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THE RE-GENERATION OF MYTHICAL MESSAGES: ROCK ART AND STORYTELLING IN NORTHERN FENNOSCANDIA

Abstract

Ethnographic research has shown that rock art is a variable phenomenon and that there are a variety of ways of approaching its social and ritual meaning. The aim of this article is to discuss the mythological significance of rock art in northern Fennoscandia and its role within ancient narrative and storytelling. It is assumed that the most frequently occurring images can be described as core motifs that dominated the narrative tradition and the vast distribution of rock art mythology in northern Fennoscandia and Karelia is further more equated with the way that other forms of narrative were transmitted between groups. The general principles behind the recurring practice of rock art were likely to have emanated from a system of shared beliefs, in which conceptions of ancestral beings and events were vital. This assumption derives from an analogy with the ethnography and narratives of the Australian aboriginal Dreamtime. It is further suggested that variations among motifs and compositions that occur between the northern rock art panels are to be looked upon as local elaborations of the narrative tradition concerning ancestral beings and events.

Keywords: Rock art, Dreamtime, Fennoscandia, Karelia, myth, memory, narrative, storytelling, transmission

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INTRODUCTION

Rock art is often considered to be one of the more important categories of material culture when discussing prehistoric ideas and worldviews. The number of works on Scandinavian rock art during the last century reflects a wide spectrum of interpretations, ranging from seeing rock art as various expressions of mythology and manifestations of religious rituals, such as hunting magic and fertility ceremonies, to more socially oriented aspects of communication within the living society. The distribution of Scandinavian rock art has also been explained in economical terms, and a division between farmer and hunter rock art has been established in the attempt to emphasise the assumed difference in mode of subsistence between the southern and the northern rock art areas in Scandinavia (e.g., Janson et al. 1989; Malmer 1992).

There is no doubt that rock art on an overall level represents a multidimensional phenomena and according to ethnography it is possible to approach the practice of rock art from a variety of perspectives. In this article I will focus on the more frequently occurring motifs on the rock art panels in Karelia and Fennoscandia and their reference to ancient narrative and myth. My main argument is that the structural similarities that appear on many rock art panels in northern Fennoscandia can be interpreted as a pictorial reference to mythological narration and storytelling. By putting the practice of rock art within a wider narrative framework, it is possible that we may gain a broader understanding of how the mythological concepts underlying the production of rock art were continuously mediated and transmitted between groups. But before we go deeper into these issues we need to clarify the role of narrative and memory in primary oral cultures.

NARRATIVE AND MEMORY IN ORAL CULTURES

The presentation of narrative and memory in this section is based mainly on the works by Jack Goody (1977, 1987), Eric Havelock (1978), Albert Lord (2000) and Walter Ong (1991). Although narrative and storytelling is found in all cultures, it is particularly important, and in certain ways widely more functional, in primarily oral cultures than in others. In oral cultures, where there is no written text, the narrative serves to bond thought more massively and permanently than other genres. In a writing or print culture the text physically bonds whatever it contains and makes it possible to retrieve any kind of organized thought or abstract category. In oral cultures, knowledge cannot be managed and communicated in the same way (Ong 1991). According to scholars of narrative research, most oral cultures generate quite substantial narratives or series of narratives, which are particularly important because they can bond a great deal of knowledge and experiences in forms that are durable. In an oral culture this means forms that are subject to repetition (Ong 1991: 141). I will return to the importance of durable forms later when discussing the significance of the repetitive employment of the more frequently occurring rock art images.

The reading of material culture as text in archaeology has been debated and rejected by some writers in the last decades (e.g., Ouzman 1998; Jordan 2004; Ling 2008), and it is true that material culture, speech and writing do not share the same qualities in every aspect. It is, for instance, not possible to identify verbs, subjects and objects in rock art imagery in the same way as in written text. But, with reference to archaeologists as Bjørnar Olsen (2003) and Christopher Tilley (1991), material culture is also 'written' through a practice of spacing and differentiation in a similar manner as phonetic writing, although material culture does not communicate meaning in the same way (Tilley 1991: 16–7). The differences between reading material culture and written text are not to be considered in a clear-cut way and the appearance of phonetic writing should therefore not be conceived of as a progressive technological development of modernity.

The term narrative can in a wide meaning be described as a paradigm of shared cultural conceptions of both myth and world view. In a gen-

eral sense one may say that narrative explains the world to us via different media and genres, such as storytelling, mythology, song, dance, sculpture, painting, etc. In this article I am specifically interested in the narrative genre of storytelling and mythological conception in ancient culture. The narrative genre of storytelling has usually something to do with the temporal sequence of events, and thus in all narrative there is some kind of storyline. As the result of a sequence of events, the situation at the end is subsequent to what it was in the beginning. Individuals in present day literate cultures are likely to think of consciously contrived narrative as typically designed in a climactic linear story; an ascending action builds tension, rising to a climax, reversal of action, untying, etc. A poet in a primarily oral culture usually makes little use of strict linear presentation of events in temporal sequence (Ong 1991: 142–4).

An oral culture has no texts, no written archives where you can 'look up' things. Instead it is the restriction of words to sounds that largely determines the thought process. But how do individuals in an oral culture recall carefully articulated experiences and organized knowledge? The answer is that you have to do your thinking in memorable (mnemonic) patterns and formulas, readily shaped for oral recurrence (Goody 1987; Ong 1991: 34; Lord 2000: 30–3). The notion of formula was originally developed in an attempt to pinpoint differences between oral and written forms of metrical composition, whose standardisation takes the form of rhythmic utterances to tie the story or poem together. It has been defined as a group of words, which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea (Goody 1977: 112–4). To think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-memorable terms would be a waste of time in an oral culture, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing. Heavy patterning and communal fixed and repeated formulas in oral cultures serve some of the purposes of writing in literate cultures (Ong 1991: 143).

