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Vibing to the furthest past: the utilisation of folklore and mythology in the prehistory exhibition at the National Museum of Finland

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the prehistory exhibition at the National Museum of Finland. The exhibition opened to the public in 2017, closed in 2023, and will reopen in 2027. The analysis is based on an examination of the exhibition texts and the immersive, multisensory elements incorporated into the exhibition. We argue that the representation of folklore and mythology in the exhibition is somewhat vague, merely serving to reimagine and embellish the distant past. It appears that folkloric elements are employed to 'fill the gaps' when the archaeological record provides insufficient or noinformation to portray individuals from prehistoric times. This results in the formation of intricate temporal interpretations wherein the archaeological periodisation is obscured and intertwined with the mythological past. This intertwining of archaeological artefacts, the 'touchable' past, and Finnic folklore and mythology highlights the difficulty of presenting the prehistoric past in museum exhibitions.

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Finland; folklore; mythology; National Museum; prehistory

Introduction

In this article, we examine the way in which the National Museum of Finland (NMF) in Helsinki engages with the representation of prehistory and employs nationally embedded elements of folklore and mythology to affect visitors and construct narratives of the remote past. The Finnish case is of broader European interest, as its *Kalevala*-metric oral poetry collections, which originated during the national romantic period in the nineteenth century, are among the largest in Northern Europe. These collections have been frequently employed to illustrate the 'ancientness' (Fin. *muinaisuus*) of 'Finnishness' (e.g. Anttonen 2005; Fewster 2006), which, as we will discuss, is considered to go back even to the Stone Age, even though Finnishness did not exist as an ethnic, social, linguistic, or political category at that time.

The prehistoric period in the Finnish region began after the retraction of glaciers at the end of the last glaciation period (circa 10 000 years ago) and lasted until the twelfth-fourteenth centuries, depending on the area, and even later in Northern Finland and Sápmi. The beginning of the historical era is associated with the advent of Christianity and the subjugation of the region's inhabitants to the Swedish crown. Since written sources, even from the Middle Ages, are scarce, oral tradition, folk poetry, and Scandinavian sagas have been used as supplementary sources for the

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Finnish past since the seventeenth century. The form of 'Kalevalaic' poetry has often been considered to be thousands of years old, but recent studies suggest that it may be considerably more recent, dating from the contact of the late Proto-Finnic language with Scandinavian languages around 200–550 CE (Frog 2019). Nevertheless, traditional oral poetry has been one of the most cherished symbols of Finnish nationalism since the nineteenth century, when the national epic *Kalevala* (1849) was published (e.g. Wilson 1976). The epic was based on oral poetry collected by the Finnish elite in a rather colonialist manner, mainly in the Karelian borderlands between Finland and Russia. The *Kalevala*, compiled by Lönnrot ([1849] 2008), was part of the European epic tradition but also played a role in broad social debates about standard Finnish language, history, and modernity (see, e.g. Anttonen 2005). It was an inherently modern project of heritagisation, significantly shaping the ways in which Finnish prehistory and ancientness were constructed, imagined, and idealised in society (see, e.g. Fewster 2006; Tarkka, Stepanova, and Haapoja-Mäkelä 2018).

In this article, we bring together the perspectives of archaeology, folklore studies, and museology to examine how *Kalevala*-metric folklore and mythology and the 'Kalevalaic' past were discussed and used in relation to Finnish prehistory at the NMF. We explore the way in which folklore-related discourses and images were linked to the archaeological objects and knowledge presented in the latest permanent prehistory exhibition (2017–2023). We also investigate the ways in which these were employed to elicit affective experiences concerning the furthest past. By examining the exhibition texts, artefacts, and visual and audio effects, we show that Finnic folklore and mythology were employed in a somewhat nebulous manner to reimagine and embellish the distant past. Furthermore, we argue that folkloric elements were employed when archaeological background information was either insufficient or absent. This resulted in the construction and conceptualisation of a temporally displaced and chronologically vague 'ancient Finnish past'.

