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EVOLUTION IN PREHISTORIC  
KARELIA**

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# MILESTONES OF SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION IN PREHISTORIC KARELIA

*Abram D. Stoliar*

*Die Geisterwelt ist nicht verschlossen;  
Dein Sinn ist zu, dein Herz ist tot!  
Auf! Bade, Schüler, unverdrossen  
Dein' ird'sche Brust im Morgenrot.*  
Goethe, Faust

The settling of the European taiga and tundra in the final Pleistocene was indeed something of a heroic endeavour. Man's penetration into the North was an historic event that triggered a highly dynamic ideological process. This is also reflected in Karelian petroglyphs, which form the easternmost portion of the Fennoscandic network of rock art sites (Figure 1).

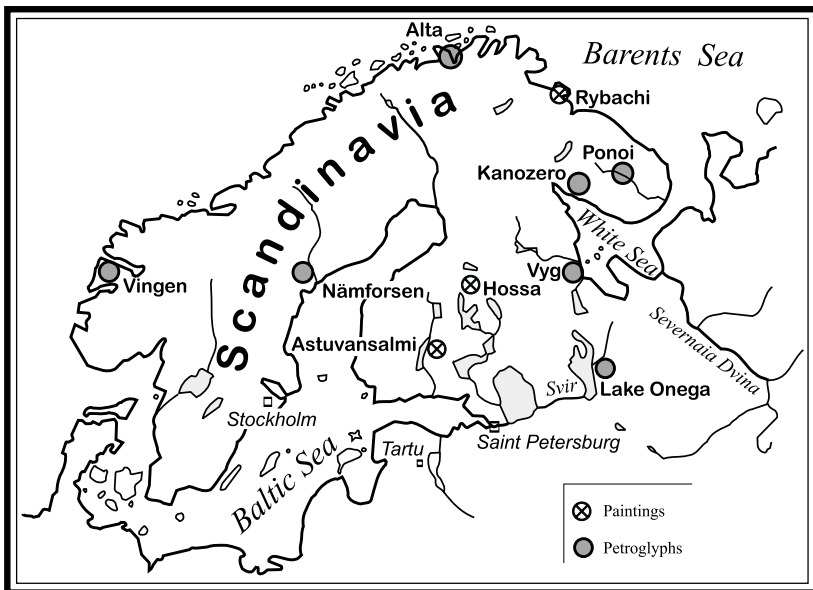


Figure 1. Some rock art localities in Scandinavia, Finland and North-West Russia. Map by V. Poikalainen.

## **THE OLENI ISLAND CEMETERY**

The burial ground on Oleni Island (literally Reindeer Island), Karelia, is highly relevant for understanding the tense social and ideological situation in Mesolithic Fennoscandia. Being the largest of known European Stone Age cemeteries and dated to 5300–5000 BC, it is also the most important Stone Age site in North Europe.

The Oleni Island burial ground is situated on a small island in the northeast corner of Lake Onega (Figure 2). As neotectonic evidence suggests, the island was even smaller in the Mesolithic Period: a hilly patch of land, approximately 1.27 km by 0.27 km, the highest point a few meters above the water.

## **RESEARCH HISTORY AND FINDINGS**

The first thing that attracts attention is the size of this necropolis on the “island of the dead”. The 1936–1938 field project headed by V. Ravdonikas revealed 177 burials (Ravdonikas 1940). Because most of the area occupied under burial sites was destroyed by limestone quarries, it may be speculated that no less than 400 burials had been made there (Arkheologia 1996). This number is in contradiction with the sparseness of population scattered over the vast territories of the North at that time. Burial grounds of this size have not been found even from the Early Holocene Palestine where population density must have been higher by several orders of magnitude.

The impression of something extraordinary inherent in the site is further amplified by the fact that evidently not just anybody was buried on the island – burials of children and juveniles are rare. Moreover, the cemetery functioned apparently only from late spring until late autumn rather than throughout the year. Additionally, each funeral must have required a team of men sailing to the island.

Another feature of this “archaeological barometer” of northern Mesolithic ideology is the way sacrality is contrasted with everyday life. Indeed, the cemetery is in an isolated position; also, its area is unusually devoid of artefacts: over the area of 2,700 square metres, only four objects have been found outside of graves.

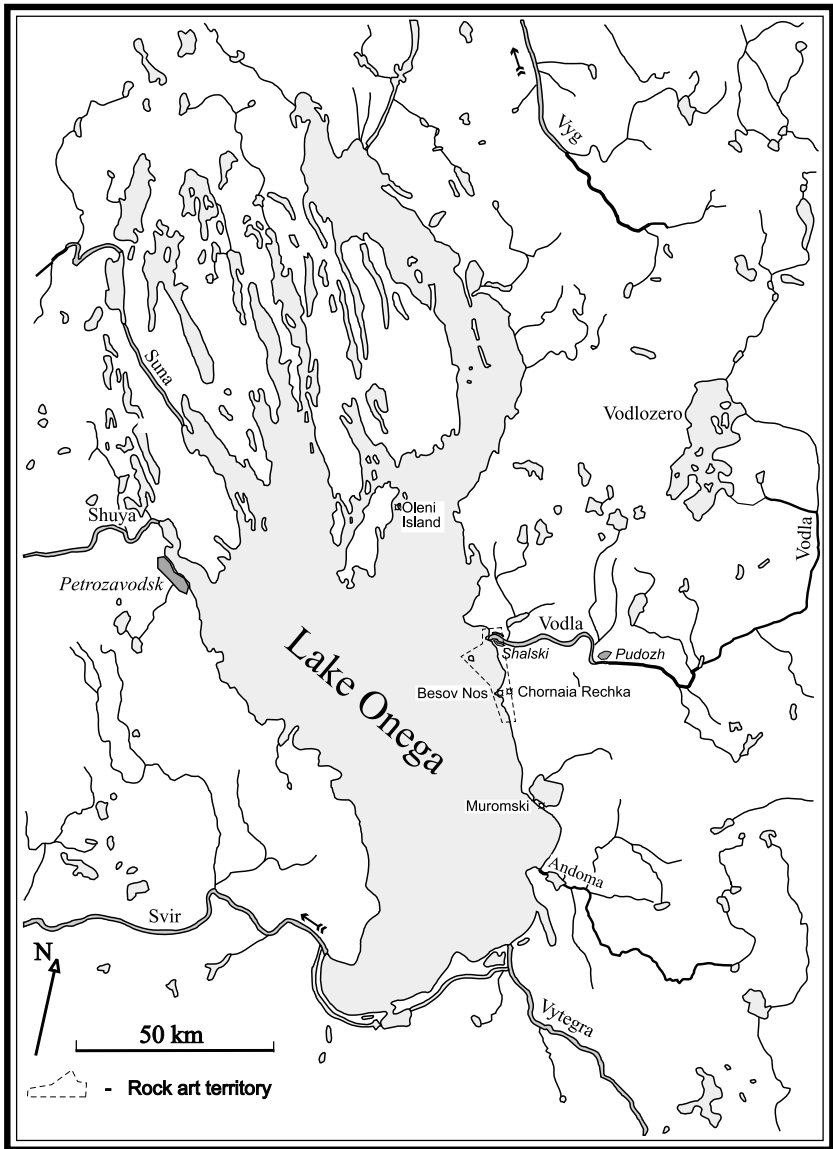


Figure 2. Lake Onega. Map by V. Poikalainen.

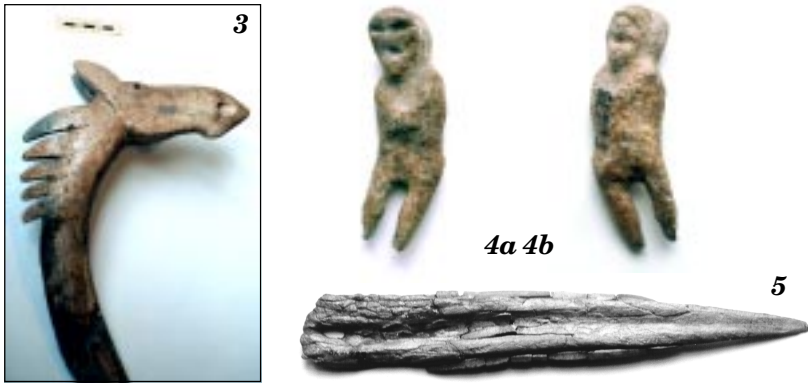
Common cemeteries replaced separate burial sites only in the Mesolithic Age. Cemeteries are highly relevant for revealing the ethnic origins and worldview of the local population. In this context, we can regard the Oleni Island cemetery as a multi-faceted manifestations of archaic concepts of the underworld as a separate and entirely distinct place.

The Oleni Island cemetery is exceptional also with regard to funerary goods, which are strikingly numerous: altogether 7,132 artefacts. There are no raw materials or nuclei, and tools which are quite abundant at Mesolithic camping sites are extremely rare, totalling less than 0.1% of the collection. Another distinction from contemporary camping sites is that bow-and-arrow hunting is accentuated, stone and bone arrowheads being represented by more than a hundred specimens each.

Ritual artefacts are the largest category of burial goods, most numerous among them fangs: pierced incisors of elks (4,372 finds in 84 graves, at least 739 individuals) and beavers (1,155 finds in 70 graves, at least 574 individuals), and pierced canines of bears (170 finds in 48 graves). Bear canines together with apparently ritual knives of grey chert (60 finds in 30 burials) seem to be common in the so-called sandwich compositions (Gurina 1956).

The 14 sculptures made of antler are more than has been found from Mesolithic campsites of the entire region.

Most sculptures represent an elk in Upper Palaeolithic tradition. Only one (fragmented) sculpture depicts the entire animal, while eight depict an elk's head. Three big round sculptures are classic examples of ancient North European animalistic art. These angle-shaped "handles" have numerous parallels among finds from the forest zone. As suggested by reconstruction of their position in collective graves Nos. 55–57 and Nos. 152 and 153, as well as by the staff-like signs carved on the coastal rocks of Lake Onega that apparently represent the same kind of sacral objects, these "handles" were side inserts in wooden staffs that can be interpreted as insignia attesting to high social status (Figure 3). The five small bas-relief sculptures depicting elk heads were probably inserts in smaller models of the similar staffs.



*Figure 3. An elk-like figurine from the Oleni Island cemetery. Collections of Kunstkamera. Photo by V. Poikalainen.*  
*Figure 4. The Janiform figurine from the Oleni Island cemetery. Collections of Kunstkamera. Photo by V. Poikalainen.*  
*Figure 5. A bone dagger from the Oleni Island cemetery. Collections of Kunstkamera. Photo by V. Poikalainen.*

Anthropomorphic representation, which was secondary in the evolution of Palaeolithic art, is represented by three specimens: an elongated rod-like female figurine, resembling the schematic Upper Palaeolithic canon; a flat representation of a male, most likely a generalized image of the proto-hero; and a Janus-faced figure, enigmatic in that it was evidently an attempt to represent more than a single person. Possibly the latter marked a continuation of the Magdalenian artists' endeavours at embodying the concept of "a human in general" by merging male and female attributes in a single symbol (Figure 4).

