



THE SIGNS OF THE SACRED ON THE ROCKS: STUDYING BEAR CEREMONIALISM AND SHAMANHOOD

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SUMMARY

The study examines the presence of bears in various burial contexts (objects made by the bear parts as paws, bear-tooth necklaces i.e). All these materials document a remarkable oral tradition where the bear is used in ceremonies and shamanic rituals. The article presents a series of findings, archaeological and other various types, related with the bear in Finland.

RIASSUNTO

Lo studio prende in esame la presenza dell'orso in vari contesti di sepoltura (con oggetti ricavati dall'orso: zampe, collane orso-dente). È documentata una notevole tradizione orale dove l'orso è utilizzato per cerimonie e riti sciamanici. Nell'articolo è proposta una serie di testimonianze archeologiche, di varia natura, riferite all'orso in Finlandia.

Reconsidering Carlo Ginzburg, research on the past reminds the work of a detective trying to find signs which are remarkable but hidden and may become meaningful as spots reflecting the past to someone who looks after the most ancient language of the human kind. During my recent field work in France I could observe cave bear bones found in *Homo neanderthalicus*' grave ca. 80.000 years ago. He probably had ideas and beliefs about death and afterlife, and bear ceremonialism, because of the signs of burials found, but he did not mark the cliffs yet. Interesting enough, CroMagnon man, and the other species of *homo sapiens sapiens* seem to have painted and carved rocks all over the world. Maybe the stoned language belongs to the necessary criteria in separating the anthropos from the other creatures. May it be defined even as a manifestation of religion – or what? The archaeology of human mind becomes manifest in cognitive science, and semiotics of religion will open ways to some important statements to be discussed here in the connection of rock art in Finnish, Karelian and Sami context.

Problems of finding and interpreting the messages of pictograph and petroglyph fields are discussed in the paper with a dvd presentation on the basis of recent fieldwork experiences in Eastern Finland, Lapland and Siberia. It has been a joint adventure of an archaeologist Timo Miettinen, a geologist Aimo Kejonen and myself as a representative of Finnish school of ethnography of religion. The ways of research of our team to be introduced in the paper may open the messages of the hidden silent language painted or carved on the rocks. The lesson learned in our joint fieldwork – skiing, biking or rowing around and between the lakes

and waterways of the ancient great Saimaa and Päijänne lakes, interesting enough, both of them without any etymology in Finnic speaking languages – is that rock art in Finland and abroad should not be studied as pictograph or petroglyph fields only but in their whole landscape, taking into consideration ecology, society, and cultural milieu in the context they are located. Oral memory related to the rocks, and cliffs and artefacts found nearby is well represented e.g. in place names, shamanic epics, local narratives is shown with the examples to be told much longer than supposed so far.

In my paper Rock Art is particularly considered on the basis of the Archaeology of the Bear in Finland. The country has gained its form in a long process, which followed the ending of the last Ice Age in Fenno-Scandinavia. The process which had started from the Norwegian coasts around Lofoten Islands at the Atlantic Ocean ca. 14.000 years ago was concluded in the inlands so that the peninsula of Finland finally got its forms by the era around 10.000-9.000 years ago. Amongst others, the ridges of the Salpausselkä, Suomenselkä and Maanselkä were formed by the thawing of the great ice masses; the couple of kilometre thick drifting ice block moved and as it melted and deposited moraine in different areas. The pressure of the ice brought about changes in the landscape which still persist. The land level on the edge of the Gulf of Bothnia rises around 8 mm a year, and inland the lake districts of Finland are taking on a new shape; at the same time the northern edge of the Gulf of Bothnia is gradually reformed so that an inner lake is built up as the result of the emerge of the natural isthmus between