Theoretical and historical backgrounds: national museums, prehistory, and the heritagisation of mythology and oral poetry

National museums are a phenomenon originating in and closely connected to European nation states. Their purpose is to showcase the heritage of a nation: material remains of the past bound together with narratives forming the essential building blocks of a national identity. Likewise, the NMF negotiates the changes, continuations, differences, unities, and disruptions in national identities and represents national values, myths, and 'truths' that – despite their constructionist nature – may be reinforced in the rather fixed encounters between the museum's visitors, its spaces, objects, and discourses (see Aronsson et al. 2012; Aronsson 2014; Watson 2021, 21–23).

The idea for the NMF was developed during the nineteenth century, and its predecessor, the State Historical Museum, was founded in 1893. The building that houses the NMF was constructed between 1906 and 1910 and opened to the public in 1916 (Talvio 2016; Figure 1). The exhibits originated from the collections of the University of Helsinki and the Finnish Antiquarian Society, among others. The idea of the museum, its physical dimensions, and its collections and exhibitions have been the topic of both academic and public discussions since its inception (Fewster 2006; Kortti et al. 2024; Kunnas-Pusa 2018; Tallgren 1924; Talvio 2016; Wäre 1996).

An exhibition presenting the prehistoric period of Finland has been a nearly permanent fixture at the NMF since 1920, although there have been intermittent periods with only temporary or small prehistory exhibitions. Until the latest exhibition, all permanent prehistory exhibitions were displayed in the same room, originally designed for this purpose, and their layouts were based on chronological and typological sequences (Huurre 1995; Talvio 2016). The exhibition discussed in this article opened in 2017. The previous permanent prehistory exhibition opened in 1995 and remained largely the same for 20 years until its dismantling. In 2017, except for the previously displayed artefacts, everything was new: a new space in the basement, a new layout, and new approaches to prehistory. The exhibition was terminated after seven years, in the autumn of 2023,

Figure 1. The National Museum of Finland. Photo: Sakari Pälsi, circa 1920–1929. Helsinki City museum. CC-BY 4.0.

because the museum was closed for the renovation of the building. The museum will probably reopen in 2027, and the prehistory exhibition will be held again in its 2017 form, although there will be some renewals. In the meantime, the museum's exhibitions can be visited virtually (National Museum of Finland, Virtual Exhibition).

The presence of prehistory exhibitions at national museums is somewhat problematic when examined in light of the idea of 'national' pasts. It is dubious to try to trace the origins of an ethnic or linguistic group that is considered a nation back to prehistoric times. However, at the time of the founding of the NMF, archaeology was seen as extremely important for studying the movements and development of the prehistoric cultures that were considered ancestral to nations and central to the process of constructing national identities and symbols (see, e.g. Díaz-Andreu 2007; Kohl 1998). Moreover, prehistory itself is difficult to present in a museum exhibition due to the long timescale and the 'mute' nature of the artefacts (see, e.g. Saville 1999, 196; Wood and Cotton 1999, 30).

According to Peter Aronsson (2008), nations can be divided into groups with different needs and objectives for displaying the past and negotiating national identities in museums. He lists Finland among the group of 'newly emerging nation-states with a great need to produce a national narrative' (Aronsson 2008, 15). Finland gained independence in 1917, after existing as an autonomous grand duchy of the Russian Empire since 1809, preceded by approximately seven centuries of being part of the Swedish realm. This historical background affected the way in which the Finnish national past and identity were constructed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, since the creation of a 'origin story' can be difficult for ethnic groups that have only recently emerged as a sovereign state (Ahonen 2019; Fewster 2006; Kunnas 2023; Watson 2021, 27; for Finnish national grand narratives, see;). Especially in the case of new nation states, the myths and narratives that build their national identity are often set in

Figure 2. Robert Ekman, *Väinämöinen's play* (1866). Väinämöinen, the old and wise sage and kantele player, is the main character of the *Kalevala*. This painting has played an important role in the creation of visual representations of the 'Kalevalaic' past. CC0.

a prehistoric past or, more accurately, 'buried somewhere within a primordial sense of origin in folk culture' (Knell et al. 2011, 11). Thus, oral poetry and the *Kalevala* have been used at the NMF to amplify the 'voice' of the displayed artefacts since the museum's establishment. In the original plans for the NMF, the so-called *Kalevala* room was part of the prehistory exhibition but eventually became part of the ethnographic exhibition (Talvio 2016, 179). This highlights the imagined connection between the prehistoric and 'Kalevalaic' pasts as entangled Finnish heritage.

