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Sounds of a Grand Race: Conceptualizing Supernatural 'Vitra' Paths as Pre-Modern Sound-Musical-Spatial Infrastructure

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Abstract

This ethnomusicological, anthropological, and archaeomusicological study examines pre-modern conceptualizations of sound, 'music', and spatiality in northern Sweden before trains, electricity, gramophone, and radio arrived, through the lens of a specific body of material: mentions of sound and 'music' in recorded folklore accounts of the supernatural race known as the *vitra* and the 'supernatural' infrastructures known as *vitra paths.* The article introduces an extensive body of material – including both written records and sound recordings – from the northernmost landscapes of Sweden, especially Lappland, Västerbotten, and Ångermanland, with particular emphasis on Lycksele and Degerfors parishes. According to folklore, the vitra lived underground, in the woods, inside the mountains, and outside human culture. They were encountered along the paths they traveled through in the landscape, and especially in auditory and musical experiences. Vitra beliefs are documented in oral descriptions and in Sámi vuole, Swedish herding tunes, and other tunes attributed to vitra. Vitra 'music' has been described as strong, beautiful, chromatic, and dissonant, and could be vocal or instrumental. This study addresses the pre-modern reception of sound and 'music' through theories of hearing/listening, soundscapes, and acoustemology. It offers new perspectives on how people in the area studied have understood their sounding reality in relation to natural spaces, landscapes, and soundscapes. It presents an interpretation of the cultural meanings of vitra paths as an originally Sámi concept related to shamanism and *Saivo*, which mixed with Swedish and Finnish folk beliefs. The resulting *transculturation* was specific to the area and produced the acoustemological and *sound-musical-spatial infrastructure* concept of vitra paths, which have been perceived – along with vitra sounds – as spatial framings of vitra areas. The study ends with a discussion of pre-modern conceptualizations of sound and 'music' before the modern concept of *music* was established in northern Sweden (and all of Western culture) with the advent of modernity.

Keywords

Vitra – Vitra paths – Sound/'Music' – Saivo/Sájva – Sámi – Swedes – Finns – Sound-musical-spatial infrastructure

1 Introduction: Sounding traces of a 'Grand Race'

> "There was another race on Earth who lived happily alongside humans – but now they are no more."[1]
>
> "[they played] … such incomprehensible sounds …"[2]
>
> "Many have seen the 'vitra' and even more have heard them; in the forest villages, there are probably very few, even today, who do not claim the latter, or at least so it was in the past. And those who have are as certain in their belief in vitra as they are in their belief in their blessedness; so it has been with many old people whom I have come to know."[3]

The first two quotes above come from a Swedish study in religious history written in 1984 about northern Sweden and surviving beliefs in supernatural, folkloric beings called *vitra*: a foreign, intelligent 'race'. The third quote comes from an older study from 1926 about this folklore tradition by the distinguished scholar and priest Erik Modin (1862–1953).[4] Vitra beliefs were localized in the northern Swedish historical provinces of Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Lappland, Ångermanland, and Jämtland, concentrated especially in Ångermanland and the area that today is Västerbotten County ("län"), which includes southern Lappland.[5] The 1984 study showed that, interestingly enough, ideas about these nature beings – quite complex and multifaceted in their conception, and strongly connected to the old agrarian lifestyle – still survived in the modern, industrialized Swedish society of the late twentieth century. But rich material also exists from the times when vitra beliefs were a living tradition. Collected in archives, this material is nearly invisible in modern written history.

More important for this study, however, is the fact that these beliefs in the vitra 'race' included distinct conceptualizations of *sound* and *music*, including encounters with vitra who were playing music or dancing, and descriptions of melodies, instruments, harmonies, etc. In fact, sound and

1 The quotation is from an anonymous informant in Bjurholm, Ångermanland, cited in Hellsten 1984: 45. Translated by the present author from Swedish.

2 Cited in Hellsten 1984: 41. Translated by the present author from Swedish.

3 Cited in Modin 1926: 56–7. Translated by the present author from Swedish. "Många har sett vittrorna och ännu flera ha hört dem; i skogsbyarna är det väl än i dag högst få, som icke säga sig ha gjort det senare, åtminstone var det så förr i tiden. Och de, som gjort det, är lika vissa i sin tro på "vittra" som de äro i tron på sin salighet; så har varit förhållandet med många gamla, som jag lärt känna."

4 Berg (1985–1987).

5 In Swedish: *landskap* and *län*. *Landskap* (pl.) are historical provinces in the southern part of Sweden and on the Norrland coast with origins in pre-modern times. *Län* (pl.) are more recent administrative geographical divisions that date approximately from the seventeenth century. The two overlap, but only partly. Dalarna and Hälsingland are sometimes also mentioned as "vitra regions". They, too, lie partly north of the chalet border.

music components in descriptions of human encounters with vitra are extensive and various – and notably frequent. Vestiges of this folklore are preserved in documents but have not been systematically investigated, with a few exceptions in some fields of the humanities and then only in the Nordic languages.[6] It has been studied only partially and a very long time ago (50–100 years ago). Importantly, little if any[7] of this older research has investigated the auditory, musical, and spatial aspects of vitra beliefs: the connections between sound and landscape and the meaning of those connections. To the author's knowledge, this article will be the first study in English not only to critically synthesize the fundamental components of vitra beliefs, which will function as necessary context, but also to investigate beliefs in the vitra as *principal makers of sound and music* in a special kind of agrarian cultural border landscape where vitra were recognized along *vitra paths* (Swedish: *viterstigar*) or *vitra roads* (*vitervägar*).[8] Importantly, this subject has never been studied before from this perspective. This article fills a gap as a first attempt at and introduction to the subject for a modern, wider readership, framed using modern theories that address sound, music, and culture in the broadest sense.

According to archival recordings on 78 rpm records and tapes, as well as written records from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, vitra lived underground and in the lakes, forests, and mountains of Norrland.[9] Sometimes humans were captured or invited into the world of the vitra, underground or in their mountain homes or other mysterious places. Humans and vitra could have various types of interactions – not infrequently, their encounters were friendly ones.[10] As the quotes above show, strong beliefs in the vitra, constituting a kind of folk religion, are well documented. Today they have been somewhat (although not completely) forgotten.[11]

Vitra is a plural word. The vitra were perceived as a people and were described as human-like, but more beautiful than humans – more seldom, as 'uglier'.[12] Vitra women, especially, are usually described as extraordinarily beautiful, with large, piercing blue eyes and beautiful hair. Folklore holds that they can be extremely tall (sometimes as tall as 4 meters, or over 13 feet) or very small. But often they resembled humans in size and height. Male and female vitra lived together in families and were born in the human manner. They lived, grew old, and died, and so they could vary in age and appearance. Vitra women are erotically attractive to humans, as are vitra men. Vitra and humans could have romantic encounters and engage in sexual intercourse. Sex could take place between vitra men and human women in the chalets (*fäbodar*, mountain cabins used during the summer when livestock were grazed on the upland pastures) or between vitra women and human men in the woods.[13] The vitra therefore seem to be physical beings to some degree – able

6 Hellsten 1984; Grundström 1959; Dahlstedt 1976; Johnson 1986.
7 With the exception of brief mentions in Dahlstedt 1976 and Johnson 1986.
8 Dahlstedt 1976; Kuusela 2021. Kuusela also uses a third term, "Vitterstråk", but the principle is the same.
9 Dahlstedt 1976; Westerström 1974a; Westerström 1974b.
10 Moman 1750: 22–3; Læstadius 1997.
11 Kuusela 2021.
12 Dahlstedt 1976; Lövgren 1961: 27–9.
13 Dahlstedt 1991.

to have sex – and yet also essentially different from humans: more invisible, spiritual, and eternal.[14] They had their own culture, working as underground farmers, shepherds, and reindeer herders, but sometimes they might be sighted above ground, mostly between spring and autumn.[15] According to the stories, they preferred to dress in strong colors. They wore red or green costumes with hoods, and they had special caps.[16] They could blend in with humans and sometimes lived (or live) among them. Vitra sounds and 'music' – which formed a point of contact with human culture – are different: vitra sing with overwhelming beauty, play instruments, and 'compose' songs that humans can hear and learn, if they are lucky. Some sources suggest that vitra 'music' had advanced harmonies with chromaticism and dissonance, in sharp contrast to the local folk music of both the Sámi and the Swedes. Of course, these songs are examples of 'supernatural music': an undercurrent in the history of human musical experiences.[17]

Vitra sounds and 'music' suggest an untold story about how music is perceived and conceptualized in the West. They are one example of *other* conceptualizations of what today is approximately defined as 'music' and 'sound' – that existed until recently in agrarian Europe. This conceptualization differs completely from both 'classical music' and 'folk music' – the modern, partly academic, partly commercially founded Western concepts developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by an educated nobility, the *bourgeoisie*, critics, and philosophers – as well as from the twentieth-century concept of 'popular music', established in great part by the music industry. These concepts and genres are well defined and have been studied in musicology for a long time, but they have implicit limitations because of the defining discourses and power structures that formed them – even ethnomusicological perspectives have their limitations here. Further, the modern Western concept of 'music' was established outside of academia very late. It is a high art, academic concept that expanded with the development of modernity. Even if, in principle, its origins go back to antiquity, it had limited practical significance outside of the university (as a strictly theoretical discipline) for a long time. Cajsa S. Lund notes:

> "The word 'music' has not been found, either, in medieval texts written in any Old Norse language. There is no record of the word in Nordic linguistic usage before the 16th century. On the other hand, there are instances of words such as chant, sing, dance, play, etc."[18]

Timo Leisiö has argued convincingly that among farmers and Sámi people in Finland, the 'music' concept was established gradually as late as the 1920s, being unknown before that.[19] The reason is that the concept itself is quite abstract and general, requiring a highly developed written culture and musical professional specialists. Thus, it evolved over a very long period from the ancient Greek *mousiké* (which included what we call poetry and music) among philosophers and in the

14 The elves in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* represent, to some extent, a mythological parallel.
15 Modin 1926: 51.
16 Dahlstedt 1976: 20.
17 Compare Bebergal 2018.
18 Lund 2010.
19 Leisiö 1986: 186; Lund 2010a.

church.[20] I hypothesize here that the late establishment of a general music concept probably also applies to the farming population of northern Sweden (which was closely connected to the Sámi and the Finns). The critical perspectives of Lund, Leisiö, and others on pre-modern 'music' concepts have been transferred to archaeomusicology or music archaeology. Within the framework of an 'auditory or acoustic archaeology', they have advanced the critique that a homogenous (and in fact modern) music concept implicitly colonizes music history, writing backwards.[21] I want to contribute to developing this critical perspective.

The conceptualizations that will be presented here are quite difficult to grasp, understand, and categorize in relation to the abovementioned more established concepts, partly because they lack the kind of defining discourse that shaped, for example, the Romantic idea of folk music. They have more in common with the sonic worlds of indigenous peoples than with Western ones – a more ready subject for an anthropologist than a folk music scholar, maybe. For example, one striking and enigmatic concept – which has really never been investigated before now – is the *vitra paths*. These were perceived as real, physical paths or roads through the outdoor landscape, known to humans, where encounters with vitra could occur and vitra 'music' and noises could be heard. But what does this combined concept of nature, supernatural beings and their paths, and human experiences of sound mean culturally, psycho-acoustically, or musically? What needs does this concept fill? What does it explain; to what question is it the answer? And what were the characteristics of the environments and sonic worlds where humans believed in vitra and thought they could hear them? Are there any common characteristics of the sound and 'music' associated with vitra – or are there not? How did vitra sound and 'music' relate to the natural landscape and/or human culture? This article discusses these questions in depth. It proposes that the sound and 'music' experiences attributed to vitra paths were connected to humanly perceived spatiality in the natural landscape, and human infrastructures in or between cultivated lands, such as fields, meadows, and pastures, and the wilderness. The article also suggests that vitra paths can be understood as a pre-modern conceptualization of *sound*, *'music'*, *and spatiality*: perhaps as paths that go between or pass through cultivated agricultural lands and areas for farming, pastoralism, and nomadism. This conceptualization lost its currency with modernity and the disappearance of the old agrarian and herding culture. Probably, the vitra paths are also founded on a cultural and religious syncretism. They may represent traces of cultural abandoning or mixing: the pushing away of Sámi, for example, as well as the blending of different cultures, mythologies, and lifestyles.

The purpose of this article is to introduce and critically discuss parts of this rich, quite unknown folkloristic material and other relevant sources. It takes an *ethnomusicological, anthropological*, and *music* or *sound archaeological* (archaeomusicological) perspective: the latter in relation to its sister discipline of sound studies, with sound in its broadest sense as the primary area of interest.[22] With sound as the overall focus, I admit that I look at 'music' as a recent, historical construction,

20 Leisiö 1986: 186–91.
21 Leisiö 1986; Lund 2010; Kolltveit 2014: 80.
22 Till 2020; Lund 2008; Lund 2010b: 185–215.

fulfilled in modernity – and music history writing, as in musicology, as also constructed from this modern viewpoint, which I want to help deconstruct and rebuild. Therefore, when I talk about vitra 'music', I put 'music' in quotation marks, simply because it is anachronistic to use the term in this context. I look at vitra paths as more holistic sounding spaces and therefore see them as 'musical', as in the title for this article.

The broader aim is to contribute, within a defined cultural-historical context, to new perspectives on *pre-modern ideas and conceptualizations* of 'sound' and 'music' in relation to 'spatiality', using vitra paths as my example. I understand the studied culture in question as functionally pre-modern, even if it reaches well into the twentieth century. The specific research questions are:

1. What are the context for and the structure of the sounds and 'music' attributed to vitra?
2. What is the relation between spatiality/space and sound and 'music' on the vitra paths?
3. How can ideas held about vitra sound and 'music' and its spatial representations contribute to an understanding of pre-modern 'music and sound' conceptualizations?

2 Material, delimitations, theory, and methodology

A large part of the material for this article comes from the archives of Sweden's Institute for Language and Folklore (ISOF).[23] The material was provided in digitized form.[24] The material investigated consists of written and recorded interviews with both female and male informants in which *vitra* are specifically mentioned. Due to the extent of the overall material, only the provinces of Lappland, Västerbotten, and Ångermanland were considered. This geographical delineation is reasonable, as most earlier research points out this area as the epicenter of vitra traditions.[25] But I will also take into consideration some Sámi vuole traditions about vitra ("sájva") from Norrbotten County. And I will analyze material from Lycksele and Degerfors parishes in more detail, as this area is of special interest to me and I am particularly familiar with both its geography and its culture. For this particular study, only a subset of this material was selected, although much more has been taken into account.[26] Studies in ethnology, linguistics, and religious history are also used as sources and are presented below.[27] Methodologically, it is important to know that the folklore records investigated here have been shaped by historical circumstance. Many of the Swedish laws and institutions for handling archaeological and folkloristic remains were organized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Sweden was a great power and needed a grand and long history, and they have remained in effect to the present.[28] A great deal of folkloristic material in-

23 ISOF is located in Uppsala, Sweden. *Dialect and People's Memories Archive*.
24 PDF and WAV files. In total, the material comprises 351 sounding memoranda: 111 from Västerbotten and 240 from Lappland. There are also 29 written memoranda from the selected provinces, many dating from the nineteenth century.
25 See Læstadius 1997; Westerström 1974; Dahlstedt 1976; Hellsten 1984.
26 The rest will, I hope, be analyzed in forthcoming studies.
27 For example, Modin 1926; Westerström 1974; Dahlstedt 1976.
28 Trigger 1993: 68–9.

cluding folk music was collected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, influenced by ethnography.[29] Sweden's Historic Environment Act (Kulturmiljölagen, SFS 1998:950) grants cultural history remains the same protections as graves, standing stones, and other more concrete remains. Chapter 2, Section 1, which is headed "Ancient Remains", states:

> "Natural formations associated with ancient practices, legends or noteworthy historical events and the remains of ancient popular cults are also ancient remains."[30]

In the case of vitra beliefs, however, the "remains of ancient popular cults" are relatively recent, nearly invisible, and mostly not marked out – with some notable exceptions to be presented later – as archaeological remains. It is difficult to find them without hearing someone talk about them, and there are hardly any vitra paths to be found in the landscape today even if the actual route of the path, whatever its origin in the landscape, was and sometimes still are well known among local inhabitants. Vitra lore is probably not alive in the memory of the younger generations, and is often misunderstood or forgotten in a Swedish folklore context.[31] From an archaeological perspective, there is certainly more to do in both localizing and investigating these paths.