The retention and recall of knowledge in oral cultures usually calls for oral mnemonic procedures of a sort unfamiliar to us. One of the places where oral memorable structures manifest themselves most spectacularly is in their effect on the narrative plot (story line or intrigue), which in an oral culture

is not quite what we take plot typically to be (Ong 1991: 141). Today we find ourselves delighted by exact correspondence between the linear order of elements in discourse and the chronological order in the world to which the discourse refers. The readers of literature for the past 200 years have normally learned to expect this correspondence, but oral narrative is not greatly concerned with strict linear presentation of events (Ong 1991: 148). An oral culture has no experience of a lengthy, epic or novel-size linear plot. There exists no such thing as a strict chronological order of episodes – a beginning, middle and an end – as is the structure of the typical drama. According to scholars of oral narrative poetry, the ancient Greek drama was among the first verbal art forms to be fully controlled by writing. Having heard singers singing hundreds of songs about the Trojan War, Homer had a huge repertoire of episodes to string together but, without writing, absolutely no way to organize them in strict chronological order. According to Albert Lord and others, there is no doubt that the composer of the Homeric poems primarily was active in an oral tradition (Lord 2000: 141–4). Narrators in an oral culture operate in episodic patterning with the aid of formulas and the repetition of themes. The sequenced linear plot or storyline (with beginning, middle and end) comes with writing. Starting in the

‘middle of things’ is the inevitable way to proceed for an oral poet approaching a lengthy narrative (Ong 1991: 143–4).

So, where does this lead us on our way approaching the distribution of rock art in northern Fennoscandia? Oral narrative in cultures is likely to be episodic and thematically structured with the aid of memorable formulas. Rock art in ancient oral societies can also be described as narrative in character (e.g., Leroi-Gourhan 1993; Fredell 2003; Helskog 2004), dominated by repeated episodes and formulas. I will here consider the repetition of rock art motifs as one important narrative media among others. Although rock art partly seem to have included elements of ancient narrative and memory it was also closely conflated with other genres of narrative such as storytelling, myth and sculpture. It is very well known, for example, that the elk figure stand out as to be one of the more frequently occurring images on the rock art panels in northern Fennoscandia. Together with the occurrence of animal headed artefacts (usually elk headed), which appear in various contexts, such as sites with mounds or embankments of fire-cracked stone (Carpelan 1977), it is evident that the elk symbolism also was mediated in a wider domain of ancient life (Fig. 1). So, it is reasonable to assume that various narrative genres in ancient culture

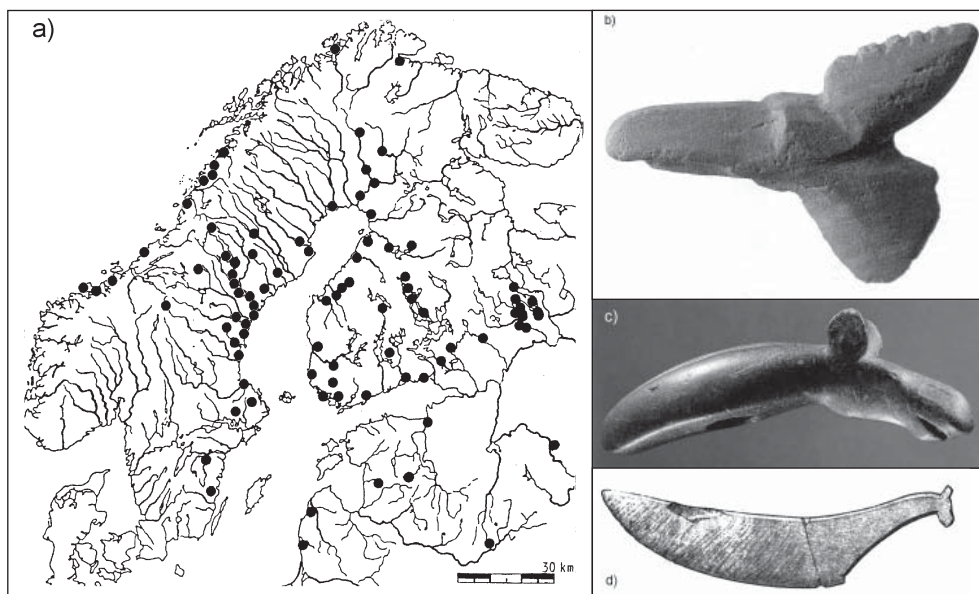


Fig. 1. a) The distribution of animal headed artefacts in Fennoscandia (Carpelan 1977); b) elk head sculpture from Ångermanland (Lindqvist 2002: 80) and c) from Upland (Burenhult 1999: 331). d) Animal headed slate knife from northern Sweden.

(story telling, rock art and animal headed artefacts) were permeated by this elk symbolism.

THE RECURRING CHARACTER OF ROCK ART

There are a great number of rock art sites distributed in Scandinavia and Finland and it is, of course, not possible to pay attention to all of them here. The south Scandinavian rock art will, for instance, not be dealt with here, although the interpretive reading of it to a large extent is analogous to the discussion presented here. The objective here is instead to focus on the most frequently occurring motifs and the figurative character of the rock art in northern Norway, northern Sweden and Finland, seen in relation to the eastern rock art in the White Sea area and at

Lake Onega (Fig. 2). Due to the limited extent in this article, I can only briefly present a selection of the rock art material, but I hope that the examples will be representative for the coming discussion. For a more all-embracing presentation of previous rock art research in Fennoscandia, see for example Janson et al. (1989), Helskog & Olsen (1995), Hauptman Wahlgren (2002), Helskog 2004, Goldhahn (2006), Lahelma (2008), and Ling (2008), to name but a few works.

