

THE VITTRÄSK ROCK PAINTING AT KIRKKONUMMI AND THE THEORY OF A SÁMI COSMOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

ABSTRACT

Currently, there are over one hundred rock paintings in Finland which are located close to water. Most of these sites are found around the Saimaa Lake region in the southern part of the country, but extend to central areas as well. Unlike the majority of the painted locations in Finland that host numerous images, figures and symbols, two net-type figures at the Vitträsk site at Kirkkonummi, which is close to Helsinki, have been subject to scholarly and indeed artistic debates and interpretations since the site was found a century ago. This investigation seeks to explain the relationship between the designs, their placement, and the anthropomorphic figure that is evident in the rock formation between them. The analysis in the paper introduces a more holistic interpretation as to why this particular area was painted and perhaps chosen for sacrificial offerings in relation to Sámi religion and landscape use.

Key words: rock paintings, net-type figures, human-like figure, Sámi religion, sacrifice, cosmology

INTRODUCTION

The following investigation is concerned with Sámi religion, animism, landscape use and local history. Within the parameters of the enquiry the author elaborates on a number of questions that have been raised in scientific discourse over the past century regarding the location, structure and designs of two prehistoric net-type painted forms on the stone terrace above Lake Vitträsk, Kirkkonummi, approximately 40km from the Finnish capital, Helsinki. The amount of attention paid to the Vitträsk area in terms of local history, Finnish romanticism and cultural antiquity is significant compared

to other rock painting locations in Finland, despite the fact that, according to Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen, ‘the first Finnish rock painting to be found was discovered along the shore of Lake Vitträsk in Kirkkonummi (near Helsinki) as early as 1917: the composer Jean Sibelius had reported it six years earlier but was ignored’ (1977: 148). Concerning the uniqueness of the site itself, no other paintings so far discovered in Finland have nets as large as those at Vitträsk. From my observations of the site on a visit there in the winter of 2014, I also found evidence of faint lines and traces of markings indicate that there have been other, even earlier, paintings present at the location in the past. These

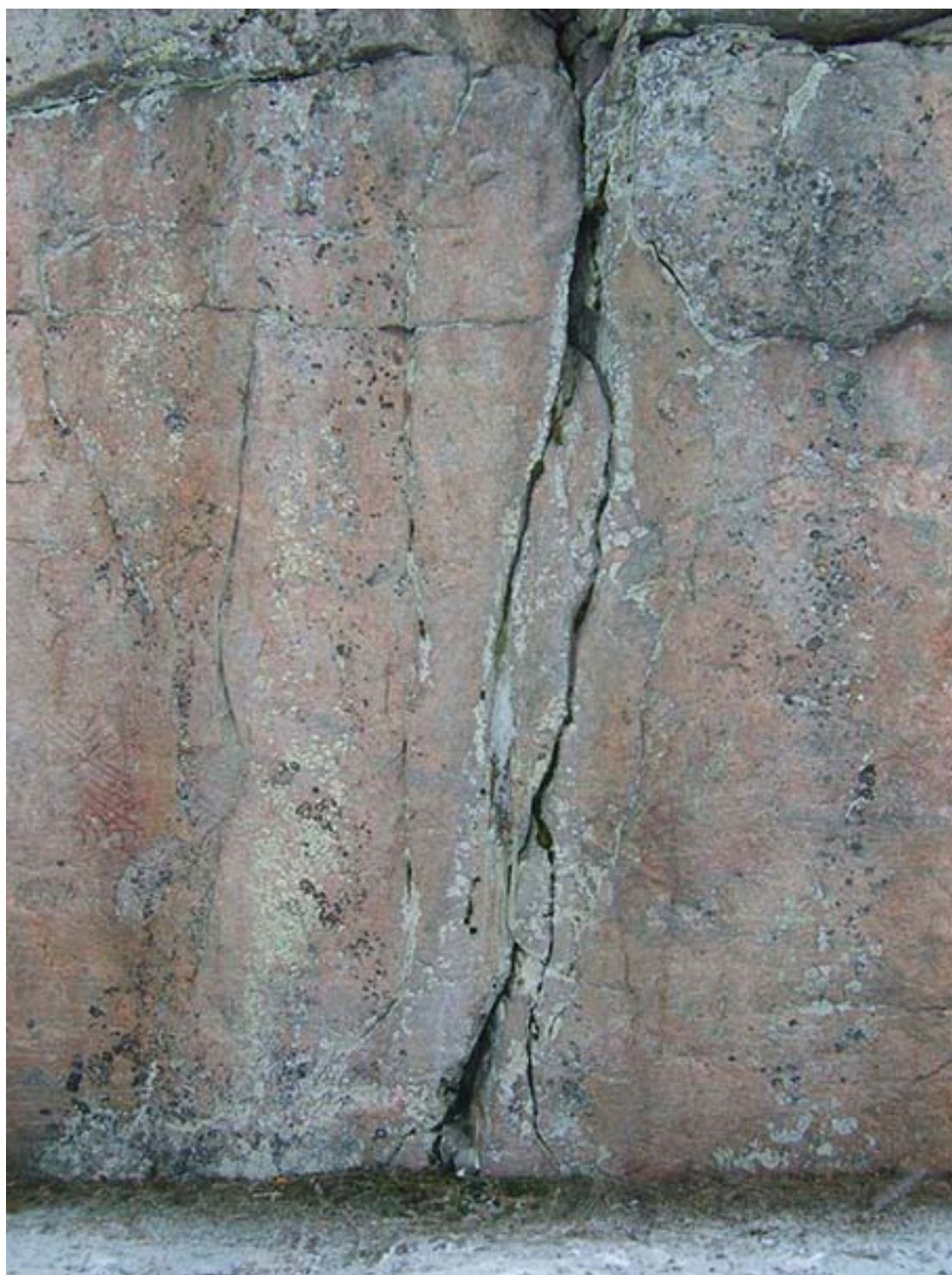


Figure 1. An overall view of the outline of the figure in rock and at either side are painted net-type figures, which are visible in faint red detail. What was also interesting to note was how the lower section of the figure's body that runs from north to south, is curved towards the left at the base, almost as if it is a serpent or snake-like being which is appearing out of the earth. The figure almost has a human face, indicating a type of hybrid stone figure in the rock (Photo: Francis Joy).

however, have eroded away, meaning the nets are the only complete images that have survived and are recognizable today.

In scholarly sources concerning the history of the site (for example, Taavitsainen 1977; Kare 2000), no mention is made of the anthropomorphic figure that is visible in the stone configuration of the terrace above and between the paintings. Instead, interpretive focus has been placed solely on the relationship between the two net-type figures, discussed in more detail below. The stone figure has human-like characteristics—possibly defining those of a spirit, god or deity—which have also been linked to sacrificial practices and hunting or fishing magic, and are reminiscent of the *sieidi* sacrificial stones of Lapland Sámi from the 17th and 18th centuries (see Figure 1). However, it should be noted that the implications of conducting analysis of such a figure are extensive because not all anthropomorphically shaped rock formations are *sieidi* stones and these kinds of stones are, in any case, salient in many cultures throughout the world. In addition, we do not know anything certain about the ethnic identity of the persons who created the figure, or their purposes. However, given the figure's morphological features and the fact it is located between the two rock paintings at the Vitträsk site, it is possible to make a comparison with similar cultural elements found amongst the Sámi, about whom we know a great deal, and therefore it is possible to present a hypothetical interpretation.