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Sweden and Finland in the course of ca. 2.300 years. In ancient times the Saimaa and Päijänne, the two biggest waterways in Finland, much larger than today, flowed out along the same waterways via Pielavesi, Kolima, Alvajärvi, Muurasjärvi and Kalaja to the mouth of Kalajoki then located at the contemporary town of Haapajärvi; since it was the home base of the author in his youth between 1944 and 1960, some observations of this book are based on my childhood eyewitness experiences as well as oral memories recalled from those I then listened to. First direction of the waterways was from east to west along Kalajoki river and later on some other river routes to the Gulf of Bothnia, until at first together and later via different routes they broke out through Kymi waterways to the Gulf of Finland. Around 5.700 years ago the waters of Saimaa finally carved out the Vuoksi river, into their present position. The careful study of waterways, altering over the course of millennia, is a key to the interpretation of Finnish prehistory. Most of the rock painting sites, of which about a hundred have been found in Finland and as many again surely await discovery, are alongside the waterways. The earliest were painted in the time of the Great Saimaa, ca. 7.000 years ago, before the Vuoksi arose. In them appear the trends of change from the forms of the late Neolithic and the Comb Ceramic period to those of the late Iron Age. When considered in relationship to other artefacts and the cultural landscape of the times of their creation, rock paintings produced with red clay, i. e. iron oxid found from the bottoms of lakes, mixed with blood, seal fat, urine, etc., illuminate the persistent traditions found in prehistory. Most common topics in the Finnish pictographs are human beings, without one exception [the so-called Astuva Atremis] male, pictured in motion with horns (masks?), horned animals (elks and deer), snakes, foot and handprints, nets, boats. Ancient artefacts discovered in association with the richest sites of rock paintings, (at Saraakallio in Laukaa, Astuvansalmi in Ristiina, Väräkallio in Hossa Suomussalmi) indicate early traces of Finnish and Sami shamanhood. Although in the rock art of northern Europe and Siberia the full size bear seldom appears, in its place there are many clear profile rocks, which present a semblance of a bear's features. Several bear cubs have been found, however. Altarikallio ('the altar rock') at Kynsikaivonniemi in Hirvensalmi is an ancient sacrificial site. Another type of object where bears are depicted are animal-headed items, usually described as weapons, which have been found in Finland. These either functioned as symbols of authority, indicating the social position of chieftains, or were ritual objects,

like those carried at the top of a staff, as found in rock art (also in Sweden and Karelia). They may have been buried in association with cult activities. On Finnish animal-headed staffs the elk and the bear are depicted; the bear seems to be younger, dating to the end of the Stone Age.

Archaeological material from Finnish, Estonian and Livonian Iron Age graves includes bear paws, bear-tooth necklaces and bronze imitations of them. Clearly, reverence for the bear is of considerable age in the Baltic Finnic area. What we see here is the nature religion of a hunting culture, practised in a society which made widespread use of the wilderness for its sustenance, even after it began adopting agriculture (SIHVO 1986, pp. 32-5; PENTIKÄINEN, MIETTINEN 2006).

Finnish professor of archaeology Unto Salo has studied burned bear bones (SALO 2007): since the bear was common, its rarity in the rock art must stem from reasons of strongly held belief. Attitudes to the bear, the most powerful hunting beast of its region, have been of two sorts. It has been both feared and honoured. The mixed attitude appears in the bear's wake, whose central function was the putting to rest of the slain divine animal and the return of its soul to its heavenly home. An example of the totemistic position of the bear among northern peoples is the Sami belief in the bear as a person clad in fake clothing, a transformed culture hero. This was an attempt to bring man and bear closer together by appealing to their common mythical origin. Pictures of the most common animal in northern rock art, the elk, were apparently intended to return the slain animal depicted to nature and to guarantee the accessibility of this, the most valuable beast of prey. By contrast, the return of the animal most dangerous to man from its supernatural world to the hunting area through depictions of it was not desirable. This may be the reason for the rarity of bear in rock art.

On the basis of the rich oral tradition it seems likely that various northern peoples had a myth about a primordial relationship with a bear, in place of which many neighbouring people had an elk or reindeer. Rock art offers a new type of research material in this matter. Although the language of the artists some four to seven thousand years ago is unknown, the tradition of rock paintings or carvings appears to cover the whole northern Eurasian cultural area from Siberia to the shores of Finnmark. The multidisciplinary investigation of rock paintings, combined with the rich vocabulary, mythology and other cultural traditions of the northern peoples is opening new opportunities for research into the world picture of northern man.

