

## ‘Noble death’, images of violence in the rock art of the White Sea

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### INTRODUCTION

The creation of rock art was an effective way of keeping memory alive in the Neolithic. By carving images, by returning to the same locations over and over again and carving more, by performing rituals or simply reminiscing about events or retelling the stories carved into the rocks, memories were kept alive over thousands of years around the White Sea in north-western Russia. Using contemporary vocabulary in trying to categorise what this rock art is all about, I suggest it is a monument, whose location as a cultural marker in a very tangible way defines landscape. By carving the rocks the local community or communities committed events, people and ideas to cultural and social memory. The long term perspective offered by rock art allows us to look at these events, people and ideas as active elements, and sometimes as an agency that shapes *hard* and *soft* memory (Etkind 2004).

The ideas of hard and soft memory were introduced by Etkind (2004) in his study of cultural memory in Russia and Germany. In Etkind’s formulation, hard memory is related to monuments and soft memory to text. Etkind proposes that these two forms can either be exclusive, ‘monuments without inscription are mute, whereas texts without monuments are ephemeral’, or they can strengthen each other (Etkind 2004, 40). In the case of the rock art I suggest they complement each other, since in the first instance rock art is based on non-verbal communication relying on visual narratives that convey the story through looking rather than reading (Janik 1999). Such an interpretation of rock art gives a voice to the images and allows the monument to communicate the stories in a way independent from other forms of message. At the same time, the monument/rock art enhances and complements other types of story telling, social or ritual communication and interaction.

In this paper, I concentrate on the memory of violence, in a situation where hard memory is exclusive to one particular site among a number of locations, and where soft memory undergoes transformation of what is carved. In such a way the monument and the memories embedded in it were culturally and socially active over the long term, while the carvings were ‘rewritten’ by subsequent generations of carvers.

## THE MONUMENT

The carvings of the White Sea are found at 14 distinct locations in north-western Russia (Figure 3.1). In this paper, however, I concentrate on depictions that are only found at the Zalavruga site (Janik 2010). Zalavruga is historically divided into two parts: Old and New. Old Zalavruga was recorded for the first time by Ravdanikas and his team in 1936 (Ravdanikas 1938), while later investigations led to the discovery of New Zalavruga (Savvateev 1970; Lubanova 2007; Janik 2010). Overall more than 2200 images have been recorded at Zalavruga. Their chronology has been established on the basis of correlations between the isostatic changes in the levels of the White Sea and C14 dating of particular locations above sea level, which indicate that the carvings were created made between *c.* 4495–2080 cal BC (5625–4001 BP) (Janik 2010). These images thus provide us with the opportunity to study from a long term perspective the embedding of hard and soft memory on the rock surfaces.

