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Visualizing the Corded Ware past: art, archaeology, and heritage-making at Myyrmäki, southern Finland

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Abstract

In 2021, a large mural depicting a Corded Ware vessel was painted on the urban suburb of Myyrmäki in southern Finland. According to the artists working with the art piece, the mural serves as an informative sign for a nearby Stone Age settlement site while also aiming to create a sense of belonging for the 'rootless people of Myyrmäki'. In this paper, I argue that the mural can be understood as a memoryscape, and in this sense, it acts as a materialization of the heritage-making process. At the same time, however, the mural combines prehistoric archaeology with contemporary topics such as antiracism and climate activism.

Keywords: Corded Ware complex, southern Finland, art/archaeology, memoryscapes, cultural heritage

9.1 Introduction

During the 1960s, archaeologist Marketta Wares excavated a poorly preserved burial site dating to the Stone Age in the rural landscape outside the city of Helsinki (Pesonen & Leskinen 2008: 43). As is often the case with Stone Age inhumations in Finland (Ahola et al. 2016), no human bones were preserved. Instead, these graves contained large amounts of ochre-coloured soil and water-smoothed stones (Ahola 2017: Appendix 1). During the following decades, a cemetery of approximately 30 inhumations were unearthed from the location (Ahola 2017). Although no reliable radiocarbon determinations exist from the cemetery, most of the graves were typical for those of the Mesolithic-Neolithic hunter-gatherer peoples of the European forest zone, while five inhumations were associated with the funerary traditions of the Corded Ware complex (Ahola 2017; Fig. 1). In addition to the cemetery, the intensive excavations also revealed a multiperiod settlement site – named Jönsas after a nearby farmhouse – that contained material from the Late Mesolithic, the Middle Neolithic (Corded Ware period), and the Bronze and Early Iron Ages (Purhonen & Ruonavaara 1994: 89).

Although the archaeological materials recovered from the Jönsas site are not as well preserved as those from other cemeteries in neighbouring regions of Finland, the long-term use of the site nonetheless suggests that Jönsas was an important location for the local prehistoric populations dwelling in, and likely also migrating to, the region (Ahola 2017). This interpretation is further supported by the presence of the five Corded Ware graves that are located within the (supposedly) earlier hunter-gatherer cemetery. Indeed, as the groups connected with the Corded Ware complex commonly reused impressive older burial sites as the locations for new graves to create a sense of belonging to the new land they migrated to (Ahola 2020), the Jönsas site must also have been a well-known and important location (Ahola 2017; Äikäs & Ahola 2020).

Despite the importance of the site, there is not much left of the Jönsas settlement or cemetery, and many local people living in the area today have

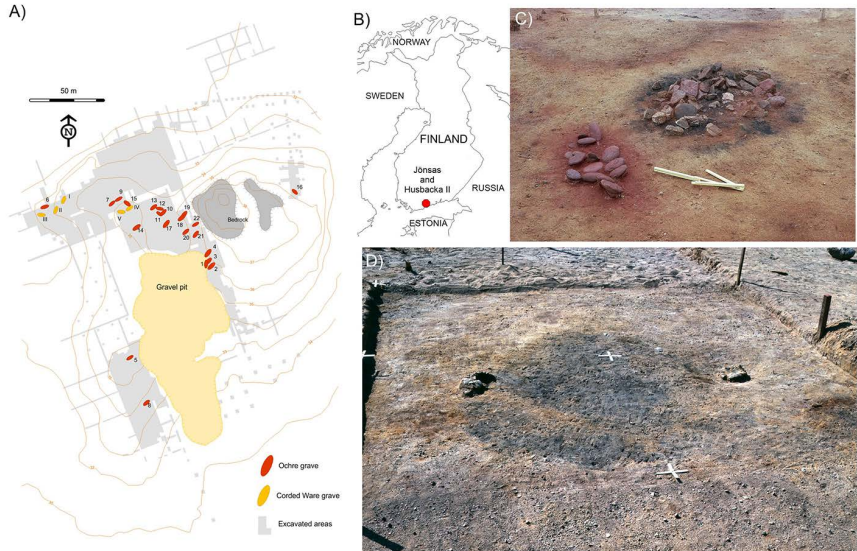


Figure 1. A – site plan from the Jönsas cemetery showing the distribution of hunter-gatherer and Corded Ware graves (after Ahola 2017: Fig. 3); B – the location of the Jönsas and Husbacka II sites; C – an example of a Jönsas hunter-gatherer burial (Grave 22) next to a hearth with an ochre-stained pit structure in the background; D – Jönsas Grave I, with two Corded Ware pottery vessels and adzes in situ. Photos Photo L. Ruonavaara (C) and T. Seger (D), Finnish Heritage Agency.