Some idea of the local ornamental tradition, which must have been quite common but is largely undocumented due to having used organic materials, is gained by observing patterns on eight artefacts. The most complex relief design consisting of angles and zigzags is seen on a sandstone fragment from burial No. 44. Another zigzag pattern, carved, decorates one side of a unique bone dagger found in burial No. 100 (Figure 5).

## ETHNOGRAPHIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CEMETERY

One of the most important issues raised by the Oleni Island cemetery is the problem of its origins and ethno-social functions.

In demographical terms, this burial ground represented a group of people by an order of magnitude larger than that represented by any contemporary camp-site in the Onega area. Apparently the cemetery was used by a population occupying a large territory, for example the coast of the Povenetskaia Bay (Guba), a place favoured by Mesolithic foragers, as evidenced by the high density of Mesolithic campsites; Oleni Island is situated near the entrance to the bay.

Undoubtedly the cemetery functioned over a period of several centuries. As of yet, however, little is known of its history. Currently it is possible to only formulate a hypothesis concerning the first burial that founded the cemetery. We proceed from the assumption that such a cemetery was founded under extraordinary circumstances, the first burial being a unique event.

This condition is completely met by burial No. 100. The burial, that of a sturdy middle-aged male, stands out from the others first and foremost by being vertical, but also by an unmatched richness of funerary goods. There were 500 artefacts scattered over the remains, totalling 1/15 of the entire collection (Figure 6). The burial is outstanding by other features as well, for example its early radiocarbon dating.



*Figure 6. Burial No. 100. Photo from the collections of the Museum of St. Petersburg's University.*

The appearance of the remains indicates that the body was intentionally exposed for looking. Indeed, not only the strict frontality of the upright figure, but also the position of the bigger semantically important artefacts (quiver with arrows and a large bone dagger with side inserts) is suggestive of aiming for visual effect (cf Figure 5).

The unusual construction of the grave (a long pit, large stones covering the body and separated from it by a thin layer of sand), and some ritual features, including a horizontal spot of ochre and artefacts near the mandible, indicate that offerings were made also some time after the burial. Possibly the grave was completely or, more likely, partly reopened on the face side for ritual purposes. That graves were indeed excavated by the Mesolithic people is beyond doubt: V. Ravdonikas has listed 13 instances where later burials were very skilfully made in earlier graves up to three times without disturbing the earlier buried (Ravdonikas 1940).

The general layout of the cemetery, as well as the fact that despite being densely arranged, graves do not overlap, implies that each grave was marked by some external sign, probably a wooden pole. In the case of burial No. 100, the most prestigious one, it must have been an especially large pole arranged parallel to the body. As the dead man became mythological in time, the pole, too, acquired anthropomorphic features and gained increasing symbolic significance. This, in fact, could be an explanation for the origins of monumental wooden idols, which were a feature of ancient cultures in the forest belt (Stoliar 1995b).

The necropolis, then, apparently was founded with the burial of a man of high status and authority. The unusual nature of his burial was intimately related to the emotional atmosphere of the “island of the dead”.

What was the ethnic and cultural context like in which this Mesolithic burial ground functioned?

In a way, the founding of this cemetery is connected with the spontaneous northward migration during the early Holocene and penetration into remote parts of the northern forest belt. Eventually some of the migrant groups settled along the coast of Povenetskaia



Guba. Most likely, these groups originally differed both genetically and culturally. By and by, however, between-group differences decreased due to a similar environment and adaptation strategies. The availability of water routes connecting all coastal habitations enhanced cultural homogeneity.

The crucial factor for the founding of the cemetery, however, was psychological. Life within the limited area of a single habitat in the harsh northern environment was monotonous, the need for social and ritual communication becoming even more pressing than utilitarian needs. The most effective and possibly the only means of relieving stress caused by the environment was provided by large-scale symbolic rituals. Abundant archaeological and ethnographical evidence suggests that rituals were inherent in most ancient cultures.

The need for an ideological centre, then, appears to have been the principal reason behind the emergence of a huge necropolis in a sparsely populated area. After all, the region was inhabited by human beings, whose descendants, the modern scholars, probably can not even imagine the strong emotions and anxieties caused by transition from nomadic to sedentary life in a new environment.

To cope with their emotional difficulties, the people of Povenetskaia Guba had to bridge a gap between their past and present. For this, the ancestor cult provided the most efficient means.

Establishing “the world of the dead” in the middle of the new homeland was tantamount to restoring Time that had gone “out of joint” during the long migration. All the peoples inhabiting the area had to join their efforts to accomplish the task. The cemetery, then, appears to be a piece of fossilized history.

The characteristic features of Oleni Island burial ground are suggestive of the Mesolithic Period when cemeteries assumed the role of ethno-cultural sacral centres. Notably, although both biological and cultural evidence indicates that a considerable degree of heterogeneity was present in the Oleni Island population, an integrated ritual sphere covered the entire region northeast of Onega.

The results of joint funerary activities were exclusively important. As Comte has put it, “the dead govern the living.” Indeed, by aug-

menting the world of the ancestors, the descendants of the dead were united by the mighty power of primitive logic.

The ritual sphere, then, provides a clue to understanding the mechanisms underlying the initial stage of the ethnic, cultural and linguistic history of the northern European populations. The crucial factor for ethnic contacts and the mergence of small human groups into ethnic units of a higher order was ideological, not economic.

The Neolithic level of human development is documented in the rock art of Karelia. Here we can see a striking contrast between their level of culture and the widespread view of this region as deeply backward and out-of-the-way. Indeed, as regards the approach in depicting man and his powerful social potential, Karelian rock art may in a sense be considered avant-garde.

## ROCK CARVINGS OF LAKE ONEGA

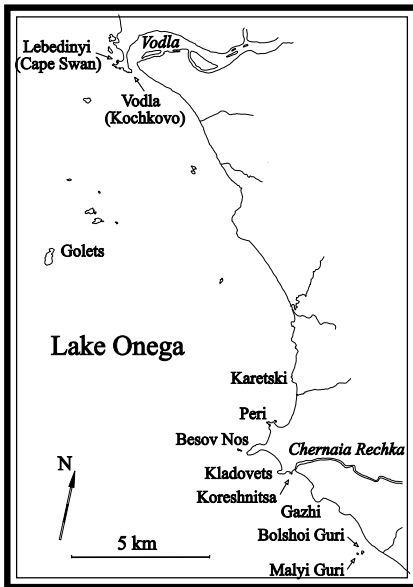


Figure 7. Petroglyph sites of Lake Onega (Poikalainen 1999).

The rock art of the eastern coast of Lake Onega (Figure 7) and the White Sea coast near the Vyg River mouth features prominently among the five major examples of Fennoscandian Neolithic “hunters’ art”. Along with features shared by the whole group, traits characteristic to each rock art “gallery” are becoming more and more distinct as more information is gained, evidencing the rich diversity of cultural progress in the ancient North.

### Research history and findings

Research into this monumental “chronicle in stone”, initiated before World War II by V.

Ravdonikas and A. Linevski and continued in the post-war decades by Y. Savvateev and others, gained new impetus in 1982–1996 with the activities of the international Society of Prehistoric Art (based in Estonia and headed by V. Poikalainen). Apart from revealing numerous previously unknown petroglyphs and two new groups in the Vodla River mouth, their research has resulted in considerable qualitative improvement of the relevant database (Poikalainen & Ernits 1998; Poikalainen 1994). I will presently use this database to attempt a historical interpretation of the available evidence. To do this, we will have to

- (a) trace the origins and evolution of the Lake Onega rock art within the context of the northern Neolithic;
- (b) analyse the ethno-cultural message of the lacustrine sanctuary;
- (c) discuss some hypotheses concerning the semantics of petroglyphs as such.

We will begin with the most significant ideographic composition, that of Cape Besov Nos.

The traditional scholarly approach toward Lake Onega rock art and petroglyphs in general has often proved erroneous. Indeed, most researchers seem to have started from the wrong place. They have somehow overlooked the primary goal of archaeological study: to reconstruct the history of each site as well as that of its subdivisions in as much detail as possible. In the case of the Cape Besov Nos, the petroglyphs have been often regarded just as they appear today, as a single unit rather than a mosaic of elements added over time.

However, as early as 1939, Linevski addressed the comparative chronology of the main figures on the rocks of Besov Nos, and his initiative should certainly be followed. Using the so-called “topographic method” or analysis of the arrangement of figures within the entire group with reference to details of natural relief, he has discovered that the three huge symbolic figures, hereafter referred to as the Triad, form a separate composition. Also, Linevski has proved that the central figure in the Triad, the so-called Devil (Russ. *Bes*), is the oldest, a concept conflicted with the traditional view (Linevski 1939).

Based on Linevski's approach we can try and assess the relative chronology of all the rock carvings in the Onega "gallery". The following criteria will be considered:

- (1) macro-topography of each promontory containing representations within the entire panorama of the east coast of Lake Onega;
- (2) micro-topography of each cluster of petroglyphs with special reference to the chronological sequence of overlapping or non-overlapping figures; and
- (3) proper archaeological principles.

Specifically, the first criterion implies assessment of the relative importance of each "hall" (promontory) in the geographical system of the entire rock "pantheon". In the second case, the likely temporal sequence of symbols in a single group is evaluated using the natural properties of the specific area, relationships with adjacent carvings, and height above the water level which provides the reference line for the early representations. Finally, archaeological considerations include finding Mesolithic prototypes for the large Triad and revealing synchronous parallels to later and smaller carvings among the flint figurines of mid-3rd and early 2nd millennia BC. The most impressive promontory in terms of macro-topography is Besov Nos, a 700-meter-long wedge jutting into the lake and dominating the entire coastal area stretching over several kilometres. On its point, the granite rocks rising above the rippling water bear ancient carvings. It is here that "the Sea of the Runes" seems to be closer than elsewhere, and its elemental might is so easy to feel.

### **Emergence and early history of the sanctuary**

With regard to micro-topography, the lower belt of the gently sloping surface of the bedrock (the inclination angle is below 20°) is occupied by the huge figures of the Triad: "Bes" (Russ. "devil") in the centre (2.46 m), "Otter" (2.56 m) on the left, and "Fish" (2.65 m) on the right. Clearly, the manner in which the monumental figures are arranged into a highly regular composition over an area of about 30 square metres indicates that the rock surface, lustrous and tobacco-brown due to the "desert tan", was absolutely clean and smooth before the figures were carved on it.

