

Rock Painting Sites in Finland

Archaeological Excavations and Underwater Investigations

At the time of this writing (2006), over 120 rock-painting sites are known of in Finland. These paintings were originally made on barren rock faces situated perpendicular to a body of water in front of them. Despite changes caused by land uplift, most of these paintings are still directly adjacent to water. For obvious reasons, normal archaeological excavations cannot be carried out in the areas next to the paintings, but there have been underwater investigations in locations in front of a number of painted rock faces.

The first archaeological excavations at a rock-painting site were carried out at Lake Juusjärvi in Kirkkonummi, west of Helsinki. This was the second rock painting discovered in Finland. The soil layer in front of the rock face was very thin with no observable cultural layer, and the excavations did not reveal any finds.

The history of discovering the third known rock painting in Finland is interesting. When the Juusjärvi painting was found in 1963, it and the Vitträsk rock painting, discovered in 1911 also at Kirkkonummi, were widely featured in the press. Sculptor Keijo Koistinen of Lappeenranta in East Finland concluded that there must also be rock paintings in the Lake Saimaa region, Finland's largest lacustrine area. He began to search for these paintings, and in 1966 he discovered a rock

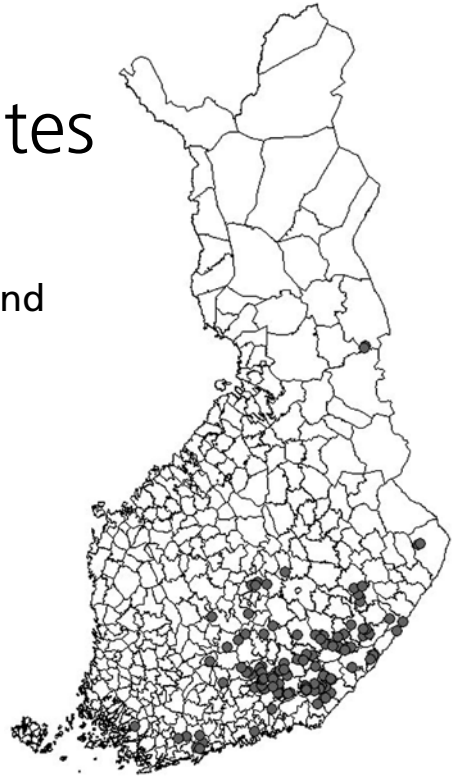


Fig. 1: Rock paintings in Finland in 2006.

painting at Valkeisaari in Taipalsaari. This, however, was not enough for the artist, who was convinced that there had to be an offering site somewhere nearby. He set out to look for a suitable large rock that he felt may have served as an "altar" or offering place. On a lower terrace next to the rock face and approximately 35 metres from the painted area, Koistinen found a flat rock that was to his liking. He turned it over and picked from the sooty soil underneath it twelve sherds of Early Metal Period textile-impressed ceramics, three flint flakes and a small natural stone with three holes (National Museum of Finland (NM) 17040:1-3). The potsherds date from 1900-500 BC. In 1970 an archaeological excavation was conducted at this site, but there were no finds (Luho 1971, 7). Traces of red ochre were later noted on the rock face near the location of Koistinen's finds,

