



THE MYTHICAL LINE

Marjukka Vainio & Riitta Virtanen***

Abstract - The mythical line

We have been exploring and photographing in Russia by Lake Onega and the White Sea since 2005. We have planned to publish a book in the year 2012. The book is intended for European readers, researchers and all those interested in art and cultural history. No book has published earlier in Central Europe that gives such a wide-ranging and versatile presentation of the rock art of Karelia. "Prehistoric Rock Carvings on the Shores of Lake Onega" is a project about Stone Age art in Russian Karelia. Its artistic interpretations, documentation, scientific research and philosophical reflection give modern man an insight into the world view, living conditions and livelihood of human beings who lived 4000-6000 years ago and into the rock art that gives them expression.

On the eastern shore of Lake Onega and in the estuaries of the rivers flowing into the White Sea, there are large fields of rock carvings. In terms of their extent and motifs the images are extremely significant for both research and art. The petroglyphs and illustrated stories were carved in the rock by Finno-Ugrian and other tribes that lived in the area around the middle of the Neolithic period.

The book also compares the carvings of the Lake Onega area, their methods and locations, with rock art of the same period on the Kola Peninsula, in the White Sea area and in Fennoscandia.

The section of the book illustrated with photographs takes the reader to the rocks where the carvings are found and into the surrounding landscape and environment.

Riassunto - Le incisioni rupestri preistoriche sul lago Onega

A partire da 2005 il nostro lavoro di esplorazione e documentazione del lago Onega e il Mar Bianco in Russia è stato finalizzato alla pubblicazione di un libro da realizzare entro il 2012. Il libro si rivolge a lettori e ricercatori europei, ma vuole anche risvegliare un interesse culturale fra gli appassionati d'arte e di cultura. In Europa centrale, nessuna pubblicazione ha ancora offerto un valido ritratto della Carelia, nella sua ampiezza e polivalenza. Il progetto "Le incisioni rupestri sulle sponde del lago Onega" è strettamente pertinente all'arte rupestre dell'età della Pietra, in Carelia, Russia ma l'approccio artistico, documentario, la ricerca scientifica e le riflessioni filosofiche ad esso connesse possono diventare uno strumento per l'uomo moderno offrendo uno sguardo sulla vita materiale e intellettuale degli uomini che qui hanno vissuto 4000-6000 anni fa.

La regione del lago Onega e dell'estuario dei fiumi che si gettano nel Mar Bianco, offre un vasto repertorio di arte rupestre attribuita a popolazioni di ceppo uro-finnico e ad altre tribù che vivevano nella regione verso il Neolitico medio.

Il libro vuole inoltre offrire dei confronti fra le incisioni del lago Onega e quelle, coeve, ritrovate nella regione di Kola, in Fennoscandia. La galleria fotografica vuole guidare i lettori sulle rocce incise calandoli nel contesto naturale e paesaggistico.

Résumé - Gravures rupestres préhistoriques du lac Onega

Depuis 2005, nous explorons et photographions le lac Onega et la mer Blanche, en Russie. Nous prévoyons de publier un livre en 2012. Ce livre sera destiné aux lecteurs et chercheurs européens, mais aussi à tous ceux qui sont intéressés par l'art et l'histoire culturelle. En Europe centrale, aucun livre n'a encore offert une présentation de la Carélie de si grandes ampleur et polyvalence. « Les gravures rupestres préhistoriques sur les bords du lac Onega » est un projet concernant l'art de l'âge de la pierre en Carélie russe. Les interprétations artistiques, la documentation, les recherches scientifiques et la réflexion philosophique donnent à l'homme d'aujourd'hui un aperçu de la vision du monde, des conditions de vie et des moyens d'existence des êtres humains qui vivaient il y a 4 000 à 6 000 ans et une idée de l'art rupestre par lequel ils s'exprimaient.