Moreover, the choice of place in the case of the Bes was apparently defined not so much by artistic or technical standards, as by ritual and semantic goals. As Linevski's observations demonstrate, the figure of Bes, apparently the first one to have been carved, is meticulously connected with tiny details of the rock relief. His trapezoid trunk, drawn *en face*, is divided in two symmetrical halves by a straight crack which is obviously older than the carving, and his face is placed in such a way that the mouth coincides with a smaller crack branching off the central one (Linevski 1939).

This highly sophisticated correspondence of the representation with its natural basis must have required a great deal of fantasy and experimentation. The result, however, was something more than merely an artistic achievement, since it embodied the idea of feeding the idol (the interpretation was first suggested by Linevski). A fish (apparently a sterlet) under Bes's right hand provides a clue as to what the ritual food might have been.

Both the idea of ritual feeding, the axial crack symbolizing the esophagus and thus ensuring a benevolent acceptance of any amount of food by the idol, and, even more importantly, the geometric stylisation of his body which resembles a wooden log, makes it likely that the representation derived from monumental anthropomorphic wooden sculptures (Figure 8). These were quite common in the Mesolithic and Neolithic cultures of the forest zone. Indeed, the tradition survived up to the recent centuries. Some wooden idols have preserved under favourable soil conditions in the Eastern Baltic area (Sarnate, Šventoji II, and other sites).

It now appears possible to trace the origin of the monumental anthropomorphic sculpture which often resulted from just a few strokes of the axe against the log, the treatment thus virtually symbolic. A clue is provided by the already mentioned unique burial No. 100 in the Mesolithic necropolis on Oleni Island, the one highly suggestive of ancestor cult as transferred to the new soil. We can thus see four stages in the evolution of a symbolic idea: (1) "natural sign" (vertical burial of a high-ranking man); (2) anthropomorphic symbol (pole) marking the burial on the surface; (3) wooden idol which had acquired its own significance; and finally (4) its petroglyphic "shadow" on the Onega rock. This semantics of the latter must certainly have reflected this genealogy.

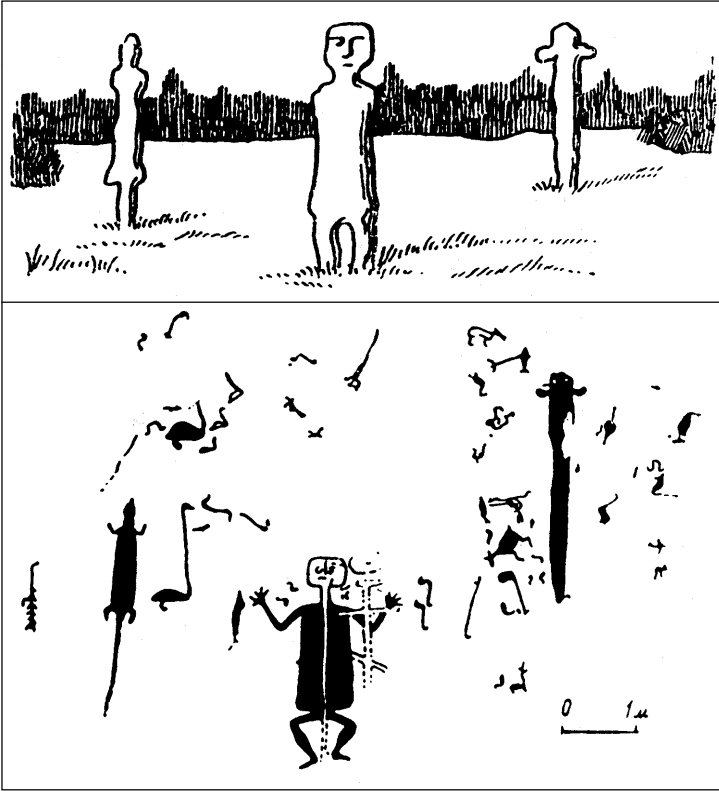


Figure 8. Wooden idols and their transformation into petroglyphs.

If the proposed reconstruction is correct, then the composition of the “Triad” must have derived from the typical structure of a forest sanctuary where widely spaced upright pole-shaped wooden idols standing in a row faced the worshippers approaching from one side. The fantasy of the Stone Age artists could hardly have spontaneously invented this “wide-angle” technique of arranging representations on a surface (the distance between the “Otter” and the large fish is 6 m). More likely, the impressive size of the three figures and the way in which they are arranged were suggested by the tradition of ritual wooden sculptures, being essentially its “petroglyphic translation” (Stoliar 1978). The idea of sculptural prototypes is further supported by the fact that a person standing near the bottom of the central drawing (Bes) is unable to view the entire Triad.



Figure 9. Primary figures on the western cape of Besov Nos.

All these considerations along with facts concerned with the carving technique (see below) apparently suffice to regard the Triad as the earliest composition in the Onega gallery (Figure 9). Its exact date of creation is quite difficult to establish, since the chronological boundaries of the Neolithic are too vague. Neither do fluctuations of the water level provide any precise date: according to the most probable estimates, the lower part of the slope, occupied by the “Triad”, was above the water from late 5th to early 2nd millennium BC.

One of the modern methods of absolute dating, however, has provided the missing information. Its use was facilitated by the fact that two Christian crosses, evidently carved in the 15th century, are present on the same site. Linevski suggested that comparing the amount of physical changes caused by solar radiation may be helpful in dating the carvings (Stoliar 1994b). In 1991, during the work of the international field seminar “Eclipse”, the Australian researcher R. Bednarik struck on the same idea (Bednarik 1992). His micro-analysis of samples of the two petroglyphs, Bes and the large cross overlapping it, has resulted in an absolute date for Bes – 2,000 BC.

This date, however, must be corrected as in the early 2nd millennium BC the Triad was submerged in the lake and was thus protected from radiation for more than 1,000 years. Adding this time span to Bednarik’s estimation, we arrive at mid- or late 4th millennium BC as the most plausible date.

Presently we will point at what appears to be a contradiction. The general tendency in the Onega “gallery” is that the earliest petroglyphs in each group correspond with the water level as it was in the respective period. Some carvings were apparently made when water was just 1–2 centimetres below. This, however, does not apply to Bes, whose feet are 46 cm above the normal water level, and even less so to the lateral figures of the Triad. This exception is easy to explain – since the Triad was the central group in the sanctuary, its role, too, must have been central. Importantly, the smaller representations surrounding the Triad are situated further away from the lake. So the space between Bes’s feet and the edge of the rock washed by water was where people taking part in rites stood. The higher position of the large fish and the Otter, as well as the large space separating all the three figures, was evidently also prompted by practical considerations, as the most “natural” way to arrange the standing people was a semi-circular row thus making it possible to ritually address each symbol.

The Triad is the key composition in the entire Onega gallery. Its characteristic features include the considerable size of the figures and, as established by R. Klimov in 1971–1974, the especially skilful and detailed fashion in which they were produced. The silhouettes were carved using a highly uniform percussion technique. Because the strokes were quite precise without being heavy, a most regular shallow surface with sharply defined borders has resulted. This technique, which possibly continued earlier artistic traditions, from drawing on the ground (geoglyphs) to painting or scratching on softer rock surfaces, ensured a representation that is virtually unaffected by time.

It appears that many petroglyphs in the upper part of the rock were destroyed (see below). Among the remaining ones, those resembling the Triad most closely in terms of technique are the following:

(a) the largest swan figure (disregarding the Vodla River mouth petroglyphs) in the main gallery, which is further referred to as Chernaia Rechka. It is immediately adjacent to the Otter, possibly providing a semantic counterpart to the underworld;



(b) a multi-figure profile composition to the left of the Otter, developing the same topos, possibly dating from the Late Archaic period, and depicting a succession of swimming swans, a man, and a boat (this ideogram will be tentatively interpreted below).

These additions, stylistically similar to the earlier petroglyphs, have apparently resulted from semantic and compositional enrichment, a process that occurred from late 4th to mid-3d millennium BC, over a span of 500–700 years within the initial period of the lacustrine sanctuary. According to the same criteria, the following petroglyphs may be attributed to the early group (Stoliar 1995a):

(c) Cape Peri-Nos III; two large solar symbols and the largest “staff” on the so-called “roof” (monolith exhibited at the Hermitage Museum) (Figure 10);

(d) Cape Peri-Nos VI: large symbols, solar and lunar, each accompanied by a long pole-shaped figure (“staff”) (Figure 11)

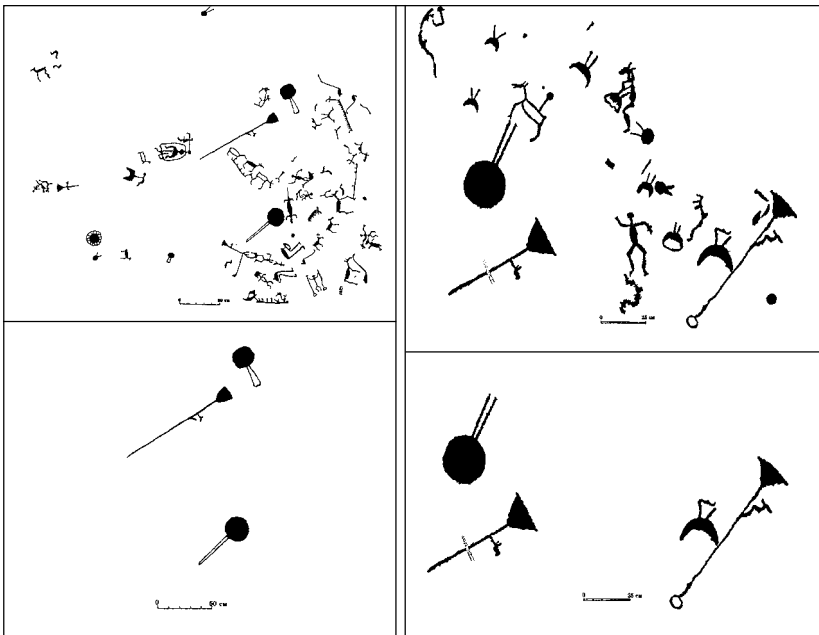


Figure 10 (left). Part of the site Peri III and its primary petroglyphs.

Figure 11 (right). The Peri VI site and its primary petroglyphs.

Notably, the prototypes of the staffs, long wooden rods (apparently primitive insignia) with side inserts shaped like elk heads and carved of antler, were found in burials of the Oleni Island cemetery, obviously those of the most important persons. Conclusive proof of the sacral relationship with the Mesolithic necropolis, a mythological abode of the ancestors situated in the “Land of the Descending Sun” behind “The Big Water”, is the fact that the “standard” staff of Peri Nos VI is directed right toward the Oleni Island situated 50 km away (Stoliar 1983). This may be taken to imply some very special state of the ancient mind. Like the anthropomorphic way in which the ancient crack on Besov Nos is treated, this demonstrates an unusual richness of ideological fantasy that had accumulated over the ages, the multitude and sophistication with which nature was spiritualised.