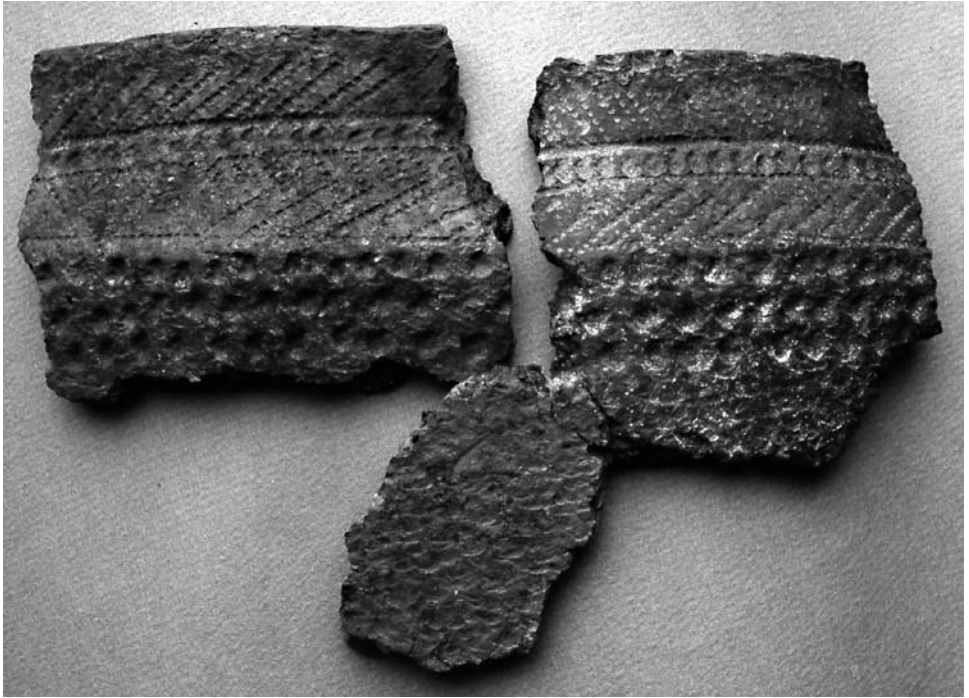


Fig. 2. Textile-impressed ceramics discovered next to the Valkeisaari painting in Taipalsaari. Photo: National Board of Antiquities / Ritva Bäckman 1998.

but they did not reveal any distinct design or pattern (Kivikäs 1995, 151). Excavations were carried out at the site again in 2005, and more potsherds (NM 35202), quartz and mostly unburnt bone fragments were discovered (Lahelma in press.). Most of Finland's prehistoric rock paintings date from the Comb Ware Period (5000-3200 BC), and the youngest ones may be from ca. 2000 BC. The objects discovered in front of the rock face are thus clearly later than the paintings. The possible association of the finds with visits to the painting site remains an unsolved question for the time being.

In 1968, when the Astuvansalmi rock painting at Ristiina was documented, a trial trench 15 metres long and 1-2 metres wide was excavated in a terrace area front of the rock face. At the west end of the excavated area immediately next to the rock a slate arrowhead, (NM 17363:1) dating from the end of the Stone Age (Äyräpää 1950, 22), was

discovered in a layer of unmixed soil. A fragment of an even-based quartz arrowhead (NM 17363:2) was found near the middle section of the painted part of rock face. (Sarvas 1969, 28-29). Its shape suggests a dating to the Early Metal Period, ca. 1900-600 BC (Carpelan 2003, 48).

Artefacts have also been found in the area in front of the large rock-painting site at Saraakallio in Laukaa. A fragment of an even-based arrowhead of a dark, porphyric rock type (NM 21774) was recovered as a stray find from the terrace in front of paintings. The retouch of the base and sides is distinctly visible. A fragment of a small artefact (17 x 15 x 5 mm) was found at the location in 1982, having been revealed by rain from among the roots of a tree.

In 1993 a small piece of flint (NM 27906) was discovered on the terrace of the rock face among sand and gravel. This item, however,



Fig. 3. The slate arrowhead and the fragment of a quartz arrowhead found near the Astuvansalmi rock face. Photo: National Board of Antiquities / Ritva Bäckman 1998. (Left)

Fig. 4. The fragment of a arrowhead and a piece of flint found in front of the Saraakallio painting in Laukaa. Photo: National Board of Antiquities / Markku Haverinen 2002. (Below)



is most probably not Stone Age flint but so-called tinder flint of a later date.

Archaeological excavations have later been carried out at four other rock-painting sites (Löppösenluola in Valkeala, Syrjäsalmi at Puumala and Kalamaniemi and Ievasvuori in Luumäki), but none of them have revealed any finds. In addition, the flat rock area above the painted rock face at Astuvansalmi was investigated in 1992, but this excavation also did not produce any finds.