It is my theory that the paintings indicate that the region where the nets are visible is significant in terms of landscape use as well as in relation to why this specific area might have been chosen for a certain purpose, perhaps for sacrifice, worship or both. In other words, the nets in their respective locations and acknowledgement of the human-like

figure in the stone terrace suggest that the representations are cultural markers, possibly related to the animistic worldview of the Sámi. Both the meaning and value of the figure at the Vitträsk site, and its relation to the types of rock paintings in close proximity, provide a good example of how critical it is in rock art research to consider the wider dimensions of landscape use and also gain a broader understanding of the role of subjective experience in the interpretation of such features.

The Sámi are the indigenous people of northern Fennoscandia who have expressed their culture, intrinsic relationship with nature and identity through art, and rock paintings in central and southern Finland have been associated with Sámi religion, with hunting, trapping, fishing magic and cultural practices. Currently, the Sámi homelands—*Sápmi*—encompass the most northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia, though in earlier times Sámi groups also had settlement areas further south. In Finland, this is evident by virtue of the many Sámi place names in the central and southern areas of the country which demonstrate that the history of Sámi culture and religion is not only concerned with *Sápmi*.

The ethnicity and cultural origins of rock paintings in present day Finland is one of the most ambiguous fields in historical and cultural history research among Finnish scholars. The main reason for this is that many of the animal and human figures, as well as boats and horned spirits, pictured in what is considered to be 'Finnish' rock art show almost identical designs and structures—carrying, in some cases, indistinguishable parallels—to those painted on Lapland Sámi *noaidi* (shaman) drums from the 17th and 18th centuries. Finnish archaeologist Antti Lahelma in his doctoral thesis, *A Touch of Red: Archaeological and Ethnographical*

Approaches to Interpreting Finnish Rock Paintings (2008), has discussed this subject extensively, as have anthropologist Eero Autio (1991) and archaeologist Milton Nunez (1995), as a means of trying to establish evidence of the ethnic origin of the art. According to Lahelma in his dissertation:

Perhaps the single strongest argument that associates the art with shamanism of the kind practice[d] by the Saami are scenes that depict falling, diving and shape-changing anthropomorphs. The falling humans are usually accompanied by an elk, fish or a snake ... these scenes are an almost perfect match with Saami shamanism. (Lahelma 2008: 52)

This kind of evidence illustrates that conducting analysis at the site, and justifying the argument that the combination of the human-like figure and rock paintings links the site with Sámi religion, animism and sacrifice by virtue of its evidence of communication between the human and spiritual world, has to be given serious consideration. Moreover, Lahelma (2005: 37–40) also goes on to say that, according to studies of Sámi religion and shamanic interactions with various spiritual powers, ‘the spirit helpers of the *noaidi* were thought to dwell inside sacred cliffs or boulders which, like the rock paintings, were typically located near water, sometimes involving a natural cavity, anthropomorphic shape or similar ‘anomalous’ features’. Equally important to remember are other instances of rock paintings found in close proximity to rock and boulder formations manifesting anthropomorphic forms: for example, at the sites of Astuvansalmi, Ristiina; Hossa, Värkallio; Mertavuori, Iitti; Valkeisaari, Taipalsaari and Verla, Kouvola (see Figure 2)

which have been well documented previously. One further relevant point to be noted is that at sites where anthropomorphs, or what might in relation to Sámi religion be termed *sieidi* stones, are evident as along with rock paintings, it can be seen as a reflection of the animist Sámi notion that all beings within nature have a consciousness or a soul with which persons may establish communication, as Lahelma explains:

Aside from large boulders, a *sieidi* could consist of a solid cliff, an entire island, peninsula or mountain. In such cases, the sanctity of the site was often concentrated on a small object, usually a strangely-shaped stone, which served as the focus for worship. And whilst most of the *sieidi* were stationary and fixed in landscape, some could be moved around on migrations. (Lahelma 2008: 127)

Each year, the number of new sites discovered in Finland keeps growing and as of January 2016, the latest report on Luukkonen’s website stated that:

There are 98 prehistoric paintings with identifiable figures plus three cases that have figures, but that can be younger (=101). And 19 prehistoric paintings without identifiable figures plus nine cases with controversial dating (=28). One naturally destroyed site had an identifiable figure, it is not included above. This gives the number of prehistoric paintings is 118 plus twelve cases with controversial dating (=130). And after all this we still have 13 sites with red colour that can be man-made or natural. Thus the total number is somewhere between 118 and 143. (Luukkonen 1994–2016: 1)

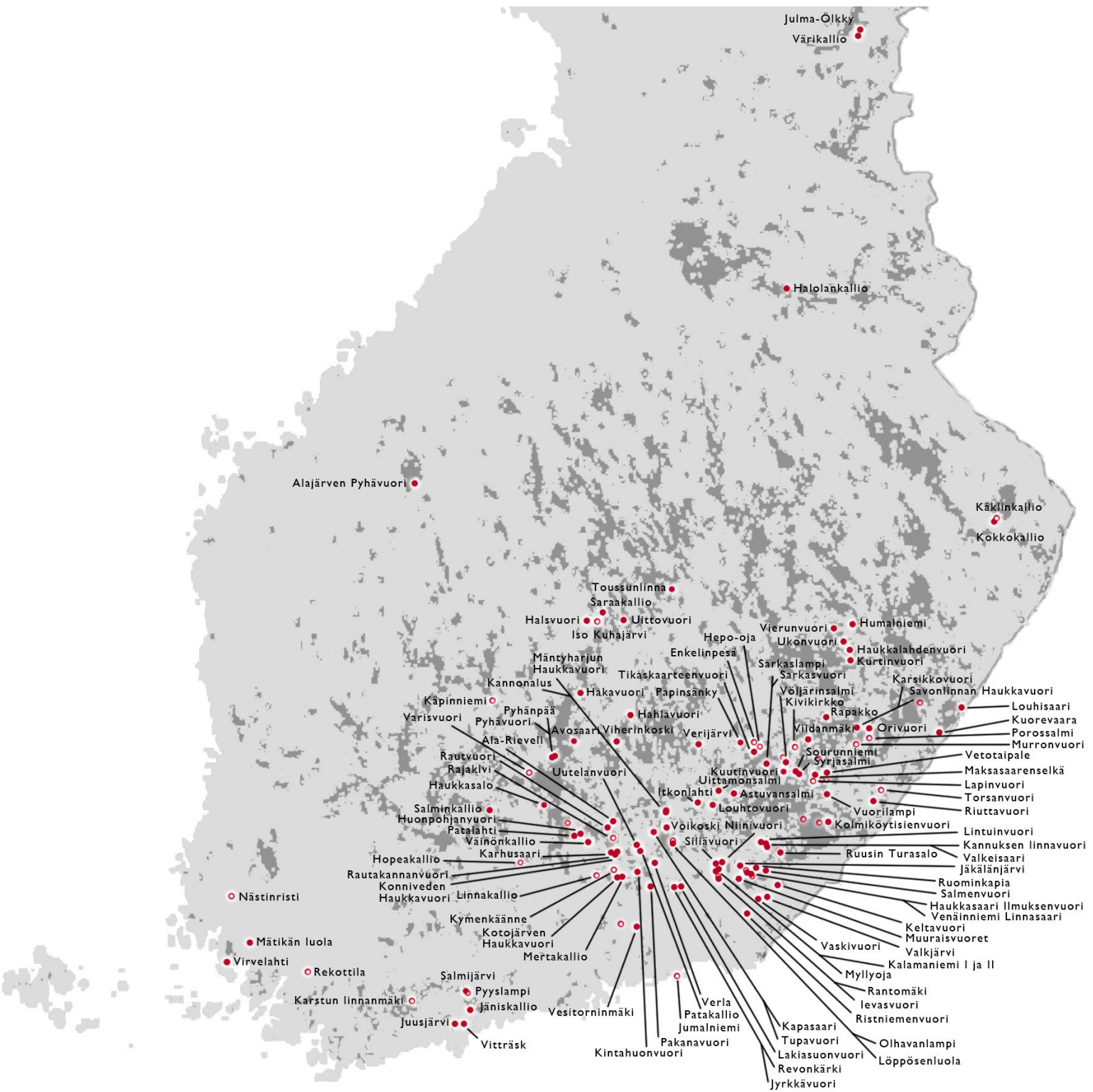


Figure 2. A current map of the rock painting sites throughout Finland. The Vitträsk site is visible close the rock painting at Juusjärvi. Reprinted with permission from Ismo Luukkonen.