Sur la rive orientale du lac Onega et dans les estuaires des fleuves qui se jettent dans la mer Blanche, il y a de larges terrains de gravures rupestres. Les pétroglyphes et les histoires illustrées ont été gravées dans la roche par les Finno-ougriens et par d'autres tribus qui vivaient dans la région vers la moitié de la période néolithique, c'est-à-dire il y a 4 000 à 6 000 ans. En outre, le livre compare les gravures de la région du lac Onega, leurs méthodes et leurs situations avec un art rupestre de la même période, qui se trouve dans la péninsule de Kola, dans la région de la mer Blanche et en Fennoscandie.

La section du livre qui est illustrée par des photographies emmène le lecteur sur les roches où ont été trouvées les gravures et lui fait découvrir le paysage environnant. Les photographies transmettent l'intemporalité et l'esprit du lieu et elle donne une image des zones de gravures rupestres dans toute leur ampleur.

* Marjukka Vainio

Artist professor, Arts Council of Finland, Finland; e-mail marjukka@marjukkavainio.fi

** Riitta Virtanen

Independent Researcher, Art teacher, Finland; e-mail riitta.virtanen3@gmail.com



THE PREHISTORIC ROCK ART AND LANDSCAPE OF LAKE ONEGA, RUSSIA (BY RIITTA VIRTANEN)

We visited the rock art sites and landscape of the east shore of Lake Onega at various seasons over a period of five years. Our expedition consisted of the artist, professor and photographer Marjukka Vainio, the art teacher and researcher Riitta Virtanen, with Erkk Murtonen as assistant. During six two-week visits, we photographed the area in different weather and light conditions from different perspectives – on the ground, from the water and from the air.

We studied the meaning of the environment through concrete visual forms and the landscape, and in terms of the level of meaning constituted by myths and mental imagery. Our research was related to art and environmental aesthetics and led to works of art and knowledge of an artistic and cross-disciplinary nature. The results of the work will be published through exhibitions and in the form of a book of photographs.

Our aim is to pass on to viewers and readers a cogent experience of interaction and presence, a connection with a multisensory, non-verbal experience of time and place, and to encourage the use of imagination as a means for acquiring knowledge. Our method entails photography (artistic interpretation and documentation), frottage tracings of rock art and writing. Background aspects of the work were the close cooperation in the initial stage with researchers, a continuous study of finds and research materials, and collaboration and interviews with local residents. [Fig. 1]

The Prehistoric Rock Art of Lake Onega

The rock carving or petroglyph sites are in an uninhabited area running 20 km along the east shore of Lake Onega. The images were carved on outcrops of bedrock near the waterline on the shores of capes, points and islands during the Neolithic Stone Age approximately 4,000–6,000 years ago. At the time, the water level was roughly the same as today. Archaeological finds and linguistic history suggest that the petroglyphs were made by members of Finno-Ugrian tribes. At present, more than 1,300 petroglyphs are known from the area. They form 22 separate groups, two of which are in the vicinity of the River Vodla. The others are in the area of Cape Besov Nos (Nose of the Devil), which is discussed in this paper.

Approximately 40 per cent of the rock carvings on the shore of Lake Onega depict swans and other waterfowl, an exceptional motif in northern prehistoric rock art. The bedrock outcrops are also marked with symbolic designs interpreted as the moon, the sun and stars. Other motifs are human figures, boats, European elks (moose) and bears.

The content and purpose of the petroglyphs remain unknown. Keys to unravelling their mythological content may possibly be found by combining the results of archaeology, ethnology and folkloristics. The rock carvings on the shore of Lake Onega have been studied since 1848. In their research, Russian archeologists and ethnologists (Vladislav Ravdonikas, Konstantin Laushkin, Yuri Savvateyev and Alexander Zhulnikov, among others) have proceeded from the assumption that the carvings represent the worldview and mythology of hunter-gatherer communities.