Investigations in front of the Haukkavuori rock-painting site at Iitti in 1973 fall between archaeological excavation and actual underwater investigations. Lake-bottom ore and the bones and teeth of animals were dug from the lake bottom at Haukkavuori at a depth of approximately one metre. The bones are presumably those of a young European elk that died in the early autumn. (Ojonen 1974, 43). The bone material was

radiocarbon-dated to 3300 ± 100 BP (1900 cal BC).

Underwater diving investigations

The first underwater investigation by divers was conducted at the Astuvansalmi site in 1973, though without any finds. The second investigation of this kind followed in 1975 on the river bottom in front of the Verla rock painting in Valkeala. Verla is Finland's only rock painting at a rapids location. The investigations at Verla did not reveal any finds. If small artefacts had been sacrificed in the waters in front of the painted rock face, the strong current of the river would most probably have moved them downstream (Miettinen 2000, 125).

In 1984, underwater excavations were carried out in front of the Värrikallio rock painting in Suomussalmi. Alongside the above-mentioned Astuvansalmi rock painting in Ristiina



Fig. 5. The Haukkavuori painting in Iitti. Photo: National Board of Antiquities / Helena Taskinen 2003.

and Saraakallio in Laukaa, Väräkallio is one of Finland's largest rock-painting sites, and investigations of the adjoining area are of particular interest. Experienced skin-divers who had worked at shipwreck sites participated in the work.

At Väräkallio, the rock face continues down to the lake bottom, descending steeply but with level and more gently sloping areas in places. From the middle part of the rock face to the southeast end of its painted part the rock face continues perpendicularly underwater to a depth of approximately six metres, where it reaches the relatively flat bottom. At the north-west end, however, there are two "shelves" 0.5 – 2 metres wide containing stone fragments and boulders that have weathered and become dislodged from the rock face. In the investigations, the shelf formations were inspected at the locations of the paintings and to a width of 5-6 metres on both sides. The loose material found on them was sieved. There were, however, no finds of prehistoric artefacts. (Kehusmaa 1984). Investigations were continued at the site in 1992, when the suitability of the lake

bottom for a later underwater excavation was determined. A detailed map of the lake bottom was also prepared with the aid of echo sounding.

This additional fieldwork suggests that it would be well founded and possible to carry out an underwater archaeological excavation on the lake bottom in front of the rock face at Väräkallio. This, however, is a highly challenging task, requiring the services of experienced divers. Visibility is poor owing to the humus content of the lake and there are large branches on the bottom from a depth of eight metres onwards. They would have to be cleared before any underwater pumping of the bottom sediments could come under way. The areas suitable for excavation are at the very foot of the painted rock face and 2-3 metres outward from an observation platform built in front of the painting (Grönhagen 1994, 15). It has not yet been possible to carry out the excavations.

Although none of the first diving investigations at rock painting sites revealed any finds, there was nonetheless great inter-



Fig. 6. The Väräkallio painting in Suomussalmi. Photo: National Board of Antiquities / Helena Taskinen 1999.

est in fieldwork in such locations. In 1985, the Department of Maritime History of the National Board of Antiquities carried out an inspection of the lake bottom in front of the Astuvansalmi rock painting. It was noted in this connection that the only way to obtain any results was to conduct an underwater excavation by pumping material from the lake-bottom terraces in front of the painting area. In 1988, the Savonlinna Provincial Museum carried out underwater excavations lasting a week at the site with the assistance of skin-divers. The work was conducted in an area approximately 15 metres long. Owing to a mud layer in places up to two metres thick and rocks and boulders on the bottom, an area of roughly 11 square metres was excavated at a depth of 4.5 to 6 metres. There were no finds even on this occasion. Fieldwork in the area in front of the painting continued in 1990. On the last day of the excavation the deepest part of the excavated area on the lake bottom revealed an amber pendant with a human face (NM 25771) at a depth of almost nine metres. This golden-brown translucent pendant has a curving crown of the head, brow ridges, a

Fig. 6a. The Väräkallio rock painting panel. (Detail). The colour has been made stronger by the computer. Photo: National Board of Antiquities / Ismo Luukkonen 2003.