never heard of the place (Äikäs & Ahola 2020: 166). This is mainly because a large suburb, Myyrmäki, was built on top of the ancient site in the 1970s and continues to be developed today (Hako 2009). Although the prehistoric past of the region was considered, e.g., in the street names of the area (Koivisto 2009: 19), these rather general names were not able to keep up public memory of the connection with the distant past. As no informational sign was put up, the Jönsas site was slowly forgotten (Äikäs & Ahola 2020).

However, in 2016, the city of Vantaa started to draw up new city plans for the Myyrmäki area (Myyrmeen keskustan julkisen ulkotilan yleissuunnitel-

ma 2017). Remarkably, prehistory – and especially the material discovered from the Jönsas site – was the central theme of the plans (Äikäs & Ahola 2020). Indeed, in these plans, the city architects had decided to preserve the natural bedrock located next to the ancient cemetery (Fig. 1a) as ‘an ancient sacrificial site’ that would be refreshed with a platform designed to be used in communal events and performances (Äikäs & Ahola 2020: 167). Suggesting that the ritual practices at the site were at the core of the plans, the presence of the ochre-stained hunter-gatherer graves were to be visualized on stairs leading to this platform as human-shaped features made from red bricks, and large concrete sculptures, representing the smooth stones discovered from the graves, were to be placed along the central avenue of the area (Äikäs & Ahola: 167, 173–174). In addition, an information stand presenting the history of the location was going to be built.

Although these plans have not been realized – and might never be – they nonetheless show the impact archaeology can have on urban planning. Indeed, aside from street naming practices (Williams 2020), long gone ancient sites can be visualized in urban locations by building monuments, memoirs or other structures relating to the sites. It is noteworthy, however, that the location and positioning of monuments and memorials in public and private spaces – the intentional creation of memoryscapes – affects their meaning and interpretation (Árvey & Foote 2020). For example, the platform designed for Myyrmäki was intended to be built not only in the close vicinity of the ancient burial site but also in a location where many cigarette butts, drug needles and graffiti are commonly discovered (Äikäs & Ahola 2020: 166). Accordingly, by building the platform on this specific location, the city likely wanted to take over and tame the area by changing the meanings commonly attached to it, e.g. drug use. In this sense, the creation of a memoryscape can be seen as a cultural process of meaning-making in which various people contribute by commemorating, passing on knowledge and memories, asserting and expressing their identity and social and cultural values and meanings (Smith 2006: 44). In other words, a memoryscape is produced by the process of heritage-making.

In this paper, I explore how the Jönsas site and the deep past of the Myyrmäki area were approached after the announcement of the 2016 city plans, by focusing on street art and specifically, on a mural painted in the suburb during the autumn of 2021 (Fig. 2). Differing from previous visualizations of the prehistory within the area, this mural, entitled ‘Husbacka II – Muistoja Muinaismeren Rannalta’ (En. Husbacka II – Memories from the ancient seashore) depicts a Corded Ware vessel discovered from Jönsas grave I (Ahola 2017: Appendix 1) putting the peoples associated with the Corded Ware culture, for the first time, at the core of the heritage-making process. By interviewing the artists who designed and painted the mural, I asked whether the Corded Ware past influenced the painting and, if so, how. By exploring the work of art – and the meanings attached to the artwork – in the wider context of Corded Ware archaeology, I also ponder how this field of archaeology and the visualizations based on this research could act as important venues for reflection and the creation of a discourse for modern-day societies.