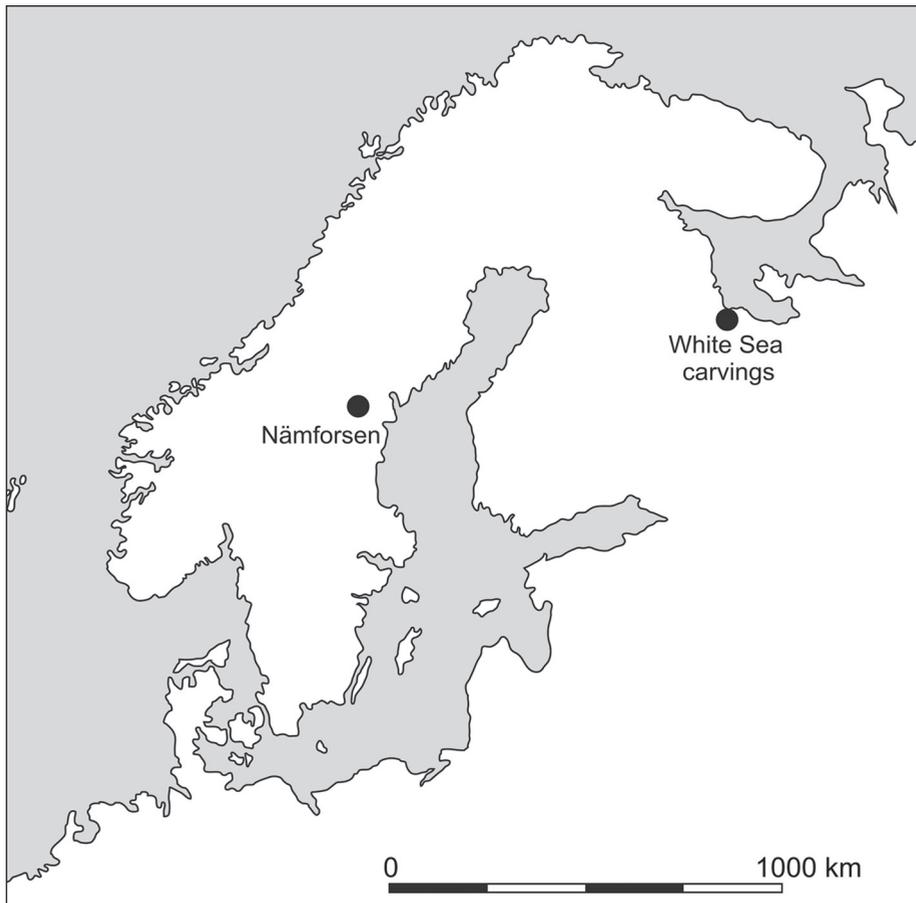


Figure 3.1: Location of the White Sea Carvings.

## VIOLENCE AND WARFARE

Violence and warfare were discussed in the context of the White Sea carvings as early as 1939 by Linevskij (Figure 3.2). He was the first archaeologist to conduct recording and field work in this region. Linevskij (1939) proposed that the carvings today known as Old Zalavruga show scenes of warlike conflict between land and sea communities. This interpretation of the carvings is framed within a classical understanding of war as a conflict between two distinct groups: ‘a state of armed conflict between different countries or different groups within a country; a state of competition or hostility between different people or groups’ (Oxford Dictionaries).

The best known example of rock art depicting war is from the Spanish Levant (Beltran 1982; Osgood *et al.* 2000; Nash 2005). The Castellón carvings were at first dated to the Mesolithic but were later reclassified as Neolithic. These examples can also be understood as representations of acts of vendetta or feuds rather than expressions of war, other forms of organised violence (Christiansen 2004). Warfare is first evidenced in the archaeological literature in accounts of skeletal remains exhibiting injuries indicating a violent cause of death from the Palaeolithic in Europe and Africa. To these we can add the account of grave 179 from Zvejnieki (Latvia), dating to the Early Neolithic, although at this time communities living in this region still relied on a food procuring rather than a food producing economy. Grave 179 was a dual burial of a female and a male who ‘had injuries: punctures in pelvis and lumbar vertebrae, and a flint flake lodged in one of the lumbar vertebrae. In the opinion of the palaeopathologist Vilis Derums, the injuries had been inflicted with considerable force, since they had left traces in dense hard bones’ (Zagorskis 2004, 81).

Acts of violence in the rock art of Northern Europe are best known from the Bronze Age, where we can see contests being conducted between men. They fight with axes, spears or clubs, the scenes take place on land or on boats (Coles 1990; Osgood *et al.* 2000; Harding 2007). In some scenes, interpreted as representations of hunting, we can see two archers holding bows with arrows pointed at each other (Coles 1990, 33, 61). Harding suggests that Bronze Age scenes reflect ritual combat rather than actual acts of violence:

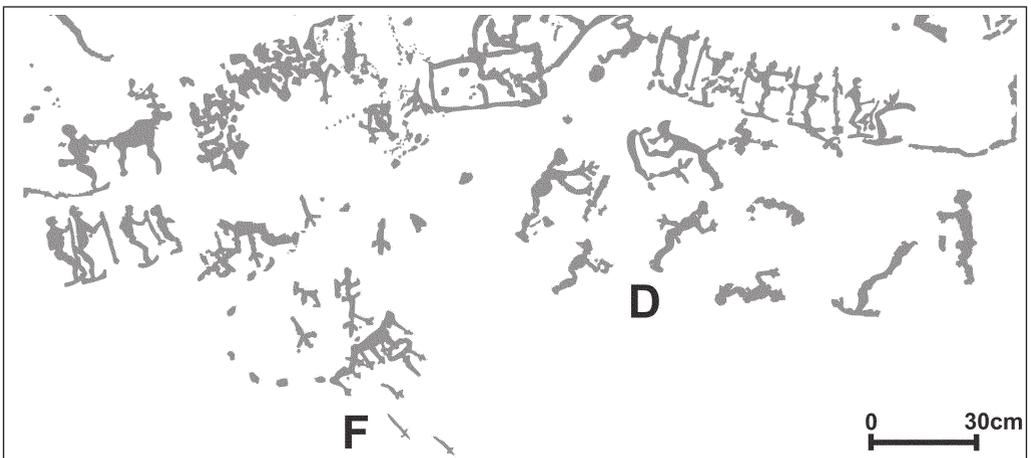


Figure 3.2: Representation of war like combat with depictions F and D (adjusted after Savvateev 1970).

*'The brandished weapons never seem actually to be striking the opponent, just waved in the air. Swords are implied by the scabbards that are frequently depicted hanging by the waist, but swords themselves are rarely depicted, and never in action. Vanquished or dead victims are not shown'* (Harding 2007, 116–17).

As I will present below, the acts of violence in the White Sea rock art differ dramatically in that we do see the injured, though this does not necessarily mean that we are witnessing representations of real combat.

The stress on looking for acts of violence and warfare is a part of the contemporary paradigm in archaeology (Armit *et al.* 2007). As Thorpe (2003; 2005) has shown in several publications, however, the expression and presence of violence differs through time and space, and is culturally specific: '*historical contingency would reject any of the unified theories ... in favour of the examination of the particular circumstances of each conflict, and indeed, of each example of the lack of conflict*' (Thorpe 2005, 6). Following such an approach I will provide an interpretation of the White Sea art that opens up the possibility of violence as a symbolic act that transcends the boundary between humans and animals, and moves us on from regarding the violence depicted as an expression of fighting for resources or control over particular territory (Sipilä and Lahelma 2007). As in most cases of archaeological enquiry, the depictions I will discuss do not have analogies in prehistoric or historical data. Rare Palaeolithic depictions show human-like figures struck by some kind of projectiles, although it is often difficult to be certain about what kind of projectiles they are, or whether they are lines symbolising other unknown entities entering or exiting the body (Guilaine and Zammit 2005, 54, fig. 10). Depictions of violence towards animals is also sporadic, even though it is more frequent than towards humans. The person causing injury to the animal is never seen, and the animal does not appear to be in distress. Leroi-Gourhan (1968), and following him Guilaine and Zammit (2005, 53) take this as an indication of ritualised violence. Ritualised violence may provide a way to look at the depictions from the White Sea, but the circumstances of what and how it is being depicted is unique to this region.

### *Injury-inflicting tools*

Let us return to Linevskij's (1939) description of warlike combat centred on one image depicting an injured individual, resembling a pin-cushion, i.e. stuck full with apparently sharp objects, the type of injury on which I focus in this article. First, however, I will summarise what we know about the types of tools that were used to inflict injuries.

Type of tools used to cause injuries known from the archaeological record can be divided into two categories: those indicated by the wounds found on skeletal remains and those depicted in rock art. The latter have been described by Chapman (1999) as tool-weapons, as they can perform other functions, such as hunting tools, as well as causing injury to other humans. As I demonstrate below, these tool-weapons are of vital importance in looking at the injured.

In the White Sea region the preservation of bones is very poor. Therefore it is impossible to infer the injuries inflicted in acts of violence based on skeletal data. This leaves us with the second way to look at the cause of injuries: through the depictions in the rock art itself. When considering the type of tool-weapons used in inflicting injuries on humans, it is striking that only one implement is depicted in the White Sea region, namely the bow

and arrow. This is in marked contrast to the iconography of the North European Bronze Age, which depicts a number of types of weapons employed in ritual violence.

