

# The Lake and Its Monster

## Communicating Connections with Landscape, Belonging and Sense of Place with Great Lake Monster Narratives

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### *Abstract*

This article explores the longstanding connection between a local version of a widespread cultural phenomenon – sea and lake serpents – and the community that cares for it. Legends and observation narratives, memorates, from the seventeenth century onwards concerning this lake serpent are analysed. The study further discusses how these narratives constitute the best-known Swedish version of lake serpents, the Great Lake Monster in the province of Jämtland, as an intermediary in connecting humans, history, landscape, and societal transformations, and how these narratives convey a sense of place. These intimate links position the Great Lake Monster as a protective spirit of the locality, a *genius loci*.

Centred around one key question – “In what ways do Great Lake Monster narratives express connections between people, history, landscape, and place?” – the article shows how early interpretations of this phenomenon were shaped by life embedded in the everyday interaction with nature and the landscape. With the older legends functioning as a formative foundation for the later shaping of the idea as a cryptid, or “hidden animal”, I argue that they can be viewed as bridging the shared idea of the lake serpent on the Frösö runestone, Jämtland, Sweden, and the cryptozoological tradition of an observed animal in the lake.

Keywords: Monster, lake serpents, storytelling, narratives, landscape, human ecology, monster observations, cryptozoology

*Cryptozoology is the (pseudo-)scientific field of studying “hidden animals”, or animals seen by people but not yet scientifically proven to exist*

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in the physical realm (Swahn 1990; Welinder 1998, 2004; cf. Regal 2009, 2011; Rossi 2016; Hurn 2017; Bubandt 2019). A crypto-creature, or cryptid, is therefore not a “real animal” but a liminal monster, awaiting discovery or oblivion – whichever comes first (Händén-Svensson 2024a).

This was not always the case with *Storsjöodjuret*, or “the Great Lake Monster” in translation. Once upon a time it lived with the people inhabiting the shores of the lake Storsjön in Northern Sweden, shaped their relationship with the water, and served as explanations for elements in the landscape – and it was as real to these people as were all the other fauna of the lake.

To understand the Great Lake Monster and its stories today, one must understand it as an ambiguous phenomenon: simultaneously a folkloric being, a cryptid, a symbol, and a monster.

## Communicating belonging

What does it mean to belong to a certain place? In this text I will explore what I understand to be a particular way of communicating belonging, namely by stories of observations of cryptids. I focus here on narratives about *Storsjöodjuret*, or “The Great Lake Monster”, in the province of Jämtland, Sweden. The work is based on my doctoral thesis in Human Ecology (Händén-Svensson 2024a), and I have not explored whether narratives of observing other cryptids function the same way.



In this article I analyse older published narratives of the Great Lake Monster and interviews conducted with observers of it. The analysis and discussion are formed around one central question: In what ways do Great Lake Monster narratives express connections between people, history, landscape and place? In order to understand how this particular cryptid is used as a way of communicating belonging, I start by placing the Great Lake Monster in the Jämtlandic landscape as a ge-

Figure 1. Storsjön is situated in the province of Jämtland in Sweden. Lantmäteriet 2023©. Map layout: Linda Stihl & Sanna Händén-Svensson.

*nius loci*. I then turn to other stories and conversations, which all differ in genre as well as in content, to explore local relationships between the lake Storsjön (Figures 1 and 2), the people living there, and the surrounding landscape, making the argument that the observation narratives discussed here are not merely told to communicate the encounter with the cryptid, but also as a way to make use of the landscape as part of the process of world-making.

Figure 2. Local map of Storsjön. Lantmäteriet 2023©. Map layout: Linda Stihl & Sanna Händén-Svensson.