My approach to the subject of the large-eyed 'race' of vitra and pre-modern conceptualizations of sound, music, and spatiality draws on several related disciplines, theories, and methods. My overall perspective is inspired by ethnomusicology, where the fundamental task is to study "the music expressions in cultures and cultural expressions in the music."[32] But my subject is not typical for ethnomusicological studies. Therefore, my theoretical perspectives are inspired by anthropology, sound studies, and music archaeology.[33] For pre-Christian Sámi religious history, a broad field of study exists as a reference.[34] The folklore documents, both written and recorded, are transcribed, analyzed, and understood within the framework of folklore studies as oral culture and narration.[35] Importantly, the languages of the folklore material are old Swedish and archaic dialects from Västerbotten, Lappland, and Ångermanland.[36] The related dialects from the communities of Vilhelmina and Vindeln in this area are the present author's mother tongues, which, together with being a cultural insider, gives me the competence to understand the meaning of these

29 Lundberg and Ternhag 2014: 11–15.

30 This law (revised in 1988) has regulated all handling of ancient monuments and archaeological remains in Sweden since the seventeenth century. https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/kulturmiljolag-1988950_sfs-1988-950/. English translation at https://www.raa.se/in-english/cultural-heritage/historic-environment-laws/historic-environment-act-1988950/. For a critical perspective on cultural heritage policy in Sweden, see: Gustafsson and Karlsson 2012. On how law and ethics affect professional archaeological practice, see: Soderland and Lilley 2015.

31 Compare Kuusela 2021.

32 Lundberg and Ternhag 2014: 9; Kjellström et al. 1988.

33 Feld 2015: 12–21; Grimshaw-Aagard 2019; Leisiö 1986; Lund 2010a; Lund 2019, cap. 1.2–3; Kolltveit 2014.

34 For example, Mebius 2003.

35 Arvidsson 1986; Arvidsson 1999: 73–82; 199–200.

36 Swedish in a general sense. The dialects in this part of Sweden were, at the end of the nineteenth century, quite archaic in their overall structure, showing similarities with old Norse and Icelandic. See, for example, Åström 1888.

documents. I have transcribed the folklore records in dialect – all quotes from recorded interviews – and translated them to standard Swedish before translating them to English.

The holistic perspective presented by Mark Grimshaw-Aagaard, which views sound as something both external (scientifically understood and described simplistically as 'sound waves') and more internal (psycho-acoustic, cultural etc.) was an important starting point.[37] I follow Tom Garner's and Mark Grimshaw-Aagard's argument that sound is not only acoustics – sound waves and rules for diffraction, absorption, reverberation, etc. – but neither, at the other extreme, should the focus be only on *discourses* about sound.[38] I embrace both. Sound is a complex phenomenon and hard to describe, and it cannot be simply reduced to component parts. But it is important to go behind both the acoustic aspects and the discourses – and here I understand folklore as discourses – especially when studying sound in the past. 'Sound as sound' presupposes and includes the laws of acoustics but also, importantly, cultural, psychological, and psycho-acoustical processes. There is always an aspect of subjectivity and imagination in how we as human beings perceive and interpret sound. In this text I will not refer much to acoustics explicitly, taking its laws as given. But it is important to see that in a pre-modern society, when the scientific principles of acoustics are unknown outside of a small group of specialists, listening – the imagining and experiences of sounds – could or can easily take the shape of a spiritual or supernatural event. This is probably important in understanding how vitra sounds and 'music' are described in the folklore sources in what is – from a modern Western perspective – sometimes a quite foreign and peculiar way.

An essential complement to this perspective on sound is Steven Feld's concept of 'acoustemology'. According to Feld, acoustemology is about "sound as a way of knowing". It looks at "what is knowable, and how it becomes known, through sounding and listening". "Audial history" can be used to understand the relation between humans and nature in its widest definition in a pre-modern society.[39] This concept is highly useful in the present context, because it was developed over a long period of time in an empirical setting when Feld was working as an anthropologist, evolving in direct response to his fieldwork on Papua New Guinea. It is thus grounded in how human perception of sound *can work* in real life, rather than being a fixed theory without this fundamental practical experience and understanding.[40] Feld's description of the "sociality of sound" could be used by analogy to understand the vitra concept in its pre-modern context:

> "To Bosavi ears and eyes, birds are not just 'birds' in the sense of totalized avian beings. They are *ane mama*, meaning 'gone reflections' or 'gone reverberations'. Birds are absences turned into presence, and a presence that always makes absence audible and visible. Birds are what humans become by achieving death."[41]

37 Grimshaw-Aagard 2019: 21: "[...] another definition of sound: sound is an emergent perception that arises primarily in the auditory cortex and that is formed through spatio-temporal processes in an embodied system."
38 Grimshaw and Garner 2015.
39 Feld 2015: 12.
40 Feld 2015: 15.
41 Feld 2015: 16.

Here we have a connection between birds – reflected "gone" sounds – and the world of the dead. These relations exist in my material, too: several stories describe how vitra answers to human calls resemble echoes and there is a connection with death. The early twentieth-century scholar Sigrid Drake, in her short synthesis of Karl Bernhard "K.B." Wiklund's ideas, mentions the Sámi's magic bird, the *keddner,* with its links to both the *kitnihah*, the 'underground' people, and echoes.[42] Maybe this connection says something about pre-modern concepts in general. Helping spirits in the shape of powerful birds are also crucial in Sámi shamanism.[43] We find an interesting analogous nature-bird-human relation in Västerbotten agrarian folklore in the myths around the Siberian jay, *Garrulus infaustus*, which is called *lavskrika* in Swedish, *röjvköksiken* in the local Västerbotten dialect (Degerforsmål), and *rökäringa* and *röfåla* in related dialects. And among the vuole (yoiks) left by Sámi Jonas Eriksson Steggo is one sung with his wife, Inga Steggo, to this particular bird.[44] It was believed that this jay, with its special cry, could hurt a hunter's luck. The name *röjvköksiken* probably means something like "the spy of the Lady of the Woods". The Lady (in Swedish named *skogsrået*; a kind of forest spirit sometimes confused with the vitra) was the undisputed queen protector of the woods and its inhabitants. She sent the *röjvköksiken* to warn animals of hunters. This reminds us of a pre-modern time and mentality with a highly animist view of nature and therefore great respect for it – far removed from today's perspective on nature, but with similarities to Feld's perspective.[45] In our post-modern day, we also find that the pre-modern idea of 'becoming-bird' is newly relevant in contemporary music composition, as shown by Elin Kanhov in her study *Encounters Between Music and Nature*.[46]

Feld also notes that acoustemology

> "favors inquiry that centralizes situated listening in engagements with place and space-time. Acoustemology prioritizes histories of listening and attunement through the relational practices of listening and sounding and their reflexive productions of feedback. Acoustemology, then, is grounded in the basic assumption that life is shared with others-in-relation, with numerous sources of action (*actant* in Bruno Latour's terminology; 2005) that are variously human, nonhuman, living, nonliving, organic, or technological. This relationality is both a routine condition of dwelling and one that produces consciousness of modes of acoustic attending, of ways of listening for and resounding to presence."[47]

The relationality perspective is highly applicable to vitra beliefs: especially the notion of "situated listening in engagements with place and space-time" and the idea "that life is shared with others-in-relation". This article uses "histories of listening" as its main methodology: the primary sources for ideas about vitra sound and 'music' are *stories*, in the form of folklore and music (written or

42 Drake 1918: 355.
43 Mebius 2003: 162–96.
44 Kjellström et al. 1988: 149.
45 Modin 1926: 11.
46 Kanhov 2023: 52–92.
47 Feld 2015: 15; Steven Feld citing Latour in Latour 2005.

recorded). Further, this material comes from a time and a pre-modern culture in which the farmers who believed in vitra lived very close to both domestic and wild animals and to the nomadic Sámi people.

Lastly, let us mention some important archaeomusicological perspectives on sound and environment in pre-modern times. One way to take a broader view of perceived sounds is to see them in relation to a 'soundscape'.[48] Soundscape theory, an extension of Murray Shafer's work, can be a point of departure for archaeomusicological classification.[49] Soundscape theory is the point of departure for Gjermund Kolltveit in his two texts *Classification of Sound, Sound Tools, and Soundscapes*[50] and *Animal Bells in Early Scandinavian Soundscapes.*[51] Kolltveit's arguments are of great interest here. He analyzes how cow and sheep bells worked in Viking soundscapes, a perspective that is productive for this study, because the bells of wandering animals make up a large part of the sounds perceived as belonging to vitra 'music' and soundscapes. Supposed similarities between the agrarian Viking society and the later, pre-modern agrarian Swedish culture before industrialization and urbanization also form a relevant, if not unproblematic, parallel.[52] Trains, electricity, telephones, and radio are crucial in shift of the latter (the pre-modern) culture to modernity – and along with the culture, its "keynote sound".[53] Soundscapes themselves can be *hi-fi* or *lo-fi.* In hi-fi soundscapes, characteristic of pre-industrial and non-urban societies, people can clearly hear all sounds, including direction and distance from the listener, without massive interference. Hypothetically, we can imagine the sound worlds of the older agrarian society in this way, with a high degree of auditory transparency: sounds of cow bells carrying over large distances, for example. In this landscape, it is not always obvious where sounds come from. For listeners inclined to such beliefs, they can easily be perceived as supernatural. By contrast, the listener in a lo-fi environment with a high noise level, such as a modern city, hears individual sounds much more poorly: the sound quality is systematically lower. The soundscapes in northern Sweden 100 years ago were mostly hi-fi, and the shift towards lo-fi with the introduction of industry, rail, and roads probably strongly affected the concept of vitra – and even more so the advent of electricity or the first radios or telephones, as suggested in some eyewitness descriptions. Drawing on the work of soundscape ecologist Bernie Krause, Gjermund Kolltveit mentions other important aspects of the soundscape: *geophony,* or the soundscape associated with the Earth, including sounds of wind, water, thunder, etc., and *biophony,* or the sounds of living organisms, both animals and plants. A subcategory of biophony is, of course,

48 The soundscape concept was first formulated by Murray R. Shafer (1994); the word is a portmanteau of "sound" and "landscape".

49 Kolltveit 2014; Schafer 1994. A *soundscape* is intended to contextualize the human sound environment in a given time and place. The soundscape is both a physical place and a way to experience that place sonically, and perhaps psycho-acoustically.

50 Kolltveit 2014.

51 Kolltveit 2008.

52 Compare Kolltveit 2008.

53 Schafer 1994. As part of his theory, Schafer formulated the concept of "keynote sound": a kind of fundamental tone in a soundscape. For coastal dwellers, it might be the roaring sea; for mountain dwellers, a whistling wind. This foundation is supplemented with sounds from both nature and human culture.

human sound: *anthrophony*. Certainly, the sounds of geophony and biophony all affect the human world.[54]

3 Vitra beliefs and folklore: General structure and earlier research

Following Tone Dahlstedt (1976), I spell vitra with just one "t" (as opposed to "vittra", the more common spelling in modern Swedish), as this spelling more closely corresponds to how the word is pronounced (with a long "i").[55] Vitra beliefs are deeply associated with the area north of the Limes Norrlandicus boundary, the so-called "chalet border". The line is both a cultural and climatic border, with Sweden's herding and chalet culture located on the north side. Historically, agriculture dominated south of the border, cattle raising north of it. The border also marks historical divides in material, food, and building cultures.[56] According to both literature and folklore documentation, a belief in the vitra 'race' was widespread north of the chalet border before the disappearance of the agrarian society and before the breakthrough of modern school education in the nineteenth century, followed by electricity and the spread of media such as the telephone, radio, and the gramophone in the twentieth century.

What, then, are vitra? Etymologically, the word has roots in the old Norse word *vættr* and is related to the Icelandic word *vättr*, meaning the people "underground".[57] It has sometimes been misinterpreted as having to do with the color white, but that is probably not correct. It is perhaps a bit old-fashioned, but not controversial, to connect vitra, as does folklorist Carl-Herman Tilllhagen, to the old Norse *svartalfer*, "black elves", who were believed to live underground, and – maybe even more so – to their counterpart in the skies, the *alfer* or *ljusalfer*, that is, "light elves". Both are mentioned in the *Eddas.*[58] As early as 1926, scholar Erik Modin argued that vitra were the direct mythological descendants of the light elves and their relatives, *älvor*, in southern Sweden and the *huldror* and *Huldrefolket* in Norway, as well as their Sámi counterpart, *ulta-folket*.[59] According to Tillhagen,[60] the common Norse cosmological heaven/earth pairing of *alfer/vättar* evolved over the centuries, in the area that would become Sweden, into the etymologically related underground races of *älvor* in the south and *vittror* (vitra) in the north. One difference between the two may be that vitra, as opposed to *älvor*, are more human- than demon-like (in some stories, vitra are distinctly angelic).

This connection is, of course, difficult to prove. Vitra beliefs might also have other cultural origins, and theoretically could be of much more recent date. As a concept, however, vitra beliefs show great similarities and parallels with beliefs in supranormal 'races' in other European coun-

54 Kolltveit 2014: 73–6.
55 Dahlstedt 1976: 8–9.
56 Larsson 2009: 20–21.
57 Dahlstedt 1976: 9.
58 The *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda* (by Snorri Sturluson).
59 Modin 1926: 46.
60 Tillhagen 1996: 198–201.

tries,[61] even if they are probably not identical. Tillhagen points out many parallels with England's "fairies", "elves", and "elle-folk" and similar beings in Germany who are also said to love music and dance.[62] Other clear parallels in western Europe are Scotland's "Good People" (*Sleagh Maith*) and Ireland's "Gentry", as well as the Fair-folk (who like vitra, wear colorful caps), Sith, and other races on the British Isles and in France.[63] The "Good People" are notably also known for their "fairy tunes": melodies collected or memorized by human musicians, often close to mounds or earthworks or the sounds of water, and learned in secret or given to them as a gift by the fairies.[64] In eastern Europe, the Fenno-Ugric Samoyeds (today approximately the Nenets) believed in *Siirtje*, a happy, human-like underground race.[65] In the Nordic countries, related beliefs also exist in Finland, among Sámi, Finns, and Finnish Swedes alike.[66] In Norway, the folk tunes known as *huldreslåttar* are related to a quite similar folklore, and form their own genre within so-called hardingfele music (music played on the eight- or nine-stringed violin, the *hardingfela*, and connected to the water spirit known as the "Fossegrim"). Musicians play these tunes on retuned violins, often using peculiar violin tunings that are not used for other songs.[67]

Vitra were first written about as early as the eighteenth century in a dissertation by Jonas Moman at Uppsala University. In that thesis, entitled *De superstitionibus hodiernis* ("On contemporary superstitions"),[68] Moman states that "vetter" or "vittror" (he uses the Swedish words in his otherwise mostly Latin text) "are found at different places at night, it is said".[69] Moman distinguishes between vitra and other "intelligent" supernatural species such as "tomtegubbar" (pucks), "Necken" (nixies), "Strömkarlen" (a river spirit), "alver" (elves), and "gastar" (ghosts). He further says (and here I follow Stig Hellsten's[70] Swedish translation of Moman's Latin):

> "These goblins or vitra are said to appear to people in human shape – be it ever so tiny – and to take pleasure in consorting familiarly with them."[71]

It is not clear in which geographical area Moman finds these beliefs, but in the mid-eighteenth century, great areas of Lappland were not colonized by Swedes, so the "consorting familiarly" idea may have been collected in Ångermanland or Jämtland, for example. Just a few years later, Abra-

61 Probably also with similar beings in other parts of the globe, but that is not touched on here.

62 Tillhagen 1996: 200–201.

63 Vallée 1969: 15–93. In Brittany in France, "Korrigans". Cécile Bardoux-Lovén explains that "These trolls in Brittany (so-called Korrigans) are mainly associated with ring dances and with singing that they perform where they live (in nature, i.e. in the forest and in so-called 'lande', typically low vegetation along the Breton coast)". Cécile Bardoux-Lovén, (personal communication, e-mail from August 27, 2024).