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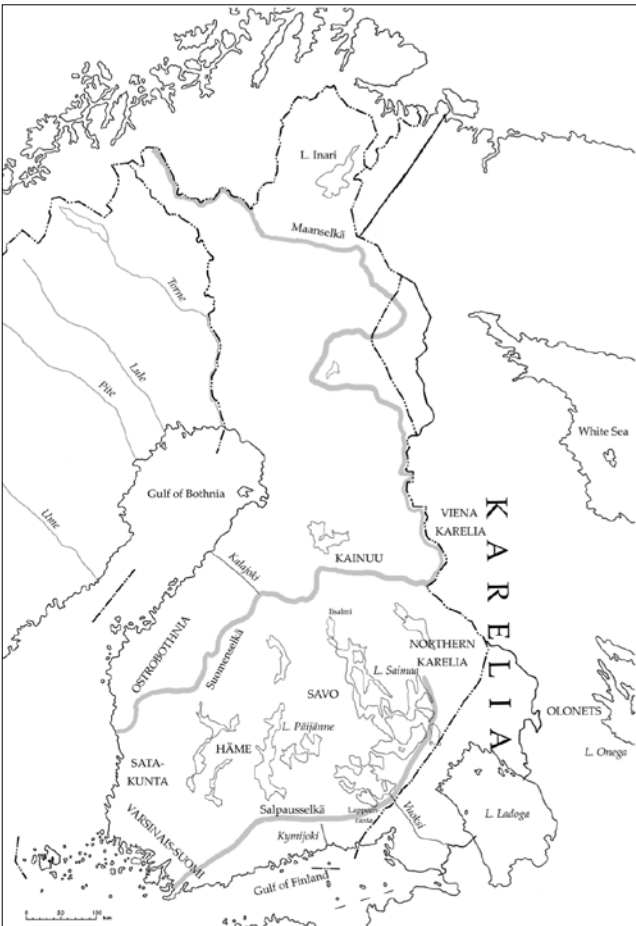


Fig. 1 - Finland, showing natural features and names of provinces. The pre-war borders of Finland are also shown (Clive Tolley)

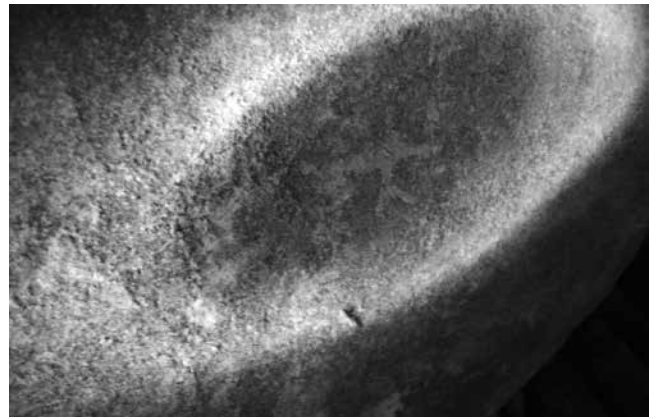


Fig. 2 - A recent 'pagan' painting probably dating to the 19th Century



Fig. 3 - Aapeli Lappalainen at sacred site



▲ Fig. 4 - The Astuvansalmi rock painting is a great narrative, painted on the rock wall over several thousand years. The oldest paintings, from the Great Saimaa period (c. 7000-5700 BP) are at the top, but the field, some 16 m deep, must have been filled up over several millennia. The sons of the Khanty shaman Ivan Stepanovich Sopochnin, Ivusef and Jeremei, presented three new interpretations on site. The animal in the painting on the left, they believed, is a forest reindeer, whose heart is separated from its body. 'Father sang to you about this in the winter' - the reindeer, two of whose legs the son of Num Torum cut off. On the right is Astuvansalmi's 'Artemis', a woman with bow in hand, dancing before a forest reindeer. Is she the foremother of the elk people? (Ismo Luukkonen)

◀ Fig. 5 - The shore was a liminal area, used for rituals

Fig. 6 - The Paltamo bear head. A pierced bear-head object, previously interpreted as a weapon or axe on the basis of its shape, which is more likely to have been a chief-tain's, ritual leader's or shaman's insignia, carried on a wooden staff. Such objects are depicted on Stone Age rock carvings from Karelia and Sweden. (Markku Haverinen).