The rock art sites within the Fennoscandian area are located in a wide range of topographical contexts, such as near meadow and wetlands, within the ancient archipelagos along the coast or in various watery and non-watery locations in the interior (e.g., Janson et al. 1989; Kivikäs 1995; Poikalainen & Ernits 1998; Klang et al. 2002). Although the specific topographical con-

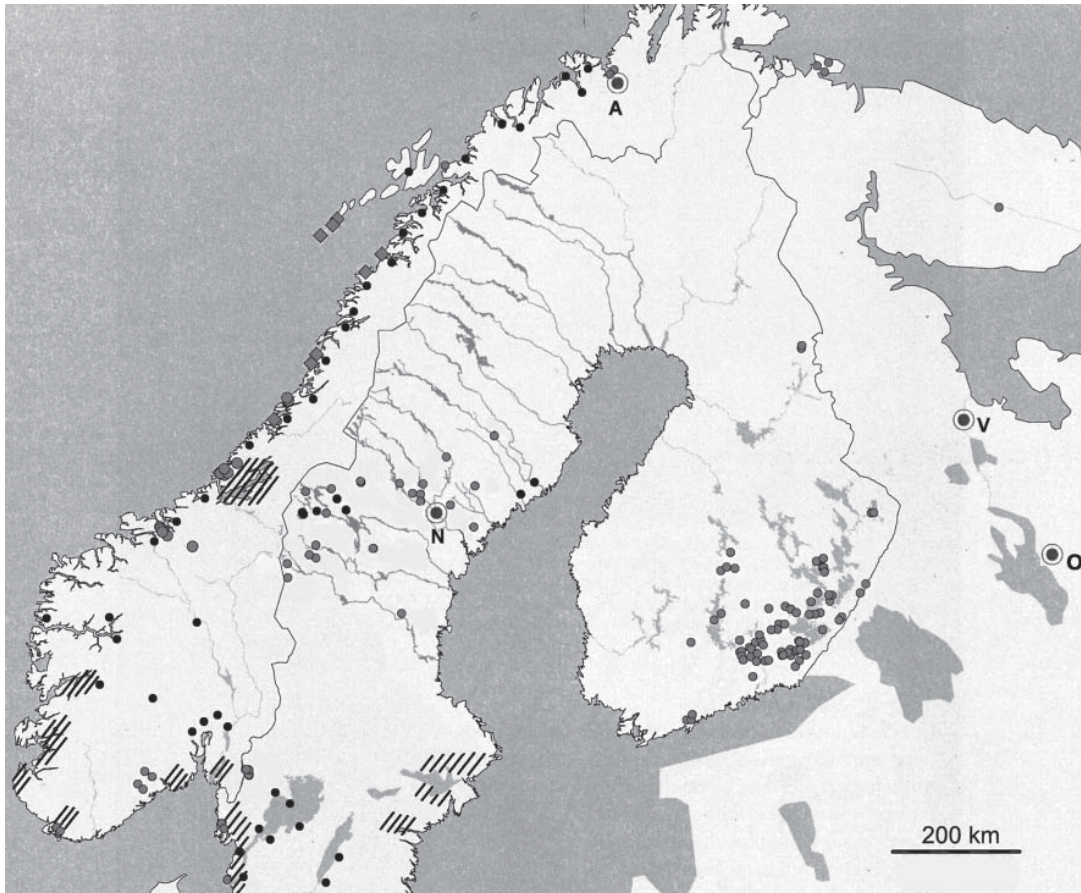


Fig. 2. Rock carvings (black dots) and rock paintings (grey dots) in Fennoscandia and Karelia. Sites marked with capitals on the map: O=Lake Onega, V=Vyg, N=Nämforsen and A=Alta. The hatched areas represent concentrations of rock art sites (arranged after Klang et al. 2002: 4).



Fig. 3a–b. Rock carving panels from Nämforsen in Northern Sweden (after Janson et al. 1989: 168 and Hallström 1960).

text of the rock art sites in the northern parts of Fennoscandia may differ, watery locations seem to be dominating (e.g., Bolin 1999). The most commonly occurring motifs on the panels are boat, animal and human figures, often repeated in series on the panels, as at Alta in northernmost Norway, Nämforsen in Northern Sweden, and at the river Vyg and Lake Onega in Karelia for example (Figs. 3–6).

Here we find depicted series of elk, reindeer, boats, humans and various animals, sometimes acting together, sometimes not. There is definitively no straightforward way of bringing a linear narrative order to these panels, but the randomly and repetitive character of the compositions is much similar to the way storytellers in oral cultures operate in episodic patterning. The distribution of these more abundant and repetitive compositions represent a system of knowledge that was shared over an extensive part of the rock art area, and I take these structural similarities to have been closely conflated with narrative, storytelling and the reproduction of myth (e.g., Helskog 2004). In a similar way as heavy patterning and communal fixed and repeated formulas in oral cultures serve some of the purposes of writing in literate cultures (Ong 1991: 143) the ancient narrators also operated in episodic patterning with the aid of formulas. Many of these ancient formulas were most likely centred on a myth of creation that, of ritual purposes, successively became ‘documented’ as repeated series of images on the rock art panels (see Fig. 3).

As has been stated above, narrators in oral cultures make little use of strict linear presentation of events in temporal or linear sequences. According to similar topographical location of the panels and the formal and repetitive character of the images, and so forth, I have suggested in earlier papers (Bolin 1999; 2000) that the rock art panels in northern Sweden can be read as a story

of creation analogous to ancestral creation myths we know from ethnography (e.g., Hugh-Jones 1979; Chatwin 1987). The ‘plot’ that I believe can be read from panels at Nämforsen (and at other abundant rock art sites) illustrates the episode of creation when the ancestors settled the land (see Fig. 3). According to the mythological message that can be interpreted from the rock art panels at the Nämforsen site, we see the elk ancestors once travelled up the river (the Ångerman River) stopping at numerous sites distinguished by rocks near lakes, rapids and other landmarks (where we today find rock carvings and paintings). Whenever the ancestors stopped at a specific site they were transformed into groups of people who performed various rituals (Bolin 1999: 154). It is suggested that the occurrence of the more frequently occurring motifs of elk, boat, and humans have resulted from the practise of generations to resurrect mythological events of creation in order to get ready access to the ancestral past. My point of argument here is that we also can apply a similar reading of the mythical message that is expressed on many of the other panels in northern Fennoscandia and Karelia.

The carved panels in Alta, in northernmost Norway, are to some extent comparable to the panels in northern Sweden, although the panels in Alta represent a more varied combination of animals and activities than the ones at Nämforsen. Along with the most occurring motifs of reindeer, elk, boat and human figures, there are many motifs of bear, maritime animals and hunting activities (e.g., Helskog 1988; 2004). It is worth noticing how the reindeer and elk figures have been repeatedly employed on many of the Alta panels (see Fig. 4), and similar to the carvings at Nämforsen there are also a large number of elk poles, elk prows and merging motifs on the Alta panels which opens up for a discussion on mutual contacts and connections between the two areas.