64 Westwood 2009.

65 Bäckman 1975: 69–70.

66 Harjunen 2020.

67 Gunnar Ternhag, personal communication (e-mail) April 23, 2024.

68 Moman 1750.

69 Moman 1750: 22.

70 Hellsten 1984: 36.

71 Moman 1750: 22: "Dessa vätter eller vittor sägs uppenbara sig för människorna med mänsklig kropp, må vara mycket liten sådan, och finna glädje i att förtroligt umgås med dem." Compare with the Swedish translation in Modin 1926: 49, n.3. In Latin: "Vettæ s. Vittæ illæ humano corpore, licet minutissimo hominibus sese ostendere dicuntur, & eorum delectari familiaritate."

ham Hülphers set down a detailed vitra story in print in his *Samlingar til en beskrifning öfwer Norrland* (Collections for a description of Norrland, 1775). The story, dated April 12, 1671, is about a priest, Peter Rahm, in Ragunda, Jämtland, whose wife had given aid to a vitra woman in 1666, after being visited by a little grey-clothed man, a "Wettar", who asked her to help his own wife in childbirth. The main part of the story goes as follows:

> "After some consideration, the priest made a decision. He read prayers over his wife and blessed her and asked her to go with him [the vitra man] in the name of God. Taking with her some linen clothes, the priest's wife then went with the man. After traveling for a time through the air, as it seemed, she came into a cabin, and next to it was a dark chamber where the vitra man's wife lay in agony in a bed. She helped her as she birthed the child, and the vitra woman's labors were like those of any human woman. Afterwards the priest's wife was offered food, but she would not eat, knowing full well that to eat of the underground people's food is to be bound by them. But the man thanked her and followed her back to the summer pastures, and they journeyed back in the same way that she had come. Later that same day, as the priest's wife was rummaging through the summer pasture cabin, she found a pile of old silver spoons placed on a shelf in the cabin … she understood that they had been put there by the vitra man [*Wettret*]."[72]

Rahm himself attested to the truth of the event in a legal document, but it is also a classic mythological motif in many countries. Rahm is a historical person: he was executed in 1678 for treason.[73]

There is an obvious similarity between the vitra and the nearby *sájva* of the southern Sámi.[74] As several scholars have noted, the concentration of similar beliefs in southern Lappland and Västerbotten may suggest that the concept of vitra at least partly originated in the Sámi cultural area, stemming perhaps from pre-Christian religious beliefs in an underworld called Saivo, the kingdom of the dead, and its inhabitants, sájva.[75] No consensus exists, however, as to whether Saivo really was the realm of the dead or something else.[76] Yet the idea of Saivo was not homogenous or evenly distributed; rather, it seems to have been concentrated in the southern Lappland parishes of Särna,

72 Modin 1926: 59–60, n.1: "Efter något betänkande fattade kyrkoherden det rådet, att han läste över sin hustru några böner, välsignade henne och bad henne i Guds namn att följa honom. Medtagande några linnekläder, gick prästfrun nu med mannen, tycktes sig liksom föras i vädret en stund och kom så uti en stuga, varest bredvid var en mörk kammare, vari vitter-karlens hustru låg och våndades uti en säng. Hon hjälpte så henne, då hon födde barnet, och det var med lika åtbörder som andra människor plägar hava. Därpå bjuden mat, nekade likväl prästfrun intaga sådan, väl vetande, att om man förtär något hos de underjordiska, blir man bunden av dem. Men karlen tackade henne och följde henne tillbaka till fäbodarna, dit återfärden gick lika som bortfärden. Då prästfrun senare under dagen stökade i fäbodstugan, fann hon en hoper gamla silverskedar lagda på en hylla i stugan… kunnandes hon förstå, att de av Wettret voro ditlagda."

73 Hellsten 1984: 36. The story is retold in a similar form by, for example, Erik Modin (1926: 59–60, n.1) and Jacques Vallée 1969: 108–9, in his comparative essay on historical folklore and UFO folklore.

74 Sájva is also partly found in Northern Sámi territory.

75 Læstadius 1997; Wiklund 1916.

76 Mebius 2003: 81–8. There are many spellings of the word: Sáivo, Sajvo, Saiwo, Saivo. I use the last, following Bäckman 1975.

Vilhelmina, Lycksele and Åsele.[77] In 1926, Erik Modin presented an in-depth study of folk beliefs in Ångermanland including much information about vitra.[78] According to Modin, the nineteenth-century Lappland priest J.A. Nensén was the first to draw a connection between sájva and the vitra.[79] It has been suggested that the Sámi themselves saw a close relationship between one category of sájva and the Swedish vitra: *vittarah, vitarah, vijter, ulda, ullta* and *guffitarak*.[80]

In the nineteenth century, Lars Levi Læstadius, an educated priest who was himself of both Sámi and Swedish origin and was a contemporary of J.A. Nensén, critically analyzed vitra beliefs in the context of Sámi pre-Christian religion and mythology in a survey entitled *Fragmenter till Lappska Mythologien* (published in English translation as *Fragments of Lappish Mythology*).[81] Written in the 1840s, it was not published until much later.[82] Considering his strict Lutheranism, Læstadius' observations on northern folk beliefs are intellectually progressive, open-minded, and psychologically insightful.[83] He is an excellent source for vitra beliefs in the first half of the nineteenth century. Noting the great extent of the stories and testimonies about vitra that he has been told, he concludes that they originate in human primitive encounters with nature and darkness, and he suggests that anybody alone in nature might naturally tend to hear or see strange things. "In larger cities", he writes, "one has no time to listen to the fir ghosts and trolls. One is continually surrounded by people. If one hears strange sounds from an attic or wine cellar, the suspicion is immediately of thieves".[84] Interestingly, he writes that "in Westerbotten the underground people are called *Underboniga*[,] 'undergroundling[s]'". [85] He further states: "I heard innumerable stories about them in my childhood, about how people were taken into the mountain, etc".[86] Læstadius writes at length and with great familiarity about Saivo and its connections to shamanism, and he is also the first writer to point out the close relations between the otherwise distinct ethnic and linguistic cultural groups of the north – Swedes, Finns, and Sámi – as a common ground for vitra beliefs.[87] Læstadius gives a concrete description of Saivo as a hyperreal world for Sámi shamans. Every *noaidi* (Swedish: "nåjd", shaman) is in direct connection with related families in Saivo. Each family consists of four or five individuals. The noaidi travels via his drum's symbols: a bird, fish, and a reindeer. He drums, performs vuole, and travels with several magic birds to Saivo. Læstadius, citing Erich Johann Jessen, describes this relation (which somewhat resembles the fictional hyperreality of a modern computer game): when you were in Saivo, you could communicate and participate, buy and hold animals and magic tools, own them as your 'property', and live a kind of 'real' life

77 Bäckman 1975.
78 Modin 1926.
79 Modin 1926: 47, n.1; Forskningsarkivet.
80 Bäckman 1975: 73.
81 Læstadius was the founder of the religious movement known as Læstadianism.
82 Læstadius 1997.
83 Læstadius 1997: 53; 63; 127; 129; 132; 133.
84 Læstadius 1997: 63.
85 Læstadius 1997: 127.
86 Læstadius 1997: 127.
87 Læstadius 1997: 129.

there, which at the same time was fictional.[88] Læstadius also thinks it is a misinterpretation to think of Saivo as the realm of the dead; he says it is a world of living, half-spirit beings, which is close to the vitra concept.

Hans Mebius, in his analysis of pre-Christian Sámi religion, draws parallels between beliefs in Saivo and its Sámi counterpart, Jábbmeájmmo,[89] and both east-Asian shamanism and Tuonela, the underworld in Finnish mythology.[90] And K.B. Wiklund, the influential early twentieth century researcher, found that ideas about Saivo among the southern Sámi people in the Lappland area were still very much alive in the early twentieth century (he gives the inhabitants the same name as the land, Saivo):

> "These *Saivo,* men, women, and children, dwelt in certain mountains and in the land of the dead under the earth, where they led the same kind of life as the Sámi themselves, only in all respects in greater perfection, wealth, and happiness. They themselves had been Sámi during their lifetime; likewise, the Sámi wished to become *Saivo* after death. Even in life, the Sámi had many dealings with *Saivo,* visiting them, feasting with them and enjoying their help in every possible way."[91]

In the first half of the twentieth century the subject of vitra or sájva was commented on, but not very extensively. To my knowledge, the most important articles include one by K.B. Wiklund about Saivo in the Sámi religion[92] (see above) and others by Ella Ohlson[93] and Lennart Björkqvist[94] about various aspects of vitra beliefs. In 1959, Harald Grundström discussed the presence of a "vitra motif" ("vitermotivet") in Sámi yoiks (vuole).[95] The year before, he had published the major work *Lapska sånger: Texter och melodier från svenska Lappland* ('Lappish Songs: Lyrics and Melodies from Swedish Lapland'), with lyrics and notated transcriptions of phonograph recordings of Sámi vuole.[96] Based on this extensive documentation and transcription work, Grundström was able to identify a "vitra motif" in a number of vuole. This was not a musical motif *per se,* but a textual and thematic one. He pointed out that the underground peoples of Sámi beliefs – the *uldat,* the *hál`dit* (lady of the woods), the *gufit` tarat* (goblins), the *gadnihah* or *gidnihah* – were, in principle, synony-

88 Læstadius 1997: 108–11.

89 Læstadius 1997: 108–13. Spelled "Jabma-aimo", is the realm of the dead.

90 Mebius 2003: 87–8. Tuonela features, of course, in Jean Sibelius' composition *Tuonelas svan* ("Swan of Tuonela").

91 Wiklund 1916. Translated by the present author from early twentieth-century Swedish: "Dessa *Saivo,* män, kvinnor och barn, bodde i vissa berg och i de dödas land under jorden, där de förde samma slags lif som lapparna själfva, blott i alla avseenden i större fullkomlighet, rikedom och lycka. De hade själfva i lifstiden varit lappar, och lapparna åtrådde också att själfva en gång efter döden bli *Saivo.* Lapparna hade redan i detta lifvet mycken umgängelse med Saivo, besökte dem, voro på kalas hos dem och åtnjöto i allt möjligt deras hjälp" (cited after Dahlstedt 1976: 17). Modin 1926: 47. For information about K.B. Wiklund, see: Karlsson 2000.

92 Wiklund 1916.

93 Ohlson 1933.

94 Björkqvist 1943.

95 Grundström 1959.

96 Grundström 1958–1963.

mous with Swedish vitra. All were known for liking to sing and for singing "pleasantly".[97] The relationship between vitra and their Sámi counterparts sájva is largely implicit in Grundström's paper – he took it for granted – but he does mention several specific parallels, building on Læstadius' and Wiklund's approaches.[98] According to Grundström, in Västerbotten, from Sorsele and southwards, the Sámi name for underground vitra-like people is sájva – a terminology specific to the southern Sámi people.[99]

This problem was later discussed in depth by Louise Bäckman in her study *Sájva: Föreställningar om hjälp- och skyddsväsen i heliga fjäll bland samerna (*"Sájva: Beliefs about Help and Protection in Sacred Mountains among the Sámi").[100] Bäckman critically discusses the various sources for this religion, which was erased and to a great degree forgotten as the Protestant Church sought to Christianize the Sámi beginning in the sixteenth century. Bäckman concludes that the Sámi concept of holy ("passe", taboo[101]) lakes and mountains to a great degree corresponded to a realm of the dead, connected with different families or clans. Probably the concept was very old, with roots in old Norse culture and the practice of burying the dead in 'family piles'. Even if the concept of Saivo and sájva changed over time, however, it was a very important one for the powerful Sámi shamans. They used vuole and drums to contact ancestral spirits in the Saivo mountains – this shamanistic and to some degree 'musical' connection is worth noting.[102] At the same time, according to Bäckman, Sámi folklore about sájva "bears a striking resemblance to the vitra legends recorded among the Swedish population in the Sámi lands in question".[103]

Interestingly, the root of the word Saivo is probably not Sámi (a Fenno-Ugric language) but old Norse with an ancient, proto-Germanic pedigree. It may be related to Gothic *saiws*, meaning "sea" or "lake" and Swedish "sjö". Some have suggested that it also has other meanings, such as "soul", or, later, "holy": as in the holy lakes in the woods, *Saivo-jaure*,[104] and the holy mountains, Saivo, that were home to inhabitants called sájva.[105] Even in later recorded folklore, it is obvious that vitra, like sájva, are especially connected with lakes and mountains.[106] The overlapping nature of these beliefs finds further support in the Sámi concept of the *ulta* people in Norway and the Finnish *haltijat*, both of whom bear many similarities to both the sájva and the vitra. Both "ulta" and "haltijat" are etymologically the same word as the Norse, Swedish, and Norwegian *huldra,* which

97 Grundström 1959: 52; Bäckman 1975. The similarities between vitra and gadniha (spellings differ) are also discussed by author and artist Lars Pirak (1932–2008) in Sarstad 1982: 3.

98 Grundström 1959.

99 Grundström 1959: 52.

100 Bäckman 1975.

101 Bäckman 1975: 8; 18–22. "Passe" means taboo, holy.

102 Bäckman 1975: 8, 114–28; Mebius 2003: 81–8, 162–96.

103 Bäckman 1975: 9: "[...] har en påfallande likhet med de vittersägner som upptecknats bland den svenska befolkningen i ifrågavarande lappmarker."

104 Modin 1926: 48.

105 Wiklund 1916; Bäckman 1975: 13–17. Bäckman gives a detailed overview of the etymology. Spellings differ.

106 Recording: Daum_Bd_4346_m16, Örträsk, Skurträsk 1983, Harald Fors, Axel Gidlund, Olavi Korhonen. All Swedish translations and transcriptions from recordings and texts in this article are by the present author.

means "the hidden one".[107] Tentatively, it is fair to suppose that these ideas may have their origin in a syncretistic, multilingual, and multicultural area of northern Scandinavia: they may be of approximately Sámi, Norse, and Finnish origin. These three cultures (with subdivisions) lived side by side and blended with and influenced one another in intricate ways for hundreds of years before becoming integral parts of the Swedish and Danish-Norwegian states.[108] Citing Knut Bergsland, Louise Bäckman observes that all this points in one direction: "the Nordic peoples, the Sámi included, lived in a kind of 'symbiosis', rather than in different 'nations' each with its own 'independent' history".[109] The cultures and their respective musical traditions have historically differed radically, however. Yet as earlier scholars in the field have noted, there was also a good deal of cultural overlap: the different groups were always in contact. As early as 1926, Erik Modin presented the interesting idea that the vitra/sájva etc. might have an older, common Nordic origin.[110] These perspectives of a common origin appear valid but are certainly at odds with (for example) twenty-first-century nationalistic ideas about the Sámi's ethnic distinctness, separateness, and unicity as an indigenous people. To be sure, it is a historical fact that ethnicity and culture is not essential and unchanging, but rather is constructed, re-constructed, and modified over time.[111]

In southern Lappland, the area of Saivo beliefs, there is plentiful documentation of relatively recent vitra (or perhaps sájva) beliefs. There are clearly areas where records and reports of encounters with vitra are numerous. One such area is Vilhelmina in the Lappland part of Västerbotten County. In one interview conducted in Vilhelmina in 1991, an old man is asked whether vitra are real. He tells the interviewer, "Sure, I have met one of them, in the shape of a little girl", and describes in detail the encounter and the beauty of the girl, "who was terrible at running (fast)", until she vanished before his eyes. He says that "in the olden days, vitra were everywhere". There still seem to be frequent "encounters" with them, and several testimonies of vitra paths and vitra stones exist from Vilhelmina in modern times. A neighbor of the man just mentioned had the problem that vitra often used his snowmobile and moved it without permission.[112] Similar stories from a century ago are told of vitra who moved horses, cows, and reindeers. Clearly, in archaeological and anthropological terms, these fragments of beliefs from the last thirty years are a living cultural

107 Modin 1926: 49.

108 Including the part of Sweden that became the Russian Grand Duchy Finland in 1809 and later Norway in union with Sweden 1814–1905.