The rock art site at Cape Besov Nos is at present completely uninhabited; there are only fishing huts belonging to local people at the mouth of the River Chornaya. The area is usually reached by water, along the River Chornaya from the village of Karshevo and from Shala or Petrozavodsk. The attractions of the area include rock art sites, a landscape of beauty, the peace and quiet of the natural surroundings and rich stocks of fish. In recent years, the numbers of tourists interested in rock art and nature, fishermen and holiday-makers have grown, especially in the summer months. In the winter, there are only a few local fishermen in the area. Last year, the Muromsk Nature Preserve was enlarged to include the rock art area at Cape Besov Nos, which means that the latter is now officially protected by the Russian state. We do not know what changes in conservation legislation will mean in practice, economically and administratively. The area is so invaluable with regard to its treasures of prehistoric rock art, natural environment and landscape that we feel it should be included among listed World Heritage sites. [Figs. 2 and 3]

Artistic and cross-disciplinary interpretation

In our work, we proceeded from the hypothesis that if the rock art locations were sacred sites for prehistoric people, the surrounding landscape must also be imbued with meaning. The rock faces with petroglyphs and their untouched natural setting form an entity. The Cape Besov Nos area has remained almost unchanged since the time when the carvings were made. With the aid of multisensory aesthetic experience and imagination, present-day people can interact with the environment, nature, the landscape and the carved rock faces, thus generating new knowledge and interpretations.

Photographs of the landscape, rock art sites and carved markings make our subjective experiences, feelings and interpretations of the landscape and rock art visible and accessible to experience, evaluation and discussion. While expressing cultural values, the setting also steers the formation of values and experiences.

We also wanted to investigate the experiences, attitudes, values and notions of local inhabitants regarding the shore landscape on Lake Onega. We carried out an interview survey in the village of Krasnoborskiy located 24 km inland from the shore of the lake. The interviews revealed the strong connection of Russian people with nature, their love of their home region and their romantic desire to preserve the area unchanged, in addition to the connection of the future of the rock art areas with political decisions.

The marked process of change that Russian society is experiencing was evident in statements for and against increased tourism, depending on the personal interests of the respondents. The interviewed villagers felt they did not have much say in the future of the nearby rock art area. [Fig. 4]

ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

Worldview expressed by the landscape

For the Neolithic hunter-gatherer communities, the landscape of the east shore of Lake Onega represented the environment of their worldview in concrete terms, with specific meanings for places and the forms of the terrain. The petroglyph sites were used for ritual purposes from early spring until autumn. The selection of marked rock faces at the tips of capes and points to serve as sacred sites was not a coincidence.

The archeologist Aleksander Zhulnikov combines the results of archeology, folkloristics and ethnology in his interpretation of the landscape of the rock art areas on Lake Onega. The sanctuary symbolising the centre of creation was located in a place that was regarded as the meeting-point of heaven, earth and the underworld, for it was in such a place that people could connect with the spirit world and their ancestors. The tips of the capes and points linked water and earth, the basic elements of primal creation.

The locations of the carved rock faces on islands and the tips of capes and points correspond to this archaic notion of the structure of the universe. The world was constructed on a vertical and horizontal axis, with concepts of birth and death, day and night, summer and winter, light and dark associated with the upper and lower ends. The worlds of the heavens and waters and the underworld were the abodes of spirits, the dead and mythical creatures – a different reality. People living in the middle world, the centre of creation, had to be in contact with these worlds for various reasons. The different parts of the universe were linked to each other by a mythical river, a large body of water or a vertical axis (later the world tree). The points and capes with petroglyphs on Lake Onega faced west or northwest towards the edge of the sky beyond the wide, sea-like expanse of Lake Onega, which was believed to be the boundary of the world. Among the peoples of northern Eurasia, the realm of the dead was located in the north or the west. Cape Besov Nos, extending the furthest into the lake, could have borne the association of a gateway to the underworld. [Fig. 5]

INTERPRETATIONS OF ROCK CARVINGS

Bes: The best-known individual rock carving on the shore of Lake Onega is *Bes* (Devil), a 2.5-metre-high mythical human figure carved into the rock face at Cape Besov Nos. It is unique in northern rock art. This creature is lying on the rock face with legs spread out towards the water, hands raised and the mouth of its square head open. To the right and left of *Bes* are large depictions of a burbot or catfish and an otter. The head of the figure is split in two by a natural crevice in the rock. This is the key to interpreting this rock carving. The way to the afterlife is believed to pass through cracks in bedrock in interpretations of rock art in various parts of the world and in the old folk poetry of the Finno-Ugrian peoples. The frightening appearance of the Piassa devil has been compared with that of the female ruler of Tuonela, the mythical Finno-Ugrian realm of the dead, who guarded the opening leading to the womb of the earth. Finnish incantation poems, among other sources, contain depictions of the ruler of Tuonela.