So the earliest group of Onega petroglyphs (up to 25 figures) included the formidable altar at Besov Nos and two of its “branches” with monumental symbols on adjacent capes of Peri Nos VI and III situated to the north, their maximal straight-line distance being 1,200 m.

These silhouettes, unusual in terms of size and location within the Besov Nos area, make up less than 3% of the entire number of representations in the Chernaia Rechka collection. They are much less numerous than the small figures with the average size of 25–30 cm and whose total number on Besov Nos is above 150 (over 800 in the entire area).

### **The sanctuary at its prime**

The duality of Besov Nos petroglyphs has, up to now, failed to attract the attention of scholars or prompt them to look for historical, ideological or artistic reasons underlying this differentiation. It seems, however, that the emergence of smaller figures was caused by a variety of radical changes evidently reflecting the tensing and complication in ethno-cultural processes. Nine new rock “halls” make their appearance on the capes along the 10 km long stretch of coast and on two islands. The huge scope of the Chernaia Rechka rock sanctuaries matches that of the more ancient Oleni Island cemetery, and they were both evidently used by the population of the entire area east of Onega. Most importantly, new topoi were intro-

duced, the most frequent ones being forest animals (elk, reindeer, bear), and old ones (birds and anthropomorphic symbols) were enriched. Rich multi-figure compositions appear, often acquiring the nature of complex ideograms in which solar and lunar symbols, reduced to the size of a badge, combine with animal and bird figures and with anthropo-zoomorphic images. Some carvings detach from the coastline and rise up the sloping rock. They were carved on grey granite-dabase, which provides a less favourable background and is also more liable to weathering.

All these changes can hardly be explained by an autochthonous evolutionary transformation of petroglyphic art. Rather, they mark a breach of continuity, an abrupt ideological shift caused by ethno-social factors. The reduction of figures by a factor of 10, 20, or even 25, appears to have occurred virtually instantaneously rather than being a gradual process lasting for centuries. In the same way, large symbols turned into small badges (this applies both to solar and lunar symbols and to “staffs”). The only exception are separate relatively large petroglyphs representing birds, who played the central role in the sanctuary, being the crucial elements in the concept of the world (see below).

What we observe here, then, is a mysterious contradiction, which is at first sight suggestive of a spontaneous and arbitrary nature of the artistic evolution. This agnostic interpretation, however, turns out to be absolutely erroneous when basic demands of historical analysis are met.

The isolationist concept of the petroglyphs, viewing each group of figures as something separate and independent both from other artistic forms and from everyday life, makes analysis necessarily abstract and formal. Generally, archaeological evidence very seldom provides a clue as to what were the specific events that constituted a historical process. In this case, the task of historical reconstruction has apparently been ignored altogether making it impossible to gain any idea of the context in which the petroglyphs were created.

It seems much more worthwhile to try and view petroglyphic art within the cultural and historical framework of that period. Specifically, much can be gained from addressing regional processes that

most likely coincided with the change of the artistic canon and the culmination of the Onega rock art. In this context, the petroglyphic revolution appears to have been an ideological corollary of a new ethno-cultural situation.

Indeed, the second half of the 3rd millennium BC was marked by a massive northward migration of Volosovo-Garino tribes from the forest part of the Volga Basin. The zone of their most intense settlement included the area southeast of Lake Onega and adjacent areas in Arkhangelsk Province'. Apart from a new archaeological culture, whose most distinctive feature was porous ceramics with vegetable admixture, the immigrants introduced new ideological and artistic motifs.

New ideology, in fact, was the main factor that enriched the cultural substratum, thus giving new impetus to the local petroglyphic tradition and bringing it to its peak. Although this interpretation with its proof has been available for half a century, it has not been

in common use: in as early as 1948, S. Zamiatnin made some highly insightful observations when he compared the unique flint sculpture of Volosovo Culture (anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines, solar and lunar symbols) with Karelian petroglyphs (Zamiatnin 1948). These parallels, which appear only in the Onega petroglyphs, and not in the White Sea ones, are indeed too striking to be random; neither can they be explained away with the synchrony of the phenomena (Figure 12). The similarities include highly specific representations, such as an animal carrying an astral symbol on its back. At present it is possible to identify some other no less complex im-



*Figure 12. Flint figurines from the Moscow National History Museum.*

ages (see below) rendered both in flint sculpture and, as it were, in its petroglyphic “shadow” on the Chernaia Rechka rocks.

Using all the available evidence it is possible to reconstruct some episodes in north-western Russia’s historical past. In the beginning of its second stage, the Onega rock sanctuary, developing both in time and space, assumed the role of an intercultural centre, a focus of ethnic and cultural interaction. The place had evidently turned into a melting-pot where seasonal festivals and rituals eventually resulted in a blend of the autochthonous culture with that introduced by the Volosovo immigrants. Social and ideological processes were stimulated both by the rapidly increasing population density and by the fact that the communities of the aborigines and the immigrants were close in terms of cultural development and thus “psychically interpenetrable”, to use Teilhard de Chardin’s expression. The ritual synthesis of ideological beliefs and ways of expressing them was most likely accompanied by actual hybridisation. That intertribal marriage rites accentuated the theme of childbirth is suggested by the petroglyphic associations of Peri Nos III and Karetski.

### **The final phase of the sanctuary**

The length of the second stage in the functioning of Chernaia Rechka petroglyphic association, when the development of the Onega rock art tradition attained culmination and became a stimulator of intercultural mixture, may be estimated at about 500 years. The decline of this monumental sanctuary was caused by natural factors, specifically the periodic transgression of Lake Onega, its maximum dating back to early 2nd millennium BC. The process was marked by the gradual rising higher of petroglyphs at Besov Nos, Kladvets, and Karetski above the water level, despite the fact that the grey granite provided a less contrasting background.

As the water level was rising, eventually reaching as high as 2 metres above the current water level, many petroglyphs were submerged, which must have inspired several generations of aborigines with awe. One can hardly imagine the amount of social energy that was wasted in futile attempts to oppose nature. These attempts are evidenced by a somewhat carelessly carved bird figure imitating the swan figure 0.7 m away, next to the Otter (cf Figure 8). Even more

importantly, at the upper end of Besov Nos platform, 4.7 m away from the head of the giant Otter belonging to the Triad, right on the line continuing its long axis, on a grey heavily weathered granite surface, the lower part of another Otter (length 69 cm) is present. An intentional face-to-face juxtaposition of two similar figures suggests that the weathered surface of the upper belt contained a full or partial replica of the Triad, likely its mirror image, opposing, as it were, the advancing water. This provides an answer to the question as to whether the Triad was still worshipped during the second stage, when the rock was covered with numerous smaller figures. The answer is yes, implying that the key ideological elements, fixed as visible symbols, persisted for a very long time indeed.

Using specific features of the slope in terms of relief and surface area, it was possible to resist the rising water, as evidenced by Kladovets, where the uppermost petroglyphs are situated 1.96 m above the modern water level (Poikalainen 1995), the main group at Besov Nos (2.33 m), and especially Karetski (2.56 m). Karetski, the northernmost cape near Chernaia Rechka, seems to be where the declining sanctuary was moved to. Later, a dramatic decision was reached to move it even further away, to some place elsewhere in the rocks, since the old one was apparently doomed.

Three capes of Vodla region were selected for that purpose: northern Lebediny (Cape Swan), southwestern Lebediny, and the cape near the Vodla River mouth, all of them situated about 16 km north of the principal petroglyphic gallery, on the right bank of the Vodla near the place where it flows into Lake Onega (Kochkovo) (cf Figure 2). The first step in this direction was taken when Karetski was still the focus of ritual activities, and the final decision concerning the change of address was likely prompted by the fact that the new locality was similar to the previous one – the new sanctuaries, too, were situated on capes north of the Chernaia Rechka near the place where it flows into the lake. Technological consideration, on the other hand, were given low priority, since all petroglyphs of the Vodla area were made on grey granite. In contrast to the Chernaia Rechka association, not a single figure here is situated lower than 1 m above the water, the highest ones 2.36–2.62 m.

Over 300 figures have been discovered in the Vodla rock sanctuary. The new collection differs from the Chernaia Rechka gallery in many

respects. Most importantly, bird outlines are quite numerous (66% of the total number of representations on Lebediny capes, and 60% in the Vodla River mouth). Many of them are quite large. The most striking example is the Vodla swan, 4.1 m high, which surpasses the figures of the Triad in size and is in fact the largest among the more than a thousand petroglyphs in the entire East Onega area (Poikalainen & Ernits 1998). The possible reason is that the removal of the sanctuary was preceded by a break in artistic activities resulting in a relaxation of standards. Overall, however, the ideological message of the three Vodla galleries appears to be the same as that of the Chernaia Rechka association. Moreover, it is accentuated and even hyperbolised here. The Vodla associations, then, should be viewed as the third, final stage in the development of the Onega rock art.

### Chronology and interpretations

Thus, as the “chronicle in stone” attests, the prehistoric past of the Onega area may be tentatively subdivided into three successive periods (Figure 13).

(1) Late 4th to mid 3rd millennia BC. A petroglyphic art centre emerged in the western Besov Nos, two of its smaller offshoots with large figures were founded on neighbouring promontories, Peri Nos VI and III. Possibly, Chernaia I, a nearby settlement on the right bank of the Chernaia Rechka River near its mouth, was abandoned by the same people who founded the sanctuary. The small cemetery on Cape Kladoverts may be the place where they buried their dead. If so, then we have some idea of both the material culture and the spiritual needs of this Neolithic population. Solar and lunar symbols, which are persistent topoi of petroglyphic art, may have been prompted by the magnificent view of the

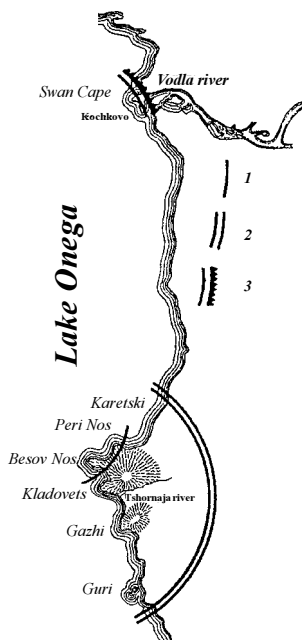


Figure 13. Development of Onega rock art site.

boundless lake above which the sun and the moon circled across the sky.

(2) Mid-3rd to early 2nd millennia BC. This was the period of explosive extension and enrichment of the sanctuary, which turned into a regional intercultural sacral centre. The connection with the settlement apparently disappeared, and the entire area, stretching at 10 km along the coastline, became the place where tribal rites and festivals were held. This highly dynamic development was evidently caused by the interaction of two ideologies: one created by the Onega aborigines, the other by the Volosovo-Garino immigrants. The corollary of this cultural mixture was that some images introduced from the forest Volga area and known from flint sculpture were mirrored in petroglyphic art. Their influence may also be seen in the diminished size of the petroglyphs, implying that the canon moved in the direction of smaller sculptural forms.