Written records of conceptualizations of this lake monster exist from 1643 and into our days, and it has been continually reimagined and re-contextualized, while still keeping its core narrative form recognizable. The meanings ascribed to the creature are not fixed; rather, they are shaped by the people who engage with it across different social, cultural, and spatial contexts. Drawing on



a range of narrative materials, I have elsewhere discussed the history of the figure, identifying four dominant conceptualizations: (1) as a *väsen*, a folkloric being embedded in a cosmological order and tied to pre-industrial vernacular ontologies of nature; (2) as a *cryptid*, positioned within a scientific discourse and treated as an object of empirical inquiry; (3) as a *symbol* for the region, mobilized for tourism purposes, regional branding, and economic development; and (4) as a figure of popular culture, often rendered in monstrous or fantastical form (cf. Händén-Svensson 2024a). These shifting representations reflect broader transformations in how landscapes are experienced, narrated, and commodified. While focusing on the relationship between the first two identities, this article discusses how folklore operates as a living, adaptive system – one that mediates relationships between people, place, and the more-than-human world (cf. Cruikshank 1994; 1997; 2000[1998]). In doing so, it contributes to ongoing

ing conversations in both folklore and landscape studies about the role of narrative in shaping spatial imaginaries and cultural memory (cf. Schama 1995).

First mentioned in writing by the Danish physician and rune historian Ole Worm (1643:522–523), it was at this time called a “lake serpent”, a folkloric being inhabiting and ruling the lake. In early narratives of this lake serpent, which by and large explain an eleventh-century runestone’s placement by the eastern shore of the island of Frösö in the lake (Plantin 1685), their interconnected relationship is made obvious. In later narratives, the focus is instead shifted to the witnessing of a “hidden animal”, as the understandings of the lake serpent were transformed to adapt to scientific and societal changes. In making room for zoological interpretations of the old narratives, scholars in zoology (as well as archaeology), tried to identify the species of the creature described by witnesses (Lönnerberg 1898, 1899a, 1899b; Olsson 1899; Wibling 1903). In this process, the repertoire of stories told about *Storsjöodjuret* also shifted, from shared legends to individual memorates (for discussions about memorates and individual narratives of experience, see e.g. Dégh & Vászonyi 1979; Honko 1964; Klintberg 1973; Meurling 2016; Rooth 1979), which also share patterns and motifs (Händén-Svensson 2024a, 2024b).

However, no animal was found that matched or explained what was witnessed, and the once commonly shared folklore, traditions, and beliefs about the lake serpent vanished and gave room for the cryptozoological interpretation present today (Malm 2017; Heuvelmans 1958[1955], 1968, 1983, 1990, 1997, 2007, cf. Händén-Svensson 2024a; 2024b). Contemporary images and uses of *Storsjöodjuret*, besides its lure for cryptozoologists and *believers*, can best be described as that of a symbol of the province of Jämtland, Sweden, often used for tourism purposes.

In the following I will focus on the communicative meaning of the stories as expressions of a sense of place and belonging, and I will show how the Great Lake Monster functions as a mediating link between humans, history, the landscape, and societal change. I argue that *Storsjöodjuret* and the people who care for it belong together, share history in this landscape, and that through this connection a sense of place is constructed.

## Theoretical Perspectives

This article draws on two main theoretical categories: folklore studies and geography. Working together they contribute nuanced understandings of the relationship between people, the phenomenon, and the place.

Theoretically I base the analysis in phenomenological geography, and

core concepts such as sense of, and belonging to, place, and that of *genius loci* (Norberg-Schultz 1980; Relph 1976; Seamon 2018). From this perspective, “one can define place as *any environment that gathers human experiences, actions, and meanings spatially and temporally*” (Seamon 2018:2, italics in original). They are assigned meaning by individuals but can simultaneously be a shared experience (Relph 1976; Raymond et al. 2021; Tuan 1977). Place can also play a central role in the formation and communication of identity on both individual and collective levels (Riley 2010:652; cf. Glassie 1995[1982]; Hornborg 2001; Laime 2014).