It has been proposed, on the basis of arrowhead morphology and the technology that allowed the attachment of flint barbs into arrow shafts, that archery dates from the end of the Palaeolithic (Guilaine and Zammit 2005). The earliest remains of bows and arrow shafts date to about 11,000 years ago (Insulander 2002). One of the best

examples of Mesolithic bows come from Vis I (Russia) and is dated to between 8000 and 7000 years ago (Burov 1989, Guilaine and Zammit 2005). The bows from Vis I differ in length from short bows *c.* 55cm long to large bows, 250–350cm in length. Guilaine and Zammit (2005) compare the large bows to Maglemosian bows similar in size found in Denmark, dating to between nine and ten thousand years ago. They also point out that the length of these bows does not differ from the depictions of majority of bows in Spanish Levantine rock art. The White Sea bows are not as long, and some look flexible, suggesting technologically advanced two-wood or composite bows (Figure 3.3) (Insulander 2002). Such composite bows would be used to release arrows perhaps up to a distance of 889m, the record attributed to Turkish Ottoman archers in 1789. Even if we half this distance assuming that neither the technology, skilfulness nor materials used in prehistory were as advanced, it is possible that arrows could still be shot over distances of up to half a kilometre. Not all the bows depicted in the White Sea rock art are two-wood or composite bows, some being the so-called self or simple bows (Figure 3.4). The depictions of the use of the bows in the rock art suggest a relatively short range. The space between the person who releases the arrow and the person who is struck is usually very short, possibly indicating a particular relationship between the ‘slayer’ and the ‘slayed’. In most cases, however, we do not see the ‘slayer’.

There are no other tool-weapons depicted in the White Sea carvings other

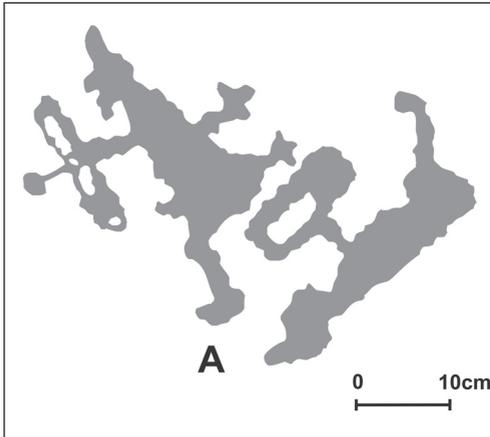


Figure 3.3: The image of a human with arrows in the back, depiction A (adjusted after Savvateev 1970).

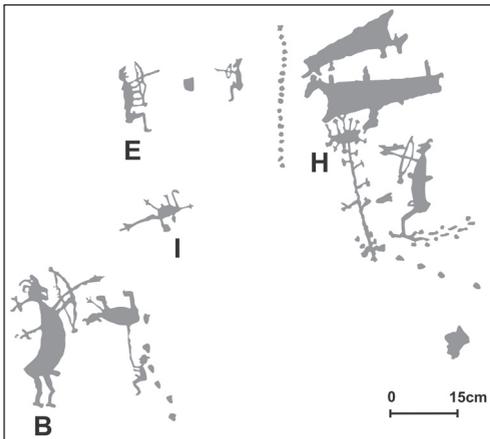


Figure 3.4: The image of a human with arrows in the back, depiction B; representation of ‘pin-cushion’ human, depiction E; representations of ‘pin-cushion’ non-humans, depictions H and I (adjusted after Savvateev 1970).

than bows and arrows. Images of clubs are linked with individuals taking part in processions or in boats. There is just one scene that might depict fighting with the fists, but this could equally be the depiction of some sort of embrace.

Looking again at the composition considered by Linevskij (1939) as an illustration of war, the image of the person struck by a number of arrows is compelling. Furthermore, on the right of this image we see a number of humans with arrows lodged in their bodies. What we see in this composition are two types of injuries: one showing arrows piercing the individual concerned in the back; the second depicting something resembling a human 'pin-cushion' (Figure 3.2).