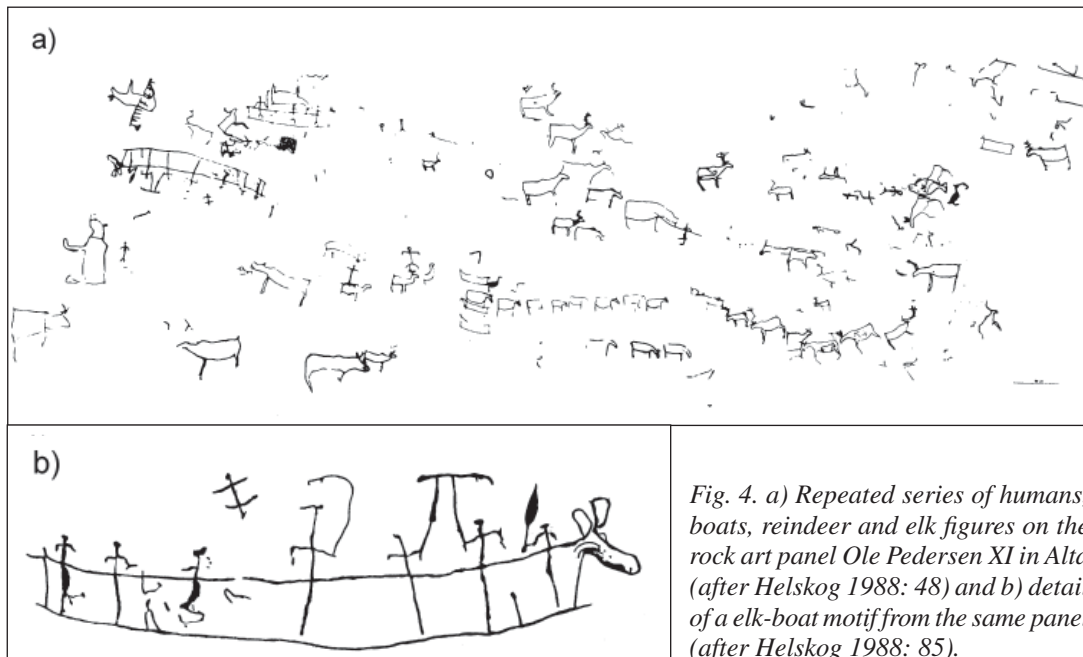


Fig. 4. a) Repeated series of humans, boats, reindeer and elk figures on the rock art panel Ole Pedersen XI in Alta (after Helskog 1988: 48) and b) detail of a elk-boat motif from the same panel (after Helskog 1988: 85).

In an interesting paper on the northern rock art Knut Helskog (2004) has suggested that the formally repeated combination of figures on the Alta panels represent stories with spirits and people, and that the modelling implies information about the makers' perception of landscape. With reference to northern ethnography, a variety of creation stories existed among the Sámi and Fenno-Ugrian groups and some of these stories may, according to Helskog, be reflected on the rock art panels in Alta, such as the Bear story (Helskog 2004: 266). I definitively agree with this assumption. It is further suggested that the presence of elk and boat images should be associated with funeral activities such as the transportation of the deceased to the underworld (Helskog 2004: 275), but although this is an interesting hypothesis the absence of dead people or dead beings depicted on the panels makes it less convincing.

Instead, the creation myth suggested in this article may be further developed by analogy with the narratives related to the beings and events of the Australian aboriginal Dreamtime, or *Wangarr* in aboriginal Yolngu languages. Dreamtime is not just referring to the ancient past but is rather to be associated with what we understand as eternal time (Verran 1998: 247). In aboriginal thought, Dreamings are Ancestral Beings in the sense that they both come before and continue to inhere in the

living generations, and their spirits are passed on to their descendants (Law 2004). I take the northern rock art to be the ritual enactment of the passing of such creation stories between generations, and similar to aboriginal narratives and graphic designs, the combination of images employed on the northern rock art panels represent a number of ancestral narratives (e.g., Law 2004: 128–30).

In aboriginal thought, territory is not imagined as a block of land hemmed by frontiers (Chatwin 1987). Territory is rather conceived of as an interlocking network of 'lines' or 'ways through'. According to aboriginal tradition every clan inherited a stretch of the Ancestor's song and the stretch of country over which the song passed. Each Ancestor, while singing his way across country, was believed to have left a trail of 'life cells' or 'spirit children' along the line of his footprints (Chatwin 1987: 66–7). The semi-fictional work of Bruce Chatwin describes the ancestral beings and events in the following way:

On the First morning, when the drowsing Ancestors felt the warmth of the sun on their eyelids, they felt their bodies giving birth to children. The Snake Man felt snakes slithering out of his navel. The Cockatoo Man felt feathers. The Witchetty Grub Man felt a wiggeling, the Honey-ant a tickeling, the Honeysuckle felt his leaves and flowers unfurling, and the Bandicoot

Man felt baby bandicoots seething from under his armpits (Chatwin 1987: 81).

Parallel with this myth of creation, there are several merging rock art motifs occurring on many of the northern panels, which maybe illustrate such transformations or the birth of various beings according the rock art myth of creation (see Fig. 6), and similar to aboriginal narratives and ancestral beings, the merging rock art ‘beings’ are part human, part animal, part natural, part social, part spiritual and part geographical (e.g., Law 2004: 133).