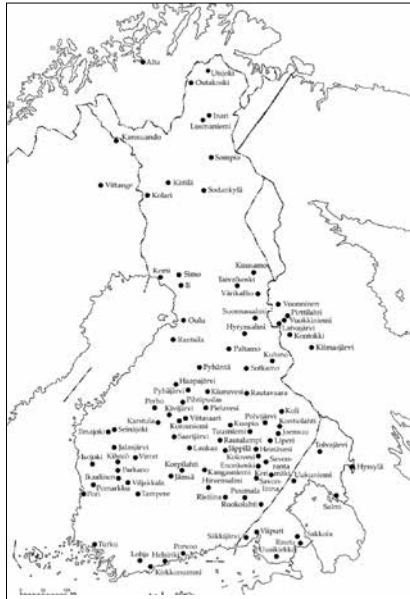


Fig. 7a - Finland, showing places, primarily by kunta (township). The pre-war borders of Finland are also shown. (Clive Tolley)

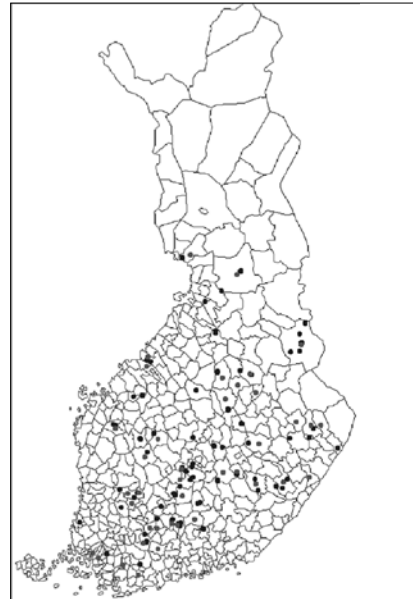


Fig. 7 b - The distribution of oks-i-, oks-, oh-den-, ohen-, ohto- in Finnish place names. Names from the standard atlas (black), and from the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (such as do not appear in the standard atlas) (grey, with one dot per township; more than one example may occur in a township) (Risto Pulkkinen and Marko Salmenkivi)

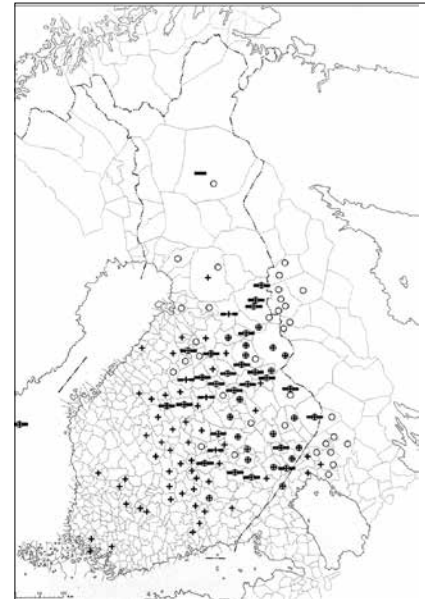
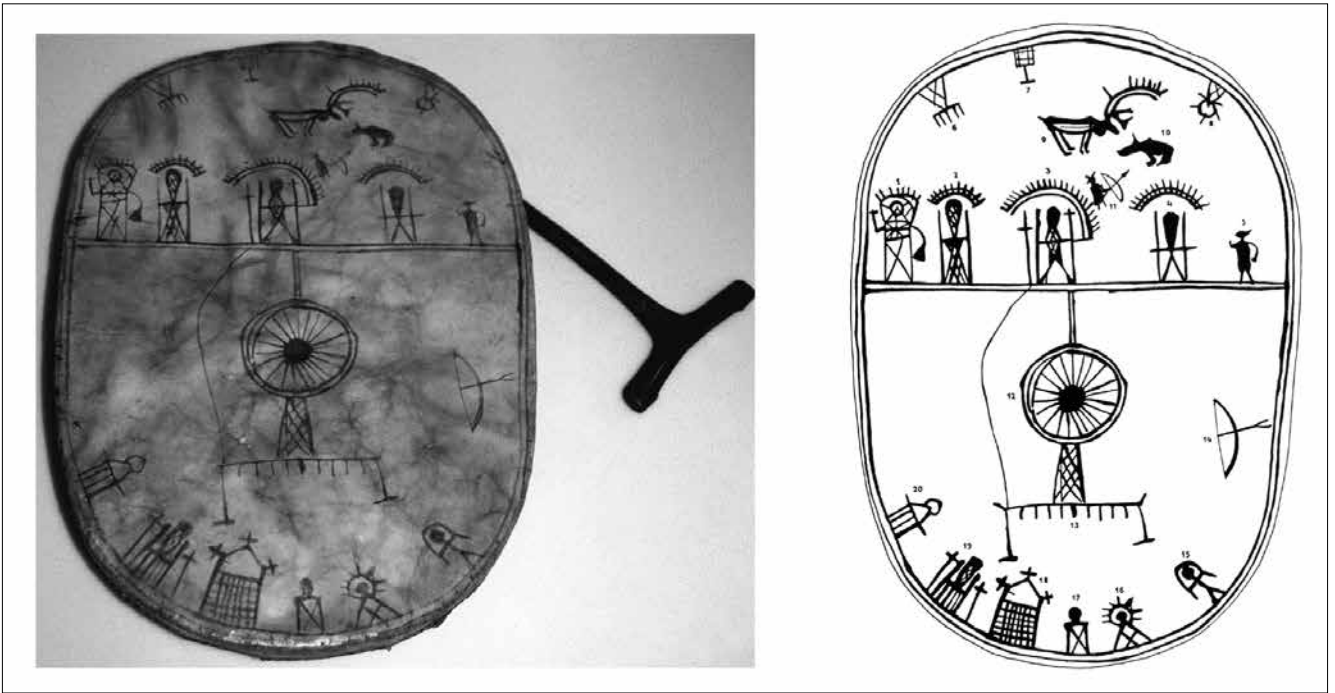