The older legends about *Storsjöodjuret* not only established, but also continuously maintain, a tradition of the lake serpent as a *genius loci*. The concept, used to describe a deeply felt meaningfulness attached to a certain place, entered geography with the phenomenological landscape research in the latter half of the twentieth century. The idea sprang from a Roman tradition around the beginning of our era, where certain sacred locales of significance for a family or cult were said to be protected by place-bound spirits, often depicted as serpents (Flowers 2017; Malm 2017). The architect Christian Norberg-Schultz, in a central study in 1980, used the concept to describe the feeling of or for a place in architectural analysis. *Genius loci* thus describes a kind of “spirituality” significant for meaningful places (Norberg-Schultz 1980; Relph 1976; Tuan 1977; Vecco 2020), and places can be attributed anything from a long and deep to a weak such sense of “spirituality” (Lewicka et al. 2019; Raymond et al. 2021).

“Some landscapes”, writes Ulrich Magin in 2016 (p. 211–212), citing Charles Fort (1994:12), “contain the necessity of a creature or phenomenon, and because these fit that landscape or the desires and/or fears of their inhabitants, they are not only ‘necessary monsters’, but can also be regarded as an expression of the *genius loci*.” Fort attributes cryptids the role of handling various feelings people in a particular time or social group experience towards place and argues that feelings of homeliness and belonging to a place or landscape can be embodied in the cryptid as a *genius loci*.

In the following I will use the early legends of the Great Lake Monster as a way of placing the lake serpent in the landscape, showing how the *idea* of a serpent body in this water is constructed historically as a shared folk belief and narrative. This idea is then given new meanings in a later interpretation as a cryptid, connecting observers, landscape, lake and monster in historical processes of meaning-making and belonging.

## Materials and Empirical Data

Folklore legends from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are analysed, as well as interviews with witnesses alive today. The interviews, conducted between 2018 and 2023, focused on the informant's observation as well as other aspects that they brought up in relation to telling me about the time (or times) the lake monster revealed itself to them. Four interviews are cited in this article: Gustav, a man in his seventies, saw *Storsjöodjuret* in the 1980s; Emma, a woman in her forties, witnessed the lake serpent in the early 2000s; Imbar, a woman also in her seventies, saw it in 2013; and Orvar, a man in his eighties had a very close encounter with the cryptid when it was caught in his fishing gear in the 1990s.

The origins of the older narratives about the lake serpent (here discussed as a background to the idea that later reveals itself in physical shape to the interviewed observers), their age or socio-cultural contexts, are unknown. I stumbled across them in daily newspapers, magazines, books, and archives during the work with my doctoral dissertation (Händén-Svensson 2024a). They are published, with all the scholarly frustrations this evokes; information on provenance, the narrative's position in the teller's repertoire, personal and creative addenda, etc., are all missing in the "frozen" written form of each particular narrative. Oral traditions, in contrast, are fluid, in constant adaptation to situation, contexts, inter-personal relations, and motifs of the storyteller (cf. Cruikshank 1994; 1997; 2000[1998]), and we can imagine that these stories once also were "alive". What follows are thus my interpretations of a very small sample, and I make no claims to have exhausted the possibility that several more narratives – and interpretations – exist.

The older stories are legends, and as such part of a larger set of cosmological beliefs about the world, including the relationship with nature, animals, and magical beings (Klintberg 1972:14). From the late nineteenth century another kind of narrative entered the stage of Great Lake Monster stories: *memorates*. A memorate about an observation, or of the witnessing of a "hidden animal", is individual in reference, but analysed in relation to each other reveal that they share common structural and almost formulaic elements (Händén-Svensson 2004a). The observation can within a cryptozoological context be held as proof of the animal's existence, making the memorate a kind of "eyewitness statement" (cf. Loxton & Prothero 2013:13–16).

The earliest narrative in the material analysed here was published in 1836 in a newspaper article about a trip to the mountain Åreskutan, located in Jämtland, Sweden. Other stories are still in use today, primarily in the contexts of (cultural heritage) tourism. Below I give brief summaries

of them. Previously, the archaeologist Stig Welinder (1998; 2004) has discussed the relationships between the monster, local (cultural) history, and the landscape. Of the legends discussed here, the one about the two trolls Jata and Kata is referenced in Welinder's writings.