Fig. 7. The Astuvansalmi painting in Ristiina. Photo: National Board of Antiquities / Helena Taskinen 1998.



nose, mouth and chin. There is a drilled hole in the neck part, the pendant having been worn on a strap around the neck with the head pointing downwards, but when taken into the hand it faced the viewer rightside-up. There are only minor marks of wear on the surface of the piece. The pendant is approximately 25mm long, 14 mm wide and 9 mm thick. (Grönhagen 1991, 74).



Fig. 8 and 9. The amber pendant with human face (NM 25771) and the same in profile. Photos: National Board of Antiquities / Ritva Bäckman 1998.

This remarkable find of an amber pendant provided the incentive to continue investigations in the following summer. An undefined sandstone artefact (NM 26331:3) was found at a depth of 1.5 metres right at the water-line. The most interesting artefacts were recovered near the location of the amber pendant found during the previous summer. Less than a metre from this location a small piece of bone (NM 26331:4) and an expressive amber pendant with a human face measuring 32 x 12 x 13.7 mm were recovered. The finds also included the face part

of a third similar pendant (NM 26331:2) that had broken into at least three pieces. The first-mentioned amber pendant is oblong, with the sides polished to a smooth finish. There is a shaped representation of a human

Fig.7a. The Astuvansalmi rock painting panel. (Detail). Photo: National Board of Antiquities / Ismo Luukkonen 2001.

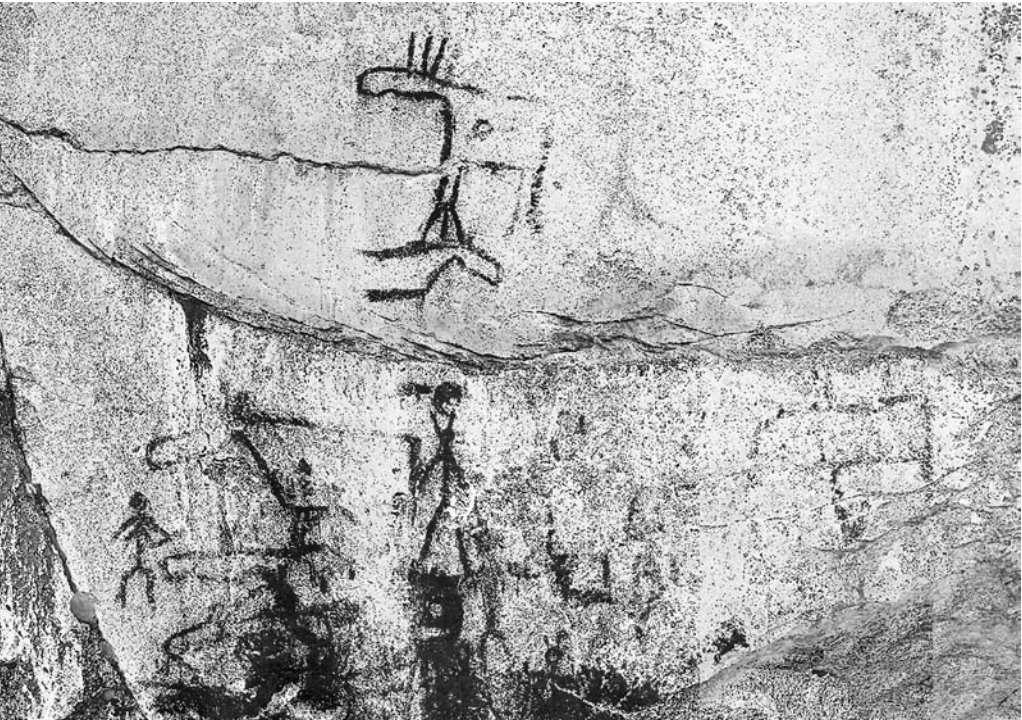




Fig. 10. Human figures at the Juusjärvi rock painting.
Photo: National Board of Antiquities / Ismo Luukkonen 2001.

