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Telling tales in a pot? The decorative motifs of Early Iron Age Luukonsaari pottery from the Jyrinlahti site in Liperi, Eastern Finland (ca. 400–200 calBC)

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Abstract

Decorative motifs in the ceramics of pre-agricultural societies in eastern Fennoscandia typically consist of geometric and rather monotonic patterns. An Early Iron Age Luukonsaari Ware pot from the Jyrinlahti site in Liperi, North Karelia, which has possible boat and cross pictures, is an exception to this rule. The paper presents this artefact, elaborates on comparative motifs in rock art and discusses the role and manifestation of storytelling in foraging societies.

Keywords: Storytelling, Early Iron Age, Luukonsaari Ware, Eastern Finland, iconography.

23.1 Introduction

Stories, both their production and consumption, are a central part of people's lives. Even today, we gather together to watch a good story on Netflix or relax with a good book. In forager communities, however, stories are also an important source of general historical, social and ecological knowledge (Scalise Sugiyama 2017). By communicating this knowledge in a lively and engaging manner, storytelling performs a crucial pedagogic function and plays an important role in the survival of forager societies.

Despite the significance of stories, storytelling has not been often considered in the archaeological research done in eastern Fennoscandia. Even though Fennoscandian rock art and its iconography has occasionally been connected with the myths and stories present in Kalevala-metric poetry or Sámi ethnographies (Lahelma 2007), storytelling is only rarely connected to other archaeological materials (see, however, Ahola 2021). This might be due to the fact that eastern Fennoscandian pottery is rather devoid of pictorial motifs, with the decoration consisting mainly of geometric, and consequently, rather monotonic patterns. The only published examples of other kinds of illustrative motifs are depictions of water birds and humans in Typical Comb Ware dated to the earlier part of the 4th millennium BC (e.g. Äyräpää 1953; Pesonen 1996). Some examples of such motifs are also present in Säräisniemi 1

Ware (ca. 5100–4500 calBC) and Kierikki Ware (ca. 3500–2800 calBC) (Äyräpää 1953; Nieminen & Ruonavaara 1984).

Illustrations are also rather rare in other artefacts from eastern Fennoscandia: sculptures of animals and sometimes humans have been identified on stone tools (Carpelan 1974; 1977), pictorial and geometrical motifs were likewise sometimes engraved or painted on stone tools (e.g. Edgren 1977; Väkeväinen 1982), and clay idols depicted humans and animals (e.g. Kashina & Zhulnikov 2015; Nuñez 1986; Wyszczomirska 1984). The richest category of illustrative art, though, involves the above-mentioned rock carvings and paintings, where a variety of motifs are represented, sometimes with obvious stories depicted in stone (e.g. Helskog 2012; Lobanova 2019; Nyland and Stebergløkken 2021).

In this paper, we discuss prehistoric storytelling practices from the perspective of an Early Iron Age Luukonsaari-type pottery find from Liperi, North Karelia, that portrays obvious illustrative motifs. To understand the story behind the illustrations, we compare the find with other contemporary artefacts, rock paintings and the Luukonsaari pottery group in general. Furthermore, we contextualise the find in the light of forager storytelling practices and the emergence of narrative art in relation to pottery decoration.

23.2 A unique Early Iron Age pottery vessel from the Jyrinlahti iron smelting site

23.2.1 Jyrinlahti ceramics in context

The Jyrinlahti site in Liperi, North Karelia, was excavated between 1998 and 2000.¹ In 1998, the settlement site and iron production site were investigated, and in the second year, one of the several cooking pits visible in the site was excavated. The site has yielded traces of Stone Age occupancy from the Typical Comb Ware period (ca. 3900–3500 calBC), as well as Bronze Age Sarsa-Tomitsa-type textile ware (ca. 1750–650 calBC) and Early Iron Age occupancy with asbestos-tempered Luukonsaari and Sirnihta Wares (ca. 1100 calBC – 300 AD).² The excavated cooking pit was radiocarbon dated to 760–540 calBC (Wk-9163, 2480±50 BP; Table 23.1).³ Two possible remains of fireplaces and two waste pits were discovered at the settlement site. Besides pottery, the following items were also found: three pieces of worked iron, iron slag, Luukonsaari pottery and slag burnt together, burnt bone, two fragments of bone artefacts, quartz debitage and artefacts, jasperoid and flint flakes, one tinderflint and several pieces of asbestos. The osteological material was analysed by Kristiina Mannermaa, and it contained fish (cyprinids, pike) and mammals (beaver, fox, possible seals, ruminants), species typical

Lab code	C14 age BP	CalBC (68.3% HPD region)	CalBC (median)	Context, material
Wk-6917	2889±56	1200–990	1080	charcoal, fireplace (2)
KI-4442	2510±70	780–540	630	charcoal, fireplace (1)
Wk-9163	2480±50	760–540	620	charcoal, cooking pit
Wk-6916	2370±60	720–380	480	charcoal, waste pit (1)
KI-4441	2240±35	390–200	280	charcoal, waste pit (1)

Table 23.1. Radiocarbon dates from the Jyrinlahti 1 site.