## Great Lake Monster Legends

There are several origin legends that tell the story of how the creature came into existence. The first one published, as far as I have found, appeared in *Jämtlands-Tidning's* supplement *Jämten* on 29 January 1897. In this narrative the lake serpent appears in the human world as a punishment, motivated by disobedience to the rules set in dealings between trolls and humans. I retell it here in part:

A long time ago, somewhere near the lake Storsjön, lived a wealthy, but unusually stingy, farmer. He only provided barely enough food for his people. One day he consulted a forest troll [...] about how to feed the people of his farm in the least expensive way. He got good advice: for an entire day he should cook only lake water and was strictly forbidden to peek into the pot until the evening when it got dark. [...] He immediately informed his wife of the new cooking method, and she started on the task right away, after having been thoroughly warned to obey the troll. [...] However, when the evening came, she peeked in the pot thinking, "It can't hurt." To her great horror, a small creature rolled out of the vessel, across the floor, and straight into the lake. The woman fell dead on the spot. With her curiosity, she had incurred the troll's wrath upon herself and her husband, who was killed by a bear at the same moment.

The story continues with a sequence which I believe to have been the most important part in early narrations of this legend, letting us know that the serpent grew until it could coil around the islands in the lake. The locals hurried to contract the well-known Kettil Runske, who bound the unknown animal. The method used to bind the monster differs in the origin legends analysed, but most of them connect to the serpentine motif on the Frösö runestone, thus explaining the presence of this strange stone in the landscape.

Building on shared beliefs, fears, and hopes, folklore serves to shape, communicate, and uphold norms (Arvidsson 1999; Frykman 1977; Skjelbred 1998; Stattin 1984). In this story, a fear of unknown fauna presents itself as a small, unrecognizable animal that rolls from the pot into the lake. Such species were not known in the human world, and therefore a man with magical powers, Kettil Runske, was sent for to keep the otherwise uncontrollable in check, marking the animal as *unusual*.

*Traces in the Landscape*

In another origin story, the trolls themselves take on the task of cooking something. This marks a shift in the communication of *why* Storsjön has a lake monster. Today this is the most frequently retold variant of the stories here discussed, and it comes in many versions, e.g. in *Jämtens* 1917 (below, Westin 1917), and a shortened version recorded in 1955 (read from “The Map of Nordic Folklore”). They show a strong resemblance but exhibit one important difference from a placelore perspective.

A long time ago two trolls, Jata and Kata, stood on the eastern shore of Storsjön, each of them cooking something in their cauldrons. They stirred and cooked, and cooked and stirred for days, weeks, and months, wondering and waiting to see what would eventually become of it. Then one evening, after a long time of cooking, a strange sound was heard from one of the pots. It sounded like a sick child, groaning and screaming, and suddenly a loud bang sounded, as from a violent thunderclap, and a strange black animal with a snake’s body and a cat’s head jumped out of the cauldron and disappeared into the lake. At the same time, both the kettles and the trolls disappeared; only white smoke was seen after them, and a gaping chasm appeared in the ground. [...]

The animal that sprang from the cauldrons thrived in Storsjön and grew immensely, spreading fear and terror, and finally grew so large that it encompassed all Frösön and could bite its own tail. Kettil Runskel then bound the monster with a powerful spell, which was inscribed on a stone erected on the eastern shore of the island.

We also see a clear reference to the old Norse serpent Jörmungandr/Miðgarðsormr, hinting that the local serpent belongs to pre-Christian mythology and cosmology.

In the version found on “The Nordic Map of Folklore”, another relationship between nature and monstrous being is uncovered when the explosion from the cauldrons not only presents the world with the Great Lake Monster, but also creates a large, gruesome chasm that fills with water: the lake itself is created at the same time. The unknown animal again grew so large that it eventually encircled the island in the middle of the lake, so it could bite its own tail, and the rune magician was contracted to bind the monster.

