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Sámi Myths and Medieval Heritage

Marte Spangen, Department of Archaeology, History, Religious Studies and Theology, University of Tromsø, Norway

Abstract: Sámi landscapes are pluralistic and contain traces of a variety of activities occurring in the past and present. This includes remains of medieval houses and hunting installations that are different from the ones used in later Sámi contexts. The Sámi have created their own interpretations of these enigmatic features in the landscape, relating, for instance, so-called 'Stállo' house grounds, reindeer pitfall traps, and 'circular offering sites' to widespread and recurring motives in Sámi mythology, like the troll-like Stállo, the belligerent *Čud* people, and the importance of religious rituals. The three case studies in this article highlight elements of the associated myths that indicate a medieval origin, while questioning to what extent the myths can be employed in interpretations of medieval archaeological remains, and to what extent they reflect later socio-cultural conditions and the Sámi conceptions of themselves and the world. As the chosen narratives potentially reflect internal 'central myths' about the Sámi role and identity in the Middle Ages and today rather than historical situations and events, such an exploration may shed new light on both the myths and their medieval and later contexts.

Introduction

There is a reciprocal relationship between humans and their surroundings; people create their cultural landscapes as they use and observe them, while landscapes, topographies, and non-human actors also shape people, practices, and beliefs. This has been studied in a number of

ways within subjects such as history, geography, psychology, social anthropology, and archaeology. Various aspects and theoretical approaches have been emphasized, including the *longue durée* effects of natural conditions on society, the cultural creation of place, the affordance of landscapes and topographies for certain human activities, and the ever-present interconnections between people, animals, and other non-human actors.[1] Moreover, the concept of *materiality* and how things affect human behavior and being-in-the-world has been frequently discussed in archaeology over the last fifteen years.[2]

Even before this concept was adopted, researchers within archaeology had a lasting interest in studying how the remains of the past, which continue to linger in the landscapes around us, have affected people in different places and time periods and shaped their understanding of the world and themselves.[3] Investigations show, not surprisingly, that large, conspicuous, and enigmatic monuments in particular tend to call for an explanation. Consequently, such structures are integrated into the existing local worldviews, and the mythical and mythological complexes of the time. Such explanations often suggest

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[1] Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World*; Tuan, *Space and Place*; Gibson, *Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*; Ingold, *Perception of the Environment*.

[2] Olsen, 'Material Culture after Text', pp. 87–104; Olsen, *In Defense of Things*; Svestad, 'The Impact of Materiality on Sámi Burial Customs and Religious Concepts', pp. 39-56.

[3] For example, Burström, *Mångtydiga fornlämningar*; Burström, Winberg, and Zachrisson, *Fornlämningar och folkminnen*; Gazin-Schwartz and Holtorf, *Archaeology and Folklore*; Andrén, 'Places, Monuments, and Objects', pp. 267–81; Lund and Arwill-Nordbladh, 'Divergent Ways of Relating to the Past in the Viking Age', pp. 415–38.

construction by giants or other non-human creatures, but many stories also relate monuments to more or less specific historical events.[4]

The Sámi in northern Fennoscandia are no exception. They have observed more or less unexpected features in their familiar landscapes and interpreted them within their frames of reference at the time. This article will focus on some medieval activities in Sámi landscapes and the known Sámi myths about these. Three examples will discuss the Sámi interpretation of so-called 'Stállo' house grounds, of pitfall traps for reindeer hunting, and of a type of structure called 'circular offering sites'. Archaeologists have studied these features, considering such aspects as construction details, dating, and placement in the landscape. Over the last three decades, these studies have led to new theories about the initial function, dating, and social context of these archaeological types.[5] Local Sámi interpretations of the structures have been discussed, too, with varying degree of influence on the ethnographic and archaeological understanding of their original use.[6]

Over the last few decades there has been a growing awareness of the relevance and problematics related to the use of such sources in archaeological interpretations, especially in

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[4] For example, Klintberg, *Svenska folksägner*, pp. 26–27; Burström, Winberg, and Zachrisson, *Fornlämningar och folkminnen*, pp. 96–103, 107–09, 114–30.

[5] Storli, '*Stallo*'-*boplassen*; Liedgren and Bergman, 'Aspects of the Construction of Prehistoric Stállo-Foundations and Stállo-Buildings', pp. 3–26; Sommerseth, 'Villreinfangst og tamreindrift i Indre Troms'; Spangen, *Circling Concepts*.

