as these the cultural landscape on the northern Sweden is constructed as a wild place that has been lightly touched by the reindeer-herding activities of a vanishing people.”

The same may be applied to Finland. Even today the travel industry is selling the idea of an empty wilderness where a visitor is alone with nature. This narrow picture of “cultural” cre-

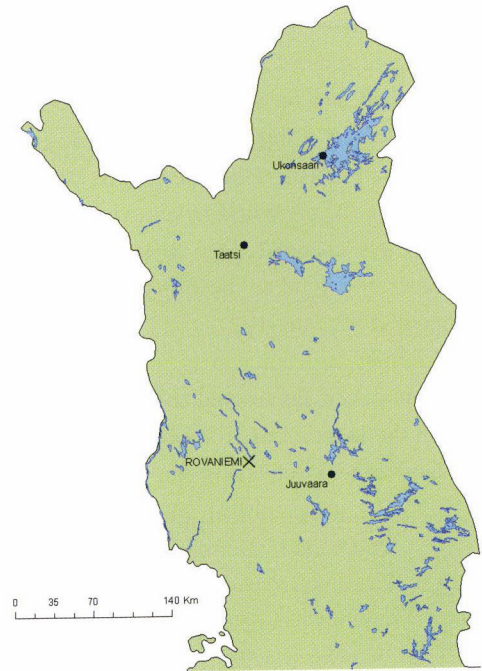


Fig. 1. Location of the *sieidi* sites referred to in this article.

ated by farming – versus “natural” wilderness – leaves but little room for other interpretations of cultural landscape. Sámi ritual landscapes are an example of a cultural landscape not created by agriculture.

Here I am trying to look at Sámi ritual landscapes in a wider context. Cultural landscape is seen not only as an environment heavily modified by human action, but also as cultural meanings and symbols attached to a landscape. I am also taking into consideration a wider zone of landscape. Ritual landscape is seen as the whole area in which the *sieidi* can be experienced.

Spatial analyses provide an opportunity to study ritual places as part of a larger cultural landscape instead of just studying single sites. Spatial analyses and landscape archaeology enable the study of the relationship between ritual places and landscape and the ways in which people experienced it. This brings a cognitive



element into the research. This is of special relevance when we study ritual practices. Humans do not choose the places for their actions on purely rational grounds, but cultural meanings have also influenced their actions. Especially in the case of ritual places, symbolic and social values have been important. People comprehend space on the basis of cognitive models which give cultural meanings to the landscape (Rapport 1994: 483–484; Tilley 1994: 1–2).

Viewshed analyses offer another way of seeing, an attempt at a less biased way of looking at the world.

In this study I concentrate on three ritual sites: Inari Ukonsaari, Kemijärvi Juuvaara, and Kittilä Taatsi (Fig. 1). Analyses are based on the DEM (digital elevation model) with a 25-metre grid and the official register of Finnish monuments and sites produced by the National Board of Antiquities. Furthermore, a more detailed register of *sieidi* sites is being used. Ritual landscapes are studied using overlay commands and buffers created by viewshed analyses.

#### *Inari Ukonsaari*

Ukonsaari (Fig. 2) is an island situated in Lake Inarinjärvi, 11 kilometres east-northeast from Inari village. The island is 300 metres long, 100 metres wide and 30 metres high. The most obvious element in the landscape of Ukonsaari Island is its topography in relation to the lake. The high island in the middle of the water offers a view from and to a long distance. A viewshed analysis showed a total number of five sites (Fig. 3): two burial islands, two dwelling sites, and a stray find.

The dead were buried on an island to protect them from the beasts. **Vanhahautuumaasaari**, the name of which refers to a graveyard (Fi. *vanha* ‘old, ancient’, *hautausmaa* ~ *hautuuma* ‘[Christian] graveyard’, *saari* ‘island’) was in

use for 50 years until 1973. On the south-western side of the island, there is a dwelling place that dates to the Stone Age. There are some marks of a fireplace there.

The other burial island, **Alppasaari**, is situated 100 metres south of Vanhahautuumaasaari. It was in use at the same time as the Pielpajärvi church (1760–1880).

**Äärelä** is a dwelling site situated by a streamlet, 950 metres southwest of Lake Inarinjärvi. Its dating is unknown.

The dwelling place of **Uruniemi** is located by the shore of Lake Inarinjärvi and it dates to prehistoric times.

The stray find at **Kirkkoranta** is from the Stone Age.

#### *Kemijärvi Juuvaara*

From the Juuvaara hill in Kemijärvi parish, there are nine sites within the viewshed in the area of the Kemijärvi Lake (Fig. 4).