#### ACTS OF MEMORY AND IMAGES: SOFT MEMORY AND TIME

##### *Humans with the arrow/s in their backs*

The depiction of the first type of injury looks stylised (Table 3.1). The legs of individuals with arrow/s lodged in their backs can be straight as in a standing position, or with knees bent as if sitting but with the chair removed (e.g., Figure 3.4). The highest concentration of such carvings is at Old Zalavruga (Depiction D), dated as the last carved (Figure 3.2). Similar image can also be found in other locations at New Zalavruga, dating to a number of phases, suggesting they are persistent and not just introduced and later forgotten. The soft memory is thus carved into the rocks over time, but the message takes different trajectories as it was 'rewritten'. This phenomenon can be traced through representations of animals with arrows in their backs, or rather tails. Two images of water birds, one sitting in a tree, the second free standing is found in the first phase (Figure 3.6). It could be argued that the relationship between the arrow in the back and the human having the arrow in the back can be traced from the start to the end of carving at Zalavruga. It is significant, the relationship starts with the image of a bird which in subsequent carvings transcends the animal/human divide to become human, most probably male. In both the humans and birds the arrows are very well defined, and there is no question that the carvings represent the lower part of the arrow with the shaft partly visible and well-defined fletching. Sometimes arrows are lodged in the back *per se*, sometimes in the bottom, and sometimes in the back of the head.

Soft memory when looked at from the perspective of the relationship between time and subject carved can be interpreted as the reworked 'text' according to particular needs to express ideas and concepts by the local communities at particular times. Hard memory

DEPICTION NO	NON CAL BP
A	c. 4645
B	c. 4688–4340
C	c. 4210–4079
D	c. 3952–3666

Table 2.1. Dating of the images representing humans with the arrows in their backs (Janik 2010, 90).

on the other hand stays in place creating the focus for the soft memory to be reworked and redrafted in the process of carving.

The images of humans with arrows lodged in their backs differ through time. In the earliest Depiction A (Figure 3.3), the injured party with two arrows in his back is associated with the carving of a second individual. Both individuals hold a bow in their hands, but while the injured man holds an arrow in his bow ready to be released, the second person's bow is empty. The size and 'bendiness' of the bows might indicate the use of the two wood or composite bow, especially in the case of the bow held by the first person, while second possibly has a soft bow. Both archers have special hairstyle, while the first also has a beard. It is significant that in a number of depictions from the whole range of carvings we can distinguish well-defined hairstyles or hair decorations as well as beards.

The second carving, Depiction B (Figure 3.4) shows a large man who holds a bow with an arrow ready to be released towards a swan. This man also has a special hairstyle or hair decoration, and indeed one of the arrows could almost be a pony tail.

The third image, Depiction C (Figure 3.5) is a composite of three male figures carved one after the other, creating a fan-like impression. The feet are close, while the torsos spread outwards. The figures are connected to each other, to the right they are linked to unidentified object, and on the left with a large image in a shape of a salmon. The man in the middle has an arrow embedded in the area of his waist. The last man on the right holds a bow with an arrow directed at a creature in front of him. All the men have hairstyles with large folding-forward fringes and beards.