(3) Mid-2nd millennium BC. Due to the submerging of the principal groups of petroglyphs at Chernaia Rechka, the sanctuary was moved to the open rock platforms on capes near the Vodla River mouth, which were less favourable in terms of granite surfaces but were situated higher above the water level (the locations, nevertheless, resembled the previous ones at Besov Nos). The submergence of more and more petroglyphs was perceived as a dramatic event by several generations of the aborigines. Under these conditions, the process of cultural transmission was reduced, and the idea which was central in the development of the Chernaia Rechka tradition was emphasised: the animistic theory underlying the entire non-rational logic that was supposed to explain the meaning of life.

The above statements evidently need some proof. Travelling along the “sacred” places of the rocky area of Onega, one ultimately begins thinking about the semantics of the petroglyphs. This problem, in fact the first one which faced Grewingk and Shved, who discovered the rock art galleries at Besov Nos and Peri-Nos III, has received too little attention. Although recent studies abound in broad statements, the data related to the semantics of the petroglyphs are too meagre for a 150-year-old scholarly tradition.

Of course, the results are largely dependent on the paradigm on which the approach taken by the specific researcher is based. The



importance of these basic principles is seen from the long-standing dispute between the two key figures in the pre-war scholarship: A. Linevski and V. Ravdonikas. Both played a major role in petroglyphic studies since they linked Onega rock art with prehistoric antiquities of Europe.

Linevski, who usually based his judgments on logic, tended to see petroglyphic art as a true reflection of everyday life in all its details. Petroglyphs, he believed, were like photographs (Linevski 1939). This naive rationalistic approach was strongly opposed by Ravdonikas, who tried to base his ideas on philosophical postulates concerning primitive mind and the directions in which it allegedly evolved. He believed that the petroglyphs reflected life only insofar as the reflection was not distorted by specific features of human mentality at that time (Ravdonikas 1937a&b).

Indeed, by far not all aspects of real life were reproduced. Some highly important features were apparently ignored altogether. The most striking example is fish, which is represented in merely 0.2% of the petroglyphs despite being the main dietary component in the foraging population.

The discrepancy between the two scholars is also seen from the fact that one series of figures (over 150 so-called “signs”, or 13% of the



*Figure 14. Solar and lunar signs at the Peri VI site. Photo by V. Poikalainen.*

total number of petroglyphs) was interpreted as true-to-life pictures of traps (in fact identical with those in the Perm Museum) by Linevski, and as lunar and solar symbols by Ravdonikas (Figure 14). None of the two had any doubts concerning his interpretation. As the dispute is continuing nowadays, it is becoming obvious that truth was on Ravdonikas's side.

Clearly, although the general result of any specific study was defined by the writer's basic paradigm, further details depended on ethnographic or folklore parallels (Ernits 1990, 1994). While Linevski tended to make direct comparisons, Ravdonikas was oriented toward more abstract and generalized semantic identifications. The latter approach was continued by K. Laushkin, who based his analysis on the nuclear text of the *Kalevala* using the "bilingual method" (Laushkin 1962).

Despite the apparent polarity and intransigence of both traditions, they do have something in common. Indeed, the essence of both approaches was to project ideas suggested by ethnographic or folklore data upon ancient art. It was hoped that this projection would result in some sort of correspondence. Some parallels, however, appear to be spurious and may have been prompted by mere imagination. Also, the method is necessarily static and, even if the parallels were correct, it is impossible to examine the entire fantastic picture arising from the relationships between separate representations. The Triad at Besov Nos provides a rare exception, since it was in fact seen as a coherent composition and was associated with epic tales of the ancient North.

All the above may be illustrated by the widely held speculations concerning the religious beliefs associated with petroglyphic art. These include magic, totemism, solar and cosmic cult, and fertility cult, all of these allegedly referring only to animals, but not to man. Animism has almost never been mentioned, as though the idea was taboo. There was evidently only one exception: a passing remark in Ravdonikas' last publication concerning the animistic beliefs which appeared for just a short while before the final stage of the petroglyphic tradition (Ravdonikas 1956).

The possible reason underlying lack of attention toward animism is the persistent scholarly conviction that this irrational ideological

belief emerged quite late in cultural evolution (because it was allegedly too complex to be intelligible for the more primitive mind). That this reasoning is unwarranted may be seen from the Upper Palaeolithic data, clearly suggesting that the principal ideological system at that stage was animism. As we are going to see below, petroglyphic art, too, was based on the animistic worldview, and this applies to its all three developmental stages.

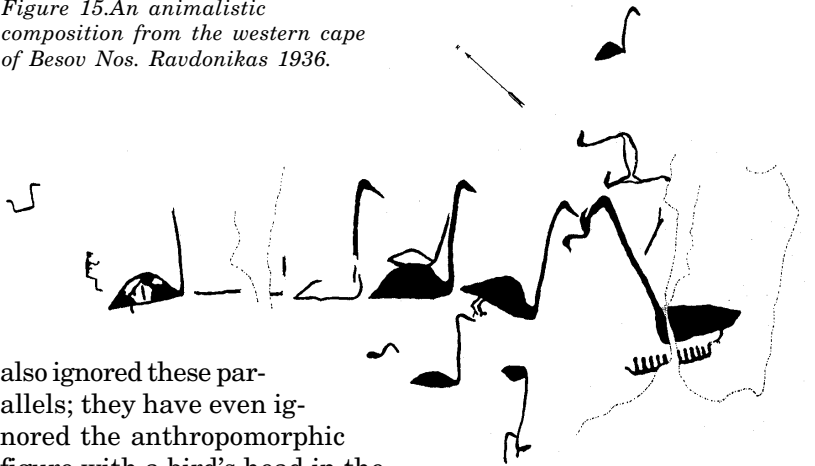
Our attempts at semantic interpretation are quite tentative; in fact, it does not even appear possible as yet to see in what way the petroglyphs reflect the Neolithic people's basic outlook on the world, let alone to trace their more specific beliefs. Two new elements of our approach, however, may stimulate further research. First, evidence concerning the development of the artistic canon should be linked with information on ethnic and cultural history of the region. Second, one should try and interpret entire compositions, each of which is a coherent entity, rather than separate petroglyphs.

Specifically, with regard to the first point, it is essential that the initial stages of the petroglyphic tradition are linked with the ideology of the Onega Mesolithic Period. This is especially relevant for Bes, which may be indirectly related to Mesolithic high-status burials, evidently attesting to the survivals of the ancestor cult.

The second point may be illustrated using the bird topos, the only one present in all groups of Onega petroglyphs. There are as many as 500 bird representations, 42% of the total number. They become more common toward the final stages, as evidenced by the three promontories in the Vodla mouth. Notably, however, not a single attempt at interpreting this motif has proved successful. Adherents of the "realistic" approach seemed to have no difficulties with it since Linevski and his followers, including N. Gurina, did not hesitate to link bird representations with the allegedly important role of bird hunting (Linevski 1939; Gurina 1956).

What they had failed to take into account, however, were numerous ethnographic and historical parallels pointing to the symbolic role of the bird in animistic myths explaining the world. Those who tried to interpret the famous circular composition on Bolshoi Guri Island, which has much in common with the topos of the world emerging out of the bird's egg, as described in the *Kalevala*, have

Figure 15. An animalistic composition from the western cape of Besov Nos. Ravidonikas 1936.



also ignored these parallels; they have even ignored the anthropomorphic figure with a bird's head in the western group of petroglyphs at Besov Nos (Figures 15 and 16).

It is especially paradoxical that the largely overlooked semantic clue for the bird representation is provided by the most salient rock composition of Besov Nos. The main part of this pictogram, situated to the left of the Otter in the Triad, consists of a file of large swans. The whole profile composition, arranged in a horizontal band suggestive of a coherent narrative plot, is the largest and perhaps the most informative one in the entire collection (Figure 15). It also contains representations of a man, his badge, a boat, and a tree. Being highly dynamic and symbolic, it evidently gives account of

the human soul (shown by a small column inside the body of the first swan on the left) liberated by death. Having passed along the whole file of birds, it falls (also in the form of a column) into a "boat of the dead" situated under the large swan on the right (Stoliar 1994d).



Figure 16. The typical motifs of humans, birds and boats in Onega rock art. Copy by V. Poikalainen.

If we assume that animistic beliefs are the logical and semantic basis of petroglyphic art, it is easy to understand the meaning of the late petroglyphic association in the

Vodla River mouth where bird representations are especially numerous and include a huge outline of a swan along with other large birds. The new sanctuary was the place for retaining the main symbols of the Neolithic religion and the “bank of souls”.

Was animism indeed the first ideology that motivated people to create the Onega sanctuary or did the sanctuary emerge later? Some evidence suggestive of similar, or maybe somewhat more elementary ideas can be gained from the Mesolithic Oleni Island cemetery, where 25 graves contained bones from those parts of the birds which served as their “natural symbols”. Bes, the principal character in the Chernaia Rechka pantheon, too, seems to have a soul, since some birds are shown near his mask. Finally, the largest and probably the earliest swan in this collection is found next to the Otter as its semantic opposite.

One may hope that further research would ultimately disclose some, although certainly not all, basic mental principles underlying petroglyphic art.

## **WHITE SEA PETROGLYPHS**

Neolithic petroglyphs on the islands of the Lower Vyg River, the White Sea coast, were discovered much later than those on the Onega Lake coast. Research into this group has followed a peculiar pattern.

The discoverer of the White Sea rock art was A. Linevski, who in 1926 struck upon a large group of figures carved on a rock in the northern part of Shoirukshin Island, the Vyg River, near the waterfall (he changed the vernacular name of this “gallery”, Chertovy Sledki, “Devil’s Footsteps” to Besovy Sledki, meaning the same but somewhat milder). Subsequently he discovered a number of similar petroglyphs on Yerpın Pudas Island, 400 m downstream (Linevski 1939).

Soon, Linevski’s brief publications appeared, prompting the arrival, in 1936, of a field team led by V. Ravdonikas. The results of the survey surpassed all expectations: besides thoroughly documenting the petroglyphs reported by Linevski, Ravdonikas discovered an

addition group of 68, south of those found earlier, and several previously unnoticed carvings on Yerpin Pudas. The most sensational find, however, was a huge petroglyphic panorama on Great Malinin Island, 1.5 km downstream from Shoirukshin, a work of art that has retained its significance as one of the monumental masterpieces created by the Neolithic hunters (Ravdonikas 1938).

The third event, both unexpected and highly important, was Savvateev's discovery made in 1963 (Savvateev 1970). Close to the Zalavruga site discovered by Ravdonikas, carved representations were found on a rock surface below the Neolithic cultural layer. In the course of five subsequent field seasons (1963–1968) the petroglyphs were unearthed: 26 separate groups occupying the surface area of 1 ha.