In this case, the monster is connected to the place not only as folklore about water and trolls but as an embodied part of the landscape, as the entire lake is created in the great explosion in which the lake serpent with a cat’s head and snake’s body is formed. In this version the “birth” of *Storsjöodjuret* made an impression not only in people’s minds but also in the physical landscape, being shaped by its birth.



*The Frösö Runestone and Kettil Runske*

So, what is the story of the stone with magic runes on the eastern shore of Frösön, recurrently included in the older narratives about this local lake serpent? The Frösö runestone is dated to 1050/1080, and was erected by Östman Gudfast's son who, according to the inscription, "had Jämtland christened". The earliest mention of a lake serpent in connection with the runestone appears in Ole Worm's work from 1643, and later records from the Swedish Antiquarian Inquiries during the 1680s suggest that the people ascribed the runes magical power to control the lake serpent, which served as a representative of frightening aspects of life lived by the lake (Plantin 1685). Already in the mid-seventeenth century the lake serpent and landscape elements were tied together, forming the foundation upon which later legends and observation stories were formed. The stone, with its central placement on the shore, became what Eskeröd (1947:65–87) called a "milieu dominant" – that is, something in the environment that is so dominantly present that it shapes, and reshapes, folklore in the area – in the adaptation of the local lake serpent narratives.

The man who, according to the legends, inscribes the runes and binds the lake monster is most often called Kettil Runske, or some version of that name, and the next source linking the stone to Kettil Runske appears in *Norrlands Tidningar* in 1836. During a trip to the mountain Åreskutan the author and his travel companions stayed a few nights on Frösön and later wrote about the lake serpent tradition as a model of explanation of the often harsh weather conditions on the lake. According to the author, a serpent is said to lie chained to the bottom of the lake by a church bell that, during a transport over the strait in winter, went through the ice and landed on the serpent's tail. The narrative thus also functions as an image of Christianity's victory over older religious and belief systems.

## Belonging to Place

An observation of a cryptid can, in its own way, reinforce an individual's sense of belonging to place. It becomes a memorable event – an "anchor" in their personal narrative – but also a piece in a larger, shared process of relational place-making, and in this next section the article will focus on contemporary expressions and narratives of the relationship between the Great Lake Monster, the people, and the landscape. By examining how these relationships are articulated through legends and other forms of vernacular storytelling, I aim to connect the older narratives with the experience of observing the cryptid, and the narration of this experience. These do more than recount encounters with a cryptid; they embed the

creature within a dense web of place-based meanings, positioning it as a protective spirit of place –a *genius loci*. In this way, the Great Lake Monster becomes a symbolic and affective anchor for both individual and shared senses of place.

“Belonging to a particular locality evokes the notion of loyalty to a place, a loyalty that may be expressed through oral or written history narratives of origin as belonging, the focality of certain objects, myths,” writes the anthropologist Nadia Lovell (1998:1). I argue that the cryptid functions as a “focusing object” of shared history and as a symbol of such connections. The storytelling surrounding this local cryptid acts as a form of cultural inscription, shaping how the landscape is perceived, remembered, and inhabited, and the legends can be viewed as contributing to a shared *sense of place* that is emotionally charged and socially transmitted. As the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) has argued, *topophilia* – the affective bond between people and place – is often cultivated through narrative, memory, and embodied experience.

In an interview in 2021, the tourism developer Anne Adsten describes it thus: “The *Storsjöodjuret* is a part of us, a part of who we are [as Jämtlanders].” An observation of the Great Lake Monster is of course not the only way in which local belonging is communicated in Jämtland. But it is, I would say, a very special way, which is expressed repeatedly in interviews and narratives. In the following I will explore a few of these, using them as entry points to understand how belonging to place is narrated, expressed, and given shape by the observers. The monster observation is rendered meaningful in more than one way, as both confirmation of belonging and as the powerful experiencing of witnessing something extraordinary from the legends.