109 Bäckman 1975: 49 n.87.

110 Modin 1926: 49 n.2. Compare Drake 1918: 355.

111 Stoor 2007: 13–14; Barth 1969. On the one hand taking notice of the Swedish state's sometimes racist and overall colonialist oppression of the Sámi during the 20th century, and on the other hand the more modern perceptions of the Sámi as a much distinct group in the Nordic countries, the inhabitants in the north are often closely related. Many inhabitants in Norrbotten and Västerbotten counties are descended from several of these different ethnic groups, sometimes without knowing it. For example, I found out during my research that I am partly descended from Swedes from the coastland; westward-migrating Finns from Savolax and Tavastland, who founded the first agrarian colony in Örträsk in southern Lappland in around 1676; and southern Sámi from nearby Lycksele who became Christian citizens and for several generations were ringers ("klockare") in the Swedish church and state administration in Lappland in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

112 Recording: Daum_Ka_1510B_m16.

heritage, rooted in the landscape and in human, cultural collective memory: a deep belief grounded in firsthand experiences that you *do have* a concept for. It is an expression of traces of beliefs deeply rooted in a pre-modern, pre-industrial, pre-urban culture that to some extent still remain. It is the belief in a half-supernatural, half human-like race: "a reflection", in the words of one informant.[113]

It is clear that beliefs in both vitra and sájva – and huldrefolket, ulta, and haltijat – are almost completely non-Christian, pre-Christian, or 'pagan' in nature, even though tales do exist that explain the origins of the vitra and sájva within a Judeo-Christian context. According to these tales, vitra and sájva are the descendants of the hidden children of Adam and his first wife, Lucia or Lucidéa: "But with her he would not openly associate; therefore she and her offspring [i.e, vitra] grew shy and hid themselves from mankind",[114] and "some fell into lakes and some fell into mountains".[115] Some folklore records say that vitra themselves are either pagans or do not believe in God and have no religion.[116] It is also recorded that vitra and sájva are generally quite similar to humans in appearance, behavior, and living conditions, as one might expect of these supposed underground cousins. But they live in a parallel, partly invisible world: in the forests, under the earth, in the lakes and mountains. They are the equals of humans, and sometimes more advanced technologically. Those humans who see or hear vitra are "strong" individuals – psychologically stable, perhaps.[117] Vitra can cooperate in several ways, and they live in a dialectical interaction with human culture. This applies to all activities of daily life and subsistence, such as haymaking, milking, cattle herding, childbirth – when human and vitra women sometimes could help each other as in the example from 1666 above – housebuilding, and road construction, but also to cultural products as 'music' and other auditory phenomena.

Finally, some more important works should be mentioned here. Two studies by Tone Dahlstedt (*Tro och föreställningar kring vitra i övre Norrland*, 'Faith and beliefs about vitra in Upper Norrland', [118] and *Kvinnors möten med vittra: Närhet, ömhet, sexualitet*, 'Women's encounters with vitra: Proximity, tenderness, sexuality')[119] are the most comprehensive scholarly texts written about vitra to this day. The texts discuss all the important aspects of vitra, including their music in general and, notably, vitra paths in the natural landscape, as well as the occasional sexual encounters between vitra and humans, from a female perspective.[120] Dahlstedt draws on former research in the field, not least that of Læstadius and Grundström, whose theories she partly synthesizes.[121]

Another important overview, and one used here, is Alf Arvidsson's *Arbetslivets folktro: En sammanställning av traditionsmaterial från övre Norrland* ('Folk beliefs of working life. A compilation of

113 Recording: Daum_Bd_4044_m16, Sorsele 1982, Israel Jonsson, Olavi Korhonen.
114 Modin 1926: 48.
115 Recording: Daum_Bd_4346_m16, Örträsk, Skurträsk 1983, Harald Fors, Axel Gidlund, Olavi Korhonen.
116 Recording: Daum_Bd_4044_m16, Sorsele 1982, Israel Jonsson, Olavi Korhonen.
117 Recording: Daum_Bd_4349_m16, Örträsk, Långsele 1983, Harald Fors, Olavi Korhonen, Ingvar Königsson.
118 Dahlstedt 1976.
119 Tone Dahlstedt 1991.
120 Dahlstedt 1976: 46–8.
121 Mention should also be made here of Westerström's (1976) study on the history of names.

traditional material from Upper Norrland'), a compilation of traditional material partly about vitra.[122]

Stig Hellsten, already mentioned above, published a discussion in 1984 of testimony about vitra beliefs that he recorded with the help of priests in fifteen Ångermanland parishes in the autumn of 1933. Fifty years after the recordings were made, he returned to them, linking the old records to new reports from the parish priests to see if beliefs in vitra were still alive or had disappeared. Hellsten found that vitra beliefs were still very much alive and identified Bjurholm Parish as a last stronghold of vitra beliefs in the early 1980s.[123]

The subject of supernatural sounds in a Swedish context has been briefly discussed in one ethno-musicological study: Anna Johnson's wide-ranging dissertation *Sången i skogen: Studier kring den svenska fäbodmusiken* ('The song in the woods: Studies of Swedish chalet music'), about herding music. Johnson takes up with the subject of supernatural music in chalet culture in some detail, and, importantly, synthesizes some of the beliefs that existed about supernatural and vitra music: it is mainly vocal, peculiar, "stunningly beautiful", and richly ornamented with elements of halftone steps and different sounds. She also points out the richness of this material.[124]

An article by the present author has appeared in the "musicology of music/record production" research field, proposing an experimental approach to music research with vitra music as a case study.[125] Two recent works deal with sexuality and bodily movement in old and modern folklore: Catarina Harjunen's *Att dansa med de(t) skeva: Erotiska möten mellan människa och naturväsen i finlandssvenska folksägner* ('Dancing with the skewed: Erotic encounters between man and creatures of nature in Finnish-Swedish folk tales')[126] and Tommy Kuusela's "Swedish fairy belief: Traffic accidents, folklore, and the cold light of reason".[127] Kuusela's text, on modern vitra-related folklore, critically discusses modern beliefs in "fairies", among which he includes vitra. He also takes up the idea of humans crossing paths with vitra and accidents happening as a result. Importantly, he points up the biases in early twentieth century folklore collections, particularly the strongly nationalistic tendency to see Swedish folklore as stemming from old Norse mythology. While this is a *bias* we should remain aware of, I think it is hard to deny the principal correctness in the observations of the early folklorists of the obvious connections between this non-Christian folklore and older pre-Christian religious beliefs. Clearly, however, ideas always change over time.[128]

In addition, there are several other texts that describe vitra mythology and are used here as sources: *No finns vittra* ('Well, vitra exist'),[129] *Gamm-Strid och vittra* ('Old Strid and vitra'),[130] *Vittra vid*

122 Arvidsson 1986: 42.
123 Hellsten 1984.
124 Johnson 1986.
125 Burlin 2015.
126 Harjunen 2020.
127 Kuusela 2021.
128 Kuusela 2021: 260–61.
129 Westerström 1974: 1: 58–9.
130 Westerström 1974: 2: 118.

Manjaur ('Vitra at Manjaur'),[131] and an in-depth high school paper, *Vittra: Edgar Nilsson berättar om ett sällsamt naturväsen* ('Vitra: Edgar Nilsson tells about a strange creature of nature').[132] With that, most of the known and relevant titles have now been mentioned.

Vitra beliefs were alive for at least 400 years but are probably of much older origin – how old depends on your perspective. In this article, the beliefs, themselves, fascinating as they are, are not the fundamental focus but rather a point of departure. They provide the context for an investigation of the strong sonic element of vitra mythology, folklore, and beliefs and its relation to spatiality – the sonic landscape – that will here be sketched out.

4 Cases: Descriptions of encounters with sound and 'music'

From folklore records of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we know that vitra, at least at times, could be both seen and heard. They could even be noisy. Written records and sound recordings attest to two main types of auditory experiences related to vitra beliefs. What I will call Type A experiences involve hearing non-musical sounds made by vitra primarily as *social creatures*. The listener hears vitra speaking, shouting, and engaging in everyday social interactions – and even communicating vocally, but non-musically, with humans, such as through laughter. Type B experiences involve perceiving sounds made by vitra primarily as *musical creators and communicators*. In this case, the listener hears, for example, bells of different but unknown shapes, instruments, and vocal melodies or other musical sounds. Type B experiences seem also to occur even in non-musical contexts, when the listener is alone, in solitude, in moments of self-absorption, spontaneously, and without warning. Both types of experiences typically occur when the listener is out of doors: on a mountain, beside a lake, in the woods, or on a vitra path. Men, women, and children could all hear vitra, and the auditory experiences of sounds and melodies occurred in normally comfortable situations: typical settings include fishing, hunting, or being out in a pasture.

I will now outline how vitra auditory experiences are described in the sources, with reference to these two main categories. Leaving the general aspect of sound experiences aside – and here again, I take Grimshaw-Aagard's perspective on the subjective side of sound experiences as my point of departure – let us dive directly into the folklore records. The story below reproduces general mythological motifs, such as how to steal animals belonging to the vitra with pure steel, but importantly, it also includes distinctive descriptions of both vitra sounds and vitra 'music'. This particular story – remarkable for its concrete details – is about a human-vitra encounter that took place sometime in the nineteenth century. The story, from informant Alf Burström, was recorded on tape at Vindelns folkhögskola in 1935 and transcribed by Gunnel Westerström. It was passed down to Alf Burström from his father Elias Burström in Åbyn, Burträsk, Västerbotten. Elias Burström was born in the 1880s. The "Strid" of the story is Gamm-Strid ("Old Strid"), whom stories

131 Eklund 1984.
132 Nilsson 1979.

say was an "old soldier, knowledgeable in all uncleanness and sorcery, and a strong man of honor":[133]

> "As Strid approached the Kvarnbäcken [a brook], a vitra family came walking. Quick as lightning, Strid sought out his sharp file and hid in the moss. When the vitra family had waded across the brook with their seven children and nineteen red-spotted cows, the vitra man shouted: 'We rest here!' The children jumped into the brook and gamboled about on the swirling water and ate the white foam. The mother gathered leaves for their tea. The father sat on a clump of grass and sang the vitra song, which begins this way: 'We have a mind that makes the blood pulse / you can hear it beat when I say the Word'.
> This was Strid's moment. A grazing cow came closer and closer. Hardened though the warrior was by famine, hardship, and troubles, yet his hand trembled. And now the file was thrown across the cow from the left, and in that instant he became the owner of the cow. And now an infernal howl and noise arose. They all knew what they must do: gather the remaining cows and return the way they had come, back to Gobacktjärnberget [a mountain]. Strid found his file. For safety, he threw it a few times more across the cow from left to right. All the while the cries of the fleeing vitra family could be heard... Strid traveled many times up to Gobacktjärnberget. He finally found out that he had been wrong. The inhabitants of that mountain were trolls. They had a castle with ninety-nine windows but no door. The vitra lived some way off, in Trångmyrberget. One should not mix up vitra and trolls. The vitra are a grand race."[134]

Unlike trolls, who were perceived as more malevolent, vitra were indifferent to humans, or even kind to them. Sometimes trolls are confused with vitra and the story above leaves open the possibility of multiple interpretations. This story describes sounds of both Type A and Type B – the sounds of both the vitra and their music – even if it is hard to *hear* the tune in the story. The story has concrete ingredients that are visual, sounding, spatial, and interactive: the encounter in the midst of the natural landscape, the vitra singing, the noise, and the physical interaction between vitra and humans. It reveals an important, immanent spatial dimension: the meeting is in nature, with all its spaces, and the places where the vitra live are also mentioned. Similar points could be made about the stories below. They include entire scenes that are in their essence cinematographic: unreal, but with a special credibility. In a recording from 1971, informant Oskar Nord of Granö relates the following story told to him by his uncle:

> "My uncle told me about when he was a little boy and was the shepherd boy. He was sitting with cows in a field in the forest where it had burned a few years earlier. So there the cows had good grazing. He called it the hunter's grass, it went up next to the cows, they had such good pasture there. They got so quiet there. So he was sitting on a stump with the cows one day. Then all of a sudden he heard the rattling of bells, cowbells, and people shouted and

133 Westerström 1974: 118, translated from Swedish by the present author.
134 Westerström 1974: 118. "Grand" is a translation of the Swedish word "storvulen".

> came out of the mountain, and it was high and steep there, stony, a man could not make his way down there, and there were cows coming down, there were many cows, and all the men were dressed in red, and the women were dressed in white. And so they passed right next to him on the way west."[135]

This story of hearing bells is a typical example of a combined Type A and Type B experience. Here, the informant reproduces another person's story of a vitra experience that was both auditory and visual. The sound environment is the one most typically described for vitra; the vitra also have their most typical appearance and behavior. They have colorful clothes, prosperous livestock; they make sounds, whisper, and talk, just like humans; the sound of bells is also heard. At the same time, the vitra show that they do not obey the laws of nature or living beings; that they do not belong to this world as we humans do. They can walk down a steep cliff with ease.

Some stories, by contrast, give the modern reader the impression that the vitra encounter might actually have been an encounter with an unknown human, secretly observed. One 81-year-old woman told the following story in 1926:

> "When I was 12 or 13 years old, I saw a vitra woman dancing on an early summer evening just after the sun went down. It was up on a stone hill in Svya [Sveden], north of the village of Strinne, that I saw it. Round, round she danced, while she sang an unusual song: it was only in one turn [beat]. The vitra woman was dressed in a blue skirt but wore no bodice, only her 'shirtsleeves'. I listened and watched for so long that I learned the song, which I can still sing today."[136]

This example is definitely a Type B experience: a visual experience of seeing the vitra woman dancing as well as singing. Unfortunately, there is no transcription of this song from approximately about 1850. A recorded lyric for another vitra song (without melody) is from 1860 and goes: "Kó, tjäva mó, kó, tjäva mó, langspenete gäta!"[137] Another herding girl in the early twentieth century heard vitra herding calls and said they were much more beautiful than those of humans: as "lovely to hear" as the bells of the vitra's cows.[138] Vitra are mentioned now and then as being good dancers. At the Adak mine in Västerbotten, which was opened in 1921, it was said that the Sámi had hidden silver treasure and asked the vitra to protect it. But vitra had been seen dancing at the treasure sites.[139]

In many accounts, the idea of vitra music appears indirectly, as when the accounts describe dancing. In the material I have investigated most closely, it is more common to find *descriptions* of

135 Recording: Daum Umeå 19710623, Oskar Nord, Granö, Degerfors, Västerbotten, Gunnel Westerström.

136 Modin 1926: 66: "Då jag var 12–13 år gammal, såg jag en vitterkvinna dansa en försommarkväll strax efter att solen gått ner. Det var uppe på en stenbacke i 'Svya' (Sveden), norr om Strinne-byn jag såg det. Runt, runt dansade hon, under det att hon sjöng en ovanlig låt: den var blott i en "vändning" (takt). Vittran var klädd i en blå kjol, men hade intet livstycke, utan var bara klädd i 'överdelsärma'. Jag hörde och såg på så länge, att jag lärde mig låten, som jag kan sjunga än idag."