The total number of petroglyphs in all the associations, including the northern, central, and southern groups at Besovy Sledki and Yerpin Pudas (100), Old (Staraia) and New (Novaia) Zalavruga, and the three small nameless islands (37), is approximately 2,100. At least 100 compositions of varying complexity have been recognized (Figure 17).

According to Savvateev, the most common representation is that of boat. So far, 265 of these have been registered, and their "crews" amount to 1,000. Also, there are 294 human representations, 230 of forest animals (deer, elk, bear, etc.), and 152 of sea mammals (mostly beluga whales and seals) (Savvateyev 1994). Bird silhouettes, 152 in number, apparently have less abstract semantics than the "animistic" birds of the Onega sites. Simple abstract symbols (separate spots, lines, etc.), whose meaning is unknown, amount to 20% of the entire number of petroglyphs. These, too, are radically different from the lunar and solar symbols of Chernaia Rechka.

The petroglyphs are situated on a gently sloping (sometimes virtually horizontal) surface of the rock, 14–22 m above the modern sea level. The preferred background was lustrous brownish "desert tan".

The size of most figures is 20–50 cm, and the percussion technique is similar throughout the entire site, the depth of the depression being 1–3 mm. The entire sacral archipelago stretches for 1.5–2 km along the Vyg River. Notably, it is situated in the place where the

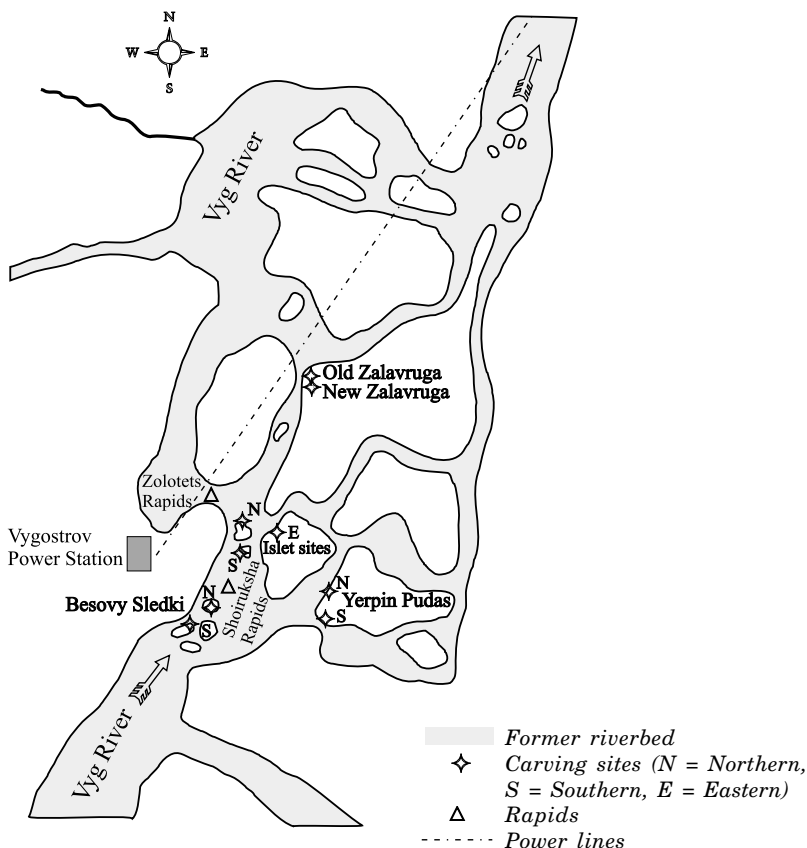


Figure 17. White Sea petroglyph sites at the mouth of the Vyg River. Poikalainen 1999.

sea mammal hunters used to set off for their dangerous sea trips to the unfriendly White Sea. Sea hunting was risky but it was the only occupation that enabled people to survive on the coast. Sixty pre-historic sites registered in the area attest to a population density that was considerable for forested Neolithic and enhanced intertribal relationships and ritual activities, including petroglyphic art (Savvateev 1977).

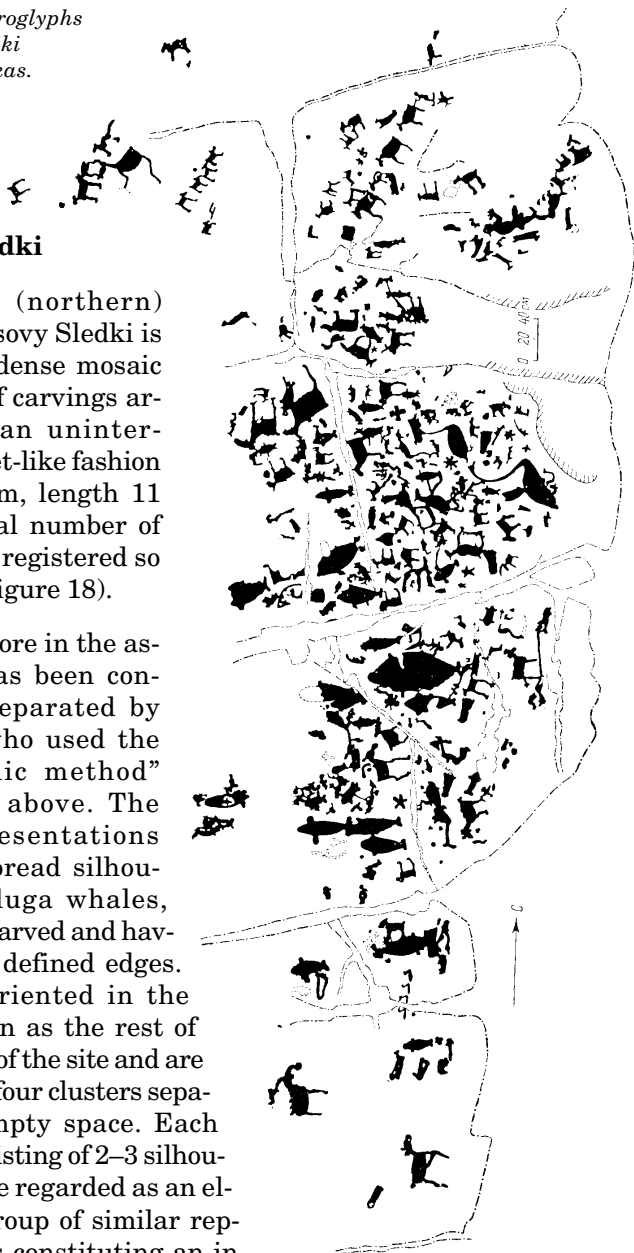
In the following, we will focus on the key sites of the White Sea petroglyphic centre: Besovy Sledki, Old and New Zalavruga.

Figure 18. Petroglyphs of Besovy Sledki after Ravdonikas.

## Besovy Sledki

The main (northern) group at Besovy Sledki is a 40 sq. m dense mosaic consisting of carvings arranged in an uninterrupted carpet-like fashion (breadth 4 m, length 11 m). The total number of petroglyphs registered so far is 470 (Figure 18).

The initial core in the association has been convincingly separated by Linevski, who used the "topographic method" mentioned above. The first representations were the spread silhouettes of beluga whales, thoroughly carved and having sharply defined edges. They are oriented in the same fashion as the rest of petroglyphs of the site and are arranged in four clusters separated by empty space. Each cluster, consisting of 2–3 silhouettes, may be regarded as an elementary group of similar representations constituting an independent ritual unit.





Large silhouettes of beluga whales are inscribed in a 5 m long band situated parallel to the water level, implying that here, like in the Onega area, the water surface functioned as a horizon, a reference line in relation to which the earliest representations were arranged. This level is stressed by seven “footprints” which were made later and are arranged, in a dot-line fashion running toward the anthropomorphic Bes.

The earliest clusters of beluga whale silhouettes lying perpendicular to the reference line were, in a sense, strung on the transverse axis. Adding the same standard element resulted in a simple band-type composition that was expanding as more and more figures were added. This type of composition, then, may be described as a discrete, homogeneous cluster-band type.

Topographic criteria make it possible to separate early petroglyphs in the most ancient core area of Besovy Sledki. They include a unique pair of large swans northeast of the band of beluga whales, and the Bes in the northern part of the platform: a figure of roughly the same size, presenting the third, anthropomorphic, local centre in the structure of the northern group (Stoliar 1977).

The history of the gallery terminated with an apparently prolonged period of covering the rock surface with numerous small silhouettes (forest animals, boats, footprints, and various symbols). At the northernmost periphery of the area is a profile-band composition depicting a skier chasing four elks, rather sophisticated in terms of artistry and possibly synchronous with the latest representations at Old Zalavruga.

### **Zalavruga Ia – Old Zalavruga**

This huge petroglyphic “hall” situated on a sloping bedrock is distinct in its highly complex compositions. These works of petroglyphic art attest not merely to a century-long evolution of artistic practices, but, most importantly, to the scope of mythological thinking underlying them.

The first thing to be noted is that the association is divided into two parts which are widely different in terms of topoi, size of figures, and artistic techniques: the central part, occupying about 60 sq. m



*Figure 19. Petroglyphs of Old Zalavruga after Ravdonikas.*

(64 figures), and the peripheral cluster with 126 figures including 55 human representations (Figure 19). Topographic criteria suggest that the peripheral part is the later one. Here, on the large north-eastern slope spatially separated from the water, numerous small compositions and separate figures were added after the main granite dome had been covered with bands of monumental representations.

The central part of Old Zalavruga (Zalavruga Ia) is evidently the result of creative activities of several generations. Its layout is made up of several large profile-band compositions, each consisting of a succession of reiterating figures made in a highly sophisticated fashion and arranged without interdistances. This type of composition is best described as a coherent homogenous profile-band.

Since representations of deer and boats are strictly profile, the direction of movement is easily seen despite the fact that figures are static. Moreover, the direction is the same not only within each band, but in all of them.

Four bands of that type have been discovered at Old Zalavruga. Two of them, situated in the southern part, depict rows of wild reindeer converging at an angle and mark the western and southern borders of the granite rock from the water side. In the centre of the composition, two more bands are inscribed: a row of large boats with many people inside, and, partly overlapping with them, three extremely large reindeers.

Evaluating the relative age of these compositions is a difficult issue. In only a few instances can the partial overlap of representations be used as a criterium, like in the case of two huge deer overlapping with the last boats in the flotilla (Ravdonikas' observations). Any judgment as to which of the bands are earlier and which are later, are largely hypothetical. Apart from topographic evidence, clues are sometimes provided by artistic features, such as the tendency of animal figures to become larger with time.

The following creation sequence appears to be the most likely: (a) most deers in the western row and the main part of the southern row that was adjoined in an angle-like fashion shortly after the western row had been completed; (b) a chain-like succession of boats starting from the rightmost one leading the flotilla; (c) the sixth, considerably enlarged deer in the western band, and the small skier chasing it (he is six times smaller than the animal); (d) the first (right) 2.5 m long deer, the central one in the composition, and two larger ones (2.8 m each); and (e) a series of final additions standing out of the principal association, mostly small anthropomorphic and other figures, sometimes apparently belonging to compositions.