In my earlier work, which centred on how the intricate web of the social, the cultural, the historical, and the local influenced the shaping of this Swedish cryptid, I interviewed eleven observers about their experiences. The purpose of the study was to demonstrate how this scientifically still unvalidated animal serves as an interesting representative of a borderland between the real and the imagined, and how views of nature, landscape, place, society, history, and culture are woven together with storytelling and scientific exploration to illuminate socio-ecological relationships. Earlier research on cryptids and the regionally grounded history of them have mainly focused on their meaning in local folklore (ethnology/anthropology), investigations of what is observed (zoology/crypto-zoology and environmental history), or the people searching for them (sociology, sociology of religion, and tourism).

When inquiring about an interview, I asked the informants to show me places they thought I need to have visited to understand their observa-

tions. This is what happened.

Gustav lives in a small town in Jämtland. This place has been his home for over forty years, and he has witnessed the Great Lake Monster twice. He begins by going back much earlier than the day he “met” *Storsjöodjuret* and points our driver to the home he built for his family in 1977–78. On our way there he tells me about the municipality’s history and his life here. Only several hours into our drive does he bring me to the shore where he saw the Great Lake Monster. I understand this as a way of connecting his observation narrative to the place, grounding it in the landscape (cf. Glassie 1995[1982]). To understand his observation, I must understand him belonging here. By introducing me to the landscape before giving me his story, he is narrating not just the experience, but also his relationship to this place.

Emma, whom I interviewed online during the COVID-19 pandemic, also uses her observation as reinforcement of her belonging to this place. In her family a chronicle is told that very tangibly connects her and her family to the area and to the runestone, and thereby also to the lake serpent:

Me: What has fascinated you about the myths and stories?

Emma: Maybe the fact that *Storsjöodjuret* can be connected to the Frösö runestone in some way, because on my father’s side we are directly descended from the one who raised the stone. The serpent on the stone is bound with something, and it is said that when the curse is broken, the serpent will come loose, grow larger, and encircle Frösön. According to the legend, the whole island will then sink.

[Later in the interview:]

Me: Would you say that your observation has affected your everyday life in any way?

Emma: Hard to say, I have always respected those who have seen it. I feel humbled. I am extremely grateful that I might have seen it. Humbled and grateful.

The water surface splitting and the hidden animal revealing itself is highlighted in the observers’ life narratives as a humbling event to cherish with gratitude. Emma’s observation becomes a kind of double confirmation of this being her place: she witnesses the monster that, through the legends, relates to the runestone with an inscription significant to her family’s history.

Imbar, with whom I drove through the Jamtlandic landscape in 2019, talking about history, family, her life in the area, and her Great Lake Monster observation, also described the event as a positive and confirming experience. The event took place in 2013, when she was sitting on a warm bus on her way home from work. Years later – this time in cold and windy weather – we walk out on the same bridge so that I may come as close as possible to the site of the original observation.

Imbar: What happened was so strange. I was startled and almost jumped out of my seat and thought “What was that?” It was such warm and sunny day, and I had placed myself on the wrong side of the bus. But it was so beautiful, so I stayed and looked out over the water. Just as the bus drove over the bridge, something arched from the surface in a cascade of water [...] and then it came up once more!

Me: What does it mean to you that you got to see it?

Imbar: Well, I thought it was fun and fascinating. I usually say that “I never get to see anything, I never experience anything, I am so sceptical.” So that was fun!

Standing there beside her, gazing out over the water, allowed me to gain a personal and emotional understanding of the event and its spatial context. The embodied act of returning to the site, even under different conditions, becomes a form of situated knowledge-making, where landscape, memory, and narrative converge. Imbar, who says she never experience anything extraordinary, was on that day in 2013 allowed a glimpse of the cryptid of the lake, and I on this day in 2019, a glimpse of her observation.