When turning to the occurrence of rock art in south-eastern Finland there are approximately 125 recorded rock painting sites, and nearly all of them are situated to the east of the Kymijoki River (see Kivikäs 1995; Lahelma 2008 for a detailed presentation of the rock art material). The most frequently occurring motifs in the rock painting material in Finland are depictions of elks and humans, usually located on steep rocks in direct contact with lakes and watercourses (Edgren 1993). Due to the dominant distribution of similar motifs and their similar location to various waters, it is reasonable to assume that the practice of rock art in both Finland and northern Sweden was based on a similar set of mythological and religious beliefs associated with ancient shamanism (Lahelma 2008). Like the dominant part of the rock art panels in northern Sweden, the Finnish paintings are located on steep lakeshore cliffs where the elk motifs depicted close to the ancient water surface. The rock painting of Verla in Finland, for example, has several properties in common with the rock carvings at Landverk in Northern Sweden (Figs. 5a–b). The elk images on these panels can also be interpreted as illustrating a mythological sequence where the

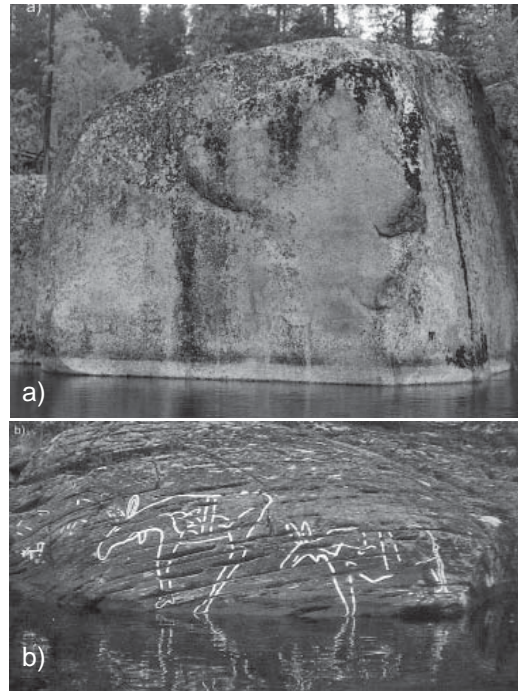


Fig. 5. Rock art panel from a) Verla in Finland (after Kivikäs 1995) and b) Landverk, Jämtland, in Northern Sweden (after Janson et al. 1989: 156).

elk ancestors is seen rising up from the water ready to settle the land. On the panel from Verla, a few humans are also depicted possibly representing the transformation of the ancestors.

If we turn further eastward, two rock art territories are located in Karelia in north-western Russia with a strong concentration of motifs (Fig. 6): one of them is at the mouth of the Vyg River on the White Sea; another is on the eastern shore of

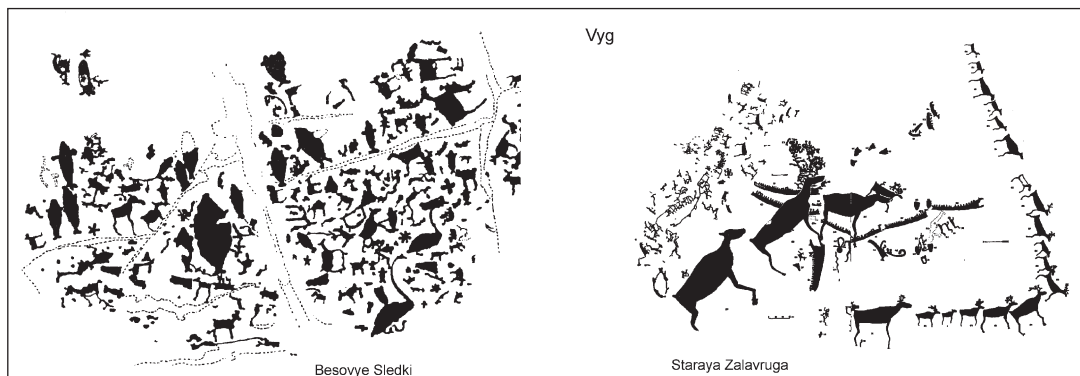


Fig. 6. Rock art panels from Besovye Sledki (left) and Staraya Zalavruga (right) on the River Vyg in Karelia (after Autio 1981: 56–65).

Lake Onega. The combination of motifs is slightly different from that in northern Sweden and south-eastern Finland. The overwhelming prevalence of waterfowl motif (swan-like motifs) is to be noted among the Lake Onega carvings. Other frequently occurring motifs are solar signs, human, boat and reindeer/elk motifs (Poikalainen 1999: 702). It is also interesting to note that the swan-like motifs are very often depicted in a similarly repetitive manner as the elk and boat motifs in Scandinavia (see Poikalainen & Ernits 1998 and Poikalainen 1999 for a more detailed presentation of the Karelian rock art). We can note that the animal species which can be determined on many panels in Fennoscandia and Karelia usually corresponds to the species in the natural environment. In line with Honko (1981), these motifs are likely giving both myth and narrative a distinctive character, with reference to both ecological features and supernatural creatures. The White Sea rock art in the northern part of Karelia contains many marine themes, such as whale-like motifs, although the most frequently depicted motif is the boat followed by human and elk motifs (Poikalainen 1999: 702). Despite some differences in composition between the two rock art areas in Karelia, there are motifs that reflect contact between the White Sea area and Lake Onega. This is most clearly represented by the whale and the swan-whale depictions on the Besov Nos site at Lake Onega and the swan-whale and double-headed waterfowl on the Besovye Sledki site on the River Vyg (Poikalainen 1999:

707–9). In a similar way, as in north Scandinavian rock art, several merging motifs occur (Fig. 7a–b). These merging motifs were definitively an important component in ancient narrative and myth since they likely illustrate the process of transformation between humans, ancestors and supernatural creatures. Merging motifs occur all over the Fennoscandian rock art area, which further supports the idea that the practice of rock art, to a large extent, was based on a commonly shared conception, closely connected with ancient mythology and narrative transmission between rock art areas.