Today, the influence of the *Kalevala* and the nineteenth-century imaginings of the Finnish past (Figure 2) remains strong. Images and discourses related to the *Kalevala*, oral *Kalevala*-metric poetry, and the mythology to which they refer still constitute one of the most widely accepted ways to negotiate Finnishness and the Finnish past, especially in nationally charged heritage contexts, such as inventories of intangible cultural heritage (see, e.g. Haapoja-Mäkelä 2019). These banally nationalistic discourses circulate affective and rather fixed images and participate in reconstructing the understandings of national landscapes, gendered bodies, and touristic imageries, among others (see, e.g. Mäkelä and Linkola 2024). As Tarkka, Stepanova, and Haapoja-Mäkelä (2018, 19) argue, since the nineteenth century, Finnish cultural nationalism has been greatly influenced by the idea of 'Kalevalaicity' (Fin. *kalevalaisuus*) – a generic way of thinking that the languages, images, values, etc. related to the *Kalevala* are authentic, inherently Finnish, very old, and shared by a homogeneous group of people. This ideal has had significant sociocultural effects. For instance, the *Kalevala* has been awarded the European Heritage Label because of its 'living role in today's world' (Finnish Literature Society 2024).

Materials and methods

The prehistory exhibition was held in the basement of the NMF, in rooms that previously housed permanent thematic exhibitions, such as numismatic, jewellery, tableware, and weapon collections. The rooms were renovated for the purposes of the prehistory exhibition (Figure 3). The exhibition included several rooms that displayed the prehistoric period in thematic rather than chronological sections, although the chronology of Finnish prehistory was also included in the display. The exhibition plan was devised by archaeologists Vesa-Pekka Herva and Antti Lahelma. The exhibition planning team consisted of staff working at the archaeological collections of the Finnish Heritage Agency and other professionals at the NMF. The work for the design and display technology were commissioned from a private company specialising in creating exhibition and concept designs. Therefore, it must be kept in mind that the final vision presented in the exhibition is not the interpretation or narrative curated by a single person but one that was created, negotiated, and revised by several actors.

This article is based on two fieldwork visits to the exhibition in January and April 2023. L. Kunnas visited it again in October 2023, just before the museum closed, to make final notes. During these visits, we familiarised ourselves with the exhibition by taking photographs, carefully reading the display texts, walking around slowly, and experiencing all the interactive components. The analytical process began during these visits, as we discussed the emerging themes related to folklore elements and prehistoric representations.

We also used textual works as supplementary material in the analytical process after the fieldwork: a refined version of the manuscript in which the exhibition was based on Herva and Lahelma (2017) and a monograph partly based on the same thematic approach, with a view of a 'Northern cosmology' evident in the exhibition (Herva and Lahelma 2019). We carefully read the texts and inspected the exhibition to find mentions of persons, phenomena, places, and events related to the *Kalevala* or *Kalevala*-metric poetry. During the analytical process, we

Figure 3. Part of the prehistory exhibition at the NMF. Photo: Titus Verhe/National Museum of Finland.

identified three important themes and examined the links of Kalevalaic elements to them: 1) artefacts related to iron and travel, 2) interactive and multisensory tools, and 3) the archaeological record.

Kalevalaic elements, exhibition artefacts, and the themes of iron and travel

When the previous prehistory exhibition opened in 1995, it was criticised for being old-fashioned (see, e.g. Lähdesmäki 1995). The contemporary literature on prehistory exhibitions gives the impression that many of the elements used in the 2017 exhibition had already been discussed and used in many European museums during the 1990s (see, e.g. McManus 1996; Pearce 1999). Therefore, it seems that when the 2017 exhibition was planned, the set-up had to be as different as possible from the previous exhibition. Consequently, the traditional prehistory room was abandoned, thematic sections were used instead of typological and chronological order, and folklore and mythology were introduced to animate the 'mute' archaeological finds. There were also fewer objects and texts and more immersive and affective tools.