Orvar also begins his story with a retrospect revealing feelings of long belonging to this place. Our driver and I have just arrived at his home when Orvar points to a potted plant in a windowsill:

Right in this spot in the house stood my aunt, she was visiting from America, and it was the same day the Americans landed on the moon, when she told me that when they moved into the house in 1895, my grandfather carried her sister, who was very young, and my grandmother carried that cactus over there.

The cactus would, if still alive and thriving (I do not know), be 130 years old now, time materialized, and it functions as a hub where time, place, and kinship run strongly intertwined from his grandmother and grandfather, through the house’s four generations, to himself and his children. He continues by telling us about the very old family line he belongs to. He shares memories from meetings with relatives with us and shows us the family’s coat of arms. The first stop, on our way to the place of his observation, is a church that has a central place in his ancestral history. Orvar’s potted plant, the family’s imprints in the landscape through buildings and farms, which he shows us during our travel in the landscape, point both backward and forward. He has been here for a long time, as in a forward motion initiated long before he was born. A motion that is brought to life when I ask him to tell me about his Great Lake Monster observation.

The informant Fjälla makes a similar connection when we meet for an interview in March 2022. She takes me through the provinces of Jämtland and Härjedalen, and we drive to both her parents’ farm, the home

she shared with her husband, and to the summer pasture, where she has lived a seasonal pastoralist lifestyle since she was a little girl. Later in the interview – after arriving at her current farm, feeding her sheep, and when her dog has placed her head in my lap for some cuddles – Fjälla reflects on her relationship with this place as she comments on the shifting socio-ecological dynamics she has observed in the region. Drawing on her lived experience, she articulates a distinction between two modes of engaging with the environment: one rooted in “nature experience,” the other in “land use.” The former reflects an emotionally situated, culturally mediated relationship with place, one she associates with her childhood, while the latter is shaped by instrumental and economic rationalities, materializing in developments such as large ski resorts with “ski-in, ski-out” lodging. These orientations correspond, respectively, to intimate, place-based sociality grounded in shared lifeworlds, and to more abstract, transactional forms of interaction marked by anonymity and detachment.

As a short detour, I will lastly allow myself a comparison with another Nordic lake monster, Selma in Seljordsvatnet in Norway, to accentuate that the processes of connecting the witnessing of a cryptid to the shaping of identities, feelings of belonging to a landscape, and a sense of place is after all perhaps not exclusive to the Jamtlandic region. For over 250 years, stories of this lake serpent have circulated in this Norwegian community, embedding the creature in the cultural landscape and local identity. Bernt Solvoll, cultural consultant in the municipality of Seljord, told *The Guardian*’s reporter Flora Botsfjord in 1999 how he, some time after commencing his position, began to wonder when Selma would “welcome” him. And then, finally, one calm afternoon, as he is driving along the shore of the lake, the water suddenly begins to stir. For approximately ten minutes he witnesses waves forming and something repeatedly sending up cascades of water, before the lake gradually returns to stillness. He has been approved.

When I ask for an interview regarding *Storsjöodjuret*, the stories originate from other places than I first expected. The pattern that appears suggests that the experience of witnessing the monster is not an isolated incident, neither in the witness’s life nor in the realm of narrating. The observers relate the monster to other places, events, and parts of life, and when I ask about observations these relations are brought up. I begin to understand that observations of the local lake monster can be viewed as a reinforcement of person’s sense of belonging, and that narrating the observation is a way to share this relationship with others. It peeks into family histories, church history, potted plant cultivation, summer pasture life, lifestyle, heraldry, landscape, and environmental history – and much besides. It becomes clear that the Great Lake Monster connects and in-

fluences diverse areas of Jamtlandic society and the lives of people here. Through storytelling, people do not simply describe the landscape, they inhabit it, engage with it, and co-construct its meaning. The local "hidden" lake serpent, in this context, is not just a folkloric figure, nor just an imagined undiscovered species, but a relational entity that mediates human-environment interactions.