Although there is not a comprehensive list for each site, the current data concerning dating by Lahelma, presents the following information:

According to current understanding, the paintings of the large Lake Saimaa region [and also Lake Päijänne] date from approximately 5000–1500 cal. BC (Jussila 1999; Seitsonen 2005a), and similar dating's have been suggested for other areas as well (e.g. Seitsonen 2005b). This locates the paintings mainly within the period of the Subneolithic Comb Wares cultures, which practiced a hunting-gathering-fishing economy. However, the rock painting tradition appears to continue to the early part of the Early Metal Period (1900 cal. BC–300 cal. AD). (Lahelma 2008: 123)

Rock paintings in Finland have been drawn using red ochre and can be associated with shamans' 'inner' and 'outer' landscapes from pre-history and their experiences during out-of-body travel. This is in addition to cosmological events, which might provide some indications of the origins of prehistoric culture and which are characterised by art pertaining to ritual and ceremony used in sacrifice and hunting. Although there are variations in interpretation of both the context and contents of the paintings throughout present day Finland, there are common themes that stand out including totemism, animal ceremonialism, shamanism and various forms of hunting magic.

One of the proposed aims of this article is to interpret what the stone figure, in combination with the net-type figures, means in terms of the artistic symbolism of a cultural landscape that has associations with Sámi religion and cosmology in that 'painting rocks was an important part of the process by which

populations could tap into ancestral powers at specific topographical locations' (Tilley 1994: 48). Another dimension to the paintings becomes visible when the ritual behavior they embody is encountered in association with the stone figure, together presenting a fine example of landscape use for creating sacred space.

The theories and interpretations presented within the study aim to demonstrate that by combining different cosmological, animistic and hunting / fishing magic elements together within the area under investigation, in addition to the discovery of the stone figure, these different but intricately related dimensions support the argument that the presence of the figure along with the two rock paintings is indicative of a sacred sanctuary. It seems to be no coincidence that rock paintings would thus signify a holy place that is consistent with Sámi tradition related to hunting practices, widely recognized throughout Lapland from the 17th and 18th centuries as containing elements of sacrifice.¹

To elaborate further, a painting is not always only a painting, but quite often part of a wider cosmological landscape or *passé* (sacred-holy place in Sámi terminology), which has been created to express a form of oral narrative and otherworldly communication wherein some area or aspect of the rock has acted as a type of membrane through which sacrificial offerings have been made to a spiritual being. Bringing the phenomenon of rock paintings and the outline of the stone figure together for analysis and elaborating on a possible relationship between these two types of phenomena is, therefore, the purpose of this scholarly study and an attempt to link the Vitträsk site with Sámi cultural practices in relation to sacrifice, cultural memory and self-identification. With this in mind, the article presents in conclusion a comparison of some almost identical features

and modes of ritual behavior connected with prehistoric rock art, places of sacrifice, drum symbolism and worldviews, and links between these.

APPROACHES AND METHODS USED IN THE ANALYSIS AND FIELDWORK

The methodological approach to the subject matter focuses on the theory that the Vitträsk stone figure and rock paintings are primarily concerned with a cosmological landscape and hunting magic and sacrifice, rather than shamanism. However, linking the practice of shamanism with the rock paintings cannot be ruled out completely, and it is therefore also investigated. Based on the theory that the site is predominantly linked with hunting magic and sacrifice, animism can be understood as playing a central role within the framework of the research because the phenomena is commonplace in hunting cultures where there is belief in the existence of non-human entities within certain landscapes that possess spirits or souls. To elaborate further on this point, an examination of *noaidi* drum symbolism from Lapland demonstrates that sacrifice was made to certain spirits within the landscape at least up until the 17th and 18th centuries.

In a general sense, there exists the theory in studies of animism that human beings throughout prehistory have maintained ties with non-human life forms, especially ancestors either who have become ghosts or who belong to a particular animal clan, with a totem, such as the bear, snake, fish, bird, wolf, reindeer or moose, which characterizes human-animal relations. This communication has been undertaken through sacrificial activities and thus is understood as a way of showing respect for nature and maintaining cosmic

order. It could be argued that in a much broader sense than shamanism, animism illustrates the concepts of a cyclical worldview, thereby demonstrating the active connection between humans and other life forms. Moreover, and in terms of landscape use, specific designs of rock paintings have been created in order to enhance sacrificial practices and inter-species communication between human beings and the spirit worlds. Understanding the important function animism plays in recognizing and identifying cosmological landscapes, and their importance to prehistory research, are prerequisites for conducting holistic research into the fundamental principles of Sámi religion via rock art analysis. This has also been particularly evident in relation to hunting magic because the Sámi are well known for their creation of mythic discourse and cultural practices in connection with this, which have been expressed and documented through art.

One further important point which justifies the holistic approach to the research, is that my study of rock art in Finland and the study of Sámi *noaidi* drum symbolism from Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish Lapland, indicate links between these two forms of art and the oral traditions of the Sámi; there are local cultural patterns that can be established and subsequently followed. These patterns, which consist of symbolism, structures, figures and spiritual beings that reside in nature, indicate that interactions with natural landscapes have been and still are one of the central practices for exhibiting and validating self-identification and cultural memory and thereby affirming culture and its intrinsic relationship with nature.

The communication of culture is extremely important in this regard, and it is a significant reason why a cultural context of both past and present is key to understanding

the nature of oral history. A linking of the past with the present is often a goal in establishing the continuity of cultural tradition, and imbue these traditions with a certain degree of current relevance. (Taiaiake 1999, cited by Preston 2005: 57)

The value of taking unique cultural landscapes into account as a basis for carrying out holistic analysis in rock painting research is paramount; this is highlighted by the differences in perspectives in research practices based on static-linear Western worldviews (resulting in a focus on only the painted area) versus indigenous worldviews (which encourage a holistic focus taking into account the whole landscape) which relate to the world in terms of cyclicity and interspecies communication, thus referencing cooperation between human subjects and spiritual powers.