In this section, we discuss the themes of iron and travel and their representations in the exhibition. Both themes were supported by evidence from folk poetry, which was often referred to very vaguely in the exhibition texts, with expressions such as 'magical dimensions were associated' or 'there are also references in folklore'. Actual archival references to folklore material were not provided. Doing this, of course, would have created a contradiction between the actual artefacts on display and folklore references: Many of the artefacts are thousands, or at least several hundreds, of years old, while folklore archival material mainly dates from the nineteenth century. For example, the idea of the intrinsic power (*väki*) of iron was widely used in the incantations[1] of rural Karelian sorcerer-healers at the beginning of the twentieth century (see, e.g. Karlsson 2024), whereas in the exhibition text, this social background was melded with the more general idea of the 'Finnish Iron Age':

> Iron is more durable than bronze and has more uses. Iron ore is also readily available, which made metal artefacts everyday items in the Iron Age. Nonetheless, magical dimensions were also associated with iron and its production. It was regarded as a living material with its own will and personality and a particular intrinsic power, known in Finnish as *väki*. (Exhibition text, English version)

Of course, it is possible to associate the depictions of traditional ironworking in *Kalevala*-metric poetry and the related rituals and practices with the reality of Iron Age Finland. For example, the habit of folding or breaking iron swords before burying them in late Iron Age Finland has been interpreted, among other things, as the symbolic killing of the weapons (Karvonen 1998). Furthermore, iron metallurgy, forges, and blacksmithing most likely continued the same traditions from the Iron Age until the industrial era (nineteenth century). It also seems probable that ritual practices and magical thinking have always been (and are still) linked to technological innovations (Herva et al. 2014).

However, there is no factual evidence that the 200-year-old Karelian iron-related incantations explain the Iron Age worldview even if the poetic form dates from that era. In the absence of literary evidence, only educated guesses can be made.[2] Moreover, the allusions to 'Finnish' oral traditions and the Iron Age silence the voices of nineteenth-century Karelian singers, who were mostly impoverished peasants residing in the remote borderlands (some of which did not even belong to the Finnish territory) but whose songs and worldviews may have been referenced, as they are well documented. However, from the perspective of the exhibition and the national museum, the connection between material artefacts and iron-related folklore elements created a nationally charged aura of 'uncanny' mysticism and an idea of Finnish cultural cohesion that goes back to the Iron Age. This interpretation is even more significant when considered in conjunction with the fact that an iron incantation is included in the *Kalevala*, which further reinforces the weight of this symbolism.

The exhibition also included a showcase in which different kinds of travel-related artefacts, such as boats, skis, and sledge runners, were displayed. These artefacts date from different prehistoric periods and were thus not necessarily used concurrently or in the same geographical area. However, they were bound together through a reference to the *Kalevala*'s main hero, Väinämöinen, in the exhibition text. In the following text, the theme of travelling is implicitly connected to the practice of a shaman or a witch travelling 'between worlds' in a trance-like state (see also Herva and Lahelma 2017, 50–56, 83–86):

> In prehistoric times, the world opened up to people by moving in the terrain, not from maps. One had to be able to read rocks, outcrops of bedrock, bodies of water, plants, and animals.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Rock paintings include depictions of large boats with crews of up to twenty people. [. . .] The boat was a symbol of moving on to the afterlife. [. . .] There are also references to supernatural boats in folklore. For example, the hero Väinämöinen of the Kalevala builds a boat from the bones of a wild reindeer or fish with the aid of a magical song and sets off to paddle to the netherworld. (Exhibition text, English version)[3]

The idea that a shamanistic-animistic worldview, as documented among indigenous Siberian peoples speaking Uralic languages, was also prevalent in Finland during prehistoric times and has left traces in folk poetry and traditional customs was first proposed by comparative folklorists and religious scholars. One of the most prominent among them was the folklorist Anna-Leena Siikala (1943–2016), whose texts on 'Finnish shamanism' (see, e.g. Siikala 1992) have been widely read by scholarly and general audiences. Moreover, studies on Siberian shamanistic practices have been employed to interpret prehistoric rock art (see, e.g. Lahelma 2007).