¹ Original excavation reports are kept in the Archives of the Finnish Heritage Agency, Helsinki, Finland. They are also available at www.kyppi.fi.

² The dating of Luukonsaari and Sirnihta pottery is considerably difficult. The most recent general archaeology textbook dates Luukonsaari pottery between the 11th and 7th century BC (Lavento 2016: 195–197), but other dating schemes also exist. Only a limited number of radiocarbon dates are available.

Figure 23.1. A–B – Luukonsaari pottery from the Jyrinlahti 1 site (KM 31057: 90, 96 and 148). C – Luukonsaari pottery from the Juvonen site (KM 14254: 2). D – a stone engraved with a cross from the Jyrinlahti 1 site (KM 31057: 170). Photos P. Pesonen.



of the lake environment. In addition to the radiocarbon date of the cooking pit, four other radiocarbon dates were also obtained from the site, all falling into the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age periods (Table 23.1). The dates from waste pit 1 reflect Early Iron Age Luukonsaari occupancy (combined result of dates: ca. 400–200 calBC; Table 23.1), while the date from one fireplace (fireplace 2, ca. 1200–990 calBC; Table 23.1) is most likely connected with Sarsa-Tomitsa pottery. The other dates are in line with the dates mentioned above, although there are no clear pottery contexts for them.

The decoration on one particular Luukonsaari pot – the main player in this story – is strikingly different from any other pottery discovered at the site. It consists of a horizontal frieze made with a drawn comb-stamp, which had occasionally been stopped and pressed – a common motif in Luukonsaari Ware. The motifs above this frieze really make the decoration unique in a Finnish context. Only four pieces from the vessel have survived, but they are enough to give an impression of the visual effect achieved by the ancient potter (Fig. 23.1a–b). One of the pieces includes two motifs: 1) six vertical comb-stamps in a row (the crew on a boat?), with diagonal and bended comb-stamp endings at both ends, a vivid reminder of elk-headed boat motifs in eastern Fennoscandian rock art, and 2) the fragment of a crossed comb-stamp with bended ends. The latter pottery fragment also contains comb-stamps under the frieze, while the top of the rim is decorated with comb-stamps in various directions. The fragment also includes a row of comb-stamp ‘notches’, both on top and under the frieze.

Two of the pieces of the same vessel fit together, and the ensemble also includes two motifs: 1) a similar cross fragment with bended ends like in the first piece, and 2) a boat figure with apparently eight vertical comb-stamps with similar bended (elk-head) endings like in the first fragment, only this time with the addition of a triangle on top of the vertical stamps produced with three comb-stamps, one of them in the middle of two diagonal stamps (Fig. 23.1a). One could perhaps imagine that the motif is a sail. The other Luukonsaari vessels found at the site do not show similar decorative patterns; rather, they are composed of rather common geometric stamp patterns. The decoration on one Sirnihta-type vessel was also organised in a frieze under the rim. One of the two Sarsa-Tomitsa pots has an S-shaped profile in the top section of the wall, with modest pit and stamp decoration and textile prints on the surface.

Interestingly enough, the excavation also yielded a small piece of slate stone with an engraved cross on its surface (Fig. 23.1d). The piece of stone was found together with Luukonsaari pottery in the waste pit (waste pit 2). The stone had not been worked in other ways; only its decorated surface had

³ Calibrated using Oxcal v. 4.4.4 (Bronk Ramsey 2009) and atmospheric data from Reimer et al. (2020). The same applies to all radiocarbon date calibrations used in this paper.



Figure 23.2. The distribution of Luukonsaari pottery in Finland (and some Karelian sites, according to the Kipot and Kielet database of Finnish collections, accessed 19.10.2021, unpublished data) and the location of the Jyrinlahti site, in Liperi, North Karelia. Map naturalearth-data.com.

been smoothed. The stone has no exact parallels, but it may be taken to represent similar pictorial imagery as the clay vessel.

Parallels for the motifs found on the Luukonsaari pot were sought from existing literature and by checking the other Luukonsaari material from relevant sites in North Karelia and North Savo.

The boat motif is undoubtedly unique in the area: no other pots decorated with such motifs have been found from the prehistoric era in the eastern Fennoscandian area. However, the bended cross has one parallel surprisingly close by – a similar symbol was found on Luukonsaari pottery at the Juvonen site, also in Liperi (Fig. 23.1c). Common decorative compositions of Luukonsaari Ware consist of drawn comb-stamp friezes together with simple stamp patterns (e.g. Kosmenko 1993; Meinander 1969).