[6] Manker, *Fångstgropar och stalotomter*; Kjellström, 'Är traditionerna om stalo historiskt grundade?' pp. 155-78; Vorren and Eriksen, *Samiske offerplasser i Varanger*; Wepsäläinen, *Stalotomterna*.

indigenous contexts such as that of the Sámi.[7] The history of studies of archaeological features started with a fascination for ancient monuments as early as the Middle Ages. The credibility of such sources as myths and folklore, as well as the saga literature and similar written sources, regarding such monuments, has changed over time.[8] The value they have been credited with has depended, in part, on the context. Indigenous people have been perceived to have a more static culture, and thus to be more likely to preserve actual historical information through traditions than the supposedly modern and progressive cultures of the West. To some extent, this has led to a somewhat indiscriminate use of oral traditions as a source for explaining the historical past in indigenous contexts, sometimes as far back as the Stone Age.[9]

It is important that archaeologists acknowledge the value of traditional information for understanding landscape use and worldviews of indigenous groups in the past.[10] Such an approach corresponds with the recognition of the rights of indigenous groups to define their

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[7] Burström, *Mångtydiga fornlämningar*; Burström, Winberg, and Zachrisson, *Fornlämningar och folkminnen*; Solli, *Narratives of Veøy: An Investigation into the Poetics and Scientifics of Archaeology*; Solli, 'Narratives of Veøy. On the Poetics and Scientifics of Archaeology', pp. 209–27; Gazin-Schwartz and Holtorf, *Archaeology and Folklore*; Nilsen, *Brytninger mellom lokal og akademisk kulturminnekunnskap*; Damm, 'Archaeology, Ethno-history and Oral Traditions', pp. 73–87; Skandfer, 'Ethics in the Landscape', pp. 89–102.

[8] Cf. Klindt-Jensen, *A History of Scandinavian Archaeology*; Hastrup and Sørensen, *Tradition og historieskrivning*.

[9] Flood, *Archaeology of the Dreamtime*; Ecko-Hawk, 'Forging a New Ancient History for Native America', pp. 88–102; cf. Damm, 'Archaeology, Ethno-history and Oral Traditions', p. 78.

[10] For example, Schanche, 'Horizontal and Vertical Perceptions of Saami Landscapes', pp. 1-10; Barlindhaug, 'Cultural Sites, Traditional Knowledge and Participatory Mapping'.

own cultural heritage.[11] However, while myths may include elements of ancient historical realities, one-to-one interpretations of their content to explain archaeological features and historical situations are problematic because they run the risk of reinforcing reactionary stereotypes about a static culture for the indigenous groups they concern.[12]

The following exploration of Sámi myths about three types of medieval monuments will exemplify the questions that arise in relation to the use of different myths and legends as sources of knowledge about the historical past as this is constituted in modern Western academic traditions. It will also exemplify the importance such narratives have for negotiating Sámi past and present identities today.

‘Stállo’ House Grounds

The ‘Stállo’ house grounds are found in the high mountain areas, mainly in the mountain range marking today’s border between Norway and Sweden. There are around 470 recorded house grounds of this type between the 64th and 69th parallel. The house grounds are oval or rounded rectangular, with widths of 2 to 5 metres and lengths of 2 to 6.5 metres. They are usually clearly visible due to their size, their semi-subterranean construction, where the floor level is dug down to a level beneath the surrounding terrain surface, and the surrounding embankments of surplus soil or sand from the floor area. Their location in mountain areas with limited vegetation contributes to rendering the traces clearly visible even today (Fig. 1). There is some debate over the construction details of the walls and roof the embankments must have supported, but convincing arguments have been made for a construction similar to

[11] Skandfer, ‘Ethics in the Landscape’.

[12] Spangen, *Circling Concepts*.

the Sámi *bealljegoahti*, a round turf hut with curved wall / roof posts (a so-called 'bow-pole framework'), whether these were covered with turf or with materials such as bark or cloth. An important difference from the usual *bealljegoahti* is that the Stállo house grounds are often distinctly larger. They also have a conspicuous internal relation; where the sites include three or more house grounds, these are usually organized in rows.[13]

Radiocarbon dating suggest that some of the Stállo house grounds may have been constructed as early as the seventh century, but the main phase of use was between *c.* AD 800 and AD 1050, with continued use into the fourteenth century on some sites. In addition, in several regions examples indicate that certain houses were reused in the seventeenth century or later.[14] The datings are mainly based on samples of charcoal from fireplaces within the houses. The excavated house grounds have produced only a few finds of animal bones and objects.[15]

There have been lengthy discussions about the cultural and economic context of these house grounds.[16] Today, most researchers relate them to the Sámi, though with contrasting views of whether they were used during wild reindeer hunts or in early reindeer herding.[17]

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[13] Storli, '*Stallo*'-*boplassene*; Mulk, *Sirkas*; Bergman and others, 'Kinship and Settlements: Sami Residence Patterns', pp. 97–114; Liedgren and Bergman, 'Aspects of the Construction', pp. 3-26.