However, linking shamanistic practices observed in Siberia during the modern period and folk traditions and poetry documented in the nineteenth century to the worldview of Stone Age inhabitants in the area of the present-day Finland is problematic due to both geographical and temporal distances. Siikala (1992, 285–297) herself acknowledged this problem, emphasising that nineteenth-century Karelian mythic singers were not *shamans* but *sages*, although some mythic images of the incantations can be traced back to shamanistic thinking. Similarly, in the book accompanying the exhibition, Herva and Lahelma (2017, 48–49) indicate that relying on these kinds of analogies requires caution. Nevertheless, the exhibition combined Väinämöinen's character with Stone, Bronze, and Iron Age travel, thus interpreting the 'mute' artefacts through a nationally significant and imagination-tantalising narrative that underscored the relationships between the artefact, the other world, and the masculine heroism of Väinämöinen. Thus, the quotidian uses of somewhat prosaic artefacts receded into the background.

Listen, see, and touch! Immersing oneself in the mystical past

The second theme analysed in this study concerns the relationships between the Kalevalaic past and the various multisensory tools used in the exhibition. Museum studies have considered multisensory interactions with archaeological artefacts, sites, or digital tools as 'healing' (Chatterjee, Vreeland, and Noble 2009) or as enhancing the experiences of authenticity, materiality, and locality (Ireland 2016). Furthermore, innovative interactive digital tools have been somewhat fetishised in museum curation. However, studies suggest that the visitor's experience may differ from that of the enthusiastic digital ideals of curators, as more traditional ways, such as turning the pages of an old book, may be more conducive to enhancing the visitor's agency (Barry 2014). Waterton and Dittmer (2014, 70) note that there is a widespread tendency in the museum field to move from three-dimensional visual representations, such as scale models, to audiovisual and haptic technologies that can multimodally intensify and enhance the museumgoer's bodily experience. Moreover, they claim that 'technologies of the body' are becoming the preferred element of museum visits (Waterton and Dittmer 2014, 70).

Our immersive experience began when we walked down the stairs from the museum's main lobby to the prehistory exhibition, which felt like descending into the past. This feeling was enhanced by the chronology chart in the staircase, which visualised time going backwards as we descended the stairs. The location of the prehistory exhibition in the basement of the museum and the arrangement of the space in such a way that the most distant past was located at the bottom of the building and subsequent epochs were displayed on higher floors can be interpreted as implicitly telling the history of Finland as moving from 'darkness to light', a typical Western, Cartesian, and Christian way of telling a nation's history (see, e.g. Watson 2021, 91–92). The windows of the exhibition rooms were covered, resulting in a somewhat dim light, a muted sound, and a quiet, almost stagnant atmosphere. The display cases and walls were white and clean. The exhibition space thus evoked feelings of serenity, respect, and even sanctity.

Various digital tools were also strongly present: multilingual touchscreens for exhibition texts, a touch wall, sound and visual effects, and videos. Screens displayed short videos of, for example, frosty forest landscapes and winter scenes. The forest in the videos represented multitemporal connections to the forested past of Finnishness, which is so often depicted in canonical landscape and heritagised images of Finnishness (see, e.g. Mäkelä and Linkola 2024). As Sheila Watson (2021), 92–93) notes, landscape imagery is often used in national museums to emphasise the supposedly intrinsic connections between people, places, land, and origin myths. Similarly, the videos in the exhibition invited visitors to immerse themselves in the winter landscape, which is at once everywhere and nowhere in Finland and exists simultaneously in the past and present. Forest images often represent the mythical and even explicitly 'Kalevalaic' past of Finnishness in heritagised contexts, as the idea of the forest as the cradle of the Finns is widely circulated (see Mäkelä and Linkola 2024), even though Finnish forests are heavily exploited and extensively cut down for industrial use.

The exhibition also included a huge interactive touch wall that displayed a replica of the Astuvansalmi rock paintings in south-eastern Finland. The rock art at the Astuvansalmi site has been dated to the late Stone Age (circa 4000–2200 BCE). Thus, it is most probably not associated with the culture of groups using the Proto-Finnish language and, hence, 'Kalevalaic' poetry. A cultural continuity between the rock painters and the indigenous Sámi people has sometimes been suggested, and Sámi culture and folklore have been widely acknowledged in the rock paintings (see Lahelma 2007, 2012; Rainio et al. 2017), but this interpretation is also problematic.[4]