We may conclude that the rock art in northern Fennoscandia and Karelia has several properties in common. The rock art sites are generally located in similar topographical environments; the figurative motifs consist of animals, humans and boats, which sometimes merge with each other or are repeated in series on the panels. When interpreting the conceptual meaning of these common characteristics, I will argue that the idea underlying the production of rock art in Karelia and southern Finland was based on a similar set of concepts and beliefs as I have suggested for the practice of rock art in northern Sweden (Bolin 1999; 2000). These concepts and beliefs were to a large extent conflated with mythological narrative and stories of creation similar to the ancestral creation myths of the Australian Dreamtime. It should also be observed that the repetitive character of rock art occurring on the more abundant rock

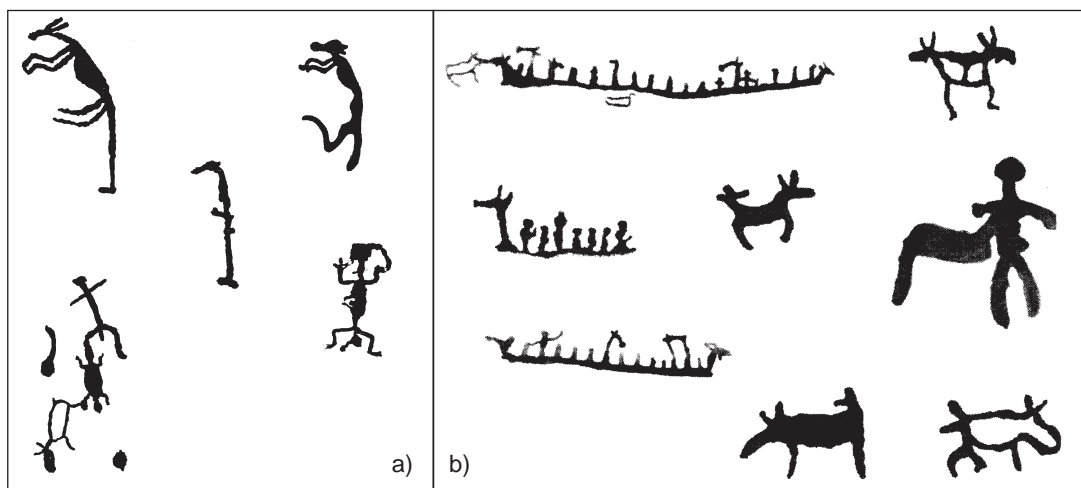


Fig. 7. Merging motifs from a) Lake Onega, Karelia (after Autio 1981; Poikalainen & Ernits 1998) and b) Nämforsen, Northern Sweden (after Hallström 1960).

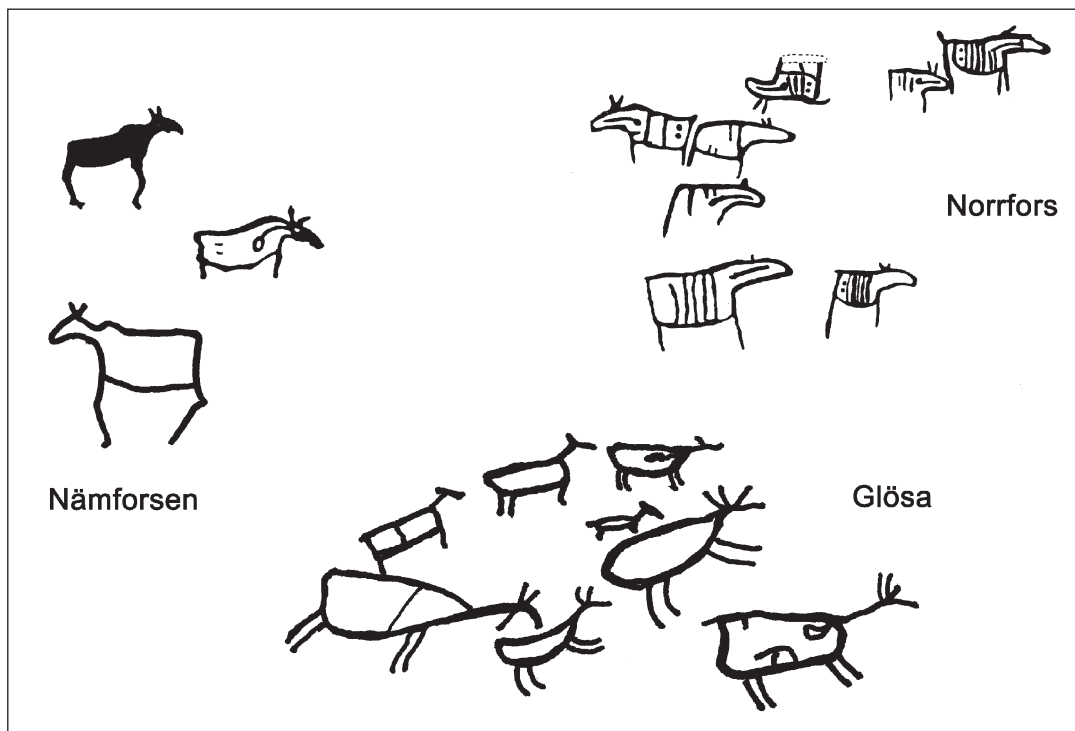


Fig. 8. Various forms of elk motifs from northern Sweden (arranged after Hallström 1960; Janson et al. 1989; Malmer 1992).

art panels, as at Alta, Nämforsen, Vyg and Lake Onega, has a temporal dimension that likely represent the successive acts of communication in a long term perspective (e.g., Jordan 2004: 123; Law 2004).

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN ROCK ART NARRATIVES

Beside the fact that there are some sets of rock art motifs that dominate on the panels we find both variations and similarities existing between rock art panels in the northern area. Local elaborations of image design are commonly occurring, both within and between areas. Many of the more frequently occurring motifs, such as the design of boat and elk images, seem to have been subject to stylistic adjustments according to the local or regional tradition (Fig. 8). This leaves us with a number of local elaborations and 'dialects' of a rock art tradition that in its elementary structure was familiar to people over a vast area. We also see that some of the animal species that can be determined on the panels to some extent correspond

to the species in the natural environment. This is parallel to narrative and oral tradition, which is generally dependent on a combination of conditions, such as existent ecological factors, the common social and cultural history within the group and supernatural phenomena (Honko 1981). The variety of animals and activities depicted on the panels in Alta and Karelia, for instance, seem to be larger than the panels in both Finland and northern Sweden (Helskog 2004: 284–5), and it is reasonable to assume that the variety and content reflects variety in the stories of associated ancestral beings and events.