9.2 The Husbacka II mural

The ‘Husbacka II – Memories from the ancient seashore’ mural was painted on the wall of an apartment building in September 2021 (SAV Taidekolektiivi 2022; Fig. 2). The artistic work was undertaken by Maikki Rantala and Essi Ruuskanen from the Street Art Vantaa collective, and the artwork was funded by the Finnish Heritage Agency in collaboration with the Vantaa Society, Hämeen rakennuskone Oy, Asunto Oy Myyrinlahti and Sto Finxter Oy. As the artists wanted to act against climate change, the mural was painted with a climate-friendly paint that reduces nitric oxide and ozone, among other pollutants, from the atmosphere (Rantala & Ruuskanen pers.comm.).

According to the artists (Rantala & Ruuskanen pers.comm.), the main idea of the mural is to serve as an informative sign for the nearby Stone Age settlement site. Indeed, an Early Neolithic (c 5200–4000 calBC) settlement



Figure 2. The Husbacka II mural. Photo M. Ahola.

named Husbacka II is located immediately next to the mural, and accordingly, the painting has been named after this site. Curiously, this site – located less than one kilometre from the Jönsas site – has no Corded Ware phase of use. Instead, according to conducted excavations (Leskinen & Pesonen 2008: Appendix 1), the site contains solely hunter-gatherer materials that clearly predate the oldest Corded Ware dates from Finland (c 2800 calBC; Pesonen et al. 2019). However, as one of the artists had an MA degree in archaeology and consulted the Vantaa City Museum during the creation of the artwork, the idea to include a Corded Ware vessel from the Jönsas site (Fig. 3) in the

mural was intentional (Rantala & Ruuskanen pers.comm.). Indeed, even though the other motifs in the artwork – the seashore, edible plants and small fragments of bone and stone – visualize the hunter-gatherer peoples and the ancient landscape, the Corded Ware vessel was added as something people could relate to. As Essi Ruuskanen explained to me, ‘Everyone recognizes a pot and that’s why we wanted to have one in our mural. As this vessel – and Corded Ware in general – has been discovered in the Myyrmäki area, we



Figure 3. Pottery vessels from Corded Ware burial sites in southern Finland: A – vessel from Jönsas Grave I (KM 19913:543); B – vessel from Jönsas Grave V (KM 23532:1120); C– vessel from Silvola grave (KM 10981) locating roughly two kilometres west from the Jönsas site; D – partial vessel from Jönsas settlement (KM 19275:393–394, 847); E – vessel from Jönsas Grave I (KM 19913:545; this vessel is depicted in the Husbacka II mural); F– vessel from Jönsas Grave IV (KM 20087:555). Photo I. Bolgár, Finnish Heritage Agency.

thought it would be a suitable addition. Furthermore, even if the mural has been painted as an informative sign for the Husbacka II hunter-gatherer site, it is also commonly used as part of guided tours dealing with the Stone Age archaeology of the Myyrmäki area.’

In fact, even though the size of the Corded Ware vessel seems to suggest that the Husbacka II site is a Corded Ware site, this was not the intention of the artists. Instead, the vessel – along with the river running from the ancient seashore through the vessel and the artwork itself (Fig. 2) – can be understood as temporal layers in time. Indeed, as Maikki Rantala explained, ‘The river in the painting symbolizes the way the landscape has changed over the course of time.’ Here, Rantala refers to isostatic land uplift that has had a huge effect on the Finnish landscape in general. In the case of southern Finland, this means that Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic sites located next to seashore were far from the sea during the 3rd millennium BC. When the people associated with the Corded Ware culture buried their dead at the Jönsas site, this location was no longer an island – as it was during its initial phase of use – but a natural meadow near a small lake or river (Leskinen & Pesonen 2008: Appendix 3).

Aside from the course of time, another aspect the artists wanted to emphasize in the mural was the fact that there are no ‘locals’ in the Myyrmäki region (Rantala & Ruuskanen pers.comm.). Both artists saw this as something of importance, as today, there is a large migrant community in the suburbs (Saukkonen 2021). Moreover, as Myyrmäki itself was established only in the 1970s, it does not have a long history (Hako 2009). Accordingly, one aim of the artwork was to create a sense of belonging for the ‘rootless people of Myyrmäki’ (Rantala & Ruuskanen pers.comm.). In other words, the aim of the mural was to show that people had dwelled in and migrated to and from the Myyrmäki region for thousands of years, even if the suburb itself had only a history of approximately 50 years. In this sense, the mural can be understood not only as a piece of art or a source of information but also as an intentionally built memoscape with a clear ideological agenda.