[14] Mulk, *Sirkas*; Storli, '*Stallo*'-*boplassene*; Liedgren and others, 'Radiocarbon Dating of Prehistoric Hearths', pp. 1276–88; Sommerseth, "Villreinfangst og tamreindrift i indre Troms'.

[15] Sommerseth, 'Villreinfangst og tamreindrift i Indre Troms', pp. 234–35.

[16] Also summarized by Mulk and Bayliss-Smith, 'The representation of Sámi cultural identity on the cultural landscape of northern Sweden'.

[17] Manker, *Fångstgropar och stalotomter*; Mulk, *Sirkas*; Storli, *"Stallo*'-*Boplassene*; Liedgren and Bergman, "Aspects of the Construction of Prehistoric Stállo-Foundations and Stállo-Buildings'; Sommerseth, 'Villreinfangst og tamreindrift i Indre Troms'.

The emergence of reindeer pastoralism or herding in Sámi societies is an extensive debate in itself, and many researchers believe this development happened after the main period of use of the Stállo houses.[18] Based on the manner in which the houses were constructed, others have suggested that the Stállo sites were in fact winter dwellings for reindeer herders.[19] However, studies of the landscape context of recorded house grounds, and the climatic and environmental conditions during their main period of use, renders this theory somewhat unlikely. Considering the harsh weather, lack of firewood, and limited grazing opportunities in the high mountains during winter, this time of year seems less than ideal for reindeer and herders to stay in the areas in question.[20] An alternative explanation is that reindeer herders used the houses in summer or early autumn,[21] but there is no conclusive evidence for this. Investigation of landscape use during the Middle Ages in the Lule Sámi area, Sweden, and in Troms County, Norway, argues rather convincingly for the use of these sites as housing for Sámi autumn hunting expeditions into the mountains. In the fifteenth century, the Stállo house grounds are replaced by scattered hearths in what is known from later times to be grazing lands for reindeer in these areas, suggesting an increased importance of reindeer herding.[22]

An entirely different interpretation is presented by researchers that have used both archaeological comparisons and folkloristic sources to argue that the house grounds are *Norse*

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[18] Mulk, *Sirkas*; Sommerseth, 'Villreinfangst og tamreindrift i Indre Troms'; Salmi and others, 'Tradition and Transformation in Sámi Animal-Offering Practices', pp. 472–89.

[19] Liedgren and Bergman, 'Aspects of the Construction of Prehistoric Stállo-Foundations and Stállo-Buildings'.

[20] Storli, '*Stallo*'-*boplassene*, p. 60; Sommerseth, 'Villreinfangst og tamreindrift i Indre Troms', p. 245.

[21] Storli, '*Stallo*'-*boplassene*.

[22] Mulk, *Sirkas*; Sommerseth, 'Villreinfangst og tamreindrift i Indre Troms'.

settlements related to taxation of and trade with the Sámi.[23] This interpretation is based on comparisons with the house building techniques in Iceland, L'Anse aux Meadows, and other unmistakably Norse settlements, arguing for a similar construction of the Stállo houses with solid turf walls. According to this theory, the walls have later deteriorated to the extent that there is nothing left of them today.

The Sámi name for these unusually large turf house grounds, *Stállo* houses, has been used as a further argument for this interpretation. The idea is that Norse tax collecting practices included violence and coercion that may have caused the remains of their house to be associated with danger and hence the well-known Sámi mythical troll or ogre figure Stállo.[24] The explanation emphasizes the nineteenth-century interpretations of the Stállo character as related to historical experiences of attacks and robberies. For instance, the famous Sámi preacher Lars Levi Læstadius noted, in the margins of a manuscript about Stállo traditions, that originally this character was nothing other than old Vikings and thieves who settled in desolate woods and sometimes robbed the Sámi of their reindeer.[25] The Norwegian linguist and ethnographer Jens Andreas Friis concurred with this and repeated the opinion about the Viking / robber origin of the Stállo character. He believed the name probably stems from *Staalmanden* (Norwegian for the Steel Man, or the Iron Clad), referring to the Sámi word for steel as *stalle*. He notes that Stállo sometimes appears in a *ruovdegakte* (Sámi), an iron jacket (-*gakte* being part of the Sámi traditional dress). According to Friis, this probably reflects old memories of berserks, the infamous Norse elite warriors, in coats of mail or

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[23] Hansen and Olsen, *Hunters in Transition. An Outline of Early Sámi History*, p. 48.