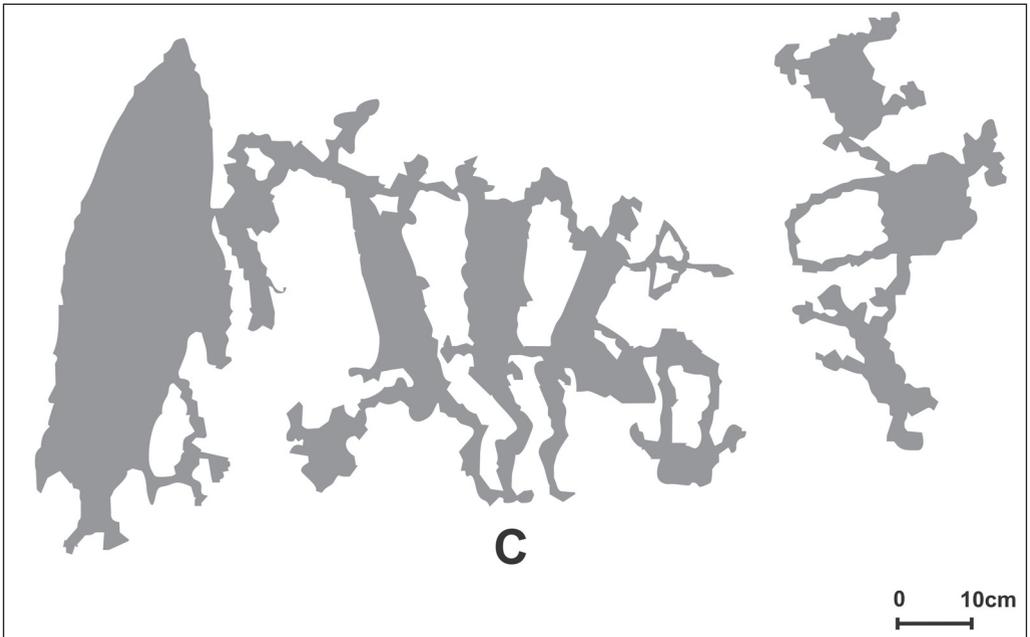


Figure 3.5: The image of a human with arrows in the back, depiction C (adjusted after Savvateev 1970).

The last figures, Depiction D (Figure 3.2) comes from one of the latest compositions to be carved. They comprise three individuals with arrows in their backs. In this composition we can also see a 'pin-cushioned' individual.

#### 'PIN-CUSHION' IMAGES: 'PIN-CUSHION' HUMANS

The idea of the 'pin-cushion' death represents the symbolic act of destroying not only the body but also the spirit (Kelly 1999, 102, pl. 2; Guilaine and Zammit 2005, fig. 18). Extending modern distinctions back to the Neolithic may not always be appropriate, but in this case arguing for a spirit:body distinction is helpful and shows the scenes in the context of an understanding of what is being represented in the rock art. This practice has been known through the millennia:

*'Perhaps the most common mutilation was "overkill" which involved shooting so many arrows into an enemy's body that he looked like a "human pin-cushion". In these cases, the disfigurements expressed hatred for the enemy and were meant to enrage surviving foes. Similar mutilations practiced on the bodies of the victims at Crow Creek in 1325, at the Larson site in 1785, and at Little Bighorn in 1876 show that the North American Plains' traditions of mutilation and scalp taking persisted for over 500 years. Over 11,000 years ago, overkilling with arrows was practiced by the enemies of the victims buried in the Gebel Sahaba cemetery in Egypt. Several adult skeletons, male and female-bore evidence of having been shot with between 15 and 25 arrows' (Kelly 1999, 102).*

The meaning of these acts, however, could have differed according to time and cultural context. Sipilä and Lahelma (2007) have argued for such an understanding of the Zalavruga carvings. Such an interpretation, however, points towards the need for a more intricate approach than just using direct ethnographic analogy when we look at other 'pin-cushion' depictions from this rock art complex.

At Zalavruga two depictions of humans being killed in this 'pin-cushion' manner have been found (Table 3.2). The first is part of a large composition (Figure 3.4), where two archers face each other, Depiction E. The one on the right has a bow with an arrow, while the larger figure on the left also holds a bow with an arrow and his upper torso is replete with three or four arrows. Both figures possibly have beards but different hairstyles: the hair on the right hand figure is similar to those of the Depiction C, while the hair on the left figure has an elaborated fringe as in the cases described above. What is important when thinking about the symbolic destruction of the spirit when the body is 'already' killed, is that both look the same, the 'killer' and the 'killed'. They hold their bows with arrows directed towards the person opposite and they are almost in a sitting position.

The second example shows an equally alive person (Janik 2005), Depiction F (Figure 3.2). The visual narrative in this image is slightly more complicated and its interpretation

DEPICTION NO	NON CAL BP
E	c. 4688–4340
F	c. 3952–3666

Table 2.2 Dating of the images representing 'pin-cushion' humans (Janik 2010, 90).

depends on our acceptance of where the arrows are coming from and who is shooting whom. Looking from the individual on the right we see arrows lodged in the body of the standing person who holds the bow. The bow is empty, but pierced by two incoming arrows, and the body of the person holding the bow is ‘pin-cushioned’ from head to toe by seven arrows. The arrows fly towards and behind the first archer reaching a second individual who holds and is pierced by one arrow. The carved marks most probably indicate footprints leading from one individual to the other. Visually, then, these two individuals are linked by flying arrows and footprints. The line of footsteps could indicate that the individual on the left, after covering the distance implied by the foot marks, was struck by all the arrows and that we do not in fact see the ‘killer’. On the other hand we could also interpret this scene as representing one person in pursuit of the other. Whichever interpretation we choose, and even if it is possible that additional ‘arrows’ were added by different people at later times – thereby augmenting and altering earlier narratives the individual on the right has ‘pin-cushion’ injuries. Looking to the right we can see a number of individuals with arrows in their backs as indicated above, but none of them seems to have been targeted by particular arrows or any individual with a bow.