137 Modin 1926: 66. In principle untranslatable to Swedish and English.

138 Modin 1926: 67.

139 Recording: Daum_Bd_4000_m16, Malå, 1982, Olavi Korhonen, Gustav Lundstedt, Joel Skoglund.

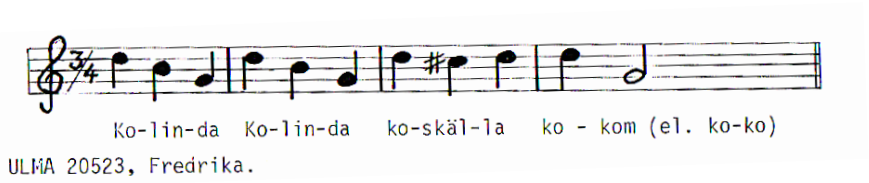

Figure 1: "Vitterkök" from Fredrika, Lappland. Cited after Tone Dahlstedt 1976.[142] Also mentioned in document 13444, Astrid Vange, 1939, Tärna, Kungl. Universitetets bibliotek Uppsala.

remembered songs or movements – as in the examples above – than saved melodies *per se*. A 50-year-old teacher in 1926 remembered an strange encounter she had when she was a student and out in the woods: "she heard a wonderfully beautiful herding call", answered it with her own call, but couldn't find the other singer, and answered several times with no reply, "whereafter she heard the same voice and the same trills, so tender and beautiful-sounding" beside her on the road, frightening her greatly until she reached more populated areas, upon which the voice disappeared.[140] Sometimes, however, real melodies were written down. Figure 1 shows the melody of a vitra herding call that was heard enough times to be remembered – a "Vitterkök", or shepherd calling tune, mentioned by Tone Dahlstedt.[141] Note the unusual halftone step from D to C sharp.

Some preserved Sámi vuole related to vitra are found in Harald Grundström's anthology *Lapska sånger* (*Lappische Lieder*, 1958–1963), which includes commented transcriptions of vuole recorded by several informants in Norrbotten county. Grundström himself identifies what he calls "the vitra motif" in Sámi vuole, and gives several examples of lyrics intimately associated with vitra and/or sájva, where the melodies are not known or are variable.[143] One of these informants was Jonas Eriksson Steggo, an exceptional "expressive specialist" who in February 1943 recorded about 83 vuole in some intense sessions in front of a microphone and electric engraving machine together with researchers from Landsmåls- och folkminnesarkivet (a predecessor to ISOF) in Uppsala.[144] Together, these vuole form a "united work of art" about Steggo's life, according to later research.[145] Musically, they exhibit a notable variation in tonality and rhythm. Some use only a couple of notes (a major second); others use the whole octave. Often the only intervals are fifths or thirds.[146] One of two vitra-related vuole transcribed in *Lapska sånger* is "Jordiskii vuolle" ("Vitrornas, de underjordiskas, vuolle") from volume 1, sung by Steggo.[147] The other is "Gidniha vuolle" ("En vitervuolle") from volume 2,[148] sung by Johan Persson Ragnefjäll, Radnejaur, Arjeplog. "Jordiskii vuolle" is rhythmically complex, transcribed in $^{15}/_{8}$, $^{9}/_{8}$, and $^{15}/_{8}$ time. The tonality is G major; the musical tension is principally developed in the rhythm. The vuolle seems to be at-

140 Modin 1926: 70–71.
141 Dahlstedt 1976: 46.
142 Dahlstedt 1976: 46.
143 Grundström 1959.
144 Grundström 1958: 57.
145 Ternhag 1990; Stoor 2007: 107–18.
146 Kjellström et al. 1988. For more on Jonas Eriksson Steggo, see pp. 131–50.
147 Grundström 1958: 57. The vitra vuolle is also mentioned as one rare example of a religious dimension in Steggo's vuole: Kjellström et al. 1988: 148.
148 Grundström 1963: 56–7.

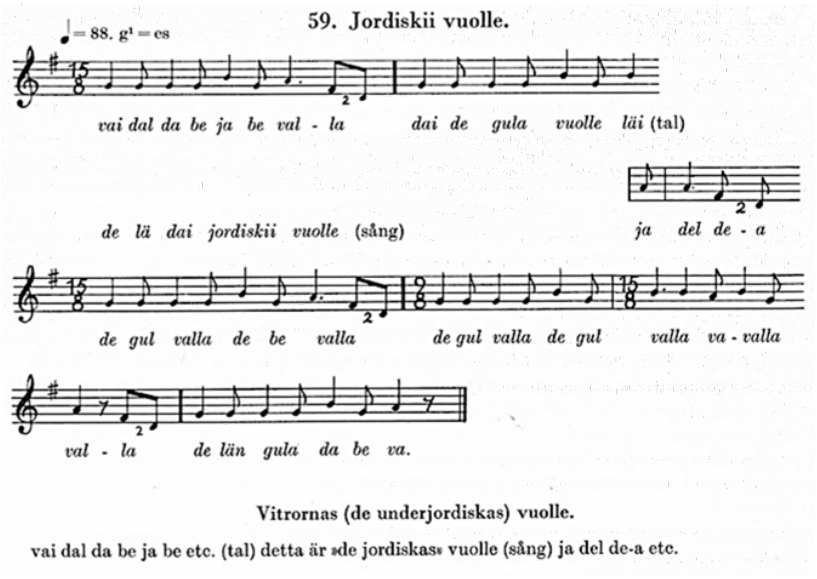

Figure 2: Transcriptions: "Jordiskii vuolle" performed by Jonas Eriksson Steggo. From *Lapska sånger* 1, 1958: 57.

tributed to the vitra: the lyrics say, "this is the vuolle of 'the earthly ones [i.e. the underground ones, or vitra] …". Meanwhile, "Gidniha vuolle", which is transcribed in a free rhythmic $^{3}/_{4}$ meter, has lyrics that seem to be a prompting from the vitra to the Sámi reindeer herders to wake up and capture the herd of reindeer that has been scattered in all directions: "Ah, chap, get up, get up! The calves have scattered here and there, here and there, about each other, yes, here and there åija våija. Get up, get up, the herd set off helter-skelter all vaija holla våla. Get up at once, the herd went on its way helter-skelter, helter-skelter".[149] According to Krister Stoor, who specifically mentions these two vuole about vitra (although from a performance perspective), in this vuolle it is the vitra man (or woman) who calls the reindeer herder "godfather", which implies some kind of alliance between them.[150]

More than twenty years before Grundström's recordings, the pioneer of recording Sámi vocal traditions, Karl Tirén, published his monumental work *Die Lappische Volksmusik* (1942). In a recent re-publication in Swedish (by Gunnar Ternhag in 2022), retitled in Swedish as *Den samiska folkmusiken,* two vuole are explicitly attributed to the *katnihah* creatures (singular "kani"), who are somewhat similar to vitra. The two vuole are No. 343, "Katnihavuolle", and No. 362, "Katnihavuolle", both recorded in 1912 in Lule Lappmark. Both are written in complex meters (6 + $^{7}/_{8}$ and $^{5}/_{4}$, respectively) and No. 343 has lyrics about two beautiful *katnihah* girls singing.[151]

Compared to the vitra-related songs of the Swedish-speaking populations, these vuole are different: musically, lyrically, and in the relationship between vitra and humans that they express. As 'music' or transcriptions themselves, they are principally Type B sounds – tunes 'from' vitra – but the stories connected with them have elements of Type A sounds, such as the sounds made by the vitra wake the herders up. The vuole seem to be both *by* vitra and *about* them and their relation to the reindeer herders; in a deep way, the songs connect humans and vitra. According to Grundström, the Sámi perceived vitra or sájva in part as the spirits of their forefathers; therefore,

149 In Swedish (from Sámi): "Ah, guffar, stig upp, stig upp! Kalvarna har skingrats hit och dit, hit och dit, om varandra, ja, hit och dit åija våija. Stig upp, stig upp, hjorden gav sig iväg huller om buller alla vaija håla våla. Stig upp med detsamma, hjorden for sin väg huller om buller, huller om buller."

150 Stoor 2007: 44–8.

151 Tirén 1942/2022: 232; 236; Ternhag 2018.

the vitra were always friendly and helpful, waking tired reindeer herders at critical moments, talking and singing to them. But there are also traditional tales about vitra who, instead of helping the Sámi, fooled, tricked, and imitated them in a not-so-kind way when they were collecting their reindeer.[152]

The tunes coming from vitra otherwise seem to have a special character of escape. They could also be threatened by the Christian faith (generally, baptism protects against vitra tricks, like prayers), as they belong to another world. The 'music' of vitra often corresponds to memories: lost or nearly lost. Erik Modin, in his book from 1926, records the following story of a forgotten vitra melody:

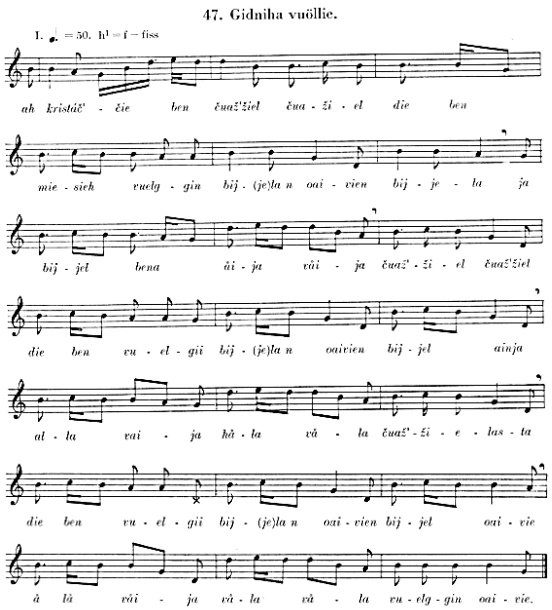

Figure 3: Transcription: "Gidniha vuolle". Performed by Johan Persson Ragnefjäll, Radnejaur, Arjeplog. From *Lapska sånger* 2, 1963: 56–7.

> "When the vitra women take the cattle up to the pasturelands, they sing and call to them with pleasant voices, and in several places it has been possible to record both the words and the melodies to these 'vitra songs' or 'vitra-kökar'. One such record is found in the aforementioned book *Gamla Tåsjö* from a village, Rotnäset, in the parish there. In Multrå about 10 years ago, an old woman named Brita died, who sang a 'vitterkök' for the present author that she had heard a vitra woman sing out there in the countryside in her youth, when she went herding. Since I myself was not in a position to record the melody that she sang, I sent to the woman's cabin a couple of young ladies who knew music, who would do me that service. They learned the song from the old lady with the intent of writing it down when they got home to the piano in the parsonage. But as they neared the parish church, all at once they completely forgot what they had learned and later they could not reproduce the melody. And shortly afterwards, the old lady died, taking her secret with her."[153]

152 Recording: Daum_Bd_5857_m16, Arvidsjaur, Stenbacken, Johan Lundström, Aldor Stenvall, Krister Stoor.

153 Modin 1926: 52–3. Translation from Swedish: "När vitterkvinnorna gå i vall med kräken, 'köka' de och locka på dem med behaglig röst, och man har på flera håll kunnat uppteckna både ord och melodi till sådana 'vitterlåtar' eller 'vitterkökar'. En sådan uppteckning finnes i den förut anförda boken 'Gamla Tåsjö' från en by, Rotnäset, där i socknen. I Multrå dog för ett 10-tal år sedan en gammal kvinna, Brita, som sjöng en 'vitterkök' för förf., som hon i sin ungdom hört en vitterkvinna sjunga bort i marken, då hon gick där och gätade. Enär jag själv ej var i stånd att uppteckna melodin efter hennes sång, sände jag till kvinnans stuga ett par musikkunniga fröknar, som skulle göra mig den tjänsten. De lärde sig låten av den gamla i akt och mening att sedan uppteckna den hemma vid pianot i prästgården. Men komna i närheten av sockenkyrkan, glömde de med ens alldeles bort vad de lärt och kunde sedan ej återge melodin. Gumman gick också kort därpå i graven med sin hemlighet."

In a recording made in Åmsele in Västerbotten in 1970, Edvard Karlsson tells the following story about an experience of his own:

> "It was [...] ... in Bjurträsket ... it was, we were there and were going to shoot, the grouse was playing [...] and so then in the morning, the sun had just come up, and we heard sounds starting to come from a boat, and we saw two [persons] start to row, now understand, each time they rowed it made such a loud sound ... it was so early, and as they rowed and rowed they began to play an accordion, and they played such beautiful things, my God [laughter], oh, then we heard them when they made land, sounds came from the two of them in the boat, then it got quiet, what was that then? Was it the vitra?"[154]

This story also includes sounds of both Type A and Type B. It is worth noting that the vitra seem to keep up with new music technology – here, the modern accordion, which they play nicely and to great effect. At the same time, the story reminds us that some lakes and ponds were ruled by vitra and, among the Sámi, by Saivo and sájva. Læstadius writes of fishing ponds about which the noise of fighting could be heard, and, in dreams, fighting between Sámi and sájva – the latter did not like to be disturbed.[155] In stories by another informant, Sigfrid Hellsten, the vitra also play the accordion, and the only sounds are of Type B:

> "I was there, at home, I think I was eleven years old when we went out from inside, me and Dad, and Dad said, did you hear that, he said, well, it was accordion music, the *best* accordion music we could ever hear, we heard it then, and then he says now, now we should bring in the hay, because later the weather will be bad, and so it happened, they [the vitra] had such [power] ..."[156]

Vitra are obviously predictors of bad weather, and they also seem to have the power to govern it. Hellsten next relates a story about how one of the vitra took the shape of a train, although there was no railway at his family home. While it is unusual for vitra to act like machines, it is in line with overall beliefs that vitra can take whatever form they want (even if that form most often is human-like):

154 Recording by Gunnel Westerström 1970–06–03: "He va just de där... i Bjurträsket... he var, vi va där och skul skjut, spelt tjäder och ve hå och så då på morgonen, sola hade just kömme opp å, då hört vi hur det börje på och rapple i ten båt, och se to börje de på å ro, förstå var gang de rodd dill dem hårt hur e låt, å se då å ja hade ja på var träsket låg då, det var så tidigt, å se då, bäst, bäst som dem rodd denna så börje dem spela dragspele å spela så harregud (skratt), fina saker, å då hort vi dom när dom tog land å, he ramle sammales i båten, sen blev det töst, å vad va he då? Var he vittra he?" (Transcription by Toivo Burlin. Recorded by Gunnel Westerström, 1970–06–03). Edvard Karlsson tells several stories about vitra in this recording, which he says happened to him, as well as those told to him by others. Even so, he expresses great skepticism about whether vitra really exist. He tends toward the belief that experiences of this kind are a "transmission" of sounds and pictures from another part of the country or the world, like television. Exactly how he thinks this happens is not clear, but he also claims to have heard vitra several times although he has never seen them. He also explicitly says that vitra have their paths along which they can be heard and seen.