On the whole, Zalavruga Ia exemplifies the development of the cumulative principle of arranging representations, from mere stringing to a more complex fashion, culminating in the integration of separate topoi, when bands representing different themes were united into a single narration-like context. These are indeed full-fledged compositions in a modern sense, a complex outcome of artistic and mental integration.

### **Zalavruga Ib – peripheral part of Old Zalavruga**

This part presents a striking contrast to the Zalavruga Ia in its lack of monumental bands and the radical diminution of figures which

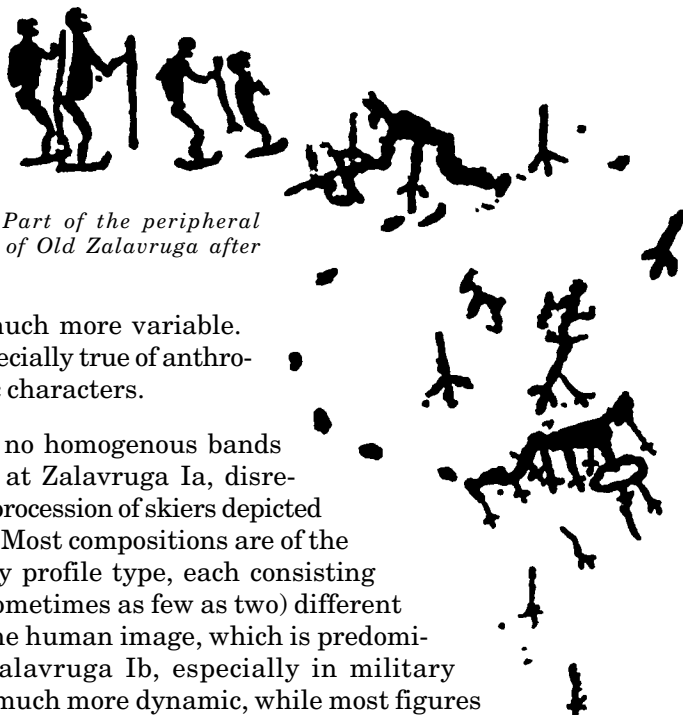


Figure 20. Part of the peripheral petroglyphs of Old Zalavruga after Ravdonikas.

are also much more variable. This is especially true of anthropomorphic characters.

There are no homogenous bands like those at Zalavruga Ia, disregarding a procession of skiers depicted in motion. Most compositions are of the elementary profile type, each consisting of a few (sometimes as few as two) different figures. The human image, which is predominant in Zalavruga Ib, especially in military scenes, is much more dynamic, while most figures

of animals remain static (Figure 20). The man chasing the deer has “grown up” and become commensurate with the animal. The human image, then, is no longer subjected to a sort of “discrimination” seen in Zalavruga Ia (Figure 21).

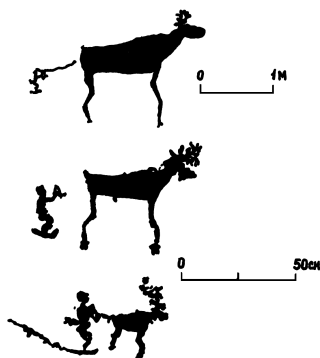


Figure 21. The dynamics of human and elk representations: a – in the early developmental phase; b – in the central phase; c – in the final phase.

The variety of small representations typical of Zalavruga Ib are notably different from the mosaic pattern of Besovy Sledki. Each scene is to some extent independent and can be perceived as a separate unit. Their abundance is suggestive of some vestigial custom. Although the ideological atmosphere is different, the sanctuary must have still retained some of its

old ritual meaning, which was the reason why numerous new petroglyphs were crowded onto the remaining peripheral space of the same sacred rock in Zalavruga.

Overall, Zalavruga Ib, which is genetically related to Zalavruga Ia, gives evidence of the transformation of earlier canons and is peripheral only in terms of location, not of artistic message.

## Zalavruga II – New Zalavruga

This exceptionally rich site, discovered and studied by Y. Savvateev, marks the final point in the entire creative evolution of petroglyphs and contains the most mature works of Neolithic art (Savvateev 1983).

The petroglyphs of Zalavruga II, similar to those of Zalavruga Ib in scope, are arranged in several clusters 15–20 m apart. Distance from the coast has increased to 60 m, thus expanding the area of the sanctuary. The compositions at Zalavruga II are masterpieces depicting events developing in time. The peak of this artistic tradition is seen in the famous hunting scene with three skiers (group IV) (Figure 22). The choice of place is of crucial importance here,

*Figure 22. Part of the New Zalavruga hunting scene after Savvateev.*



implying that esthetical criteria might have influenced ritual ones, resulting in the sacralisation of a certain part of the rock surface.

Silhouettes are still in profile, and there are about 90 compositions, consisting on the average of twenty figures, and the human image is still more active while animals are as static as ever. The distinctive feature of these complex profile compositions is that figures (most importantly, those of humans

and animals) are commensurate, techniques are more sophisticated, and narrative details, which were just hinted at in Zalavruga I (ski-tracks, ski poles, and weapons shown in the winter hunting panorama) are more elaborated. Notably, new topoi are introduced, such as collective sea hunting. The human image is also more individualised than before: each of the three skiers in the composition mentioned above has his own features. All these facts attest to some radical and avant-garde tendencies which largely replaced the rigid schematism of previous ages.

### **Developmental phases and their interpretations**

Structural and topographic analysis, then, has revealed a succession of four stages in the compositional development: (a) the core petroglyphs at Besovy Sledki; (b) Zalavruga Ia, (c) Zalavruga Ib; and (d) Zalavruga II. All four stages are linked by an entirely logical line of compositional development. Additional proof is provided by the way forest hunting is depicted. The obvious conclusion is that all the sites together should be viewed as a unitary collection which, in contrast to the Onega gallery, evolved spontaneously without having been subjected to external influences.

Also, distinct turning points are distinguishable in compositional development; Zalavruga Ia and Zalavruga Ib are separate entities, each representing a certain ideological and artistic stage. In the first case, we observe a tendency toward extreme exaggeration of ethno-cultural symbols (successions of animals, flotillas of boats), apparently reflecting a sort of defence response caused by some ideological shift. At Zalavruga Ib, a variety of completely new elements appear, dominating among them is the image of man in action. Hunting and apparently military scenes are quite dynamic. This dramatic change of artistic atmosphere and the new accent on military imagery suggest that something extraordinary must have happened. We should bear in mind that Linevski, who was admittedly somewhat literal-minded, interpreted these compositions as “memorial records” and a reflection of intertribal conflicts.

In contrast to “isolationist” theories that viewed the evolution of petroglyphic art as a purely autochthonous process, one should once again turn to the migration of Volosovo-Garino people in the late 3rd millennium BC. It appears that its northernmost wave, as at-

tested by numerous finds of porous ceramics and the miniature flint figurines, was especially powerful. However, unlike in the Onega area, relationships between the immigrants and the locals were apparently antagonistic (Stoliar 1994c). This could have been due to a number of factors including competition for food, the belligerence of sea hunters, and possibly the linguistic barrier. Rather than enriching the petroglyphic tradition, this antagonism caused psychological conflicts. Ultimately, however, the rejection of the immigrant culture, too, contributed to the artistic development of petroglyphs and in some way made the human image more important.

Accepting the hypothesis of a relationship between certain events in the history of the White Sea coast and petroglyphic art, one can explore certain possibilities of dating the rock art. It is commonly accepted that the petroglyphs in the core area of Besovy Sledki are the earliest. As to other groups of petroglyphs on Great Malinin Island, Savateev, to whom we owe most of our knowledge of this group, believes that New Zalavruga is earlier than Old Zalavruga; however, in this article we have presented evidence in favour of the opposite view.

Savvateev (1970; 1977; 1983; Savvateyev 1994) was uncertain with regard to the chronology of separate groups. In 1970, he expressed the view that the chronological limits were narrow, but in 1977 he claimed that the petroglyphs may have spanned across a period of 1,500 years. Despite the availability of various dating techniques (pollen analysis, paleogeography, radiocarbon, and archaeological finds from numerous sites), the issue is still unresolved due to contradicting data (Arkheologia 1996: 145–146).

Indeed, very little can be said on the issue. In broad terms, petroglyphic art dates back to the 4th and 3rd millennia BC, and there are reasons to believe that it was practiced during a long period of time. It may also be speculated that the White Sea petroglyphs predate the Onega ones, but this cannot be proven at present. Such uncertainty makes it especially rewarding to address archaeological data which have not yet been used for dating purposes. Specifically, it may be attempted to link abrupt changes in petroglyphic depiction with certain events reconstructed from archaeological evidence. One of these was the migration of Volosovo-

Garino people to the White Sea area in the second half of the 3rd millennium BC; Zalavruga Ia, and especially Zalavruga Ib, do seem to coincide with this event. If so, New Zalavruga (Zalavruga II) must be dated to the late 3rd – early 2nd millennium BC. The Volosovo-Garino migration, then, could be used as a reference point for both petroglyphic centres: Onega and the White Sea.

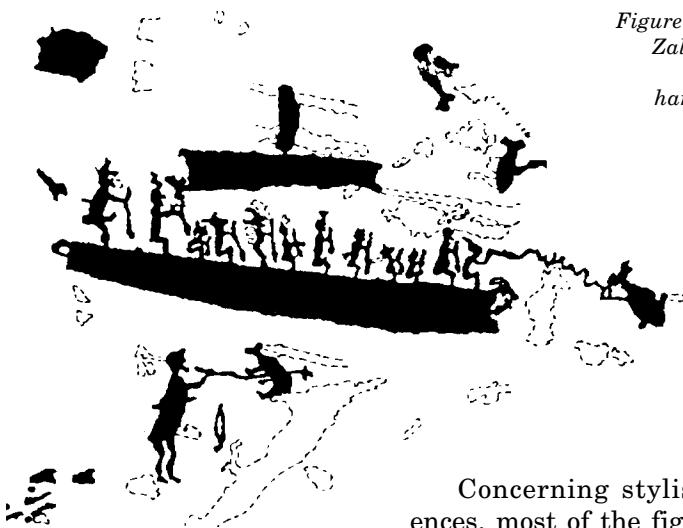
## COMPARISON OF ROCK ART AREAS

If this assumption is correct, it is no longer possible to speak of a unite Karelian petroglyphic art since both centres evolved largely independently and, moreover, responded to the same migration in a totally different way. Indeed, similarities between them turn out to be superficial. Although in both areas, petroglyphs tend to concentrate near the water level, topographic context was different, rendering their perception different as well. While petroglyphic representations in the White Sea area formed a closed sacral archipelago, the Onega area (Chernaia Rechka) is a 10 km long amphitheatre-like stretch of coast facing the lake and open skies.