According to Honko, the recurrently occurring motifs give narrative and folklore a distinctive character, often with reference to both ecological features and supernatural creatures (Honko 1981: 36–7). The most frequently occurring motifs in the north refer to elk-like animals, while the more recurrently occurring animal motifs in the southern parts of Scandinavia for example, usually refer to deer-like animals and wild boar. The rock art panels at the river Vyg and Lake Onega in Russian Karelia has, beside the frequently depicted elk

motive, a large number of maritime species and water fowls such as whale, fish, swan, to name a few. In this context it is evident that specific animals and ecological features in the surrounding environment provided a frame of reference for ancient narrative and myth as well as the practice of rock art. The ecological environment can of course not alone explain the variations between sites in the northern rock art region, and although it is true that the figurative content of rock art may differ from one site to another it is hard to avoid the existence of the structural similarities occurring between the northern sites.

The rock carvings and rock paintings within northern Fennoscandia and Karelia have several mediating features in common which makes them interesting when discussing a commonly shared corpus of narrative and mythology. The following features seem particularly relevant when considering the narrative significance of the northern rock art material. First, most rock art panels seem to be dominated by a number of specific core motifs, usually employed over and over again in series on the panels. The repetitive character of the motifs suggests that the meaning content was continually integrated in narrative over generations. The heavy patterning of the most frequently occurring images, that is boat, (elk) animals and humans, can be described as core motifs that dominated the re-generation of the narrative tradition. As the younger members of the northern hunter and gatherers learned the mythology and were initiated to sacred knowledge, they had to memorize the ancestral stories, names and locations of sacred sites, and so forth. This initiation was probably important in the rituals that were performed in connection with the making of the images on the panels. According to studies of Aboriginal practice, the enactment of narrative in ceremony, visual depictions, and the celebration of the sacred are all tied up in a more or less local bundle that does not distinguish 'nature' from 'culture'. The details of that local bundle are likely to be known only to those with appropriate social affiliation (Law 2004: 128). According to Law, the same ancestral story is known and sung by communities in different parts of Australia. As the story of an ancestor's journey, for example, involves a travel of hundreds of miles, its narratives also belong to different tribal groups in different places in the territory and the stories of these groups interweave with one and another to produce a kind of

continuity (Law 2004). The wide spread of elk images and other frequently occurring motifs is, in my opinion, a good illustration of such a spatial continuity of storytelling.

Although there are great similarities within the northern rock art imagery it is evident that the circulation of narratives also produced differences. The occurrence of less frequently depicted motifs, such as fish, birds, and bear, indicates that there were a number of narratives covering the northern rock art territory. The ceremonial elaboration of narrative in Russian Karelia is, for instance, not fully part of this continuity in every detail. The occurrence of maritime species, birds and waterfowls employed was most likely conflated with a different narrative than those in Finland and northern Scandinavia. So, beside the large number of 'ancestral elk stories' occurring on the panels at Vyg and the shores of Lake Onega, it is evident that this rock art imagery also referred to narratives of other ancestral beings and events.

TRADE ROUTES, GATHERING PLACES AND 'SONGLINES'

But how can we, more deeply, understand and explain the vast distribution of similar motifs within Fennoscandia and Karelia? How were narrative and various sorts of knowledge transmitted between groups? It is well known that the hunter-gatherer way of living generally encompasses a high level of mobility, both within and between domestic and other areas. Of course, there are several reasons for a person to move from one place to another such as trade and exchange, marriage, warfare, excommunication, etc. With reference to the work by Bruce Chatwin (1987) trade and exchange have always been of vital importance among Australian aboriginal groups, but not strictly in the English sense of the word (Chatwin 1987: 63). According to aboriginal conception the trade route is the Songline or Dreamline, because songs, not things, are the principal medium of exchange in the aboriginal knowledge system. Trading of 'things' is the secondary consequence of trading in song because the singing of verses was the singer's title of deeds to the territory. He or she could lend their song to others and borrow others in return. The one thing you couldn't do was to sell or to get rid of them. When time was right to sing the Songline, messages would be sent out, up and down the track, summoning

song-owners to assemble at the big gathering place. One after another would then sing their stretch of the Ancestor's footprints (Chatwin 1987: 64). Consequently, a song could leapfrog over quite large distances through language barriers, regardless of tribe or frontier. According to the Australian historian and philosopher Helen Verran (1998: 129), the aboriginal knowledge of ceremonial gathering sites and their connections is contained in a large corpus of stories in which the songs, dances and graphic designs usually go along with the ceremonial elaborations of these stories. The wide spread of both rock art and animal designed artefacts all over the northern area is, in my opinion, well corresponding to the narrative practice and knowledge of connections described by Verran and Chatwin.

The point here is that many of the more abundant northern rock art sites can be conceived of as ceremonial centres in the landscape similar to the 'stops' and big gathering places along the aboriginal songlines described above. Other places of importance are the numerous sites with mounds of fire-cracked stone that occur all over the northern rock art territory (Bolin 1999). Many of the mounds and embankments of fire-cracked stones seem to have been in use from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age, which is parallel to the general dating of the northern rock art. The social significance of these sites as places for gathering is apparent. Large amounts of bones from beaver and elk have been recovered on these sites, which indicate that they were used as sites where big game was regularly butchered for cooking and feasting (Bolin 1999: 121). The proportion of non-local materials, such as red slate, asbestos tempered pottery, and flint deposited in many of these structures suggests that these sites frequently were used as gathering sites where groups from different areas met and exchanged various things. Finds of animal-head designed objects and miniature sculptures representing elk, waterfowl and bear (e.g., Carpelan 1977; Bolin 1999: 79–81), may additionally indicate activities such as story telling and ancestral narration as being closely interweaved with this animal-head symbolism.