[24] Kjellström, 'Är traditionerna om Stalo historiskt grundade?'; Wepsäläinen, *Stalotomterna*.

[25] Cf. Manker, *Fångstgropar och stalotomter*, p. 219.

similar armour[26] (though this is contradictory to the usual description of berserks specifically *not* wearing armour).

Some early twentieth-century researchers also argue that the Stállo house grounds may have been houses for Norse / Germanic people who hunted wild reindeer in nearby reindeer pitfall traps.[27] However, the Swedish ethnographer Ernst Manker rejects this because he found nothing in the Sámi myths about the Stállo hunting anything other than beaver.[28]

The arguments for a Norse origin of the house grounds based on a link between Norse tax collectors, Vikings, or villains, and the mythological Stállo, has been criticized for assuming too high a degree of historicity in these myths.[29] The recorded Stállo stories and notions are of relatively late date. Manker notes that none of the seventeenth-century sources on Sámi beliefs even mention the word or name 'Stállo'. The notion of Stállo is, however, explained in the earliest Sámi dictionaries in the eighteenth century as a ghost or a giant, with definitions Manker believes reflect older traditions.[30] Nevertheless, the variation in both Stállo myths and ideas about the Stállo house grounds indicates a more complex relationship between a historical reality of the Middle Ages and the narratives and notions recorded from the eighteenth century onwards. Several of the authors recording such stories note that the Stállo traditions are manifold and vary geographically.[31] In the nineteenth century, recorded

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[26] Friis, *Lappiske eventyr og folkesagn*, pp. 75.

[27] For example, Drake, *Västerbottenslapparna under förra hälften av 1800-talet*, p. 318.

[28] Manker, *Fångstgropar och stalotomter*, p. 228.

[29] For example, Holm, 'Review of: A. Wepsäläinen, Stalotomterna', pp. 62–64.

[30] Leem, *Beskrivelse over Finmarkens Lapper 1767*; Lindahl and others, *Lexicon Lapponicum*; cf. Manker, *Fångstgropar och stalotomter*, p. 217.

[31] Læstadius, *Fragmenter i Lappska Mythologien*; Manker, *Fångstgropar och stalotomter*, p. 219.

descriptions portray him as a large human-like creature who was strong and hungry for human flesh, but dimwitted and easy to fool. His paraphernalia were a silver belt, a purse, a staff, and a dog (thus not necessarily an iron shirt or jacket). The Sámi are quoted to think either that Stállo was created at the beginning of time or that he was a human who had washed off his baptism and had sworn to serve Satan.[32] Thus, the association of Stállo with a Norse population is not specifically mentioned in Sámi traditions, and in many cases there is no reason to assume this connection.

A prerequisite for the connection between the Stállo figure and Norse tax collection is that the latter was associated with some sort of danger and force. Over the last forty years of Sámi archaeology and history, the view of the tax collection as a situation where the Norse pressured the Sámi to pay these taxes has been modified by emphasizing the bilateral relationship of exchange, where both parties had something to gain. The Sámi are suggested to have been involved in a redistributive chieftain economy. Besides, they could easily 'disappear' in the vast forests, plains, and mountain areas to avoid direct violence from the Norse.[33] The fact that Sámi languages contain an Old Norse loanword for 'gift', *skeaŋka*, has been suggested to illustrate a more peaceful and mutually rewarding relationship between the two groups. In a Norse Viking Age context, the word meant 'poor' or 'serve', and gift-giving was often related to drinking.[34] Still, it should not be dismissed that the Norse collecting of tax or tribute may have included at least elements of direct or indirect threats of violence and

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[32] Læstadius, *Journal af Petrus Laestadius*; Fellman, *Anteckningar under min vistelse i Lappmarken*, pp. 160–61; cf. Manker, *Fångstgropar och stalotomter*, pp. 217–18.

[33] Odner, *Finner og terfinner*; Hansen, *Samisk fangstsamfunn og norsk høvdingeøkonomi*.

[34] Schanche, *Graver i ur og berg*, pp. 333–34.

coercion, which may have caused anxiety and conflict both between the two communities and within the Sámi societies.