Fig. 7c - Ritual bear-hunting in the Finnish-Karelian area (Sarmela 2000).
 O Variants of hunting and feast songs (the birth of the bear, leaving for the den, awakening the bear, death of the bear, escorting the bear, welcoming songs, beginning the meal, hunters' praise) = Variants of returning songs (eating the bear's head, carrying the skull, skull-tree verses) + Skull trees

Fig. 8 - The Muurreppää sacred pine beside Lake Muurasjärvi, central Finland





Figs 9 a-b - Photograph and Diagram of a seventeenth-century Sámi drum from Lycksele. Note the rhomboid sun in the centre, containing a reindeer, probably an offering, and at top centre an elk and a bear (which also appear on the centre left rim) walking upon a sacred *sáiva* mountain containing a spiritual being (*saivo olmai*), probably the 'Master of the Animals', associating these animals with the realm of the sacred (Manker 1950, no. 1)



Fig. 10 - The back of the drum is its 'inner heart', seen by the shaman himself as he uses it. Animal depictions are found here too

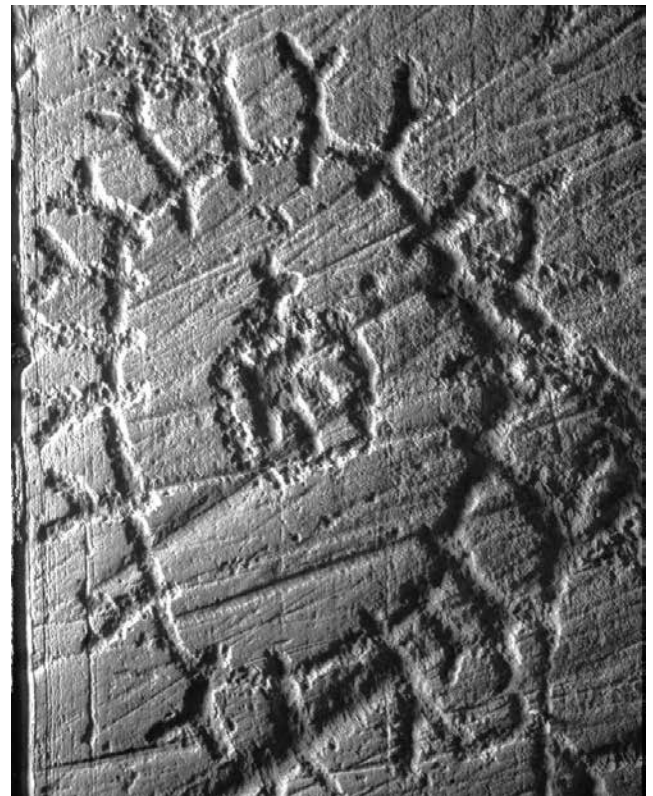


Fig. 11 - A bear on the rock carvings at Alta, partaking in a cosmic drama (Knut Helskog)