From the study of rock art phenomena and the artistic decoration of *noaidi* drums it is evident that cyclical worldviews and cosmologies appear to be constructed around traditional practices at sacred sites where inter-species communication has taken place, something which impinges on methodological issues and should be considered beforehand. I use the term traditional because the Sámi identify with each other across national borders with regard to identical cultural practices which have existed for thousands of years. Moreover, indigenous people throughout the world share a common tradition of portraying hunting through art, for instance, through the re-enactment of myths and documentation of oral history; both of which are linked with recording cultural memory. Typically, inter-species communication, it can be argued, is the essence and fundamental basis in the construction of oral tradition and sacred narrative in Sámi cosmology. In practice, stories are constructed in relation to self-identification

and with the belief that everything in the cosmos has a soul and is therefore related or interconnected. In fact, in contemporary Sámi culture, traditional knowledge of reindeer herding still follows these principles, as described by Elina Helander-Renvall (2008: 1): ‘The Sami reindeer herding culture is animistic in the sense that there are no clear borders between spirit and matter. Moreover, all beings in nature are considered to have a soul or spirit’ (see also Helander-Renvall 2010).

Early research at the Vitträsk rock paintings site, it may be argued, has not taken into consideration that the place may have its own spirit situated amongst the painted areas. Yet better-understood examples of the symbolism created through the decoration of drums and creation of rock paintings in relation to self-identification have emerged as a result of research into Sámi cosmology and shamanism where evidence of communication conveying social relations with other realms of life such as spirits and animals is encountered in various forms.

The landscapes on *noaidi* drums from Norway, Sweden and Finland, and rock paintings in locations such as the Juusjärvi site, Kirkkonummi and at Hossa, Värrikallio, in northern Karelia, show remarkable similarities. This provides the opportunity for identifying further markers of Sámi religion in the content at the Vitträsk site as it is reminiscent of a scene consistent with hunting magic, and, therefore, cultural practices and patterns of behavior that have been noted amongst the Sámi. Corresponding illustrations should therefore play a central role in the formulation of research approaches and methods and how they are chosen, in order to avoid past practices of discrimination against Sámi pre-Christian religion and cosmology, as was the case in relation to analysis of figures and symbolism

painted on *noaidi* drums from the 17th and 18th centuries. Discriminatory practices were undertaken by priests of the northern districts of Lapland who were appalled by the ways the Sámi engaged with the powers of nature, because they did not understand the concept of how the Sámi approached nature holistically. The narrow approach to understanding Sámi religion by the priests resulted in their burning and destroying sacrificial places and drums, and producing false accounts about the religion. A comprehensive account of the destruction of Sámi religion can be found throughout the works of Lars Levi Laestadius (2002 [1838-1845]). Furthermore, in some cases in early rock painting research in Finland, groups of symbols and figures from rock paintings have been isolated and studied on their own, or else they have been mixed with traditions from Siberia, instead of keeping the study within a local context and striving to make comparisons with, for example, the motifs on the Sámi shaman drums from Lapland. As is now being recognized, when prehistoric rock art and *noaidi* drum motifs are brought together for comparison considerable similarities and contexts in terms of landscape use, cosmologies, ritual behavior and sacrificial activities are immediately apparent.

Drawing on a phenomenological research method in analysis, supported by the idea of standing back and observing the location and natural position of the stone figure rather than focusing solely on the paintings themselves, helped solve the problem of why the two nets may have been placed in their respective locations at Vitträsk. The use of phenomenology is a suitable method for the study of prehistory because, typically, the 'phenomenological study of religion deals with a personal participation of a scholar in the religion he seeks to study in order to understand the essence (meaning) and manifestations of the religious phenomena of a

particular religion' (Ekeke and Ekeopara 2010: 266). In a similar vein, archaeologist Christopher Tilley (1994: 11) states, 'The key issue in any phenomenological approach is the manner in which people experience and understand the world', and where the observer remains neutral. In the case of the Vitträsk site's relation to Sámi religion, this is evident through the art and primary source material from Lapland, namely the *noaidi* drums.

Because painting rocks has been practiced since the Stone Age, data assessment was undertaken in relation to both past and present contexts: early literature on the topics of rock art and *noaidi* drums and their contents, as well as involvement in fieldwork at other rock painting sites in Finland. These experiences helped formulate the phenomenological research method in relation to a comparative study of rock art and drum symbolism. This was the approach taken at the Vitträsk site to the extent that I opened my mind prior to the discovery of the stone figure to the idea that the rock paintings were possibly not the only criteria and content at the site, and as a result, the nets painted on the stone terrace were only a part of the field of investigation. Similar hypotheses have been used and found to be of value in earlier rock art studies in archaeology, for example by Tilley, who states the importance of understanding that when approaching a proposed area of investigation, rock paintings can occasionally be located by 'localized features of topography' (Tilley 1994: 48) conducive to establishing contact with the world of the spirits. With the recognition of the human-like figure at the Vitträsk site, it was easier to understand that although the net-type figures may have been created for sacrificial purposes, the essence of their role and function may have been to act as a medium or communication channel between human beings and a non-human subject. In



Figure 3. The net-type of figure at Hjemmeluft rock carving site Alta, Finnmark, north Norway, which depicts part of a reindeer's body alongside it (Photo: Ismo Luukkonen). By contrast to what Kare (2000) has stated above, the image here may also show what Tilley (1994: 48) refers to in relation to rock paintings: "sites of particular importance in representations of landscape frequently refer to the places where the ancestors came out of and (having grown tired) went back into the land, between these two events creating their dreaming tracks and localized features of topography". In this case, perhaps the mythical ancestor is portrayed as a reindeer, thus indicating a further link with Sámi cosmology.

terms of phenomenological research, according to Ekeke and Ekeopara (2010: 268), [this is called] the principle of eidetic vision. The word eidetic is from a Greek *eidos* which means 'that which is seen', thus form, shape, essence'. In practice, there is immense value in examining the shape and forms within the landscape close to the paintings from a distance, because from close up, anthropomorphs and *seiidi* figures that bear human-like resemblance are not always obvious. In some cases in rock painting research it is obvious where the anthropomorphs and *seiidi* figures are, in others it is not; but, where

recognition is possible, we may then be able to conceive how the various dimensions of the paintings can be encountered and in some cases interpreted from within a more holistic framework that includes why these sites may have been chosen.

The reason that recognition of the human-like figure is part of the presentation of research methods is because its identification demonstrates the importance of being observant, in this case not of a human subject but what could be described as a mythical one—thereby also presenting a case study for



Figure 4. A close up picture of the net-type figure to the left of the human-like figure at Vitträsk, which shows how consciously the structure of the symbol has been painted (Photo: Francis Joy).



Figure 5. The remains of faint net-type lines, which are visible on the rock painting at the right side of the stone figure (Photo: Francis Joy).

research development. The uncovering of the stone figure's features in the terrace endorses the value of conducting a much wider field analysis of the area under investigation in rock painting research; in the case presented below the application of more effective research methods revealed new information that automatically placed the study in a more 'holistic' framework.

In the following section, I have included a photograph of the net-type figure at the Alta rock paintings in Finnmark (Figure 3), Norway, for comparison with those which I took of the nets at Vitträsk (see Figures 4 and 5). The comparative method is important because evidence of Sámi prehistory and populations in southern Finland is a controversial issue

amongst archaeology scholars (see Sámi historian Veli-Pekka Lehtola 2008). However, the rock art from Alta is very important because Sámi populations still reside in Alta, Finnmark today. Therefore, I am demonstrating how, in each case, the designs of the nets indicate communication, sharing similar contexts with regard to animism, ritual and Sámi cosmology, thus presenting new evidence of links with Sámi prehistory in southern Finland. This provides additional support for my theory linking the discovery of the human-like figure at the Vitträsk site with Sámi sacrificial tradition.