Iron production was practiced at the Juvonen site as well, connecting the two sites both chronologically and spatially. Even more interestingly, another site, Likolahti 1, just a few hundred metres from Jyrinlahti, also shows signs of iron production. A pattern is emerging with respect to Luukonsaari Ware and iron production in the Liperi region during the Early Iron Age.

The distribution of Luukonsaari Ware is not just restricted to Finland: much has been found in Karelia as well, west of Lake Onega (see Kosmenko 2009: Fig. 3). Prior studies have dated Luukonsaari Ware to between 1100 calBC and 300 AD (Carpelan 1999; Tallavaara et al. 2010). So far, only a limited number of radiocarbon dates have been connected with Luukonsaari Ware, and only one tentatively published on a date list: a charred crust from a piece of ceramic found at the Sotasaari site in Suomussalmi, Kainuu (Hela-97, 2575±100 BP, 905–410 calBC; ¹⁴CARHU - Radiocarbon Dates of Helsinki University), which is a bit earlier than the dates for ceramics found at the Jyrinlahti site. Furthermore, no concise studies have been done on Luukonsaari Ware and its connection (Fig. 23.2), genesis and relation to iron production, which seems so clear in light of the Liperi sites.

23.2.2 Connections to rock art tradition

Remarkably, the decorative motifs – a boat and an oblique cross – present in the Jyrinlahti vessel have clear parallels in Finnish rock art. Although oblique crosses have only been documented at seven sites,

boats are among the most common motifs in these panels (Lahelma 2008: Appendix 3). Curiously, oblique crosses occur together with a boat motif at most sites, while they are present at only one site without the boat. Interestingly, the oblique cross has typically been painted above all the other images, or else next to the uppermost images on the rock panel (Lahelma 2008: Appendix 2).

Although oblique crosses are represented at several sites, a cross motif with bent ends has been recorded only at the site of Ruominkapia, in Lemi (Lahelma 2008: Appendix 2). Similar to the other sites, the Ruominkapia cross also occurs together with boat motifs (Fig. 23.3) and is in the uppermost spot on the rock panel (Sarvas & Taavitsainen 1976). It could thus be reasonable to assume that there is a connection between boats — interpreted sometimes as vehicles for conveying a shaman's spirit (Lahelma 2008: 56–57) — oblique crosses and their location above other images. However, even though the Finnish rock art tradition likely continued for several millennia (from the 4th millennium BC to the 1st millennium BC; Jussila 1999), the Ruominkapia site — as well as other sites with boat motifs — has been dated to the early 4th millennium BC (Seitsonen 2005). Accordingly, there is a temporal gap of several millennia between the site and the Jyrinlahti vessel.

However, as the ritual use of ancient rock art sites seems to have continued even after the tradition of painting the cliffs ceased (Lahelma 2008: 41), it is plausible that the people who made the Jyrinlahti vessel knew about the Ruominkapia site — or rock art sites in general — and considered them as somehow sacred. Since ritual practices had changed, though, the meanings attached to the sites and motifs might have been completely different from those assigned to them by Stone Age peoples. The ritual practices associated with the rock art cliffs might also have been repeated simply as a tradition, with the original meanings long forgotten (see Berggren & Nilsson Stutz 2010). In this sense, the symbols depicted in rock art might have been used in pottery decoration because the people using the Jyrinlahti vessel discovered them at an ancient rock art site or because the symbols were simply supposed to be used in such instances. Indeed, as Robert Keesing (2012) explains, the meaning behind symbols is usually not as important as the act of using them. The meanings attached to the symbols might also change, e.g. due to a dream, possession, divination or other revelation put forward by a ritual expert or other person in a leading position.



Figure 23.3. Part of the rock painting at Ruominkapia, in Lemi, South Karelia. Photo I. Luukkonen.

23.3 Making pots, telling tales?

Aside from its unique decoration, the Jyrinlahti vessel seems to differ from prior – and even co-existing – pottery traditions in the way the decoration was positioned on the vessel. Indeed, even though only a few shards of the vessel have survived, the decoration was not arranged in monotonic patterns but instead is reminiscent of narrative art.