The same applies to representations of boats with similar (animalistic) rostra. They differ not just in terms of construction (which is quite understandable) but in semantic terms as well, since they apparently express opposite ideas (“boats of the dead” in Onega versus almost true to life representations of actual boats used by the people at Zalavruga II). The same applies to bird representations of the White Sea – they should be viewed as just birds, not animalistic symbols, like in the Onega galleries. Their depiction, too, is different: abstract astral signs in Chernaia Rechka (about 100) versus elementary ones (dots, spots, dashes) probably denoting specific actions, on the White Sea.

While some of the Onega symbols are inscribed in silhouettes of animals, no such cases have been registered in the White Sea sites. Unlike the abstract and fantastic ideograms representing the developed stage of the Onega pantheon (those at Karetski Nos, for example), the compositions seen at New Zalavruga are quite realistic. Sea hunting scenes and figures of skiers are common in the White Sea area, but absent in Onega. The frequency of human figures is very different in the two centres.





*Figure 23. The New Zalavruga scene depicting the harpooning of a whale after Savvateev.*

Concerning stylistic differences, most of the figures of the White Sea collection are dynamic profile silhouettes. People are depicted in groups, in contrast to the Onega sites, where most human figures are single (except a few cases where sexual intercourse is depicted). While most human figures in Onega are of roughly the same size (except the earliest ones in the Triad at Besov Nos), a progressive increase in their dimensions is seen in the White Sea area where “micro-skiers” of Zalavruga Ia were gradually replaced by larger and larger figures, the latest of which are commensurate with the figures of the chased animals (cf Figure 21).

Weapons, clothing, and headgear are shown in detail, and humans depicted at Zalavruga II have certain features of individuality. As more and more attention was given to the human image in the sea hunting scenes in the White Sea centre, men were no longer being regarded as just crew members. While early human representations are mere dashes sticking out of the boats, as in a flotilla at Zalavruga Ia, the latest ones (New Zalavruga) are full-length silhouettes which are especially expressive in the beluga whale hunting scene in group IV and which evidently represented specific recognizable individuals (Figure 23).

These differences are all the more significant because they attest to dissimilar ideological attitudes, possibly accentuated by the specific environmental context of each sanctuary. The White Sea col-

lection focuses on hunting (both sea and forest) magic while paying less attention to animistic and astral motifs; some of the compositions possibly represent initiation rites. This seems to be especially true of the already mentioned whale hunting scene in group IV which seems to be quite realistic in showing people taking part in the rite and apparently guided by a mentor (cf Figure 23).

The general conclusion based on the comparison of both associations is that they are vastly dissimilar in terms of abstraction, generalization, relative importance of the emotional and the logical, and, ultimately, in the entire ideological background. Notably, Ravdonikas (1937a&b), proceeding from the archaeological theory of the pre-war era, attributed these centres to different stages in the evolution of the primitive mind: magical (White Sea) and cosmic (Onega).

What, then, was the principal cause underlying the profound differences between these two examples of northern European Neolithic art created by two groups of foraging people? The White Sea site is situated in the taiga belt. Paradoxically, the harsh environment was favourable for the people who had managed to occupy this unique niche, because sea hunting (and possibly wild reindeer hunting) was quite productive. Population density must have been rather high, making life more intense. Hunting was a powerful generator of emotions, which resulted in hunting scenes, both actual and ritual, represented in petroglyphic art. The range of motifs in the White Sea centre is not as wide as in the Onega region, possibly due to the seasonality of hunting rites (specifically, spring festivals may have been celebrated in the Onega area but not on the White Sea coast).

Other factors must have been involved as well. The radically different ways in which the two human groups responded to the same historic event (Volosovo-Garino migration) suggest that the inhabitants of the two regions, White Sea and Onega, may have belonged to different ethnic groups, possibly proto-Saami and proto-Finnish, respectively.

However, all these differences notwithstanding, the ultimate socio-cultural mission of the two sanctuaries was basically similar. For the first time, the idea of man as a social force came to the foreground. The tribal proto-hero in whom this idea materialized was

possibly Väinämöinen's forerunner. No less importantly, seasonal festivals held near the petroglyphic sanctuaries stimulated inter-tribal contacts and thus served as catalysts for ethnogenetic processes.

## CONCLUSION

Scholars who have long been studying the earliest stages of human occupation in northern European Russia (territories north of Saint-Petersburg) have faced numerous difficulties. In the early 1700s, isolated artefacts found in the Ladoga area were regarded as just rarities. In the 19th century, more of these were collected by N. Butenev, E. Eichwald, and especially I. Poliakov in Olonets Province. Only a few sites had been discovered; most remained hidden in the dense forest and marshlands. Also, certain ill-founded views concerning the antiquity of human population in the area prevented scholars from intensifying the search.

Vorso's work *Northern Antiquities*, dealing with Scandinavian archaeology and translated into Russian, as well as von Baer's authoritative views concerning the allegedly late date of man's penetration in the region (from Siberia, as he believed), chilled the scholars' hopes to discover early cultures in the region.

Basically the first serious attempt at revealing traces of prehistoric human settlement in the Russian North was made by A. Inostrantsev, who worked on the southern coast of Ladoga in 1878–1882 and tried to implement geological methodology in his excavations. In late 19th century, however, even these fundamental studies were just an episode, because in the 1880s the focus of research had shifted to kurgan (burial mound) cultures of South Russia.

In 1922, archaeological research in Karelia was resumed, and more Holocene sites were discovered. On the theoretical level, however, there was little if any progress. The predominant view was that the late Stone Age cultures of Karelia and adjacent circumpolar areas were backward, archaic, and conservative, and had introduced virtually no ideological innovations. The North versus South dichotomy was sharpened by the concept of Neolithic Revolution, a theory that tended to consider only economical progress. Four important dis-

coveries made in the area shortly before World War II had had wide implications:

- 1) the “Arctic Paleolithic” of the Barents coast,
- 2) the huge Oleni Island (South Reindeer Island) burial ground,
- 3) monumental petroglyphic “galleries” of east Onega
- 4) the White Sea (the Vyg River mouth) petroglyphs.

In fact, it is only now that their actual role has become quite evident. The significance of the “Arctic Paleolithic” is that northern Fennoscandia and the Kola peninsula are now seen to have been populated at the same time. It is somewhat less evident that Oleni Island burial ground, whose chronological attribution (at Filatova’s initiative) required about 50 years, is the key site representing the developed Mesolithic Period and highly important for assessing ideological features of that period.

Finally, the widely known petroglyphic art of Karelia marks one of the highest points in human development in the Neolithic and, as such, is relevant not merely for northern Eurasian foraging societies but for cultural history in general. The principal idea manifested in them is the separation of the human theme resulting in the emergence of the archetypical image of the tribal hero. Against this background, several specific issues are seen, evidencing ethnic and possibly linguistic complexity of both the Onega and the White Sea populations.

These four associations form a chronological sequence from the early Mesolithic Period to the final Neolithic. Despite having some common characteristics, they cannot be arranged into a regular evolutionary succession. More likely, they were separated by large chronological gaps and represented mere episodes in the largely unknown social and cultural history of the region, sometimes reflecting ideological shifts, such as the transition from the wooden idols to their petroglyphic “shadows”.

The so-called “Arctic Paleolithic” of Kola (before 10,000 BP), now redefined as early Mesolithic Period, was apparently influenced by the century-long process of initial population of the region by numerous small migrant groups and their subsequent adaptation to the extremely harsh environment.

Several millennia later, when ethnic, social, and cultural processes intensified, the tradition was carried on by people represented by Oleni Island burial ground. Collective burial rites were performed here by various groups evidently inhabiting the coast around Povenetskaia Guba. These rites, focusing on the ancestor cult, provided the ideological basis for ethno-cultural processes.

In the Neolithic (approximately 4,000–3,000 BC), contacts between human populations became even more intense (according to D. Bubrikh, this was a prerequisite for the formation of ethnic entities), largely due to ideology. The social integration of aboriginal and migrant groups was catalysed by mythological assimilation, as evidenced in the petroglyphic sites.

Unlike Oleni Island burial ground which, apart from being a sanctuary, had to serve practical purposes, the function of petroglyphic galleries was purely ritual. Indeed, their purpose was to transcend the narrow limits imposed on the collective mind of people living in small isolated groups and to provide a broad idea of the universe – recall the numerous lunar and solar symbols carved on the rocks of Peri Nos. The principal image, however, that dominated the entire semantic system, was that of man.

Karelian petroglyphic galleries, like their counterparts in Norway (Vingen and Alta) and Sweden (Nämforsen), have long ago been recognised as outstanding examples of prehistoric art (cf Figure 1). Their historical mission, however, was largely overlooked.

To abandon the traditional view of petroglyphs as mere drawings, one should turn to the ideas of V. Vemadski and P. Teilhard de Chardin concerning the spiritual essence of the human phenomenon.

The present state of archaeological theory is rather similar to that of late 19th century “paleoethnography” with its dogmas placing researchers “halfway to truth”, to use Teilhard’s expression. Indeed, archaeology put too much emphasis on material evolution and tended to disregard the second, crucial aspect: social mentality. Recently this bias has become even more pronounced due to the influential theory of “Neolithic Revolution” which implies that the progressive South surpassed the allegedly backward North in all respects.

Neolithic Fennoscandia, however, makes one disagree (not altogether readily, though) with this respectable piece of scholarly folklore. Indeed, the huge petroglyphic galleries are much like prehistoric cathedrals whose functions were numerous and reflected all the ethno-cultural dynamics of that era, including inter-cultural contacts between previously isolated and possibly linguistically diverse groups. Ideology, not economy, seems to have provided the basis for ethnic and cultural integration (Stoliar 1994a). Emotionally charged rituals, regularly held in petroglyphic sanctuaries on different occasions, e.g. inter-tribal marriages, catalysed integrative processes which turned the mosaic pattern of human populations into a single large community. Certain recent traditional festivals, including the Amur bear festival, the Nganasan Light Day, and the Saami Karasiok, seem to be relics of these prehistoric rituals. Their main purpose is the same: to maintain ethnic integrity. The integrative element is especially evident in the Onega gallery (see above). I believe that the ideological function was largely the same throughout the entire northern Eurasian forest belt. The principal features of ethnic processes in these regions, then, must have been similar as well.

Another thing worth being noted is that many petroglyphic representations are semantically incomplete. They were apparently being continuously supplemented with details and linked with adjacent figures through creative efforts full of sacral meaning. These galleries may indeed be viewed as the ancient artists' workshops.

The general conclusion is that the Karelian Neolithic, which followed the powerful ideological tradition of the Oleni Island burial ground under conditions of a more advanced foraging economy, made a significant contribution to human cultural integration and progress. The Stone Age people of the Russian North discovered their own pathway of spiritual evolution, possibly an avant-garde one.

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