



THE VÄRIKALLIO ROCK PAINTING, SUOMUSSALMI

The Väräkallio rock painting is located in the Hossa Hiking Area, on a cliff wall rising from the north shore of long and narrow Lake Somerjärvi near its eastern end. The painting is surrounded by a vast area of uninhabited wilderness. The Väräkallio painting and the Julma Ölkky painting, which is located some 3,5 km away in Kuusamo, are the northernmost rock paintings in Finland. Väräkallio is also one of the largest Finnish rock paintings at least as concerns the number of painted figures.

The Väräkallio painting was discovered in 1977. Leena Mäkelä and Juha Rossi were on an early spring skiing trip when they noted the red colour and the clearly discernible figures on the cliff wall. The Julma Ölkky painting was discovered by a skiing party from Tampere the following year.



Väräkallio is visible from the nearby Mieskallionvaara Hill as a shining, light-coloured rock wall. Approaching the cliff, one first becomes conscious of the strong ruddy hues and only then of the various painted figures. The painting has been executed on a rock wall plunging perpendicularly into the lake, over an area some 10,5 meters long. The lowest figures are only about 20 cm and the highest ones some 2,5 meters above the present surface of the lake.

The water level of the lake has remained at approximately the same elevation ever since the end of the Ice Age, and consequently land upheaval cannot be used to date the paintings. Most Finnish rock paintings date to the Comb Ceramic Period, 5000–3200 BC. The youngest paintings may date to around 2000 BC.

The figures have been painted with red ochre paint. The exact compo-



sition and preparation method of the paint is still unknown. It was probably made from iron oxide by heating and adding fat, blood, and possibly also egg as a binder. The red ochre figures have been preserved by a film of siliceous oxide that has formed over them. The minerals forming the protective transparent coating have been dissolved from the rock itself.

More than 60 painted figures have been identified on the rock wall. The most conspicuous are four human figures with triangular



heads. Two of these stand side by side in the middle of the wall. They have arms, torsos, and legs, and eyes and noses have been sketched on the faces. The wall also contains two triangular-headed facial portraits that appear to have horns. Triangular heads are very rare in Finnish rock art. Apart from Värrikallio, they are known only from the Verla painting in Valkeala and the Uittamonsalmi painting in Ristiina.

The other main attraction of the cliff wall is undoubtedly the horned human figure that appears to be moving. Could this be a shaman dressed in a fur cloak? The figure has retained its bright colour and is easy to distinguish in the middle of the cliff wall. The Värrikallio painting also includes 14 small human figures, some of which are fragmentary while others are headless. One figure is a male and one has feet, but otherwise they do not contain precise details.



The most common figures in the Värrikallio painting are animals. Some of them have only been portrayed in outline, but there are also some that have been completely filled in with red paint. The largest elk figure, which resides near the top of the mural, is all in red. Today, the figure appears headless, but originally it probably had a head and antlers. The head has been nearly worn away, but one can still make out the antlers. In other Finnish rock paintings, cervids (elk and reindeer) have usually been painted in outline and they are also larger than the animal figures in the Värrikallio painting. Though the Värrikallio animals are small, they have been painted in uncommonly sharp detail, e.g., most of the elk figures have ears. Altogether, the wall contains around thirty elks.

Another unique feature of Värrikallio is the grouping of the figures. Patterns such as the ascending file of animals are not known from





other Finnish rock paintings. Does this file reflect some particular event? We cannot know.

In the middle of the ascending file of animals is a smaller animal facing to the right. This has been interpreted as the only bear figure in Finnish rock art. Although it is only 8 cm long and 6 cm high, the figure captures the bear-like curve of the back and the typical features of the legs.

Other pictorial rarities are paintings of animal paws and figures that have been interpreted as lizards or birds. The double animal figure in the upper right hand corner is also unique. A pattern of three dots to the left of the compact group of animals near the left margin of the wall is also peculiar. The Värrikallio mural contains no paintings of boats, which are the third most common subject of Finnish rock paintings.



Why did the Stone Age people make rock paintings? What did the figures mean to them or tell them? The paintings can be connected with the beliefs and spiritual life of the Stone Age people. Connections can be pointed out between the motifs and the shamanistic religious beliefs of the hunter-gatherers of the northern coniferous zone. We must nevertheless be cautious in our interpretations, for our belief-world is very different from that of our forefathers thousands of years ago. Perhaps even in the Stone Age, the figures did not have a single standard interpretation. The tradition lasted for a long time, and the contents of the figures may have acquired different emphases or even different meanings. Standing before the rock painting, we stand very close to our ancient forefathers. On the age-old cliff wall, we can pick out the very same figures that our ancestors were looking at thousands of years ago.



The Julma Ölkky painting in Kuusamo

Julma Ölkky is a three-kilometre-long rugged canyon lake with walls more than 50 meters high in places. The lake is also nearly 50

meters deep. The Julma Ölkky painting lies 3.5 kilometres north-east of Värrikallio. The distance from the departure point of the boat tour to the painting is 0.75 kilometres. The mural has been painted some 1.5 meters above the

waterline on a perpendicular shoreline cliff that is visible from a long distance as a light spot in the landscape. The painting contains two human figures and an animal. Uppermost is a male figure and below it, a small cervid. The sec-