One may equate the spatial distribution of rock art mythology with the way other forms of oral traditions are transmitted. According to the general study of folklore, the expression of oral tradition applies both to process and to its product. The process is the transmission of messages by word

of mouth over time and the products are oral messages based on previous oral messages (Vansina 1985: 3; Lord 2000). In a primarily oral society, where knowledge is handed over by word of mouth, each generation adopts and memorizes the knowledge by adopting it to the immediate situation. If new knowledge is to be accepted within a community it has to be adjusted correctly according to the present situation, and not necessarily in accordance with its original content (Honko 1981; Bertell 2003). A newly adopted phenomenon must make sense in its new context.

This means that the adoption of mythological concepts, religious rituals and motifs are very much dependent on the local tradition in which they are to be performed. This is indeed a pragmatic procedure, which may involve gradual changes due to a number of factors, such as social structure, ecology and the organisation of economical and political resources, group size and the distribution of language groups, kinship and ancestral affinity, and so forth. It is therefore not surprising that we find formal variations among widely distributed iconographic categories, such as rock art. The maritime species and swan figures employed on the panels in Karelia seem to have been complimentary ancestral narratives to the otherwise dominating stories of the elk ancestor. Different language groups within a larger area are likely to include different idiomatic expressions within the narrative structure, although the plot will usually still remain familiar to the overall population. As scholars of narrative research and historians of ancient religion have maintained, the common folklore is subject to both change and to preservation through the oral tradition. These circumstances will easily create material diversity and incongruence, which will make it very difficult to trace a specific source of 'origin' (e.g., Bertell 2003: 41–3).

Tales and myths are often built around a single core image or set of core images, and on an overall level one may say that most rock art motifs are usually formalized in a similar manner. Of course, the style in which a specific rock art motif is made may show variations, both within and between areas (see Fig. 8). The stylistic variation of the elk motif in northern Scandinavia, for instance, may very well be explained by the way various sorts of knowledge, such as stories, myths and songs are transmitted and handed over by word of mouth, as mentioned above.

The transmission of oral traditions, such as the repetitive learning of telling tales and the singing of songs, the recognition of mythological formulas, concepts and motifs, is heavily dependent on the existence of social institutions where the oral traditions can be performed. The best-known situation of performance is the telling of tales (Vansina 1985; Ong 1999; Lord 2000). The telling of tales usually varies depending on the teller and the situation but the tale has to be well known to the public if the performance is to be a success. The audience must already know the tale so that they can enjoy the rendering of various episodes, appreciate the innovations, and anticipate the thrills still to come. The teller and the public are creating the tale together and, of course, the same tale can be handled by different talents and for different audiences, which makes it become something quite different, even if the plot, settings, characters, and episodes remained the same (Vansina 1985: 34–5). It is reasonable to argue that the transmission of narratives between areas most likely can explain why the images also may vary in style on the rock art panels. Seasonal feasts, ceremonies, festivals, trade routes and gatherings at the more abundant rock art sites, as well as at sites with large mounds or embankments of fire-cracked stone or with finds of animal designed objects, were probably important contexts where the narrative content of rock art was transmitted.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I am fully aware that my discussion of examples in this article is not comprehensive and the selection of panels and image compositions is far from complete. Anyone familiar with the wide field of rock art research may rightly object that it is not productive to approach this category of material culture as a uniform phenomenon from just one horizon of meaning. That has not been my intention, although I consider that rock art in general have many structuring components in common. I have argued that it is possible to equate the dynamic character of many rock art panels with the study of formula within oral narrative or poetry. But, just as the formula does not necessarily have the same value to every poet or singer, it is not likely that rock art had the same value either. Such uniformity is scarcely true of any element of language; for every form of language always bears

the mark of its speaker. According to Albert Lord (2000: 31), the landscape of formula is not level steppe with a horizon, which equalizes all things in view, but rather a panorama of high mountains and deep valleys and of rolling foothills; and we must seek the essence of formula at all points in the landscape.

In this article I have tried to argue that an important aspect of rock art is its close connection to ancient narrative, story telling, and the re-generation of ancestral myth. It is suggested that rock art to a large extent narrates ancestral creation myths analogous with the way the Australian aboriginal narratives and rock art imagery relate to the beings and events of the Dreamtime. However, in a similar way as with oral traditions, one should not conclude that the ancient rock art producers and storytellers learned their myths and formulas from only one source of origin. A poet or storyteller learns a bit from the tellers whom he or she has listened to, as they have from the tellers they have listened to, and so forth and back for generations. It would be impossible to determine who originally produced any of their stories. I believe it was in a similar way the ancient storytellers and rock art poets proceeded. The most frequently occurring rock art images can also be referred to as a 'common stock' of formulas that permeated ancient narratives.

Although I have stressed the narrative significance of rock art, it was also a ritual practice of communication with ancestors inhabiting the 'Other World'. The concept of the Other World is, according to Edmund Leach, generated by direct inversion of the characteristics of ordinary experience. Mortal, impotent men, who live their lives in normal time in which events happen in sequence, one after another, inhabit the normal World. In this world we get older and older and in the end we die. The Other World is inhabited by immortal, omnipotent beings who exist perpetually in abnormal time in which past, present and future all coexist. 'Power', conceived as the source of health, life, fertility, political influence, wealth, and so forth, is located in the Other World and the purpose of religious performance is to provide a bridge, or channel of communication, through which the power of the gods may be made available to otherwise impotent men (Leach 1976: 81–2).

The variations among motifs and compositions that occur between local rock art panels are not

to be considered as the result of ‘clear-cut’ and distant communities, continuously creating and ‘cultivating’ the underlying principles of rock art on their own, without interchange or contact with other groups. I rather suggest they be viewed as local elaborations of ancestral myths and narratives that were widely shared among different groups in the northern area. According to Paul Ricoeur (1991) and other scholars of hermeneutic research, narrative communication is fundamental to our identity, it brings meaning to the way we understand our existence. In a similar sense rock art was a meaningful media of successive acts of communication and narrative, continuously passing from a generation to the next one. The more abundant rock art sites, where motifs recurrently have been employed, are especially important here because it was probably at these sites, as well as at other big gathering sites, that the regeneration of mythical messages was performed. In this context it is very likely that the distribution of animal designed artefacts along with rock art images and compositions also served as a common oral memory for past storytellers, singers and poets.

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