As I see it, there are no fundamental differences between the use of these two designs (nets), with the exception that the Alta

example also depicts a moose caught up in the net, possibly a sacrificial offering, whereas at the Vitträsk site, the nets are empty but in close proximity to the human-like figure. Clear similarities link the data, which is placed within the context of religion. In short, the basis for comparison is justifiable in this case and the phenomenological method is reliable for the development of the research. Bringing the two sources together also enables me to explore additional theories concerning the use of nets in rock art.

In the case of Vitträsk, prior to arriving at the site the main data under analysis were initially the two net-type figures painted on the stone terrace; searching the area for a non-human subject disclosed the human-like figure in the rock terrace. Previous research, for example by both Lahelma (2005 & 2008) and Holmberg (1964 [1927]), has emphasized how such figures are very likely to be located by a lake, possibly a sign that the lake itself is holy or sacred, and the human-like stone figure a local god. As a way of presenting the discovery and visible evidence of the human-like figure in the stone terrace, two photographs were taken, which are used herein and show the nature of developments in research at the Vitträsk site. The details are presented and discussed in the sections below.

THE SÁMI SACRIFICIAL TRADITION PORTRAYED THROUGH ROCK PAINTINGS, DRUM SYMBOLISM, SIEIDI FIGURES, AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH AT THE VITTRÄSK SITE

In order to expand further on the relationship between sacrificial sites, rock paintings, Lapland *noaidi* drum art and the anthropomorphic

figure and rock painting at the Vitträsk site it is beneficial to discuss the following associations. There have been a series of questions debating links between the prehistoric rock art predominantly in central and southern Finland and the content of many of the mythical landscapes painted on the heads of Sámi *noaidi* drums of the 17th and 18th centuries from Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish Lapland. Two of the main themes discussed within artistic research and ethnographical fieldwork by Milton Nunez (1995), Eero Autio (1991) and Francis Joy (2007; 2014), have been concerned with Sámi sacrificial practices, identity and the continuity of culture and tradition as expressed through extensive symbolism associated with cultural narratives and cosmology.

To date, the remaining '71 [drums which are] considered authentic' (Christoffersson 2010: 265), are preserved in museums throughout Europe. These were collected by priests and missionaries during the colonialism period between the 1600s and 1700s throughout Lapland, although many were also burned because the instrument was considered a powerful 'manifestation of paganism among the Sami' (Pentikäinen 1998: 34) and therefore seen as demonstrating resistance to the Church. The drum was used by the *noaidi* to help induce ecstasy for healing and out-of-body travel, divination in relation to hunting, fishing and trapping practices, direction in reindeer herding and prophecy (also see the works of Ernst Manker 1938; 1950; see Figure 6).

Early research, particularly that of Finnish scholars Ville Luho (1971), Autio (1991) and Nunez (1995), and more recently the work of Lahelma (2005; 2008; 2012), has sought to examine the different types of links in the recognizable parallels between rock paintings in southern and central Finland and *noaidi* drum symbolism from Lapland. As a result, their

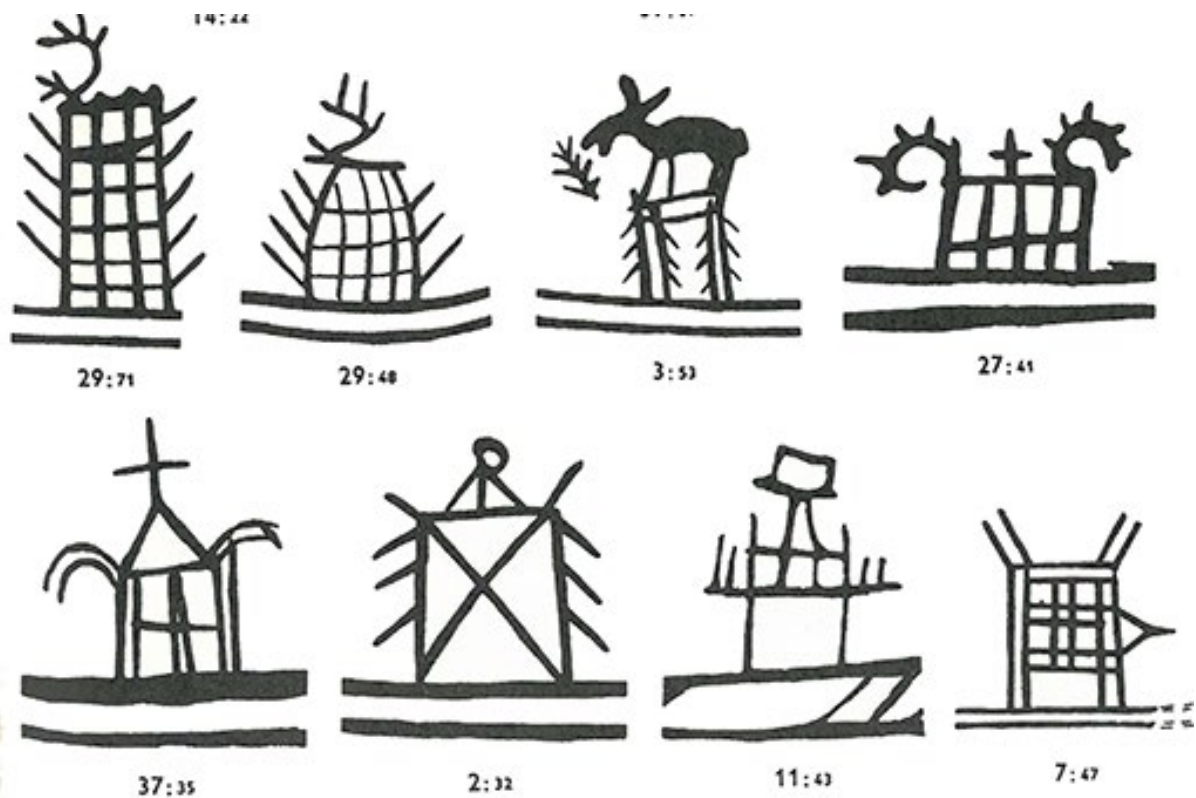


Figure 6. A collection of net-type figures from the work of Ernst Manker (1950: 121). What makes the images interesting is that when the drums on which these offering platforms were examined, they all came from Swedish Sámi drums from Åsle and Lycksele Lappmarks'. The two figures on drum number 29 (above) have some resemblance to the rock painting at Vitträsk. Antti Lahelma has also used this theory for establishing links between rock paintings and Sámi religion (see Lahelma 2008: 58–59). The illustration has been re-used with the kind permission of Nordiska Museet, Stockholm.

collective analysis has helped to determine some of the key concepts and networks functioning within the structures of Sámi religion and shamanism from prehistoric times up to the 17th and 18th centuries. The Vitträsk site data has revealed similar topographical features in the painting and location of anthropomorphic and human-like figures to those discussed by these scholars. For example, at the sites of Astuvansalmi in Ristiina, Verla in Kouvola and Hossa in Värrikallio evidence suggests each of these sites may have been chosen by prehistoric painters because, like the Vitträsk site, they

are all close to water. Yet many questions have been raised (see Luho 1971; Lahelma 2008) about the Vitträsk paintings: apart from the significance of their close proximity to water, why was this particular location chosen for decoration? For example, what Lahelma refers to as 'the similarities between Sami *sieidi* and Finnish rock paintings seem to go beyond mere coincidence' (Lahelma 2008: 138). The similarities and parallels between rock painting figures, the presence of *sieidi* and anthropomorphic figures painted on the landscapes on drums and visible at rock

painting sites, suggest to me that they serve as reconstructions of prehistoric religious practices and cosmologies, thereby demonstrating interspecies communication and cultural memory in a tradition that spans thousands of years. The primary channel for this procedure has been the decoration of surfaces considered appropriate to the expression of spiritual practices and, in the case of Sámi history, art has been the chosen format. Furthermore, nets have been a common motif—at Ievasvuori and Nastinvuori, for example (Kare 2000: 100; also see Luukkonen 1994–2016). There are other ambiguous paintings that bear similar resemblance to nets at Astuvansalmi, Sarkavesi and Haukkavuori (Kare 2000: 100). However, none of these are as clearly distinguishable as those at the Vitträsk site.