Two of the sites are classified as places of cult and stories dating from historical times. The site in **Rovajärvi** is said to be a sacrificial spring (for the **Ämmänvaara** site, see below).

At five sites, there are hunting pits, the datings of which are not known. Hunting pits have been in use from the Stone Age to historical times and they are hard to date. At most of the places there is only one hunting pit, but at **Lokkilampi** there are three pits. At **Tapionniemi** there are also minor signs of an “ancient” dwelling place and a ski has been found from a nearby swamp.

At **Ämmänvaara**, where the second place of cult and stories mentioned above is located, a quartz quarry has also been found. It is on the southern slope of the hill and the period of use is not known.

The dwelling place in **Narkiperä** has been inhabited in the Early Metal Period.



Fig. 2.  
Ukonsaari island.  
Photo: Tiina Äikäs.

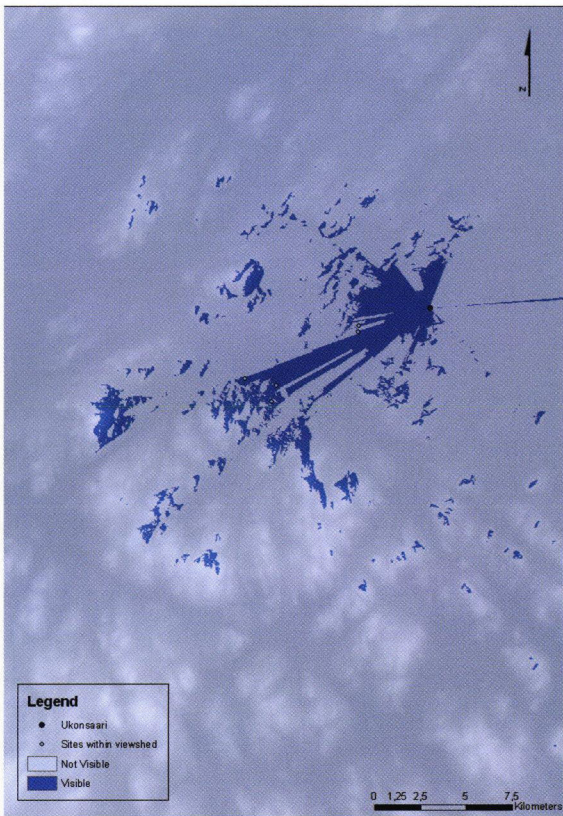


Fig. 3.  
Viewshed from Ukonsaari and sites within the viewshed. DEM: National Land Survey of Finland, permission to publish PPOH/21/07.