#### NON-HUMAN ‘PIN-CUSHION’ IMAGES

The injuries caused by overkill are not restricted to humans, but are also seen in birds, bear and other creatures of indeterminate shape (Table 3.3). This is the reason why I suggest that the interpretation of Zalavruĝa’s human ‘pin-cushion’ human images needs to go beyond historical and ethnographic analogies.

Looking again at Figure 3.2 we can see a possible relationship between the variously injured humans, birds, indeterminate creatures and archers. As in the previous example, it is difficult to suggest only one interpretation for these images. For the purpose of this paper, however, I am concentrating on the images central to this discussion. Other aspects of this composition are discussed in my previous publications (e.g., Janik *et al.* 2007; Janik 2009).

Among the carvings of the first phase we find a scene of a water bird, probably a swan, being killed with a number of arrows, Depiction G (Figure 3.6). Three arrows entered the bird from various directions delivered by two hunters standing by the bird. The ‘pin-cushion’ effect of overkill is achieved here for the first time.

FIGURE NO.	NON CAL BP
G	c. 4775–4718
H	c. 4688–4340
I	c. 4688–4340
J	c. 4688–4340
K	c. 4210–4079

Table 2.3 Dating of the images representing ‘pin-cushion’ non humans (Janik 2010, 90).



Figure 3.6: The depiction of a number of water birds the arrows in the tails back, and 'pin-cushion' depiction G (adjusted after Savvateev 1970).

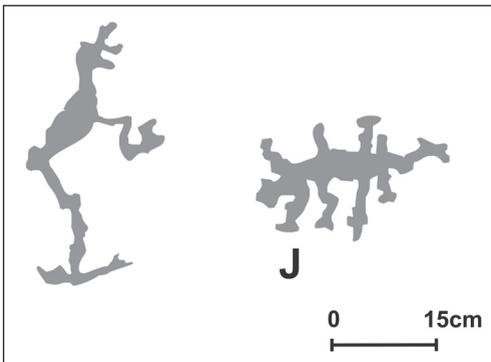


Figure 3.7: The image of a 'pin-cushion' indeterminate creature, depiction J (adjusted after Savvateev 1970).

The second representation of a 'pin-cushion' kill is part of a multifaceted composition, Depiction I (Figure 3.4). Starting from the top we see two individuals shooting at each other as presented above. Below the larger person we see a small carving of a human figure with an empty bow and, once again, an interesting hairstyle. In front of him/her we see the swan as if two arrows from this individual's bow have lodged in the bird's back. The swan's tail takes the shape of the arrow which could have been released from the bow of the male figure with two arrows in his back (as described above). Just below the arrow lodged in the bow, we see a bear impaled upside down on a spear held in both hands by the man. I suggest that the representation of the bear killed here is shown without overkill, indicating that it is part of hunting. The arrow lodged in its throat is a part of the tool rather than a tool-weapon, and the same can be said about the spear. Looking slightly above this scene and towards the right, we see a 'pin-cushion' creature sitting on top of a tree, Depiction H. This creature was most possibly 'killed' by the archer who holds a bow with arrow in his hand pointing towards it. This archer again has a hairstyle with a pony tail on top of his head, similar to the other individual hunting an elk elsewhere in this composition (Janik *et al.* 2007). It is a winter scene, but equally the hunter can be shooting at the overkilled swan, since the bird has an arrow depicted lodged in the end of its neck. Swans, however, do not normally overwinter in this region, but they perhaps arrived early, and unexpected snow could have fallen, creating winter scenery in the spring.

The other indeterminate creature is depicted within the winter scene, Depiction J (Figure 3.7). It is located at the end of the ski tracks with the individual bending towards it, possibly holding a bow in hand.