With regard to evidence of Sámi prehistory in southern Finland, it is important to acknowledge the scholarly work of Ville Luho, and his paper ‘Suomen Kalliomaalaukset ja Lappalaiset’ (1971) in relation to the rock painting at the Vitträsk site and the links between rock art and Sámi culture, as recalled by Lahelma:

During the four decades that have passed since Luho wrote his text lots of new material ha[s] been accumulated. Even if there is a lot of fundamental uncertainty and open questions concerning interpretation, dating and the language history of the Finnish area, I want to be a little braver than Luho and claim that [in] the iconography of the rock paintings and the rituals that are connected to the painted locations, there is a clear recognisable Sámi element. It does not mean that the paintings would literally have been made by Sámi people, since the Sámi ethnicity can hardly be extended to the Stone Age. However, it has turned

out that at least in the northern parts of Fennoscandia the rock picture tradition and/or the ritual action that [is] connected to it has been going on (only exclusively) in the Sámi context from historical time, it is very likely, that the creators of the Finnish rock paintings have been in some way ‘genetically’ related with the Sámi people of historical time.

The rock art of the Sámi culture in historical time was clearly fading and an esoteric tradition, which has not left no signs in literal sources. The number of sites is small and they seem by character to be marginal, but their geographical dispersion is so large, that creating the rock pictures must have been a phenomena organically connected to the Sámi culture. From the position of research its existence is an important observation, because it makes a direct historical approach possible within the interpretation of rock paintings (more about the method see for example Steward 1942).² (Lahelma 2012: 18)

I consider what Lahelma has to say as being of vital importance to the subject matter at the Vitträsk site and for strengthening the argument linking the paintings and stone figure with Sámi religion and history.

THE LINKS BETWEEN NET-TYPE FIGURES AT VITTRÄSK AND THOSE FOUND IN THE ALTA ROCK CARVINGS

In a similar vein to Lahelma (2008) and Luho (1971), Antero Kare (2000) discusses net-type figures in Alta, Finnmark, on the coast of the Arctic Ocean, which are very similar

to those found at Vitträsk. What also makes the Finnmark region of special interest is that Sámi people have been living in this area for thousands of years. The net-type of figure which captures Kare's attention, is:

especially the [one at the] Ole Pedersen XI site [which] has an interesting image of the net and a reindeer together. [According to Kare] the net is very similar to the ones at Vitträsk. ... Especially when the net is pecked in Alta together with the reindeer. Could it be an animal trap? (Kare 2000: 101)

If I have understood it correctly, what Kare means is that during hunting activities nets would be symbolically used in ritual contexts in such a way 'they would be the traps for the souls of the animals [being hunted]' (Kare 2000: 101), or those passing into the afterlife.

Therefore, what makes the Vitträsk site of interest in relation to net-type patterns, identification of the stone figure and the combination of these two features, is that they constitute a sacrificial area or significant place of power which may have been the focal point for offerings. As the illustrations above show, there are similar landscape features found in locations connected to Sámi religion and cosmology from a much later period, according to a number of ethnographical sources (Manker 1950; Helskog 1987; 1999 Lahelma 2008). This argument is further strengthened by what (Lahelma 2008: 59) has to say on the matter.

Saami drum figures [which] offer a clue to the meaning of one of the most enigmatic of symbols in Finnish rock art; the net figures at Vitträsk found by Sibelius in 1911 Luho (1971: 15) has pointed out that certain conventionalized figures used

on the Saami drums to represent sacrificial platforms (*luovve*) bear resemblance to the Vitträsk nets. The parallel is not as obvious as Luho makes it appear, because the representations of these platforms are quite variable and only some of them resemble the Vitträsk figures ... However, the net figure found at Alta [Norway] ... which is almost identical to the Vitträsk nets, provides additional evidence that his observation may have been correct after all.

As Lahelma has stated, if Luho's theory is right that the function and purpose of nets on *noaidi* drums is to represent offering places, it would be justified to suggest that the significance of the fissure on the left side of the rock at Vitträsk (see Figure 1), which runs from the mouth and neck of the stone figure and then fuses together just above the rock painting may have had different functions. Blood or fat may have been ritualistically smeared either on or just above it as a food offering to the figure, in order to secure power or luck for fishing in the lake below the terrace. A close examination of both net figures reveals how intricately and carefully the lines and detail have been painted, suggesting that considerable care and time was taken to create these circuits or grids, as would be the case in the formulation of religious art bearing importance, meaning and value.

Through understanding the important role and function of both the figure and the nets, and the value of such a combination of elements to art history research, it seems to be possible to build a more holistic explanation of why certain sites with anthropomorphic or zoomorphic stone figures were chosen for painting whilst others were not. There is a consensus amongst rock art scholars (see, for example, Helskog 1987; 1999 Lahelma 2005; 2008) that areas where, for example, *seiidi* stones located in the

landscape are considered to have supernatural links with the spiritual worlds. Prominent rocks as such have also been noted to act as guardians and protectors of certain lakes and waterways in cases where both rock paintings and carvings are found, and in particular, where there are traces of Sámi history throughout Fennoscandia, as noted by Laestadius (2002 [1838-1845]: 103–107; the chapter on the doctrine of deities).

Scholarly analysis of *sieidis* in Sámi history (Holmberg 1964; Vorren and Manker 1962), suggest that Vitträsk differs from other lake-side rock painting sites because the stone figure in the terrace is very high above the water level. Regarding the manifestation of supernatural power within particular anthropomorphic figures and the areas where they are located, Whitaker emphasizes ‘how, according to primitive belief, the power or might concentrated itself in a point, in this case, seites standing on a mountain cliff or peninsula, and therefore described the seite as a ‘place’s concentration of power’ considered ‘as god for a particular area’ (Whitaker 1957: 302).

THE HUMAN-LIKE FIGURE AT VITTRÄSK, ITS HYBRID SNAKE-LIKE BODY AND HUMAN FACE

A visit to the Vitträsk rock paintings in 2006 had not suggested any reason for their presence beyond their proximity to water, but during my visit in January 2014 with rock art photographer Ismo Luukkonen I was able to put into practice what I have since learned in rock art research, that is, to comprehend the site from a more holistic perspective. Whilst standing back from the rock paintings on the edge of the rock terrace and observing the whole area around the artworks, which are approximately 15 meters above the water line, it soon became

apparent that located between the two net-type rock drawings was the outline of a human-like figure, which stood out from a series of fissures in the rock (see Figure 1). The figure’s overall size is long and slim, almost 3 meters in height, and the head and facial features can be clearly recognized, especially the eye and outline of the head, which is wider than the rest of the body, and also a groove in the rock behind the figure’s head that forms an ear. The mouth is directly under the nose (see Figure 7), and from this point, a long fissure traveled down the cliff face towards the net-type figure on the left, which was more visible than that on the right. A second fissure appears to be connected to the figure’s neck area. Both of these cracks in the rock fuse into one fissure lower down the stone terrace wall.