Since the issues and debates related to past ethnicities and cultural ownership were not touched upon in the exhibition, all traditional knowledge presented therein seemed to be assigned to the general category of 'folklore of the area'. This was manifested, for instance, in the statement on the touch wall that 'touching a rock painting was a way to get in contact with the spirit world'. The 'spirit world' thus became a shared mythological world of the Northern people in which languages, materialities, ethnicities, ownerships, and localities merged into a bigger entity. The touch wall enabled visitors to interact with this allegedly shared world, with the colour of the paintings intensifying when the wall was touched (Figure 4). In a way, the paintings came to life through touch, and the intensification of the colours made them clearer to the inexperienced eye. The use of digital effects also seemed to create a sense that the wall interconnected the visitor/toucher, the materiality of the rock art, and the immateriality of a shared spirit world.

The final room of the prehistory exhibition, the World Tree room, served as the focal point of the integrated display of folklore, archaeological artefacts, and interactive tools (Figure 5). It represented Finnic-Northern people's beliefs about the cosmological order of the world and animistic folk beliefs related to places, objects, and native wild animals, such as bears, elk, and birds. The lighting of the room was subdued, and the cabinets displaying animal-shaped artefacts were equipped with buttons that enabled visitors to play back sound effects, such as bear roars. Thus, the soundscape was rather cacophonous. The bear roar immediately evoked a 'Kalevalaic' sentiment, at least in visitors who had participated in the Finnish schooling system, as the bear is the national animal of Finland, and

Figure 4. Touching the interactive rock painting wall in the exhibition. Photo: H. Mäkelä.

various poems related to bear rituals can be found in the *Kalevala*. Hukantaival, Jonuks, and Johanson (2023, 27–28) note that the bear is a prominent figure at the NMF, particularly in its magic object collections and argue that this may be attributed to the romanticised relationship between Finnishness and the bear. Likewise, the bear sound effects tended to evoke a romanticised image of a vague distant past.

The World Tree room also included a dragon display, which featured a drawing and a 'sound effect' of a dragon. While dragons are absent from Finnish folklore, they are prominent in Scandinavian and Germanic mythology – a fact that was not acknowledged in the exhibition. This observation highlights an intriguing aspect of the exhibition: The entanglement of distinct cultural groups was largely not addressed. We consider this a missed opportunity to present it as a defining characteristic of Finnishness, as many traditions, languages, mythologies, and identities converge in present-day Finland, creating a unique blend of Finnishness and Finnish culture in both prehistoric and modern times.

Overall, the multisensory tools seemed to enhance a numinous experience – that is, 'a deep engagement, empathy, or spiritual communion with the people or events of the past' (Cameron and Gatewood 2003, 57). In the case of the NMF and the Kalevalaic past, the somewhat mystical experience of the 'other world' seemed to lie at the core of the relationship between the visitor and the interactive tools. We thus assert that the interactive and multisensory elements of the prehistory exhibition were intimately connected to a feeling of the 'Kalevalaicity' of the past in the museum space. The interactive elements were used to embellish and deepen the feeling of the furthest past or to experience the 'vibes' aroused by thinking about and touching the furthest past.

Figure 5. The world tree room in the NMF. According to the text on the wall, 'the universe was held up by the mythical world tree'. photo: H. Mäkelä (January 2023).

Archaeological finds speaking for themselves: where the Kalevalaic elements do not fit

We conclude our analysis by focusing on the parts of the exhibition that did *not* utilise any Kalevalaic elements. We believe that certain archaeological finds do not need the aura of reliability created by folkloric evidence, even if they could easily be linked to oral poetry due to their nature. It seems that these finds are so impressive in their own right that the archaeological interpretation itself is deemed sufficiently convincing. Two examples of this in the exhibition were the Antrea Net (Figure 6) and the burial of the 'Matron of Eura' (Figure 7), representing the earliest and latest phase of Finnish prehistory.

The Antrea Net is part of an assemblage of finds found in a marsh in the parish of Antrea (in the Karelian Isthmus, modern-day Russia) in 1913. Besides the remains of a fishing net made from cords of willow bast, the find includes artefacts made of stone, bone, and antler. It has been dated to 8400–8300 cal. BCE, thus representing the earliest phase of the Mesolithic period, when most of Finland was still under ice sheets or the sea. The find has been interpreted as the contents of a fisher's upturned boat sunken to the bottom of what was then Ancylus Lake and is now the Baltic Sea. Several elements make the Antrea Net one of the most famous Stone Age finds in Finland. It is among the oldest fishing nets ever found anywhere in the world, its knotting bespeaks elaborate craftsmanship, and it includes organic residue (such as bone and vegetative fibre), which is rarely preserved in Finnish soil (Carpelan 2008).