Although narratives such as hunting schemes and human-animal metamorphoses are commonly depicted on pottery vases from classical antiquity (Coldstream 1968), and correspondingly in Mesolithic-Neolithic hunter-gatherer rock art from Fennoscandia and elsewhere (e.g. Gjerde 2010; Helskog 2012; Lahelma 2008; Lobanova 2019; Nyland and Steberglokken 2021), on a broader European scale narrative art only became more common during the course of the Bronze Age (Robb 2020). According to John Robb (2020: 469), this transformation is also present in the pottery decoration of European agricultural societies during the Bronze Age, with decoration shifting from schematic motifs towards more recognisable images from the 3rd millennium BC onwards. From the perspective of the Jyrinlahti vessel, it is interesting that V. V. Otrochenko (2015) has proposed that the geometric pottery ornamentation of pastoralist peoples of Bronze Age Europe could likewise be semantic. In focusing on Late Bronze Age (18th–12th centuries BC) pottery from the Pontic-Caspian steppe, Otrochenko (2015: 4) found that such vessels contain horizontal and vertical groups of certain signs and symbols that could, in fact, form a composed scene. Indeed, even though the vessels are decorated with geometrical patterns, such as zigzag lines, dots and dashes, the patterns are not arranged monotonically but rather in ornamental friezes in which different symbols seem to have specific meanings (Otrochenko 2015: Figs. 3–5).

While the agricultural societies of Bronze and Iron Age Europe might have begun to decorate their pottery vessels with stories depicting recognisable images, it may well be plausible that the forager and pastoralist societies were merely continuing to use the age-old geometrical decorations while at the same time adopting the novelty of assigning a narrative to the vessel. Although not as evident as a narrative illustrated with recognisable images, the use of specific symbols in such scenes might nonetheless have had clear meanings for audiences at the time. One good example of such a practice comes among the Yupik peoples of south-central Alaska and Eastern Russia, where the *yaaruilta* stories of young girls have been told by sketching and erasing the story in mud with so-called story knives (Oswalt 1964). The style of illustration for the *yaaruilta* stories consists of several predetermined signs and symbols depicting houses, people and geographic locations. Although the illustrations used in the stories might be difficult for outsiders to understand, the Yupik girls participating in the storytelling understand and follow the illustrations without any trouble. In a similar manner, people understanding the geometrical signs and symbols that were used in pottery decorations would have been able to follow these stories without difficulties.

Based on the above discussion, it could be plausible that the illustrations found on the Jyrinlahti vessel are an example of a similar storytelling practice using predetermined signs and symbols. Although the story was not illustrated with images recognisable to us today, they might nonetheless have been quite understandable in society at the time. This interpretation is supported further by the dating of the vessel, which places it in the specific period during which narrative art also became more common in a broader European context (Robb 2020). Perhaps similar to the Late Bronze Age pottery of the Pontic-Caspian steppe (Otrochenko 2015), the geometrical decoration of the Jyrinlahti vessel, rooted deep in Fennoscandian prehistory, was also intentionally arranged as a composed scene. Since the vessel was found at a site used for iron smelting, it might even be possible that the story was also depicted in relation to this practice.

It is tempting to interpret the boat motifs – one perhaps even with a sail – as a group of vessels sailing in the sea or lake (the horizontally drawn comb-stamps). Perhaps the smelted iron was transported with such boats and distributed among the Early Iron Age societies of the region. The crosses with bent ends could simply be taken as birds (Lahelma 2008: Appendix 2), but the explanation for these symbols must probably be sought a bit farther. The oblique cross with its bended ends resembles, perhaps unintentionally, the modern sign for a mining site – again suggesting connotations with iron hauling. These connotations are only echoes from the modern world and from contemporary narratives, but it is still worth thinking about such possible connections. Why do the signs conjure such mental images in us?

23.4 Conclusions

The Luukonsaari vessel found during excavations of the Early Iron Age settlement and iron smelting site of Jyrinlahti, in Liperi, North Karelia, is a unique example of narrative imagery in pottery rarely featured in prehistoric pottery from eastern Fennoscandia. Although implemented with geometric motifs, the images still strongly resemble boat and bended cross motifs familiar from Finnish Neolithic rock paintings – indicating a long chronological but perhaps short mental gap between such images. We would like to point out that storytelling may have been performed with predetermined symbology, and this kind of information may have deep roots and tap into the deeper memories of societies living in similar cultural and ecological environments.

In the Liperi region, several sites with Luukonsaari pottery are strongly connected to iron production, as indicated also in the finds from the Jyrinlahti site. The chronological milieu of Luukonsaari pottery may extend from the Late Bronze Age to the Roman Iron Age, but iron smelting probably took place from approximately 500 calBC onwards. At Jyrinlahti, the probable timeframe is 400–200 calBC. Recent research (e.g. Lang 2020) places the arrival of the Sámi languages in eastern Fennoscandia within this chronological period, and it is an intriguing future prospect to discuss the possible connections of these three phenomena. The gap between Early Iron Age stories and early modern Sámi histories may not be as insurmountable as initially thought.

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