Bringing this new information to light is important because it indicates how the person/s that created the artworks probably chose the specific area to paint because of the figure’s presence; many of the sacrificial platforms painted on the early drums are either close to *sieidi* figures or represent them, in the sense that the spirit or god would take up residence on the offering platform to consume the sacrificial meal. Furthermore, the shamanic practice of placing the hands on sacrificial stones when prophesying or extracting power for ritual purposes was not uncommon amongst the Sámi, as Holmberg (1964: 101) describes:

This method of turning to the gods was, however, not possible when the sieidi was a great rock or a stone embedded in the earth. Consulting these, the Lapp laid his hand on the rock and began his questions in the unshakeable belief that his hand would stick to it and not be loosened until he chanced to hit on the exact event that would happen to him.



Figure 7. A photograph of a natural feature depicting the head and facial characteristics of the human-like figure in the pink granite rock at Vitträsk. The shape of the head, one eye slightly to the left, mouth and indentation where the ear is situated are all visible on close observation from what could be described as a side profile. There is a fissure in the rock that appears to divide the head from the body, thereby creating a neck, making the facial features rather distinct, as seen in the picture (Photo: Francis Joy).

Likewise, the close proximity of the human-like figure to the net designs is replicated on the Sámi drums where *sieidi* figures are also painted in close proximity to net-type figures (see for example, figure 4), thus demonstrating

remarkable parallels in cultural phenomenon and strengthening the theory that this Vitträsk association bears the hallmark of Sámi cultural practices of sacrifice, the worship of stones, and possibly fishing magic, cosmology and

shamanism. When these features are combined together, they both constitute and characterize an animistic view of the world, one of the oldest forms of worship known.

The concept of feeding the figure illustrates reverence and respect for nature and other life forms, but the very act of painting the areas around the stone figure may also signify a type of initiation of the figure, thereby commissioning it to work on behalf of the people who created the art. During missionary work in Lapland among the Sámi in the 17th and 18th centuries, priests recorded the caution that had to be exercised when approaching or walking in the vicinity of *sieidi* stones. 'The Lapps do not want to show these sanctuaries to strangers because of the fear that the deity might resent it and cause some harm to be done to them; they have come too close or touched some stone gods and have consequently lost their health' (Högström 1747, cited by Laestadius 2002 [1838-1845]: 104). Yet, discussing how *sieidi* stones functioned within Sámi religion and cosmology in relation to grids or circuits of power, Karsten (1955: 93) notes:

When we hear that the Lapps sometimes smashed and maltreated, or even burnet those sieidis in which they no longer believed, we ought not to regard this as a blasphemous irreverence on their part against a divine being who had the power, but did not choose to help his worshipped. A sieidi, which in spite of cult did not bring help evidently was no god at all, and it was of no use to go on honoring a worthless natural object with costly animal sacrifices. An idol of this kind is like an electric battery the energy of which is exhausted and which has to be charged again to be fit for use. If the worshippers are not able to effect this with the stone or

wooden idol, it is fit only to be destroyed or thrown away. This was the reason why the sieidi had a first to be duly 'initiated' for its particular purpose; only after initiation did it become an *ibmel* [god]. In future, its power had to be continually maintained by sacrificial acts, just as an electric battery has continually to be recharged with the electric current.

It may be considered that the net-like figures painted on each side of the stone figure at Vitträsk represent offering platforms, where either the fishermen consumed the fish together with the human-like being, or offerings were made before and after food was located. In Johannes Schefferus's (1682) accounts of hunting practices and *sieidi* worship, there are illustrations of groups of seated Sámi eating food by anthropomorphic figures, thereby demonstrating that the practice has also long been part of their culture and customs. It is evident that nature and the spirits, which lived on and within the landscape both influenced and were an important part of Sámi cosmology and worldview, generating oral narratives and dictating how certain grids and decorations were implemented onto membranes and surfaces to build a bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds. There is no evidence to date that these net-type figures at Vitträsk were thus charged, or that one of the nets may have been used for sacrifice whilst the second could have acted as a kind of portal for the souls of the fish to re-enter the spiritual world. Nevertheless, these possibilities cannot be dismissed. What is significantly different between the rock paintings at Vitträsk and the rock carvings at Alta are that the Vitträsk paintings have been very carefully made: the lines of the designs fit inside each other and connect with one another like a grid through which currents or electricity