The burial of the so-called Matron of Eura, or Luistari Grave 56, is one of the 1300 burials in Luistari, Eura, south-western Finland, spanning the time from the Merovingian period to

Figure 6. The case displaying the Antrea Net find in the prehistory exhibition. Screenshot from the NMF's virtual exhibition. Original video: National Museum of Finland, Virtual Exhibitions.

the end of the Iron Age (circa 600–1300). Luistari is the largest known Iron Age cemetery in Finland and also one of the largest known inhumation cemeteries in the Nordic countries. It was excavated for more than 20 years, and has been extensively studied (Danielisová et al. 2025). Grave 56 was found in 1969, and the inhumed individual was nicknamed the Matron of Eura. The burial included the partially preserved skeletal remains of an approximately 45-year-old woman and remains of clothing, a remarkable amount of jewellery, and other artefacts. The minting of the coins in her necklace and radiocarbon dating indicate that the woman was buried during the first half of the eleventh century. Her attire has been considered the quintessential outfit of a well-to-do Viking Age woman in Finland. A reconstruction called the 'Eura dress' was famously worn by President Tarja Halonen at the Independence Day Ball of 2000. The Matron of Eura is one of the 'treasures of prehistoric collections' showcased on the NMF website (National Museum of Finland, Digital Collections).

What do the Antrea Net and Luistari Grave 56 have in common? They are both famous archaeological finds in Finland, presented in schoolbooks, and widely known to the public; thus, they can be called 'iconic' finds. Perhaps their most important feature, however, is that they represent individuals who lived during prehistory and whose life stories can be seen as narratives connecting the museum visitor to the time when these individuals were alive. This is more evident in the case of Grave 56: The buried individual has a nickname, her remains and burial have provided considerable information about her, and she has been perceived as the epitome of Viking Age Finnish women. The individual behind the Antrea Net find is more obscure but still has a sufficiently loud 'voice'.

Both the Antrea Net and Grave 56 have been extensively studied, so there are considerable amounts of 'certain' information on them. Therefore, it seems that no supplementary evidence provided by folklore or mythology is required. The interpretation – the 'guessing' that lies at the core of archaeological research – can be reduced to pondering the story of the Matron of Eura or what happened to the person who owned the Antrea Net.

Figure 7. Grave 56 and the outfit reconstruction based on the find at the NMF. Photo: National Museum of Finland.

Discussion

The critical analysis of the prehistory exhibition presented herein reveals that folk poetry and 'Kalevalaicity' remain central elements of Finnishness at the NMF. The references to characters, places, and events from oral poetry serve to reinforce the notion of 'belonging to the same (Finnish) story'. However, as the archival material of Finnic oral poetry was mainly collected in the nineteenth century, the factual connections between them and, for example, Stone or Iron Age are debatable. Thus, the intermingling of folklore, mythology, archaeological periods and artefacts creates rather complex relationships between national heritage, ethnicity, language, time, and the museum. This complexity was not discussed in the exhibition. On the contrary, the relationships were oversimplified. We suggest that the utilisation of Kalevalaic elements evoked sentiments of sublime and affective connections to the most distant past and the mythic history of Finnishness. Furthermore, Kalevalaic elements were employed as 'gap fillers' in cases in which the archaeological record was insufficiently detailed to provide sound interpretations. Thus, the incorporation of folkloric elements served to enhance the narrative that the artefacts lacked. This is a characteristic of prehistory due to the lack of individuals, voices, personal experiences, and events (Wood and Cotton 1999, 30; Elphinstone 2020; Henson 2020, 92–96).