The pose of *Bes* and the manner of representation also display similarities with creatures described in the beliefs of Siberian peoples. Other features of *Bes*, such as one seeing and one blind eye and hands with five fingers, point to the special nature of this creature and its partial belonging to the underworld. The status and significance of *Bes* were underlined later by an Orthodox cross carved on one hand of the figure by monks in the Middle Ages. At Besov Nos, a modern-day visitor can sense a mysterious and even intimidating mood, which is different from the other capes and points



with carved images on rock faces. Sacrifices were made to Bes in the past and, according to the interviews, even nowadays. [Fig. 6]

Transporting the soul: In the mythologies of the northern peoples, waterfowl serve as messengers and intermediaries between the worlds. The swan was the sacred bird of Lake Onega. In 1997, the Academician Abraham Stolyar of St Petersburg interpreted for us at Besov Nos the story carved on rocks at the site. The mythical tale tells how, after death, the soul of the individual is passed from one swan to another to reach a boat waiting by the bank of the River Tuonela. The boat then moves on to the Bes crack in the rock, towards the underworld, the realm of the dead. [Fig. 7]

The birth of the world: Many Russian and Finnish researchers have interpreted the group of petroglyphs carved in the rock on the island of Bolshoi Guri as a concretised version of the myth of the birth of the world maintained by Finno-Ugrian peoples. This site has also been conceived of as the place where the world was born. According to the creation myth in the *Kalevala*, the Finnish epic of folk poems, the whole universe was born from the egg of a pochard. The bird flew over the primal sea looking for land on which to lay its eggs. Finally, it found a small piece of land, in some versions the knee of the seer Väinämöinen. The golden egg rolled off the land into the sea and broke, this forming the cosmos.

This group of petroglyphs was carved on a black egg-shaped lava feature on smooth rock facing the open waters of the lake. It depicts the cosmic swan, with its back marked by three arcs, which may represent the three levels of the world. Beneath the swan is a small carving, apparently depicting an egg. The composition includes two European elks and a sun symbol. The elks may possibly represent organic nature born from the primal egg, and the sun design may symbolise the celestial bodies.

Petroglyphs carved at the junction of the worlds can be regarded as symbols employed in rituals linking the different parts of the universe. The choice of the carving site could have been influenced by the forms of the terrain, the texture of the rock, and knowledge of the effects of light on the visibility of the carvings, which are best seen early in the morning and before sunset. [Fig. 8]

MAKING THE UNSEEN VISIBLE (BY MARJUKKA VAINIO)

During the summer of 2005, our expedition camped in a tent for two weeks in the petroglyph area of Lake Onega. We were accompanied by hordes of mosquitoes in the bushes on the shore. After our busy, hot days and evenings of photographing turned to night, the mosquitoes fell silent and nature seemed to have fallen asleep. The only sound was the gently lapping of the waves against the rocks on the shore.

The immersion in the past was a strong and vivid experience. Our sense of time and place was reinforced when, after the expedition, we looked at my pictures from Lake Onega, read published research on rock art and studied maps of the locality. The trip put us in touch with the worldview of prehistoric people and our own Finno-Ugrian roots.

We discovered a unique atmosphere at Lake Onega. Life on the empty, uninhabited shore was stripped of everything that was unnecessary. We slept in a tent and a small fisherman's cottage without electricity or modern conveniences. We cooked our food on an open fire by the shore and Lake Onega before us was our bathroom. Simplicity and a pure experience of beauty persuaded us to return again and again.