155 Læstadius 1997: 287–8.

156 Recording: Daum_Bd_5680_m16, Malå 1981, Sigfrid Hellsten, Olavi Korhonen.

> "I only know one summer that we had [vitra], there was a bog below the house, the house just stood out on the hillside, and then a wet area went up from the new cultivation area up over the bog here, a big ditch, and there comes the train, we really *saw* it, how the train went along the edge of the bog going choo choo! And it made sounds and went down to the new cultivation area. Oh my God! said Father, what will it be? And it was true, the weather was so bad, yes, for several weeks, the weather was bad."[157]

In this story, vitra act even more modern, like a train. Yet they are still warning of bad weather ahead, both visually and auditorily. The sounds here are neither Type A nor Type B but something else: a sounding machine. In a number of accounts, vitra are more seen than heard, and when seen, they are definitely not so visually clear as in the "vitra train" example. To *see* vitra seems to be somewhat extraordinary. Not everyone has the spiritual strength to see them. Hearing them is also rare, but as we have seen, not perceived as unique.[158] Some vitra stories are about strange abductions and sounds. In one story, a 16-year-old herding boy is abducted by vitra. The boy mysteriously disappears. The cows came home without him – a bad sign. The people in the village look him for a long time, using the sounds of keys and horse bells as well as magic rituals such as crosses drawn on the ground to ward off vitra. When the church bells finally ring, they suddenly find him lying by a stone. Sick and confused, he says that a beautiful woman had come and taken his hand and led him into a bright room where the sun was shining. Then he became ill. This story is a good example of how bells in different shapes and sizes are seen as a fundamental weapon against vitra.[159]

To summarize, folklore records, both the examples above and others that I have not discussed in detail, often emphasize the exceptional musicality and power of the vitra, which has multiple aspects. Vitra tunes was generally perceived as powerful, beautiful, and advanced. Sometimes vitra are seen dancing – on occasion in groups, but the absence of "fairy ring" dancing is noticeable. Vitra seem sometimes to learn human waltzes, vuole, and herding calls, but the opposite – humans

157 Recording: Daum_Bd_5680_m16, Malå 1981, Sigfrid Hellsten, Olavi Korhonen. In Swedish dialect: "jag var ju ve om, hem, jag var fell, höll oppa va jag tror jag skulle va elva år då vi kom ut, inifra, jag och pappa och pappa sa, men har du hort, sa han, ja då var det dragspel, det *bäste* dragspelsmusik vi kunde få höör, hörde vi da, då säg en så här att, nö, nu jer vi ve om lada in hö, för då skull de bli daaligte veer, så det skedde, dem had såna der [...] Jag vet bara en sommar att vi had' ju, det var en my'yr nedanför kåken, kåken stod just ut bara på backubranten, å sen var det en flarkmyr opp från nyodlinga opp över myra hänna, stort e dik å der komme tåge, vi *saage* ju, hur tåget komme etter myrkanten, å tut tut tut tut! Å det de laate och for ner åt nyodlinga etter, men harre gud! sa pappa, men vi ska he va'al, å det stämde det blev så daalite väder, ja flere vecker, vart det dåligte väer." In standard Swedish: "jag var ju med om, hemma, jag tror jag skulle vara elva år då vi kom ut, inifrån, jag och pappa och pappa sa, men har du hört, sa han, ja då var det dragspel, det bästa dragspelsmusik vi kunde få höra, hörde vi då, då säger han så här att, nu, nu ska vi lägga in höet, för då skulle det bli dåligt väder, så det skedde, dem hade sådana där [...] Jag vet bara en sommar att vi hade ju, det var en myr nedanför huset, huset stod just ut bara på backen-branten, å sedan var det en myr upp från nyodlingen upp över myren här, ett stort dike å där kommer tåget, vi såg det ju, hur tåget kom efter myrkanten, å tutade, tut tut tut tut! Å det lät och for ner mot nyodlingen. Men herre Gud! sa pappa, men ska det bli? Och det stämde det blev så dåligt väder, ja i flera veckor blev det dåligt väder."

158 E.g., Recording: Daum_bd01498_m16_Degerfors_VB.

159 Holmberg 1999: 50–51.

learning vitra 'music' – is more frequently reported. Humans can hear, learn, and – if they have musical training – even write down vitra songs and melodies. Vitra melodies are perceived as special and seem to have a communicative, direct meaning. They are commonly described as particularly beautiful and different. Often mentioned are vitra cowbells, which are tuned in different pitches, can be heard from afar and make sounds of great beauty: "such incomprehensible sounds", as beautiful as the glossy, fat red vitra cows themselves.[160] And when vitra abducted humans, sounds could be used to force them to set their prisoners free. The vitra melodies themselves were usually forgotten, or not transmitted or recorded.[161] But there *are* herding calls, fiddler tunes, and vuole that supposedly come from the vitra and, when preserved, are recorded as having been "heard from" them. There are also many folklore records that testify to other auditory 'non-musical' phenomena, such as voices and sounds that could not be connected to humans and which therefore were associated with vitra. Vitra are often described as human-like sound creators, but they can also take other shapes, including the shape of a train – a sounding machine. The existence of these songs and records raises the overall question of what auditory experiences of the vitra meant for listeners. Based on both the written and oral sources, they seem to have made great and lifelong impressions: sometimes of beauty, sometimes of fear.

5 Vitra paths as supernatural infrastructure: Examples from Lappland, Ångermanland, and Västerbotten including Degerfors and Lycksele Parishes

To understand the spatial dimension of vitra sounds, we must examine the idea of vitra infrastructure in nature: namely, the idea of "vitra paths" (*viterstigar*) or "vitra roads" (*vitervägar*).[162] Vitra paths have been described by authors such as Erik Modin (1926), Tone Dahlstedt (1976), and Tommy Kuusela (2021),[163] but not really problematized. What are vitra paths? One short answer is that vitra paths are part of a magical geography associated with many rituals, including the protective use of steel and other metals as well as procedures for warding off vitra, for protecting the home, and for protecting animals against the vitra penchant for stealing or borrowing them. In folklore, vitra were mostly encountered from spring to autumn, when both humans and animals were out-of-doors. Vitra were, in principle, never to be found indoors, but could be found within the limits and borders of human culture. They might be under the barn, in remote meadows, in the woods, in streams, ponds and lakes, under or next to mountains. In a number of recorded accounts, their paths are linked to motifs of warnings, including warnings of incoming storms or of supernatural, sometimes utterly destructive phenomena such as *vitterhunden*, "black dogs". *Vitterhunden* were demon dogs with large, shining eyes that could be heard barking out in the woods, using only three barks, or "words", at a time: an ill omen, sometimes together with "a very peculiar melody in sev-

160 Cited in Hellsten 1984: 41.
161 Cited after Hellsten 1984: 41; Modin 1926: 50.
162 Both terms are used; here I have chosen "vitra paths", which seems a good description.
163 Modin 1926; Dahlstedt 1976; Kuusela 2021.

eral different parts".[164] Strange three-part sounds with simultaneous sightings of otherworldly black horses are also reported.[165] In principle, however, the view was that if people took due account of vitra needs, often in rituals, and vitra paths, they could also receive good help in return: for example, in the form of weather warnings, which seems to be a vitra specialty. These rituals also include, importantly, making offerings to the vitra. These might be of metal, or, as among the Finns in Tåsjö, Ångermanland, near-daily offerings of fresh milk (*vitterkoppen*).[166] Generally, the vitra paths were to be avoided – failure to do so could bring misfortune in the form of illness or accidents.[167] The paths were perceived as ancient and somewhat sacred (maybe "passe" in Sámi terminology) to the vitra, and their route was not negotiable.[168]

A natural explanation is that sometimes the vitra paths may have been about animal trails, paths created by the repeated movement of wild animals through an area. Vitra paths or roads seem to have been perceived as the spatial, linear framing for all kinds of human-vitra encounters, and especially the hearing of sounds (and music) attributed to vitra. When a human hears vitra sounds or music, she can be quite sure that she is on or close to a vitra path. One magical ritual involved binding the vitra to their paths (if these were known) with sacrificial stone mounds or swastikas of branches laid beside them.[169] In northern pre-modern agrarian culture, the swastika symbol was called the *vitterkors* ("vitra cross") or *torsmärke* ("Thor's mark") and could be painted as a magical protective symbol on everything related to the all-important livestock.[170] The implicit sun and time symbolism is present on several levels. Vitra supposedly mimicked activities humans performed clockwise (the Swedish word is *medsols*, "with the sun") but not counterclockwise (in Swedish *motsols* and in the archaic Degerfors dialect *anschsöns*, "against the sun") – maybe an example of pre-Christian religion leaving traces in vitra beliefs.[171] As some researchers have pointed out, there is indeed something very archaic about the vitra lifestyle, even compared to the standard agrarian culture. They are always shepherds who tend livestock; they own only cows and oxen, almost never have horses, and their paths are often for their animals.[172] On the subject of vitra paths, Tone Dahlstedt notes:

> "It was believed that vitra had their own roads where they traveled with their cattle. These roads were called vitra roads. 'When the vitra moved, they followed certain predetermined paths, the so-called vitra paths, but where these went the people did not know.' A path in the forest that stayed clear even if no one used it was thought to be a vitra path. The road from Vitterbäcken to Stångoberget in Lycksele Parish was one such road, kept open by vitra

164 Modin 1926: 67–8; Pettersson 1929/1962: 889.
165 Pettersson 1929/1962: 888–9.
166 Modin 1926: 54.
167 Recording: Daum_Bd01497, Edvard Karlsson, Gunnel Westerström.
168 Bäckman 1975: 8.
169 Modin 1926: 55. Modin mention one mound for vitra in Skedom, Multrå, Ångermanland.
170 Modin 1926: 53.
171 Modin 1926: 50.
172 Modin 1926: 51.

> cows. Reports from Bjurholm say that the vitra routes followed the lines of underground springs. If you set foot on the roads or obstructed progress along them in any way, you came into conflict with the vitra. A man in Dorris in Vilhelmina Parish tells the story of building a haystack in the middle of a vitra road. The result was that every time he put it up, it fell down. Vitra did not want to be hindered. An attempt has been made to map the vitra roads in Degerfors Parish. [...] The surveyor believes that there are three known vitra roads in the parish. He does not mention where he got the information from, however; but apparently it is a general belief in the area. Strange things have happened along these roads. What distinguishes the vitra roads is that they often run along watercourses or stretch between two lakes or ponds. 'Vitra roads often passed by ponds and streams, and therefore some ponds became notorious for being special vitra ponds, because of the events that occurred there.'"[173]

Those who chanced to build their house on a vitra path usually had to move or demolish the house. Therefore, and importantly, one had to consider vitra pathways *before* building:

> "Even when building cattle shed or stables, you had a lot to observe. In Norrland – especially in Ångermanland – it was considered necessary to offer compensation for the land of the undergroundlings, who otherwise did not leave the animals in peace. This was done by burying silver under the floor, in the threshold, or under one of the corners of the house. Furthermore, one had to make sure that the house was not built over an underground stream or spring, because then it became 'unknowable'. Also, one had to avoid building on a vitra path or over a vitra settlement."[174]

Alternatively, one could make offerings of metal objects – preferably silver – to the vitra as a kind of tribute, and even speak directly to them. In some reports of houses and buildings that happened to lie across vitra paths, regular negotiations between humans and vitra about who should move or stay were considered to have taken place.[175] The outcome was not always a given. One story describes fighting with vitra who live near or directly under the dwelling house. The informant

173 Dahlstedt 1976: 48. Translated from Swedish by the present author: "Man trodde att vitra hade sina egna vägar där hon drog fram med sin boskap. Dessa vägar kallades vitervägar. 'När vitra flyttade följde hon vissa bestämda vägar, de s.k. vittervägarna, men var dessa gingo visste icke människorna.' En stig i skogen som ej växte igen trots att ingen nyttjade stigen, trodde man var en sådan väg. Vägen från Vitterbcken till Stångoberget i Lycksele sn, var en sådan väg som var upptrampad av viterkor. Från Bjurholm meddelas att vitra hade sina färdvägar längs kallkällådrorna under jorden. Beträdde man dessa vägar eller hindrade framfarten på något sätt, kom man i konflikt med vitra. En man i Dorris, Vilhelmina sn, berättar hur han satte upp en höhässja mitt i en viterväg med påföljd att den föll ned för var gång han satte upp den. Vitra ville inte bli hindrad. Det har gjorts ett försök att kartlägga vitervägarna i Degerfors socken. [...] Kartläggaren menar att det finns tre kända vitervägar i socknen. Emellertid omtalar han inte varifrån han fått uppgiften, men tydligen är det en allmän föreställning i trakten. Underliga saker och ting har skett vid dessa vägar. Det som utmärker dessa vitervägar är att de ofta går längs vattendrag eller sträcker sig mellan två sjöar eller tjärnar. Då vitervägen ofta gick förbi vid tjärnar och vattendrag, kom därför en del tjärnar att bli beryktade som speciella vittertjärnar beroende på de händelser, som inträffat där."

174 Björkqvist 1943: 82.

175 Modin 1926: 50.

Figure 4: Map of the northernmost Swedish regions of Lappland, Norrbotten, and Västerbotten. (schoolmap by Haage 1954).

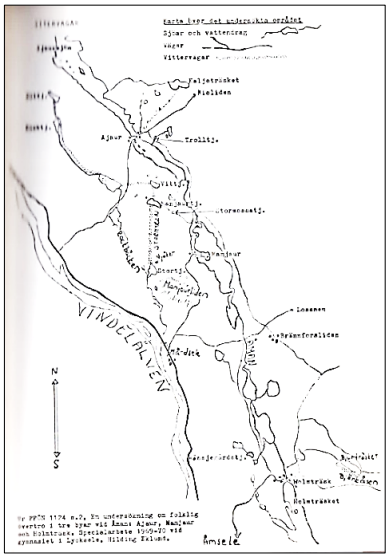

Figure 5: Map of vitra paths (*vitterstigar*) in Degerfors and Lycksele Parishes marked with dotted lines. Map reproduced from Dahlstedt 1976: 47 (Dahlstedt reproduced map by Eklund 1970).

recounts how his father-in-law, one morning after a period of many disturbances, sees a vitra woman sitting and combing her hair "in the gate" on the farm, where he shoots at her with a rifle. No corpse was found – fortunately – but the next day he heard:

> "[...] Then [vitra] moved away. They [humans] heard them do that. Then they [vitra] traveled with bells and cows and shouted and lived about, as when the Sámi drove their reindeer, and moved away in that direction, toward a little mountain creek there north, that they call the Skirkeberget, and there they moved and there they stayed."[176]

Tone Dahlstedt mentions that "Manjaurtjärn [a lake] is located by a vitra path, and here fishermen and others have often been told that they were inside the vitra area".[177] The abovementioned villages of Manjaur in Degerfors Parish and nearby Ajaur in Lycksele Parish were founded by mid-eighteenth century. It is worth noting that the area was relatively recently colonized, in about 1750–1790, by an agrarian Swedish-speaking population who competed with the Sámi in Sámi-dominated areas.[178] Before that, it was only visited by the Sámi (who continue to this day to bring their reindeer here every winter).[179] The place names are still Sámi; "jaur" means "lake" or "pond". It is probably not a coincidence that the idea of vitra paths is so conspicuous here. Perhaps the vitra paths in this area could tentatively be interpreted as memories of an old cultural border. The notion of invisible vitra paths that are only partly known seems to have been very strong in the folklore tradition in the area, as the maps above show.[180] While it remains speculation, it seems

176 Arvidsson 1986: 32.
177 Eklund 1984: 21. Translated from Swedish by the present author.
178 Göthe 1961: 41–53.
179 Bunte et al. 1982: 29–31.
180 Dahlstedt 1976: 47 cited after Eklund 1970/1984.

probable that the idea of local vitra paths is of Sámi origin and was retold to the farmers, maybe in order to protect "vitra area" ponds such as Jopptjärn – perhaps it is "passe", a *Saivo-jaure*.[181] The same is probably the case for the Manjaur and Ajaur ponds. All three pond names are obviously of Sámi origin, as are some names of lakes in the area.[182] Manjaur and Ajaur are located only about 45 kilometers north of the Jopptjärn pond.[183] Degerfors Parish still has its own mythical geography of vitra and other legends – some of Sámi origin – mirrored in its place names and folklore.[184] The oral folklore stories are connected to these ponds and lakes as well as places like Joppberget (a mountain) and Joppmyren (a bog), all known as the home of vitra and other supernatural events.[185] Located nearby is Getskalleberget ("goat head mountain"), ancient Sámi cemetery and the subject of several paranormal legends.[186] Another legendary mountain is Storskällberget ("great bell mountain"), which can be seen from far away and is known as *the* home of vitra, including associated histories of abductions of humans by vitra. These are only some examples of vitra-related local traditions involving vitra paths, mountains, and lakes from the Degerfors and Lycksele Parishes area. It is a rich area in that respect and what must be considered a cultural-historical borderland.

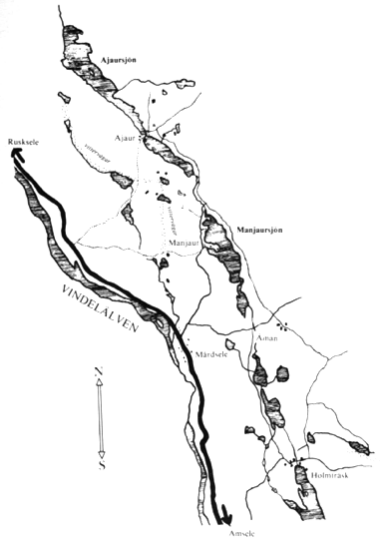

Figure 6: Detailed map of vitra paths around Ajaur and Manjaur. Reproduced from Eklund 1984: 6. Compare with Figure 5.