Creating fictional individuals or imagining backstories for the persons represented in archaeological finds or written sources is often used in museum exhibitions (see, e.g. Insulander and Lindstrand 2008). It enables the museumgoer to experience, for example, everyday life in the past or a certain historical event through the eyes of a relatable person acting as both a narrator and

a companion to the visitor. However, the further into the past one goes, the more difficult it becomes to find sufficient information to back up the facts in the stories of these individuals. Folkloric elements are then needed to access the intangible world of the prehistoric past. Therefore, it is understandable that Kalevalaic elements feature in exhibition texts concerning worldviews or beliefs. However, our analysis suggests that the use of Kalevalaic elements tends to construct a temporally displaced and chronologically vague 'ancient Finnish past'. Archaeologists and historians deal with research material that needs to be set in absolute chronology, but oral traditions and narratives usually do not adequately fit into chronological time frames (Layton 2017, 27, 31–33). Museum exhibitions, like the prehistory exhibition at the NMF, aim to form a representation of the past which is as lively and accessible as possible. Folk poetry and oral narratives are placed in the same reality as a historical, chronological past, as this is thought to enhance the perceived richness and diversity of this past. Thematic exhibitions are also meant to transcend chronology by representing timeless phenomena. This results in creating a specific variety of the past: 'museum time', a temporal dimension set on the same continuum as 'timeless' oral traditions and unbridled ancientness.

Concluding remarks

Museums are generally considered more reliable sources of information about history and heritage than many other institutions. This is also true in Finland (see, e.g. Torsti 2012). Moreover, national museums are considered to create, curate, and communicate the 'official' representation of national history and heritage. If the NMF is considered the 'flagship' of Finnish museums and acts as a window into Finnish heritage, it also has certain responsibilities regarding the representations it offers. What to include in a museum exhibition (and how) is often influenced by the different opinions of researchers, museum professionals, and the public. During times of diminishing resource allocation to museums and the field of cultural heritage, exhibitions are affected by financial constraints and the balance between researchers' views, designers' perspectives, and commercial interests. Not everything that is considered important can be included. Thus, research on the way in which prehistory and 'ancient' Finnishness are depicted at the NMF is important for making these aspects visible.

It must be remembered that the prehistory exhibition did not target professionals, such as archaeologists or folklorists, but the general public. Perhaps the vagueness and 'guessing' involved in archaeological research are considered too difficult for the public; for this reason, a more comprehensible, folklore-backed interpretation of the past may be preferred. Perhaps these issues could be explained to the public through providing some information about research methods and the way in which archaeological interpretations are formed. Once again, however, while the researchers and museum personnel involved in the construction of an exhibition would undoubtedly consider this a good idea, there might be no distorts available for it.

In this article, we have pointed out several issues that can arise from utilising folklore elements, including *Kalevala*-metric poetry, as 'gap fillers' in the absence of sufficient archaeological information, as it unhinges the chronological dimensions of the representation of prehistory. While it can also be seen as a fresh, positive approach to displaying archaeological knowledge, we suggest that the inclusion of folklore elements should be acknowledged, and the challenges of cross-disciplinarity and the issues and limits of knowledge obtainable through folklore research should be considered.

Notes

1. 'Oh you, poor iron,/poor iron, wretched slag,/Why did you carve your brother,/cut up your mother's child?/ Water is the oldest, fire the youngest,/iron the middle one./You iron created by God,/come and know thy

work,/to lick thy sore,/and heal thy ills!' Collected from Hietajärvi, Karelia, in 1904. Sung by Miina Huovinen (SKVR I4, 1919, 153; translation by the authors with the help of DeepL).

2. A big data based digital and multidisciplinary endeavour to determine the age of Finnic mythology in Estonia is underway, but no results have been published yet. This project combines linguistics, folkloristics, archaeology, and ancient DNA analysis methods (see https://genomics.ut.ee/en/content/estonian-roots-centre-excellence-transdisciplinary-studies-ethnogenesis-and-cultural). However, these studies were not referenced in the exhibition, and because of their complex multidisciplinary methodologies, referencing them in the future may be challenging.
3. In the original *Kalevala* poem, Väinämöinen travels to the land of the dead to ask for magical words to build a boat (Lönnrot [1849] 2008, poem 16). In Kalevalaic mythology, the land of the dead is not a Christian European vertical 'netherworld' but can be reached, for instance, by crossing a river (Frog 2020, 612–617).
4. For a recent discussion about the early history of the Sámi, see Svestad and Olsen (2023); Piha, Heikkilä, and Häkkinen (2024).

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