This external and internal pressure related to increased integration into a Norse redistribution system, as well as the 'taxation' involved in these relations, played out at the same time as the Stállo houses were in use. This may have caused the association of these houses with an uncomfortable situation and thus the unpleasant and even dangerous Stállo.[35] However, the sagas indicate that the trips to collect taxes and trade took place during winter,[36] when transport of goods was easier with sleighs on the snow, and there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that these meetings happened in the Stállo houses in the harsh mountain areas. It is more likely that meetings took place at Sámi winter habitation or gathering sites, whether these were villages were all *siida* (group) members lived for a while or the more sporadic meeting and market places known from later periods in the Swedish inland and in the fjords along the Norwegian coast.[37]

Thus, neither the association between Stállo and Norse actors, nor the connection between Norse trade and taxation activity, and the Stállo house grounds are entirely convincing. Why some Sámi groups have associated this medieval heritage with Stállo will be discussed further below.

Reindeer Pitfall Traps

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[35] Hansen, *Samisk fangstsamfunn og norsk høvdingeøkonomi*, p. 200.

[36] *Egilssoga*, Ch. 14.

[37] Hansen, 'Trade and Markets in Northern Fenno-Scandinavia', pp. 47–79; Bergman and Edlund, 'Birkarlar and Sámi', pp. 52–80.

Reindeer pitfall traps are found all over the historical Sámi areas in northern Fennoscandia and beyond. Thousands have been recorded, and substantial numbers of new sites are discovered every year during archaeological surveys. Estimates suggest that tens of thousands are still to be found spread across the landscape.[38] Today, the structures are usually visible as oval depressions in the ground, with variable depth and circumference, somewhat depending on the topography and degree of erosion after they fell into disuse (Fig. 2). Originally, most pits were built with a narrow rectangular wood case in the bottom, which locked the reindeer's feet so that it had no room to manoeuvre back up out of the pit. Apart from this, the construction details vary, as some have traces of wood cladding further up along the outward sloping walls, while others appear to have had only soil walls. The pits were placed in systems consisting of rows of up to hundreds of traps, and they had fences made from wood or shrubberies between them. The reindeer were led to an opening in the fence and into a concealed pitfall. A few investigated pits have featured pointy rocks at the bottom, and some written sources mention spears and sharpened poles placed at the bottom to kill the animal, but the latter is unknown from archaeological sites.[39] In addition, and especially in the mountain areas of mid- and southern Norway and Sweden, there are many stone-clad pitfall traps with low stone fences leading the animals into them.[40]

[38] For example, Ramqvist, 'Fem Norrland. Om norrländska regioner och deras interaktion', p. 170.

[39] Lundius, 'Descriptio Lapponiæ', p. 22; Fellman, *Anteckningar under min vistelse i Lappmarken*, p. 222; Manker, *Fångstgropar och stalotomter*, pp. 205–06.

[40] Bang-Andersen, 'Prehistoric Reindeer Trapping by Stone-Walled Pitfalls', pp. 61–69.

Such trapping systems have a long history in Fennoscandia, but there are very few written sources describing Sámi use of pitfalls for reindeer hunting.[41] Traps in Sámi areas have been radiocarbon dated back to the Stone and Bronze Ages. However, many of these datings are uncertain because carbon samples have been taken from the original ground surface under embankments of soil that were thrown out of the pits during the digging of the traps. Hence samples are not usually taken from material directly related to the building or use of the traps, as the organic building materials have often deteriorated completely. Though it is likely that pitfall traps do date far back in time, the majority of radiocarbon datings on construction details and contextual evidence indicate a main phase of building and use in the Middle Ages.[42] The majority of pitfall traps in Sámi areas of Sweden have been constructed and used between the first and the eleventh century, with a peak in the Viking Age (*c.* AD 800–*c.* AD 1050).[43] In the far northeast of Norway, extensive pitfall trap systems are related to turf house grounds that have been dated to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and written sources document wild reindeer hunts in the area into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[44]

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[41] Though see Niurenius, 'Lappland; eller beskrivning över den nordiska trakt'; Knag, 'Matricul oc beschrifuelse ofuer Findmarchen', p. 21.

[42] Manker, *Fångstgropar och stalotomter*; Mulk, *Sirkas*, pp. 167–68; Furset, *Fangstgroper og ildsteder i Kautokeino kommune*; Furset, *Fangstgroper i Karasjok kommune*; Halinen, *Prehistoric Hunters of Northernmost Lappland*; Klaussen, 'Strategisk villreinfangst i Troms', pp. 39, 47; Sommerseth, 'Villreinfangst og tamreindrift i Indre Troms'.