The rock carvings made thousands of years ago were an arresting experience. We looked at the imagery carved in the rock like an artist looks at pictures made by a fellow artist, a brother or sister in the arts. [Fig. 9]

The process of photographing : The landscape setting of the petroglyphs on Lake Onega is almost the same as 5,000–6,000 years ago. This exceptional landscape led prehistoric people to choose the location as their sacred site. It is a mythical, almost archetypal, landscape of memory. The landscape and natural environment of the rock art area are unique. The diversity, pristine condition and beauty of the landscape also appealed to us and encouraged us to seek the lost landscape of spirit and matter, our identity and our own Finno-Ugrian roots. The method of photography was experiential artistic interpretation and identification. Our work was also related to the Finnish tradition of research expeditions for studying the origins of our culture, its early manifestations and their connections with other cultures. [Fig. 10]

A journey into the landscape : The basis of the photography was cross-disciplinary information, interpretations of rock art, and the tradition of studying and photographing the landscape. The starting point was to photograph the landscape of Lake Onega, the rock carvings, the rock face sites and the untouched natural surroundings at different times of the day and different seasons. The aim was to pass on an arresting, aesthetic experience of nature and the landscape and to tell of the fascinating prehistoric art carved in the rock.

As the work progressed, I wanted to deepen the interpretation in a more subjective direction. I decided to reject the rules of landscape photography and take a fresh look at the landscape in its natural state and the carvings, and to receive the images that they offered. I wanted to crystallise together my personal experience of the landscape and the narrative offered by the landscape. I sought to lead the photography in a more conceptual direction with the aid of various methods provided by photographic techniques.

Despite wanting to reject the traditions and conventions of landscape photography, I had to return to its roots several times as the work progressed in my quest for an immediate means of expressing the theme and the experience. In my work, I considered the question of whether the traditional manner of photography could find a form that appeals to modern-day people without destroying the magic of the photograph. I eliminated everything that was unnecessary and superfluous from the pictures. The images, however, do not replicate the subject as such. They contain many simultaneous perspectives, the main ones being overlapping spatial and temporal viewpoints. Reality and the past must be present, though not necessarily visible.

With *The Mythical Line*, as both exhibition and book, we also want to participate in current discussion on the future of natural and cultural environments. We consider the past and present of the area from a new perspective, presenting through the new cultural meanings thus formed our position on shaping nature and political decisions regarding its future.

The title *The Mythical Line* alludes to the lines of grooves marked in the rock and the horizon of the landscape. Images formed in our collective subconscious lead the viewers to combine them with earlier experiences in their minds. The rock art sites of Lake Onega and their surroundings have remained similar to their original state and are unique documents from 4,000–6,000 years ago. The carvings are like pictures in a history book about people in the past and their lives. These images provide information on lost cultures and expand our perspective on the history of Europe. [Figs. 11 and 12].

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Fig 0 Lake Onega, Marjukka Vainio and Riitta Virtanen, Guri Island, Spring, Russia 2009



Fig. 1 Lake Onega, Kirsi-Marja Siren and Suvi Vasama, Peri III, Summer Evening, Russia 2005



Fig. 2 Lake Onega, Cape Peri, Spring Evening, Russia 2009



Fig. 3 Lake Onega, Cape Peri VI, Summer Evening, Russia 2006



Fig. 4a Lake Onega, The view from Cape Peri to Cape Besov Nos, Summer Evening, Russia 2005



Fig. 4b Lake Onega, The view from Cape Peri to Cape Besov Nos, Spring Evening, Russia 2009



Fig. 5 Lake Onega, Cape Besov Nos, Autumn, Russia 2009



Fig. 6 Lake Onega, Bes, Cape Besov Nos, Lake Onega, Autumn, Russia 2009



Fig. 7 Lake Onega, Transporting the soul, Cape Besov Nos, Lake Onega, Russia 2009



Fig. 8 Lake Onega, The Birth of the World, Guri Island, Russia 2006



Fig. 9 Lake Onega, Summer Evening I, Russia 2005



Fig. 10 Lake Onega, Cape Besov Nos North, Spring, Russia 2009



Fig. 11 Lake Onega, Guri Island, Winter Morning I, Russia 2010



Fig. 12 The Map of the Lake Onega Rock Art Area