9.3 Reconnecting with the Corded Ware past?

The Husbacka II mural is a curious combination of finds discovered from and meanings attached to two different prehistoric sites excavated in the Myyrmäki area. Although not located immediately next to the Jönsas cemetery and settlement, the flow of time depicted in the artwork creates a strong connection between Jönsas and the Husbacka II site, and accordingly, the artwork acts as a memoryscape for both locations. In this sense, the mural is clearly part of the modern-day heritage-making process. At the same time, however, the mural follows the artistic tradition in which ideology is strongly embedded in the work (Wolff 1993). Indeed, even though no heritage-making process is devoid of ideological choices (Smith 2006), these choices are often discussed in more depth within the field of art (Simoniti 2021). Indeed, by using art as a means of communication, the Husbacka II mural breaks novel ground and combines prehistoric archaeology and cultural heritage with topics such as antiracism and climate activism.

It is interesting that the artists did not draw their inspiration from the 3rd millennium BC but instead aimed to connect the ideas of ‘locals’ and ‘foreigners’ to the Stone Age in general. In this sense, Husbacka II is not, in fact, essentially reconnecting with the Corded Ware past. However, even though the artists were using a Corded Ware vessel as a motif simply because such finds were known from the Myyrmäki region, the Corded Ware period fits very well in the ideological agenda of the mural. This is because the appearance of Corded Ware materials in the eastern and northern Baltic Sea region represents one of the most obvious prehistoric migrations to the area (Nordqvist 2016). Indeed, according to recent genetic analyses (Saag et al. 2017; Mittnik et al. 2018), these pots and axes did not travel alone but came along with new genetic lineages – new people – who also arrived in the area. As these peoples likely also brought a novel religion with them (Ahola 2020), this particular period of time could be used to reflect upon contemporary issues, e.g. recent immigration and particularly the interaction between ‘locals’ and ‘foreigners’. In this sense, archaeology – especially when combined with art – could offer

an opportunity to discuss these often-problematic issues with a plurality of communicative styles (cf. Simoniti 2021).

Remarkably, the Husbacka II mural will not be the only artwork depicting the Corded Ware past in the Myyrmäki region. Sculptor Tommi Toija will produce a large bronze sculpture entitled ‘Viimeisellä rannalla’ (En. By the final shore) in the central square of Myyrmäki (Koivisto 2021). Similar to the Husbacka II mural, this sculpture has also drawn its inspiration from the deep past and will include enlarged 3D prints of the Corded Ware vessels discovered at the Jönsas graves (Koivisto pers.comm.). Curiously, here, we return again to the Jönsas site and to the ways this site is repeatedly given new meanings. Indeed, even though the site itself has been almost completely destroyed, the Jönsas materials are still inspiring new interpretations and visualizations. Moreover, with two artworks depicting Corded Ware materials, the Myyrmäki suburb not only becomes a hotspot for archaeology-inspired art in Finland but probably also the only place in Europe where Corded Ware archaeology is visualized in such a novel and engaging way.

9.4 Conclusions

The Myyrmäki suburb in southern Finland is an exceptional example of a location in which prehistory and archaeology have inspired not only town planning but also art. As the artworks are displayed (or will be displayed) in public spaces, they act as intentional memoryscapes for the prehistoric sites of the area. In this sense, art follows a process of heritage-making similar to that of town planning. Indeed, from the perspective of Corded Ware archaeology, the Myyrmäki suburb is a unique location where materials more commonly exhibited in museums are now visualized in urban surroundings. Such representations will likely make Corded Ware archaeology better known not only among the people living in the area but also to the people visiting Myyrmäki.

As we are dealing with art, however, the heritage-making process is also openly ideological. Indeed, even though the Husbacka II mural, at the core of this paper, does not clearly visualize the ideological points of departure that the artists use – antiracism and climate activism – these ideas have nonetheless been embedded in the artwork with the symbolism of the motifs, along with the use of climate-friendly paint. Although the artists did not consider the use of a Corded Ware vessel from this angle, by chance, the Corded Ware migrations to the northern and eastern Baltic Sea region fit very well with this ideological agenda. As even more art dealing with Corded Ware materials will be placed in the Myyrmäki region, it might be worthwhile to consider how Corded Ware archaeology and art could contribute together to a political debate in the public sphere.

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