## Conclusion

This article has traced the evolving uses and meanings of the Great Lake Monster in Lake Storsjön across nearly four centuries, revealing how the figure has served as a dynamic cultural anchor between people, place, and narrative. In conversations with *believers*, it becomes clear that the belief in a cryptid is embedded within a broader cultural understanding of landscape as affective, relational, and historically situated. The natural environment, often associated with notions of "home", is not merely a backdrop for these stories but is actively constituted as the Great Lake Monster's landscape. This landscape is experienced as sentient and responsive, a co-actor in the narrative relationship, and must be taken seriously in any phenomenologically informed folkloristic or geographic analysis.

The older narratives, rooted in pre-industrial cosmologies, offered vernacular explanations for natural phenomena and reinforced moral and ecological norms. In these stories, the lake serpent and the landscape are inseparable, co-constituting a world in which humans, nature, and the supernatural are entangled. The serpent is not merely *in* the lake; it is *of* the lake. These tales also converge around the Frösö runestone, where the monster serves as a mythic explanation for a tangible cultural landmark, anchoring oral tradition in the material landscape.

With the onset of industrialization, urbanization, and scientific rationalism, a new interpretive framework emerged. The being was reimagined as a cryptid, an object of empirical curiosity and speculative zoology. Yet even within this modern framing, the observation narrative remains deeply place-bound. The act of witnessing the creature becomes a means of expressing both a sense of belonging and a claim of place. In this way, the cryptid takes on the role of a *genius loci*, a spirit of place that mediates between personal experience and collective memory.

The continuity between older legends and newer memorates reveals how folklore adapts to changing cultural conditions while maintaining its role in shaping spatial imaginaries. The early narratives were embedded in everyday ecological relationships, while contemporary accounts often reflect more individualized, yet no less meaningful, engagements

with the landscape. Together, these stories form a bridge between shared cosmological interpretations and modern, often zoologically framed, understandings of the phenomenon.

In reflecting on the enduring presence of the Great Lake Monster in local storytelling, it becomes clear that such figures are not merely remnants of a mythic past, but active participants in the cultural and spatial life of a region. They offer a lens through which to examine how people make sense of their environments, negotiate belonging, and sustain memory across generations. By attending to the interplay between narrative, landscape, and belief, this study contributes to the inquiries of folklore as dynamic modes of world-making, one that continues to shape how we inhabit and imagine place in an ever-changing world.

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<sup>1</sup> I will use both names in this text.

<sup>2</sup> The word used in Swedish is *sjöorm*.

<sup>3</sup> In the translation from nineteenth century Swedish to an enjoyable text in English, I have made minor artistic choices in relation to the rhythm and flow of the text, while at the same time trying to stay as close to original wordings and particular meanings as possible. The same applies to all the stories retold here.

<sup>4</sup> The earliest mentioning of this name in connection to the Frösö runestone and/or the Great Lake Monster that I have found is a footnote in historian Frederick Suhm's collections on Danish history (1779:117): "This Kettil Runske's name is nevertheless known in Norway and Sweden, where similar stories are told about him. There is a handwritten description of the Frösö Stone whose author states that this runestone, very differently depicted by Worm, was erected by Kettil Runske to bind a large sea serpent in Östersund in Sunne parish in Jämtland. The author of this description, made in 1635, is named Morten Pedersen Herdal."

<sup>5</sup> Translated into contemporary Swedish, the inscription reads: "Östman, Gudfasts son lät resa denna sten och göra denna bro, och han lät kristna Jämtland. Åsbjörn gjorde bron. Tryn och Sten ristade dessa runor" (Williams 1996).

<sup>6</sup> A similar report was in 1955 written down from an informant born in 1861 in Tand (The Map of Nordic Folklore).

<sup>7</sup> The all too warm and sunny side, my comment.

<sup>8</sup> Fäboden in Swedish.