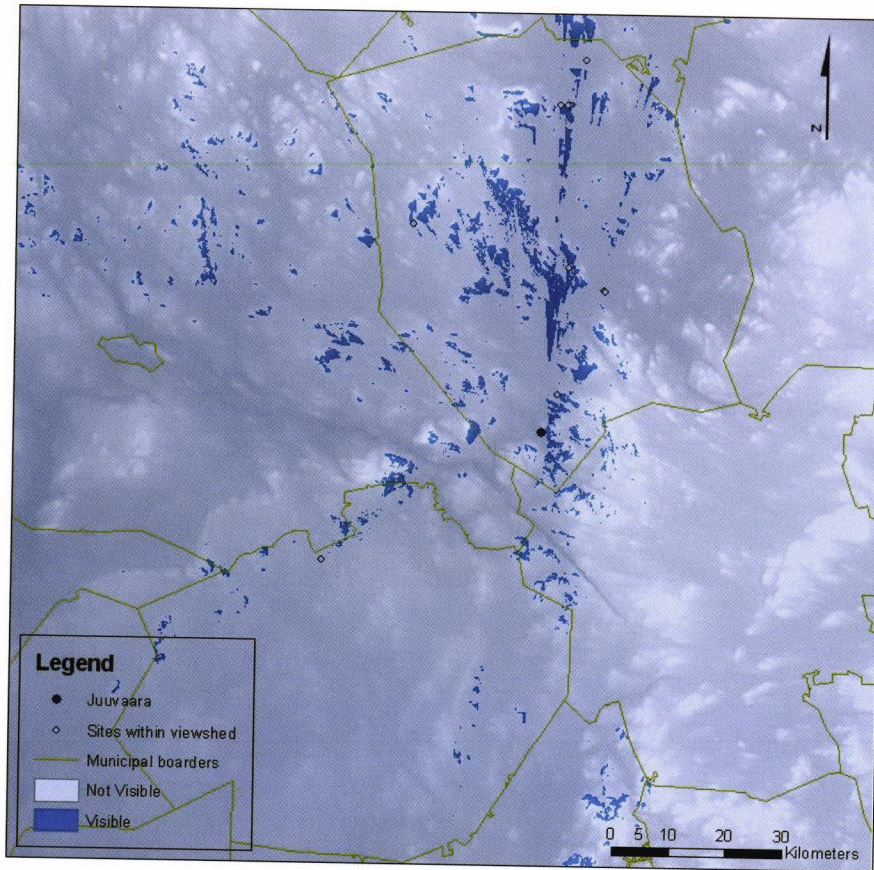


Fig. 4. Viewshed from Juuvaara and sites within the viewshed.  
DEM: National Land Survey of Finland, permission to publish PPOH/21/07.

### *Kittilä Taatsi*

The *sieidi* in Taatsi (Fig. 5) in Kittilä parish offers an interesting point for comparison. Within the area of the viewshed, there are no archaeological sites at all (Fig. 6). This corresponds to the idea of isolated ritual places provided by oral tradition. During the fieldwork conducted in the summer 2008 two hunting pits were found in the vicinity of the *sieidi*.

### Conclusions

Above I have compared three *sieidi* sites from Finnish Lapland. The first is the well-known and much studied site of Inari Ukonsaari in northern Lapland. There the two closest sites are burial islands from historical times. Further away there are three sites, two of which are from prehistoric times. Since the possible dating *sieidi* sites to the Stone Age is based only on analogies with rock art (see e.g. Lahelma 2008: 41), I leave prehistoric sites out of the discussion. Nevertheless some of them might have been part of the land-

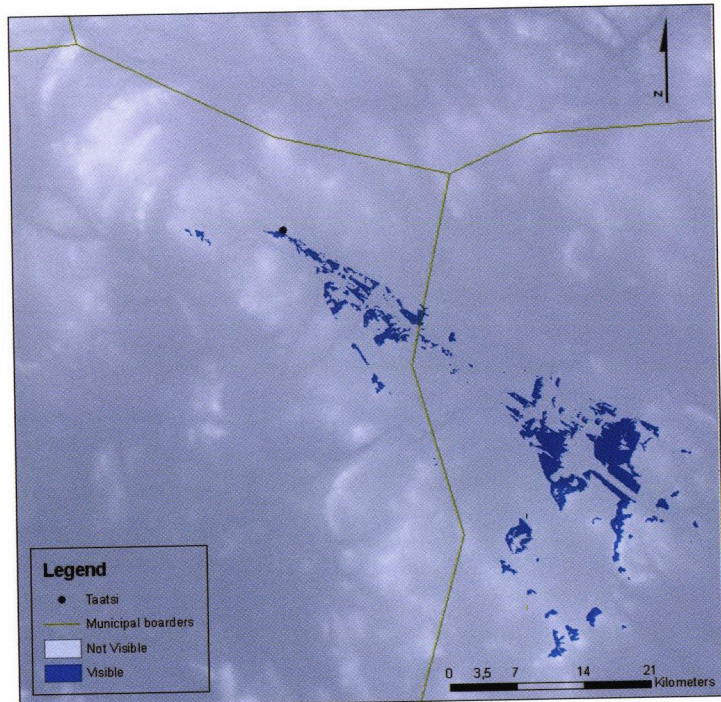
scape of memory. Therefore it seems likely that at least in historical times, Ukonsaari was close to activities concerning life and death.

My second example is from southern Lapland. In Juuvaara, the visual connection to other ritual sites is noticeable. Here, too, activities of daily life are attached to the landscape. Hunting activities go hand in hand with the ritual practices concerning the ensuring of hunting success. The problem with the comparison of these two site groups comes from the difficulties in dating either of them. Taatsi is the only one of the three cases where can we find a ritual landscape without other marks of human actions in the landscape.



Fig. 5.  
*Sieidi* at Taatsi.

Fig. 6.  
Viewshed from Taatsi and sites within the viewshed. DEM: National Land Survey of Finland, permission to publish PPOH/21/07.





I have tried to use viewshed to create zones that are better attached to the real world than circular buffers created by a fixed radius. I am aware of the fact that all borders that are drawn on the landscape are artificial in nature (e.g., Ingold 1993: 156). With viewshed I have approached the landscape from a visual perspective, giving more meaning to visibility than to vicinity. In the future, I aim to examine the landscape also in terms of vicinity and attainability.

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