face on the sharp corner of the piece, clearly displaying eye sockets under the brow ridges, a nose, lips, mouth and chin. On the left side near the eye sockets there are possible signs of an ear. The drilled hole beneath the dimple in the chin has become wider on the face side. The amber of this piece is less translucent than in the other amber pendants from Astuvansalmi. The pendant that was broken into three pieces measures 16.2 x 5.5 mm. This artefact presumably also had a drilled transverse hole permitting it to be suspended. When the excavation site was being cleared that summer, the fragment of the antler of a young wild reindeer (NM 26331:5) was also found. There were marks of it having been worked at one end. (Grönhagen 1994, 8-9)

The fieldwork at Astuvansalmi continued in the summer of 1992, when an amber artefact (NM 27146) was found at a depth of over 11 metres on the lake bottom under a

layer of mud approximately 60 cm thick. The left side of the head shown in the object is carefully polished to a smooth finish, and the natural form of the amber piece was followed when shaping it. The artefact is 34 mm long, 18 mm high and 11 mm wide. All the artefacts and objects discovered in the previous fieldwork seasons came from within a roughly one-metre radius of the same pit. This last amber artefact from Astuvansalmi was instead found approximately four metres from the location of the other pieces. (Grönhagen 1994, 11-12).

The most recent underwater investigations have been carried out on the lake bottom at the Lake Verijärvi rock painting in Mikkeli in 1996 and 1998 (Kivikäs 1999, 13, 58). Finds consisted of split stones and boulders with red ochre, which is, however, most apparently of natural origin. The surface of the painted rock face at Lake Verijärvi is rough and highly prone to cleavage, and pieces from it have fallen into the water. No artefacts or other finds were encountered in the fieldwork.

In Finland, amber pendants are dated to the late stages of the Comb Ware Culture, mainly to the period of so-called Typical Comb Ware, i.e. 3900-3400 BC. The dating of the artefacts is also in agreement with the age assigned to the rock paintings of Astuvansalmi. According to the history of the Lake Saimaa water system, the top parts of the outcrop of bedrock at Astuvansalmi were barely above water level when Ancient Lake Saimaa formed a new discharge channel through the River Vuoksi around 4000 BC. In reality, however, the paintings could only have been made when the water level had sunk by roughly 2.5 metres owing to the new discharge channel. It took approximately 1,000 years for the waters to descend to the level of the terrace in front of the painted area. Of the two arrowhead fragments from the site, the even-based one is clearly from the period subsequent to the paintings. This dating also applies to a similar arrowhead fragment from Saraakallio in Laukaa.

Amber pendants with representations of human faces are highly rare in the Finnish Stone

Age material. In addition to the finds from Astuvansalmi, only four other artefacts of this kind are known. One is a stray find from the Karelian Isthmus which formerly belonged to Finland (Metsäpirtti, NM 1922:392), one is from a red ochre grave at the Kukkaroski site at Lieto near Turku (NM 19727:481; Torvinen 1978, 42, 56) and two others are dwelling-site finds. Of the latter, one is a stray find from a site in Satakunta (Kaunismäki, Kiikoinen, NM 27105:1) and the other was found in an ancient hut-floor in the excavation of a dwelling site in North Karelia (Laavussuo, Outokumpu, NM 29556:1581). Apart from these artefacts, the Stone Age material from Finland includes only three other stone or wooden artefacts with human faces (the so-called wooden idol of Pohja NM 3481:1, a perforated axe from Kiuruvesi NM 11708 and a shaped flint piece from Virolahti KM 15329:27). In addition there are clay effigies that represent humans. The discovery of three amber pendants with representations of human faces in the same location at Astuvansalmi shows that it was an exceptionally important site.

Present studies show that the rock painting locations were generally not offering sites.

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Astuvansalmi in Ristiina and Haukkavuori in Iitti were exceptions. The human profile shape of the rock face at Astuvansalmi presumably made it more important than other rock-painting sites and imbued with greater spiritual significance. It is no random occurrence that extremely rare amber pendants marked with human faces were sacrificed in the waters in front of it. The finds of amber and arrowheads bear witness the long use of the site and its exceptionally great importance.

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