[43] Ramqvist, 'Fem Norrland. Om norrländska regioner och deras interaktion'.

[44] Odner, *The Varanger Saami*, p. 86; Munch and Munch, 'Utgravningene På Boplassen På Gållevarri'; Vorren, *Villreinfangst i Varanger fram til 1600-1700 årene*, p. 28.

The Sámi oral traditions about reindeer pitfall traps were mainly collected in Sweden in the early twentieth century but still contain significant variation. The discrepancies are probably due to a variation in the time elapsed since the traps in different Sámi areas fell into disuse, and thus to the extent their original use was remembered. However, the variations also relate to the local cultural context within which these monuments have been interpreted. In the mid-twentieth century, some Sami informants said that their ancestors had called them traps for elk or reindeer, while others, predominantly in the Pite Sámi area of northern Sweden, said they had been told that they were underground houses where their ancestors had hidden from Norse, Russian, and Karelian attackers, or the so-called *Čud*.[45] It may be relevant to mention that the Pite Sámi area features fewer pitfall traps than territories further south.[46]

Čud is a term that has been used in West Sámi contexts about anyone coming from the east to raid and rob them. The exonym is likely to have its origin in the historically documented raiding by Russian and Karelian groups in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries.[47] At this time, the city-state of Novgorod, situated by Lake Ilmen south of present-day St Petersburg in western Russia, was a major trade centre for fur. Novgorod also had the right to collect taxes from the Sámi as far west as the Lyngen fjord in northern Troms, Norway. To reinforce this right, Novgorod employed Finno-Ugric speaking Karelians as intermediaries.

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[45] Johansson, 'Om vildrensfångst på Kebnekaisemassivet', pp. 6–7; cf. Manker, *Fångstgropar och stalotomter*, pp. 19–20.

[46] cf. Ramqvist, 'Fem Norrland. Om norrländska regioner och deras interaktion', fig. 10.

[47] For example, 'Oddveria Annall' and 'Henrik Høyers Annaler' in *Islandske Annaler indtil 1578* , ed. by Storm, pp. 70, 73, 483–84; *DN*, no. 670 (1420); Hansen, 'Interaction between Northern European Sub-Arctic Societies during the Middle Ages', pp. 31–95.

The Russians called all their Finno-Ugric speaking neighbours by the blanket name *Čud* or *Chudes*.[48] Apparently, the Sámi who encountered these groups adopted the term, but it took on a somewhat different meaning and subsequently gained an additional mythical content. There are abundant local legends about the danger of the *Čud* and how the Sámi have avoided or fallen victim to them. One recurring legend is about a young man who outwits the *Čud* by pretending to guide them through the landscape when, in fact, he leads them off a cliff.[49] The frequently recurring *Čud* prefix in Sámi place names is partly related to such legends,[50] but, equally, it provides evidence of the actual presence of Karelian and Russian groups in Sámi areas in the Middle Ages. The fact that the Sámi related unfamiliar aspects of the landscape to this particularly popular mythical concept is hardly surprising.

The folklore related to the pitfall traps has not had much bearing on the archaeological and ethnographic interpretations of these sites. As described above, some researchers have suggested that the ones situated close to Stállo house ground sites may have been used by Norse groups, while discussed has been lacking about whether the traditional association with the *Čud* could indicate a historical connection between Russian or Karelian groups and the trapping systems. In any case, the traditional explanations are concentrated on the pits as Sámi hiding places rather than suggesting foreigners from the east used them. The discussion below will consider why the Sámi related these features in their landscapes specifically to this threat and the Sámi handling of it.

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[48] Hansen and Olsen, *Hunters in Transition*, pp. 146–50.

[49] The myth was popularized in the Oscar-nominated film *Pathfinder* (Norw. *Veiviseren*), directed by Nils Gaup.

[50] Bratrein, 'Russesagn i Nord-Norge'.

‘Circular Offering Sites’

The ‘circular offering sites’ currently operates as a very wide category, covering a large variety of smaller and larger stone circles and other more or less similar constructions. A recent study of 161 suggested circular offering sites in present-day Norway indicates that the structures included in the category feature substantial variation in size, morphology, topographical placement, landscape, and cultural contexts.[51] A majority of sites are not confirmed as ritual or offering sites by archaeological finds, historical sources, ethnographic evidence, or place names. These should be reconsidered in terms of original function and use, which may include fireplaces, graves, turf- or haystack foundations, house grounds, tent rings, results of children’s play, and natural features, to mention some substantiated reinterpretations.