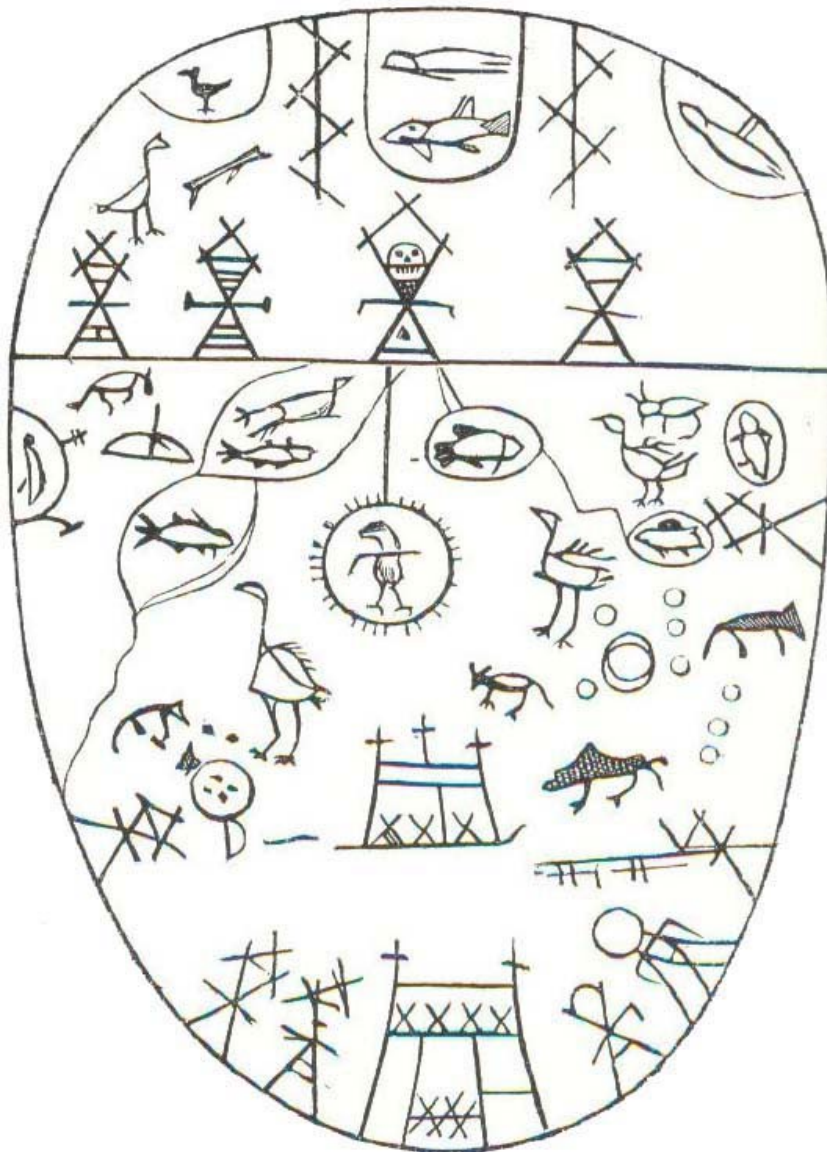


Figure 8. An illustration of 'drum number 63 from Lulea in Swedish Lapland' (from Manker 1938: 60; the illustration has been re-used with kind permission of the Nordiska Museet, Stockholm). I have chosen to use this image because the markings on the original noaidi shaman drum are hardly visible. Above and below the top sections of the line dividing the drum into two sections are different animals, mainly fish and birds, which look as if they are trapped or caught in net-like structures. The ritual formulation of the landscape and processes in motion in relation to fishing and trapping appear to be influenced or characterized by one of the four **sieidi** figures or spirits that have taken up residence on sacrificial platforms. These are evident on the top section of the drum where the horizontal line runs. The **sieidi** figure is the third from the left, whose face is visible. These strands of energies or nets appear to be linked with the base of the **sieidi**, thereby suggesting that through ritual magic and the manipulation of natural laws, the **sieidi** spirit is influencing the events wherein a successful outcome is in the making. The content of the drum exhibits typical cultural practices that consist of oral narrative, which are central to Sámi religion, where, through appeasement, the **sieidi** provides the **noaidi** with the necessary luck-power to harvest food (for a broader description of these theories, see Joy 2015).



*Figure 9. This image is taken from the Dutch edition of the History of Lapland (Schefferus 1682: 73). The **noaidi** shaman who looks as if he is holding a drum, the rear of which is just visible in his left hand, is seen communicating with the large mythical serpent in the forest that shows the animistic nature of the religion and how important interspecies communication has been for divination, in which sacrificial acts figured prominently.*

might travel or be localized. A similar procedure of using circuits of power may also have been applied to certain fishing and trapping practices. In fact, a Sámi *noaidi* drum from Swedish Lapland (see Figure 8) displays fish and birds surrounded by what look like enclosures or traps. Yet, as Andreassen (2008: 93) points out: ‘Another interpretation could be that these figures represent the coat of the shamans during trance with the helping spirit, which is in this case a reindeer and an elk ... or a shaman gone to the ‘other side’ taking the shape of a reindeer or an elk.’

Additional points of value for the theory that the Vitträsk site exhibits traces of Sámi history in the rock paintings and stone figure is the latter’s resemblance to a human-snake hybrid. Snakes and serpents often appear on Sámi *noaidi* drums, and have figured prominently in Sámi shamanism, cosmology and oral tradition and often appear at rock painting sites throughout Finland including the Saraakallio site at Laukaa in central Finland, Mertakallio in Litti and Keltavuori, Lappeenranta. Several kilometers away from the Vitträsk site is the Juusjärvi rock painting, which, based on my observations, has at least one large serpent amongst the images on the stone terrace above the lake. In his assessment of the context of the snake figures at Juusjärvi, Finnish scholar Eero Autio (1991: 56) also writes: ‘The interpretation based on shamanism seems to be possible, especially as one of the human figures in the picture seems to resemble a hybrid of snake and man’. Serpents have been crucially important to the Sámi because of their divine qualities, which are linked with both water and underground travel (see Figure 9).

CONCLUSION

Analysis in this article has firmly demonstrated the effectiveness and indeed benefit of examining areas where rock paintings are located from a broader perspective using phenomenological research methods and comparative analysis. At many *sieidi* sites the most obvious features have been the large heads and faces of the stone figures; at the Vitträsk site, however, not only is the head of the figure relatively small by comparison with others, but a long slim body is also visible, thus showing the figure in its entirety. While the human-serpent figure may seem ambiguous in the stone terrace, it cannot be mere coincidence that the rock paintings are located on either side of it, or that striking parallel features also appear on the heads of *noaidi* drums from Lapland. It may also be concluded that the two rock paintings at the Vitträsk site help to enhance the stone figure and its identity within the rock formation. Therefore, the structure of this whole composition presents a much more holistic picture of landscape use at the location than indicated by the two paintings alone. Consequently, I would also argue that we must take into account not only the structural elements that have been brought together in terms of setting, inter-species communication, self-identification and cultural memory, but also the important role landscape use plays in revealing further aspects of Sámi religion. On the other hand, the similarities between the nets at the Vitträsk and Alta sites should be mediated by Lahelma’s (2012: 18) comment that ‘it does not mean that the paintings would literally have been made by Sámi people, since the Sámi ethnicity can hardly be extended to the Stone Age’. Yet, despite the lack of certainty about the ethnic identity of the artists, on the basis of the evidence presented—in addition to numerous

other scenes that, as Lahelma has noted, are consistent with Sámi shamanism—it is possible to hypothesize that due to certain important resemblances the creators of the Vitträsk figure / paintings composition are connected to the those of Alta and possibly to the prehistoric populations who are the ‘ancestors’ of the present day Sámi people.

Moreover, I would argue that one of the problems which has led to so much ambiguity in the study of anthropomorphic figures, rock paintings and Sámi prehistory in central and southern Finland is that, currently, there are only two rock-painting locations in the present Sámi areas in Lapland, neither of which appears to have been significantly investigated. According to Lahelma there is:

a large erratic boulder on the North-Western shore of Näkkäljärvi in Enontekiö, Finnish Lapland ... where red marks of uncertain origin have been reported on the surface of this famous Saami sieidi (sacred stone). Judging by the photographs, the marks are interesting and may form fragments of figure, but a natural origin cannot be ruled out and the site should be studied by a geologist as well as archaeologist. (Lahelma 2008: 206)

The illustrations of both human and animal figures from the site presented by Lahelma clearly shows that a similar practice of painting sacred stones close to water is also found within the Sámi area in Finnish Lapland. If similar depictions were found it would help fill the lacuna of Sámi prehistory in southern Finland, and ameliorate the cultural divide between north and south which is sometimes presented in scholarly discourse, meanwhile demonstrating that Sámi history, religion and cultural practices

are not phenomena that are frozen in time, but instead, show a long and continued history across many millennia.

I would argue that the results of the research presented here have an important contribution to make towards our understanding of Sámi history in Finland with regard to rock painting research, oral narrative and cultural practices that have figured more prominently in the northern and Arctic areas of Fennoscandia. The article has shown how cosmological beliefs and animistic practices are embedded within the landscape as knowledge systems, a traditional practice associated with the Sámi and their cultural identity and memory. Furthermore, oral communication presented through art as cultural narratives have existed for thousands of years in Sámi culture. The comparisons have allowed me to conclude that the almost identical images of practices and monumental structures, painted on ancient Sámi drumheads and featured in the rock art of Alta and Vitträsk, provide evidence of cultural continuity which spans four countries. Moreover, the hypothesized links between the data discussed here demonstrate not only similarities between images but, more importantly, a time-line that is clearly visible in the artwork and landscape use in Sámi religion and history. Furthermore, because these practices span millennia, they may in fact, point towards a possible origin. At the Vitträsk site most of the paintings have been lost due to erosion but, given the fact the only two visible paintings from amongst the fragments of prehistory are located either side of the human-like figure at the Vitträsk site (along with evidence of earlier art work in the same location) means that the figure is probably the underlying reason why the site was chosen in the first place.

NOTES

1. These natural rock formations in the landscapes which resemble human and animal features/faces are called sieidi/seite in Sámi terminology and seita in Finnish.
2. Translated from Finnish to English by Linda Granfors 2015.

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PHOTOGRAPHIC MATERIAL

Luukkonen, Ismo 1994–2016. The moose and net-type figure at the Alta Rock carving, Finnmark.

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