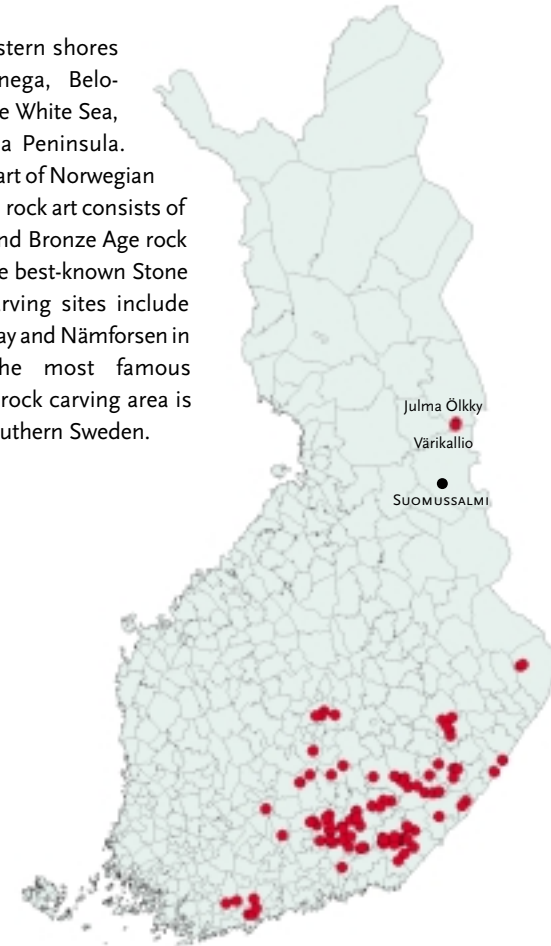
ond human figure on the lower left is indistinct. It has a round head and a wider body than the male figure. The feet point outwards and the other arm is raised to a horizontal position.

Finnish rock paintings

Most Finnish rock paintings have been executed on very rugged and imposing cliff walls. Surprisingly often, the cliffs also exhibit features that resemble either a human face or an animal. Although the land upheaval that followed the melting of the continental glacier has in many places drastically changed the water level, most Finnish rock paintings are still located on cliff walls that rise directly out of the water. For this reason, many of the paintings can be viewed in the summertime only from a boat.

A total of 104 rock paintings are known from Finland (as of 2005). Their most common motif is the human figure. The next most numerous motifs are the elk and the boat, as well as the animal paw or palm print. No rock carvings have been discovered in Finland though large murals, pecked or grooved on flat shoreline cliffs, are known

from the eastern shores of Lake Onega, Belomorsk on the White Sea, and the Kola Peninsula. The major part of Norwegian and Swedish rock art consists of Stone Age and Bronze Age rock carvings. The best-known Stone Age rock carving sites include Alta in Norway and Nämforsen in Sweden. The most famous Bronze Age rock carving area is Tanum in southern Sweden.



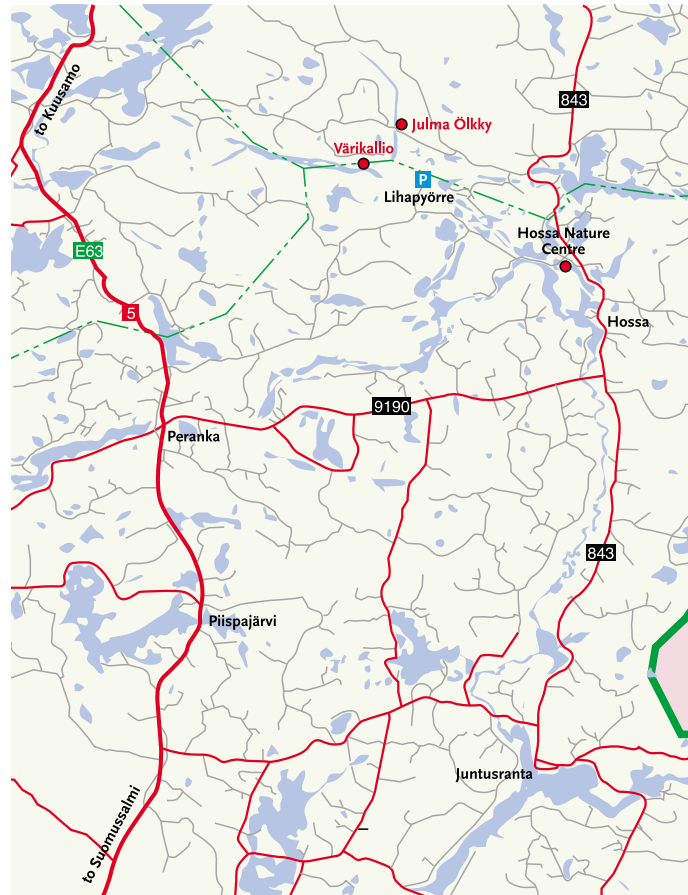
A total of ca. 40 small Stone Age rock paintings are known from Norway and Sweden. Their most common motif is the elk. A few painted figures have also been found on the Kola Peninsula.

The Astuvansalmi painting in Ristiina, the Syrjäsalme painting in Puumala, the Kolmiköytisienvuori painting in Ruokolahti, and the Sarkasvuori painting in Juva can be reached by marked access paths. The Verla painting in Valkeala can be viewed from the opposite shore. More detailed information on the location and accessibility of the paintings is available at the local municipal tourist offices.

Two marked footpaths 3.5 km and 4.5 km in length lead from the Lihapyörre parking area to Värrikallio. A long wooden platform in front of the mural allows visitors to view the paintings. For safety reasons, only 5 viewers at a time are allowed on the platform. In the winter, Värrikallio can be reached by the network of ski trails maintained by the Hossa Hiking Area. Visitors can stop for a break at the rest and campfire area located some 300 m from the painting. Additional information about the network of footpaths and ski trails can be obtained from the Hossa Nature Centre, the Suomussalmi Tourist Office and the Internet pages www.suomussalmi.fi and www.luontoon.fi



Project part-financed by the European Regional Development Fund within the BSR INTERREG III B programme



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