However, certain structures in the counties of Finnmark and northern Troms do indeed form a defined category with clearly standardized measurements and construction details that cannot be explained by such alternative functions (Fig. 3). A total of forty-two recorded sites in Northern Norway are considered to fall within this uniform category, whereof twenty-five are confirmed by surveys and other investigations. Apart from three examples of somewhat larger enclosures, these structures measure between 470 and 760 centimetres in inner diameter. They are placed in rocky terrain and feature solidly built stone dry walls of up to 140 centimetres in extant height and with substantial widths. The walls are built from rocks and slabs taken from the enclosed area, creating semi-subterraneous floor levels. Where pole photography or more systematic measurements have been available, it is clear that the structures tend to have an angular inner shape (often pentagonal or hexagonal).

[51] Spangen, *Circling Concepts*.

The walls are thought to have been much higher than today's eroded remains, some probably reaching 2 metres or more. Remains of wood in some of the structures indicate additional wooden fences. There are usually no signs of entrances, fireplaces, or burials. Apart from the remains of wood, documented finds are normally limited to a variety of animal bones. Datings indicate that these stone wall enclosures were established from the fourteenth, or possibly even the thirteenth, century onwards, and that they fell into disuse sometime between AD 1450 and AD 1650. However, some have signs of reuse in later centuries, including newer depositions of coins and other objects in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.[52]

Since the nineteenth century, it has been accepted, both in local and academic discourse, that the structures were remains of Sámi ritual places, functioning as offering sites. However, no older written sources support this interpretation. In fact, none of the sources that otherwise describe Sámi offering sites or offering site types mention stone circles. The historiography from around 1850 onwards is highly inter-referential, with little or no new evidence coming to light to support the offering site explanation. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the nineteenth-century descriptions were, in fact, informed by local Sámi traditions. While it cannot be positively refuted that the stone dry wall enclosures in question were used as ritual or offering sites in the Middle Ages, the documented uncertainties have resulted in alternative hypotheses.[53] A recent study concludes that the construction details, topographical positions, and assemblages of animal bones in the structures are highly compatible with historical and ethnographic descriptions of traps for wolves and other large predators, like fox

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[52] Spangen, '"It Could Be One Thing or Another"'; Spangen, *Circling Concepts*.

[53] Marte Spangen, '"It Could Be One Thing or Another"', pp. 67–80.

and wolverine.[54] This is further substantiated by certain place names and recorded traditions about the use of equivalent constructions as wolf traps.[55]

There are limited local traditions about the sites in question, but some local Sámi individuals or groups today are considering the remains of particular importance and treat them with a certain reverence. If we were to consider this as a reminiscence of a medieval sacredness, it would entail a Sámi tradition preserved throughout the centuries. However, the question remains as to the extent such traditions are inspired by more recent scholarly studies and explanations of the sites, instead of the other way around. It can be argued that the noted traditions are concentrated in areas and at sites were there has been an active dissemination of the offering site explanation through writing, museum work, school teaching, ethnographic field work, and tourist information in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In one case, datings made evident that depositions in an enclosure only went back to the time of the official recording of this site as a Sámi offering site in 1973.[56] This emphasizes the complexity of tradition-making and the difficulty of separating 'original' or ancient traits from newly incorporated knowledge.

One may or may not agree with the wolf trap explanation for the original building and use of the larger, standardized stone dry wall enclosures. The prolific adding of often highly

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[54] Magnus, *Historia om de nordiska folken*, ch. 18:13; Qvigstad, *Lappiske eventyr og sagn fra Varanger*, pp. 535, 537; Itkonen, *Suomen Lappalaiset Vuoteen*; Henriksson, *Popular Hunting and Trapping in Norrland*, p. 48; Álvares and others, 'Os Fojos Dos Lobos Na Península Ibérica', pp. 57–77.

[55] Spangen, *Circling Concepts*; Spangen, 'Anomaly or Myth?'.