The last image indicating overkill depicts a bear, Depiction K (Figure 3.8). Despite the bear being injured by a spear, as in all images showing bear and hunter at Zalavruga,

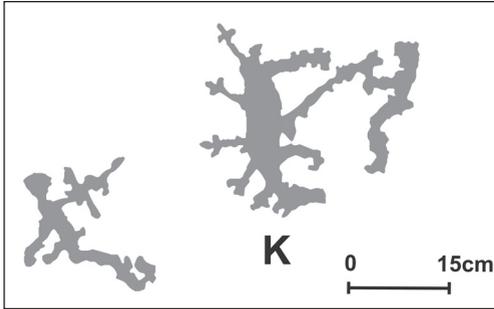


Figure 3.8: The image of a ‘pin-cushion’ bear, depiction K (adjusted after Savvateev 1970).

this particular bear has five arrows lodged in its back from the neck to its tail. The archer standing behind the bear is probably responsible for the arrows. This image is in a way transcendent between the human figures with arrows lodged in their backs and ‘pin-cushion’ injuries of humans and non-humans.

The ‘pin-cushion’ effect is always achieved by the use of a tool-weapon: the bow and arrow. Even when the bear is depicted as struck by a spear, the symbolic death is delivered by the bow and arrows. These events could have taken place during

different seasons, as suggested by the ‘pin-cushion’ kills which took place without or without the snow.

The kill involving a harpoon and whale, in addition to those showing elk being hunted by harpoon, are not depicted as ‘pin-cushion’ animals as if the harpoon was a tool but not a weapon. Therefore animals killed with the harpoon are not part of this symbolic narrative. Furthermore, it is striking that elk, the symbolic meaning of which can be traced through material culture as well as mythological reality (Burov 1989; Janik 2007 *et al.* 2009; Lahelma 2008) is not a part of this visual account.

Despite all of the above, the images of violence are sporadic and seldom, but they are a prominent part of the compositions in which they feature. What is perhaps most interesting when looking at the overkill injury and humans with arrows in their backs is that the tool-weapon transcends the type of the image as well as links them in a consistent symbolic interrelationship through the millennia. The hard memory captured in the location of the monument to which the local communities returned through time is linked with the process of ‘rewriting’ in the stone, where the humans and creatures depicted as overkilled differ, but the subjects persist.

#### THE NOBLE DEATH: TRANSCENDING CATEGORIES – CANNIBALISM

Performing the overkill with bow and arrow, which we can conceptualise as a form of demise, seems to have been in a state of becoming in symbolic terms through time. Sometimes it is a human being undergoing this form of demise, sometimes it is a bird, bear or indeterminate creature. In a way these are not exclusive, because what unites these different creatures in these representation is death delivered by bow and arrow. This form of death, I suggest, is in opposition to that described in many historic and ethnographic accounts of hunting. Instead it forms part of the tradition of the ‘noble death’. It allows community members to transcend the categories of what we think we know as human, bird and bear. Such boundary-crossing brings to mind the idea of cannibalism. We know from the analysis of human bones analysis in the Neolithic that certain bones were treated in a similar way to animal bones used for consumption, for example at the site of Jettböle on

the Åland islands and earlier at *Dyrholmen, Jutland* (Thorpe 2005; Sipilä and Labelma 2007). Those are not very frequent events, but like the rock art depictions discussed in this paper, they indicate particular rituals within symbolic and culinary transformations.

These transformations are captured in the soft memory that alters through time but is reinforced by the persistence of the use of a single location. This one locale of Zalavruga, among the 14 known at the White Sea, constitutes the hard memory of the rock art as a monument, which in turn focuses on the (re)creation of memory by the local community/ies. One could argue that this occurred in the process of 'habitus', but that would be a theme for another paper.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has argued for the utility of a distinction between soft and hard memory in the interpretation of symbolic and ritual acts of violence in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age rock art of the White Sea. A long-term perspective and the uniqueness of the archaeological data combined with contemporary understandings of acts of violence lead me to re-categorise the notion of 'pin-cushion' death as the 'noble death', in which the transcendent nature of who was injured or killed and how this allows us to look at acts of cannibalism in the new light.

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