There are also known physical and archaeological remains attributed to vitra and vitra paths: for example, the vitra stairs in Granåsen, Dorotea, and the vitra stones in Vilhelmina and Umeå.[187] In the village of Granåsen, the very first settler, a Sámi, had to move his buildings because of prob-

181 One legend has it that the frozen Jopptjärn pond was a place the Sámi passed and the site of feasts many hundreds of years ago. The word "Jopp-", probably of Sámi origin, in folklore is said to mean "dance"; in the winter the frozen pond was a meeting place for Sámi who danced at the ice. Told to me by Ture Burlin (and maybe other relatives), who heard it from his friend, Sámi reindeer herder Per Skum.

182 Isof: https://www.isof.se/lar-dig-mer/kunskapsbanker/lar-dig-mer-om-ortnamn-i-sverige/ortnamn-pa-finska-meankieli-och-samiska/ortnamn-pa-samiska. Manjaurtjärn is also called Manjaurträsket on modern maps.

183 Eklund 1984, cited in Dahlstedt 1976.

184 Westerström 1976: 96–7.

185 Folklore includes stories about vitra and unknown flying objects.

186 Recording: Daum_Bd 848_m16 19660525, Albert Näslund, Emmy Näslund, Gunnel Sandström. There are several stories of mystical encounters at the road and the mountain. It is also said to be the location for a pre-Christian Sámi cemetery, where dead bodies were placed high in trees: folklore records that a Sámi ghost shaman, *nåjd* (noaidi) was observed lifting a goat's head towards the sky near the cemetery, and cars suddenly stopped working. In the 1930 s a priest is said to have been driving over the mountain when suddenly dead skulls started to jump on the bonnet, whereafter the car mysteriously "died", and the priest had to spend the night at the place.

187 "L1937: 4855 Ristning, medeltid/historisk tid". Riksantikvarieämbetet; "L1938: 7426 Naturföremål/-bildning med bruk, tradition eller namn". Riksantikvarieämbetet. https://www.raa.se/hitta-information/fornsok/; Sveriges Radio (2022). The potential connection to for example, Sámi circular stone offering sites is beyond the scope of this article. See Spangen 2016.

Figure 7: Lake Ajaursjön in summer 2024. Photograph by Toivo Burlin.

Figure 8: Jopptjärn pond in summer 2024. Photograph by Toivo Burlin.

lems with the vitra inhabitants, who had built stairs in the cliff and danced on it.[188] The previously mentioned Manjaur and Ajaur settlements – as nearby Holmträsk rich in vitra mythology – without doubt had Sámi inhabitants before the first Swedish settler colony in 1754.[189] These are only a few examples, but they suggest that the idea of vitra paths may sometimes have been transferred to Swedish and Finnish settlers by those who inhabited the area first, often the Sámi. This might be a strong indication that the vitra path concept is Sámi.

The notion of physical paths between ponds and lakes – and sometimes under buildings – suggests the importance of the landscape and spatiality in vitra beliefs and in vitra sounds and 'music'. In short, vitra paths were both *sonorous* and *spatially extended physical paths* in the landscape, and in that respect acted as 'windows' to changes in natural conditions, such as the weather.[190] The following story from 1935 about an encounter in 1905 is one example:

> "One evening about thirty years ago I saw vitra. At the time, I was in forestry work in Hälsingland. When I was walking home from work one evening, I heard something. It sounded like a rattle. Before I could think, a woman stood in front of me. She gave me a

188 Sveriges Radio (2022).

189 Granström: "Manjaurs historia; Eklund: "Vitterdansen i Holmträsk".

190 Recording: Daum_Bd_5680_m16, Malå 1981, Sigfrid Hellsten, Olavi Korhonen, Recording: Daum_Bd_6242_m16, 1994, Arvidsjaur Granberget, Agda Lundberg, Elsy Nyman, Ingegerd Westerlund, Recording: Daum_Bd_01487, Gunnel Westerström, Sofia Åström, Recording: Daum_Bd_01497 Edvard Karlsson, Gunnel Westerström.

> sharp glance but continued down the path. I was scared at first, but then I gathered my courage and went up to her. She raised her hand as if to signal that I should leave. However, I was not afraid, but I continued to walk beside her. She then took a stick, turned towards me, and raised the stick, as if she was going to hit me. I got scared and started reading the Lord's Prayer, which I had heard was good against such mischief. Before I could look back, she was gone. I only heard a jingling, as of bells, after her. A few steps later, it started to pour rain. I thought this was strange because the sky hadn't looked like rain. I think it was 'vitra' because, oh, it was 'vitra', I'm sure of it!"[191]

When various aspects of what is known about vitra paths are considered together, certain patterns emerge. In the regions of Lappland, Västerbotten, and Ångermanland, vitra beliefs emerge according to fairly coherent and similar patterns. All accounts suggest that these beliefs developed in a syncretistic cultural fusion of influences from ethnic Sámi and ethnic Swedes as well as ethnic Finns, who all inhabited and colonized the area. According to the sources, the Saivo belief, in itself syncretistic, was widespread in this particular area. Around Lycksele, for example, sacred ("passe") and supernatural Saivo lakes (*Saivo-jaure*) were particularly common, where special rules applied to activities such as fishing: mentioned ponds and lakes Jopptjärn, Ajaur and Manjaur are located here. The sájva ruled these lakes or ponds and could act protectively.[192] Alf Arvidsson mentions how fishers, for example, may be helped or robbed by the vitra and then hear their derisive laughter.[193] It is possible that when the Finnish and Swedish settlers arrived in these areas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Sámi, who often competed with the colonizers for the same natural resources, conveyed ideas about this sacredness, "passe", including the sájva/vitra paths between lakes and ponds. These merged with the farming population's own magical beliefs from both eastern Finland (Savolax and Tavastland) and southern Sweden, which, from this perspective, gives northern Swedish folk beliefs their uniqueness in comparison to southern Swedish beliefs. In northern Swedish folklore, sounds and 'music' and supernatural vitra paths have a particularly prominent meaning and place.

191 Hjalmar Holmgren 1935. Isof 8575.pdf, recording of Karl Lundgren, 78 years old, former forest worker, born in Yttertavle, living in Innertavle, Umeå parish: "En afton för omkring trettio år sedan såg jag 'vittra'. Jag var den tiden i skogsarbete i Hälsingland. När jag en afton gick hem från arbetet, hörde jag någonting. Som en skallra lät det. Innan jag hann tänka stod en kvinna framför mej. Hon såg skarpt på mej, men fortsatte efter stigen. Jag blev först rädd, men så fick jag mod och gick fram till henne. Hon lyfte handen som till tecken att jag skulle avlägsna mig. Jag var dock ej rädd utan jag fortsatte att gå bredvid henne. Hon tog då en käpp, vände sig mot mig och höjde käppen, som om hon tänkte slå till mig. Jag blev rädd och började läsa bönen 'Fader vår' som jag hade hört vara bra mot sån't där otyg. Innan jag hann se mig om var hon försvunnen. Jag hörde bara ett pinglande, som av skällor, efter henne. Jag hann ej gå många steg förrän det började hällregna. Detta tyckte jag var konstigt, ty det hade ej sett regnigt ut på himmelen. Jag tror att det rådde 'vittra' för, å att det var 'vittra', de är jag säker på!"

192 Bäckman 1975: 13–17.

193 Arvidsson 1986: 42.

6 Memories of vitra's sounding paths: Past and present perspectives

The ideas of vitra paths as potential meeting points between humans and vitra continues to survive. Let me present a concrete example of the vitra path concept in modern folklore that I discovered myself, without previously knowing much about it. In the summer of 2010, I, the present author (A), had the following conversation with a visiting local resident (L.R.) in the kitchen of a summer house in village Blåliden, Västerbotten.[194] The local resident, born in 1948, was over for a short visit and suddenly said: [195]

L.R.: "Did you know that this house is built on a vitra path?"
A. [slightly surprised]: "You don't say?"
L.R.: "Yes, at least that's what I've heard."[196]

Let us pay attention to what L.R. seems to point out: that it is known that the house (built in 1939, close to the site of an older house from the nineteenth century) is built on a vitra path. L.R.'s remark could be understood as an explanation or warning, or just as an introduction to the deeper parts of the culture. The remark certainly shows that vitra beliefs still persist to some extent. Vitra paths were said to follow streams, lakes, and other lines in nature, and I knew, when I thought about it afterwards, that there were underground and aboveground streams and springs nearby.

A few years later, a pair of siblings, relatives of mine, told me that they themselves had *met* vitra along the vitra path, about one kilometer from the house mentioned, and on one occasion had heard sounds or noises (though not "music").[197] In about 1963, as a boy of 6, the younger sibling had met what he came to believe was a member of the vitra when he was walking by the nearby pond, Jopptjärn, with the family dog. As mentioned, Jopptjärn is known locally as a vitra area – several stories are told about it – but at the time, as a young boy, he was unaware of that. As he was walking, a very tall woman whom he did not recognize, wearing clothes in strong colors – a red costume with a blue pinafore and blue hood – suddenly appeared in the bog behind a brook fed by a spring. The boy thought it might be someone he knew from the nearby village. Wanting to be polite, he began to move towards her. Suddenly the dog, incredibly frightened, stopped and began to growl. Then the woman, with a wave of her hand and from distance of some meters away, stopped him and the dog from coming closer. The power that came from her nearly killed the dog, who fell down unconscious. The boy tried hard to wake the dog. It took a while. As this was happening, he also heard loud hissing sounds. When the boy stood up, the woman had disappeared completely. When the boy came home with the dog, his father saw that something was wrong with the dog and asked about it, but the boy did not tell him what had happened. According to this story, the being whom the boy perceived as a vitra woman acted as a strong elementary force with the

194 The family homestead, *Burlin's,* 150 years old, in the small village of Blåliden in Degerfors parish (Vindeln), Västerbotten.
195 One of the main inspirations for this study.
196 Transcribed and translated from the local dialect, Degerforsmål, by the author.
197 Older relatives of the author. Several other living persons have claimed to have heard "music" in the form of strange flute playing at the path.

power to hurt or kill the dog – but she spared the boy. [198] The other sibling in about 2017 recounted that as an older woman, she saw in a kind of dream a woman dressed in red walking "the vitra path" over the family building plot – the same area mentioned by L.R. The woman suddenly disappeared behind the barn, an area known to be a bit forbidden even today. In the dream the woman thought: "Now I must tell my family that I have seen vitra!"

What then happened to these beliefs in Lappland, Västerbotten and Ångermanland? Here are some accounts recorded by informants in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The first informant comes from Sorsele:

> "Well, there are still vitra today, but they must have fled for civilization, where have they gone, do you think? I guess they haven't had time to investigate what vitra actually are, I think not... [they were] a spirit movement, which disappeared and appeared."[199]

An informant from Örträsk says:

> "Vitra, they were the spirits who were out in the fields, and who were seen by truthful people, and seen up until the forties [i.e., 1940s] here, a woman who lived up here on Vilan, a kilometer from the village, saw a whole entourage of vitra with cows and everything on the snow, who set off, so you don't know what to say about that... [...] Vitra were spirit beings, who lived on earth just like humans, they were not ominous... [they were] a natural thing, beings who lived here but were visible only sometimes."[200]

And one informant from Fredrika says:

> "I've never been afraid of vitra, they are a part of nature [...] Dad said that when they were small there were so many vitra that they actually lived together with vitra, every single day, they forged in the forge and they cut aspens and they talked loudly with the cows, in the village they never heard them come until they saw them. But they have disappeared with time, oh dad, he, yes, I think he missed that, they disappeared with the electricity and the radio, [the] new [things]."[201]

Finally, an informant from Skurträsk:

198 A natural explanation for the strange experience, suggested by Jon Johansson (personal communication, e-mail) of June 3, 2024, could be that the boy and the dog had encountered a thunderstorm and a lightning strike.

199 Recording: Daum_Bd_4044_m16, Sorsele 1982, Israel Jonsson, Olavi Korhonen: "Nä nog finns vitra än idag, men hon torde ha flytt för civilisationen, vars ha hon nästan farit? Dem har väl visst inte hunnit utreda vad vitra är för någonting egentligen, det tror jag int... en anderörelse, som försvann och visade sig..."

200 Recording: Daum_Bd_4329_m16, Örträsk 1983, Harald Fors, Greta Jonsson, Olavi Korhonen: "Vitra det var ju andeväsen som fanns ute i markerna, och som dom har sett, sanningsenliga människor och sett ända in på fyrtiotalet här, en kvinna som bodde här uppe på Vilan en kilometer från byn såg ett helt vitterfölje, med kor och allt på snön, som gav sig iväg, så det vet man inte vad man ska säg om... [...] Vitra var andeväsen som bodde på jorden likaväl som människorna, de var inget illavarslande. En natursak, väsen som levde här men var synliga bara ibland."

201 Recording: Daum_Bd_3148_m16, Fredrika, Dammet 1979, Thomas Andersson, Elsa Siljebo.

> "Science says that when you get too many buildings too close together, they disappear …"[202]

In his article about vitra beliefs, Stig Hellsten cites several informants who observe that vitra beliefs disappeared with the advent of schools, public education, and influences from the mass media. Hellsten writes:

> "A former church ringer in Vilhelmina says: 'When you have seen them yourself, you are sure they exist', but after telling stories about his own experiences he adds (1956), 'Now nobody sees anything.'"[203]

And as Hilding Eklund poetically writes in his book *Vittra vid Manjaur*, it is not hard to understand the reason why the vitra disappeared:

> "Vitra appear rarely or almost never in modern times. This is because vitra have left their old areas and paths. These have largely been destroyed by human excavation and clear-cutting and by buzzing high-voltage lines. Vitra have therefore retreated to other, more isolated forests to find pastures for themselves and their cows."[204]

Or in the words of folklorist Erik Modin, who as early as 1926 saw a world, almost a paradise, lost:

> "Humankind has made and is making itself more and more dominant over nature. But nature becomes more and more impoverished at the same time; it loses, as time goes on, its strange mystery, its horror, its allures, its richness – its poetry."[205]

The falling into oblivion of the vitra folklore and many of the melodies and paths attributed to vitra that are consistently described in the recorded sources points to something larger: a cultural oblivion in a time of crisis and change. To sum up, it is clear that the elements of vitra beliefs, and the idea of vitra paths, instead have lived on in modified form. Tommy Kuusela presents many recent examples of such beliefs, by now quite distorted, from the twenty-first century.[206] And as my own examples of my neighbor L.R. and others show, the older forms still live on too: in people's minds, and, perhaps, in conversations between them. This is true even though some people, under the influence of modernity and extended education, began to think about vitra beliefs in a more 'scientific' way, as in this condensed quote: "I guess they haven't had time to investigate what vitra actually are" but "science says that when you get too many buildings too close together, they disappear." Statements like these are probably another way of saying that the old beliefs were no longer sufficient, meaningful, or perceived as correct. But they were hard to abandon completely.

202 Recording: Daum_Bd_3392B_m16, Axel Gidlund, Tore Holmlund, Skurträsk 1979: "Vetenskapen säger att när det blir för tätt bebyggt då försvinner dem …".

203 Cited after Hellsten 1984: 50.

204 Eklund 1984: 57.

205 Modin 1926: 75: "Människan har gjort och gör sig allt mera ensamrådande i naturen. Men denna blir samtidigt mer och mer utarmad; den förlorar, vad det lider, för henne sin underliga hemlighetsfullhet, sin skräck, sina lockelser, sin rikedom – sin poesi."

206 Kuusela 2021.

7 Results and discussion

This article set out to answer the following questions:

1. What are the context for and the structure of the sounds and 'music' attributed to vitra?
2. What is the relation between spatiality/space and sound and 'music' on the vitra paths?
3. How can ideas about vitra sound and 'music' and its spatial representations contribute to an understanding of pre-modern 'music and sound' conceptualizations?

Briefly, the findings are, first, that the perceived context of all sounds attributed to vitra (and sájva) was the natural world – from a modern perspective, its *biophony* and *geophony* – outside of, but close to human culture (and its anthrophony). Regarding the structure of vitra 'music', some characteristics are frequently reported. These include (but are not limited to) 'incomprehensible' sounds, that is, sounds "not of this world"; a grand beauty; strong, overwhelmingly beautiful voices; strange, difficult, or chromatic intervals; a predominance of vocal tunes, "kulning" or "kókning", high-pitched herding calls or rhythmically complex vuole; and also, instrumental pieces. These instrumental pieces are described as widely varied in style and instrumentation, having been played on, for example, the Jew's harp, violin, flute(s) of different kinds, bells of different kinds, proportions and set-ups, and accordion. The strong connection to the herding and chalet culture, however, means that these tunes have clear features of chalet music, one of which is high-pitched singing by beautiful silvery voices and another of which is the sound of animal bells. The chalet culture, which existed outside cultivated lands, i.e., in woods, lakes, mountains, and marshes, is the primary *cultural* and *spatial* context of this supernatural music.[207] But the overall picture is that this is an adaptation of the Sámi concept of Saivo and the supposed paths used by its inhabitants, the sájva, for their reindeers between mountains and lakes – probably with shamanist dimensions – reconceptualized by Swedish- and Finnish-speaking settlers. It is the result of a cultural mix and meeting, a *transculturation*, specific to the area and its life circumstances.[208]

According to Grimshaw-Aagard and Garner, sound is more than acoustic events transmitted to our ears. Sound is also a subjective impression and experience.[209] The human brain plays a major role, not only as the interpreter of acoustic signals, but also to fill in what is missing, and even to 'compose'. In a society without the concepts of 'composing', 'improvising', or 'creating' music, it may be difficult to say "I made this melody" or "I heard this harmony in my head". Many of the described encounters with vitra, at least as they involve hearing sounds and melodies, must be understood as real human (psycho-)acoustic impressions of sounds of unknown origin – perhaps they were transmitted acoustically over a long distance and changed in the minds of the listeners. These impressions were interpreted in the light of a familiar concept, namely the concept of the vitra and vitra paths. In several recorded accounts, it is obvious that many of the experiences described can be explained as sounds probably created by other humans, animals, or nature itself –

207 Johnson 1986: 198–206. "Sången i skogen", her material is from Dalarna, Jämtland and Härjedalen.
208 Lundberg and Ternhag 2014: 130–32.
209 Grimshaw-Aagard 2019.

anthrophony and *biophony* – which, in the ears and brains of the human listeners, who might themselves have been very musical, became beautiful music, 'incomprehensible sounds', or melodies that they attributed to the vitra. Steven Feld's concept of *acoustemology*, where sound is a "way of knowing", suggests that the acoustemological environments of the northern Swedish agrarian and herding culture, within and abutting vast areas of natural wilderness, needed vitra and vitra paths as both friend and 'other' – something to interact with, connect to, and talk about. Like birds for the Bosavi people, the vitra can be understood in a mythical sense as human forefathers or distant cousins: as 'gone reverberations', absences, transformed into a concept of an audible and sometimes visible presence on vitra paths, preparing humans to always be observant and aware, teaching that nature can be an enemy as well as a friend. In this sense, vitra offered a kind of relational feedback to human existence in a dark and frightening natural world, and as distant relatives of humans, they used sound and music to communicate, saying: "We are almost like you. Share our melodies!"

Secondly, vitra sounds/soundscapes and 'music' are strongly associated with vitra paths. The *transculturation* mentioned above produced an acoustemological and a *sound-musical-spatial infrastructure* concept, vitra paths, that have been perceived – together with the perceived sounds – as spatial framings of vitra areas, of both nature and culture. These paths are also the ultimate borders of human culture. Nature is a medium for the sounds – a soundscape. As the concept of acoustemology suggests, engagements with place and space-time are highly important when sharing and listening to sounds.[210] It is also in "histories of listening",[211] i.e., in talking with one another about hearing experiences, that the engagement becomes real. Because both vitra sounds and vitra 'music' are always heard in natural settings, it is the spatiality of this *biophony* and *geophony*[212] that is their, so to speak, 'stage'. Many testimonies and histories attest that hearing the beautiful voices echoing between mountains, in valleys, and across lakes and ponds is a wonderful event, remembered for life. Spatiality and time (manifested in long reverbs and echoes) are an essential part of these sound and musical experiences in nature. There is an implied sounding spatiality in many of the stories told about vitra and sájva. It is probable that these outdoor sound experiences were shaped by the natural acoustics of woods, lakes, and mountains, and that stories about listening to sounds in this soundscape were an essential part of the conception of this 'other': vitra sounds and 'music'. The natural sounding landscape – the geophony – of the Lappland, Västerbotten, and Ångermanland areas is quite varied, with woodlands, mountains, and many lakes and ponds. It is often very well suited to long decays and imagination-provoking echoes. One example is the abovementioned Blåliden, where a vitra path has been pointed out: the local acoustics, if one shouts or sings loudly, are absolutely stunning, with a lot of long echoing and reverbs on the nearby ponds and mountains. Examples such as this are, if not conclusive, at least suggestive of a connection between the perceived spatial aspects of the geophony and soundscape and the perceived vitra

210 Feld 2015: 15.
211 Feld 2015: 17.
212 Kolltveit 2014: 73–6.

paths. As noted by Riita Rainio et. al. in their technologically advanced and careful archaeo-acoustical investigation of the Sámi acoustic spaces of canyon lakes Julma-Öllky and Rotkojärvi in northern Finland, there are clear indications of a general close relation between Sámi shamanism, certain sounding cliffs, mountains and lakes, and concepts of the Underworld.[213]

From the earliest known records of vitra beliefs to the extensive folklore documentation to recent popular culture,[214] vitra paths are also *physical remains* in the landscape – still awaiting archaeo(musico)logical investigation – that connect concepts of *nature,* such as sounds of animals, woods, lakes, and mountains, with communicative concepts of *culture,* such as 'music'. The infrastructure of vitra paths can therefore be understood as a highly important part of this nature-culture and spatiality-sound/'music' connection. I suggest that we should understand 'sounds', 'music', spatiality, and 'vitra paths' together as both *cultural concept* and *acoustemological environment*: the vitra paths create a bridge between past and present, real and unreal, nature and culture, sound/music, time and the spatial environment, the supernatural and the natural, bad and good weather, humans and 'the others'. The vitra paths can thus be said to metaphorically transcend past and present in a world turning from 'magical' to 'modern'. One might even speculate that the vitra paths are a cultural translation of the worldview of the Sámi shaman, noaidi, in which the drum and its symbols were a tool for traveling the road to Saivo, the home of the sájva/vitra. Even when the concept of both vitra and vitra paths dissolved under the influence of modernity, traces of the old beliefs lingered.

Thirdly, the concept of vitra paths, which are the sites of both physical and supernatural sounds, can be viewed as a point of entry into a more significant problem: what conceptualizations of both sound and what modernity calls 'music' existed in pre-modern agrarian society? How were these concepts understood? I will give a short answer first, and then offer some more detail. Among the majority of the population in the northern Swedish regions investigated here, it is likely that there was no concept of music as we know it *at all before approximately 1900.* It is important to understand that the impact of modern Western culture, including the concept of 'music', grew to influence generations of adults and children only gradually. As Timo Leisiö has pointed out, today's universal concept of music did not exist at all among Finnish and Sámi populations in Finland before the twentieth century.[215] Probably the same applies to similar nearby populations in Sweden. In fact, a modern concept of music was probably not completely established until much later, in the 1920s to 1930s, under the influence of modern media, especially radio.[216] Probably there was a concept of 'music' or several particular 'musical' concepts before then, which included sounds and melodies and notions of sonic or melodic beauty. But this older concept is hypothetical and has no name. Certainly many musical practices are known or can be surmised to have existed: for example, singing lullabies, vocalizing herding calls, playing instrumental dance pieces and dancing to

213 Rainio et al. 2017.
214 To be discussed in another study.
215 Leisiö 1986: 186.
216 Leisiö 1986: 186.

them, performing work songs, etc. There probably also was some basic understanding of harmony (and regular rhythmic patterns), at least among Swedish speaking farmers. A main avenue for this influence was hymn singing in the Swedish Protestant church, a powerful institution. In northern Sweden, however, farmers and reindeer herders had to travel long distances to reach the nearest church, meaning that contacts with the church, in practice, varied in degree. Later, from 1842 onwards, most resident children in Sweden received basic education in public elementary schools, but they usually attended school for only a few years, learning some writing, reading, math, and Christianity, among other things, before often going on to live their lives as farmers. 'Music', if ever used as a concept in church or in school, meant approximately 'songs' or 'singing'.[217]

Beginning in 1925, public service radio broadcasting set completely new standards for every Swedish citizen about almost everything. Both music and the Swedish language became standardized and mediatized. Music became an umbrella concept, eventually including all genres on top of the classical tradition (but somehow related to it).[218] With this development towards modernity, the strong notion of the musical and sonorous communication of the vitra, connected to paths and spaces outside houses and villages, changed. For a long time, scales that deviated from major-minor tonality as well as unusual sounds, could be conceptualized as something 'other': the sounds of forefathers or cousins, in an acoustemological pre-modern perspective. According to one informant, the first Finnish settlers to arrive in Örträsk in Lappland in the 1670s, met with vitra who already lived there.[219] The vitra seem to have remained: they were both seen and heard regularly in Örträsk until the 1930s or 1940s. But according to consistent testimony, they sadly left the area permanently when the human inhabitants installed electricity and radio.[220]

That sound and 'music' before modern technology and media could be conceptualized as 'supernatural' in this concrete way points to a fundamental change in human perception and conceptualization of the world. We can think of it as an extended, hard Enlightenment: trains, electricity, telegraphy, telephone, and radio completely changed people's life circumstances and eventually their concepts of what was 'real' and what was not. The mysterious, parallel, sounding world of the vitra paths were replaced by soundwaves in the ether and the realistic sounds of human voices and music from the radio in the living room. Indeed, within a short span of time, these modern technologies and media gave northern Sweden – and indeed all of Western culture – a fundamentally new concept of communication, of sound and music as 'things' electrically recorded, transmitted, mediated, and modern, creating a new kind of scientifically based transparency that effectively closed the perceptual and conceptual doors on even recent historical times.[221]

217 Florin 2010.
218 Löfgren 1990; Ehn et al. 1993; Björnberg 1998.
219 Recording: Daum_Bd_4973_m16, Lycksele Knaften, 1985.
220 Harald Fors 1986: 75.
221 Volgsten 2019.

8 Coda: The eternal bells

Finally, let us take the important sound tool of vitra lore, the bells, as an example of the sounds in pre-modern soundscapes that disappeared with modernity. I will turn the floor over to Ture Burlin,[222] a well-known member of the local community, a collector of bells, a local storyteller and 'memory expert', in Blåliden and Vindeln, Västerbotten. He lived most of his life in Blåliden and continued an agricultural lifestyle into the 1960s, never owning a tractor. He himself owned a few mountain cows ("fjällkor"), a north Swedish horse, a few pigs and goats, and a dog and a cat. He spoke the archaic dialect known as Degerforsmål (or "bondska").[223] Ture Burlin was probably the first person to mention "vitra" to the present author in the late 1970s. Indeed, he had several stories about vitra (among other things) that he told to adults that were not meant for children's ears. As far as I remember, he denied that vitra had any real existence. But one story that he did tell me in the 1980s involved an experience his father, Oskar Burlin (1885–1963), supposedly had at the mentioned Jopptjärn pond when he was a shepherd boy in the nineteenth century. By the pond one day, he saw another boy shepherding cows. He heard the sound of their bells, from a distance at first, and thought it was a boy from a neighboring village bringing his cows to the pond – until the boy passed very close by him without looking at all in his direction or answering when Oskar spoke to him. Instead, the boy led the cows straight down into the pond, walking out into the water. Slowly, both the boy and the cows walked farther and farther out until they finally disappeared completely – perhaps along with the sound of the bells – under the surface of the water. This story is reminiscent of several other recorded accounts with its emphasis on the sound of bells. It also emphasizes the supposed reality of both vitra and their home under both earth and water, in what was known to be their own pond.[224]

The animal bells with their 'incomprehensible sounds' did play a crucial role in the vitra stories. And as Gjermund Kolltveit has pointed out, bells were important sound tools in Nordic culture and its landscapes for long periods of time.[225] Cowbells and other bells, such as bells for horses – Kolltveit lists three types of pre-modern bells for animals – had a great deal of importance in agricultural soundscapes, especially those that existed as natural parts of the lives of farmers and shepherds. Probably the bell ("skälla" in Swedish)[226] was strongly connected with the farming societies that expanded and developed in Scandinavia, including the Funnel Beaker culture (ca. 4000 BCE), the Battle Axe culture (ca. 3000 BCE), and the agricultural communities of the Bronze Age (1700–550 BCE) and the Iron Age (550 BCE–750 CE), continuing in principle until the present day.[227] Animal bells on cows, sheep, goats, horses, and, among the Sámi, reindeers, have had several purposes.[228]

222 The author's grandfather.
223 Degerforsmålet. See Åström 1888.
224 This story is a piece of oral folklore that I heard from Ture Burlin at least once before I was 20 years old, and which has now been written down properly.
225 Kolltveit 2008: 148–9.
226 Kolltveit 2008: 148.
227 Kolltveit 2008: 148–53.
228 Kolltveit 2008: 148; Price 2015.

One was to allow shepherds or farmers to hear the animals and find them if they got lost; another was to let one or a few animals lead the herd, and with the sounds of the bells deter possibly dangerous predators and beings in the forests, including wild animals, as well as beings like the vitra. Along with a sound tool, like the bells, it is necessary to also consider the concept of the soundscape, as sketched out in several articles by Gjermund Kolltveit, Cajsa S. Lund and Rupert Till.[229] Of bells, Kolltveit writes:

> "[O]ne purpose of bells in human perception is that they are makers of time and space. Especially relevant for animal bells is that they form, define and shape space. [...] More specifically, we can imagine that bells were territorial markers, acting as symbolic borders around the area that people used and controlled."[230]

As territorial markers, bells also symbolically delimited the areas which were controlled by the vitra. Maybe it is because of their strong symbolic function as markers of space and borders, that bells – often with an 'otherworldly' sonic touch – are so often mentioned in the vitra stories and so much associated with the vitra paths. Ture Burlin described his own childhood experiences of hearing real bells in the woods in a recording made in the autumn of 1973.[231] As a child growing up at the beginning of the twentieth century, he, like other children, used to shepherd cattle in the forest, roaming freely there from morning to night. On the recording, he speaks about his memories of these wanderings. He describes how he used to climb up a mountain and listen with pleasure to the calls that he heard from all over the forest. He loved to stand there, listening to this landscape of the sounds of far-off animal bells in all directions. On the recording, he says it was "great to hear". [232] He complains that in 1973, this landscape of sounds has passed away and is no more. "Maybe you hear a logging truck and a chainsaw; that's what you hear", he says.[233] But the landscape – and the soundscape – had already started to change before Ture was born in 1909. Between 1883 and 1894, the Stambanan railway was built through Norrland, passing close to the area we have been talking about, so that in the early twentieth century, the sounds of trains became a new, natural, and very modern part of the soundscape.[234] Nonetheless, as a child, the young Ture still found himself in a mostly pre-modern soundscape. Agriculture and agrarian life were still much the same as they had been for millennia or at least for hundreds of years: self-sufficient, without tractors, cars, or any large machinery. It is possible to imagine that Ture Burlin's auditory experiences of this world, recalled by him so many years later, offer a clue to what many children and

229 Lund 2008; Lund 2018: 14; Kolltveit 2014; Till 2020.

230 Kolltveit 2008: 149–50.

231 Recording: "Samtal i köket Vindeln (mars 1973)". *Familjens klassiker Volym 2*. 2004. Recorded by Tommy Johansson. Produced by Toivo Burlin.

232 Ture Burlin loved bells of all kinds, especially cow and horse bells, and collected them. The author owns a large part of this collection today.

233 See n. 231.

234 https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stambanan_genom_övre_ Norrland and www.historiskt.nu (maps of the Swedish railway from 1880, 1894) [accessed 2024-09-24].

adults experienced in the Scandinavian forests for thousands of years. This *was* the vast landscape that once was big enough for both humans and vitra.

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