[56] Teigmo, 'Samisk-etnografisk avdelings undersøkelser i forbindelse med de planlagte reguleringer i Skibotnvassdraget'; Äikäs and Spangen, 'New Users and Changing Traditions', pp. 95–121; Spangen, *Circling Concepts*.

dissimilar structures to the same category from around 1950 onwards, especially in Norway and Sweden over the last twenty years,[57] is still highly interesting. This practice reflects the specific socio-political climate in the Sámi areas in question during these decades, where there has been a pronounced demand from the majority societies that Sámi groups prove their (pre-) historic presence to obtain property and usufruct rights. The emphasis on an offering site interpretation can be related to a persistent stereotype, and to some extent to an auto-stereotype, of the Sámi as particularly 'ritual' and 'close to nature', arguably amounting to a central myth about the Sámi in the past and present.[58] The idea of 'typical' Sámi (ritual) use of such constructions has contributed to proliferating and maintaining the interpretation of increasing numbers of various stone circles as ritual sites.[59] This ascribed meaning has substantial significance for the understanding of the Sámi, their religion, culture, and landscape use during the Middle Ages.

Archaeology and Oral Traditions

The relationship between oral traditions and other alternative interpretations on the one hand, and the academic interpretations of heritage sites on the other, has been widely debated in archaeology, especially within branches that may be defined as 'public archaeology' or

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[57] For example, Manker, *Lapparnas heliga ställen*, pp. 25–26; Vorren and Eriksen, *Samiske offerplasser i Varanger*; Huggert, 'A Church at Lyckselet and a Sacrificial Site on Altarberget', pp. 51–75; Edvinger and Broadbent, 'Saami Circular Sacrificial Sites in Northern Coastal Sweden', pp. 24-55.

[58] Cf. Schanche, 'Kulturminner, identitet og etnisitet', pp. 55–64.

[59] Spangen, *Circling Concepts*.

'indigenous archaeology', including studies in Sámi contexts.[60] Especially in non-literate societies, the oral traditions pertaining to monuments of the past *are* the local, indigenous history. According to post-colonial theoretical approaches, the inclusion of such ethno-histories in Western academic discourse can benefit the democratization and decolonization of archaeology and other scientific projects and practices. A growing number of researchers are of the opinion that cooperation with local communities before, during, and after research projects may be beneficial, not only for ethical reasons, but also in terms of opening up new epistemological and methodological approaches. However, the practical implementation of this aim can be complicated, and there is no singular correct method for combining archaeology and local traditions about the past.

One aspect is the necessary ethical considerations concerning local participation and the ownership and use of traditional knowledge.[61] On a more practical level, a precondition for integrating local traditions in archaeological studies is to gain an understanding of what these traditions represent. It is a basic acknowledgment that oral traditions are generally part of a different discourse than academic knowledge, a discourse that has a multitude of other narrative functions beyond producing a 'truth' about the past.[62] Furthermore, such narratives are continuously adjusted to changing contexts and local environments. Adjustments tend to happen according to how groups and societies wish to portray themselves through their myths and legends (a central topic to discussions about collective memory) and according to what

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[60] Burström, *Mångtydiga fornlämningar*; Solli, *Narratives of Veøy*; Gazin-Schwartz and Holtorf, *Archaeology and Folklore*; Damm, 'Archaeology, Ethno-history and Oral Traditions'; Skandfer, 'Ethics in the Landscape'.

[61] For example, Barlindhaug, 'Mapping Complexity'.

[62] Cf. Damm, 'Archaeology, Ethno-history and Oral Traditions'.

narratives individual storytellers identify with.[63] Modifications often concern aspects of the tradition that are perceived as less important to the main message. The remaining core ideas, and quite often even the structure and plot, can plausibly be identified as that which has been central and influential to the community.[64] This means that individual storytellers can influence traditions, but folklore is also a group-defining practice. Knowledge about certain types of stories, as well as when and how to tell them, may reflect or define the individual's in-group position.[65]

By extension, folklore can serve to define an opposition to other groups. In Antonio Gramsci's view, folklore can even function as part of class struggle, when understood as the culture of oppressed groups like workers and peasants in opposition to the hegemonic bourgeois culture and worldview.[66] Mikhail Bahktin agrees that folk culture can function as social critique, but emphasizes its role as an accepted way of expressing frustrations – an outlet that most often *does not* create lasting social change.[67] Thus, oral traditions and myths of an indigenous group in a colonized situation may convey social critique, cultural subversiveness, and the venting of frustration in difficult situations. Importantly, the same stories may thematize different social, religious, or political antagonisms according to the specific time and place where they are retold. This may be done by, for instance, changing

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[63] Eskeröd, *Årets äring. Etnologiska studier i skördens och julens tro och sed*; Dégh, 'The Approach to Worldview in Folk Narrative Study', pp. 243–52; cf. Eriksen and Selberg, *Tradisjon og fortelling*, pp. 59, 220; Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*; Hodne, 'Eventyrfortellerne som forskningsfelt', pp. 25–40.

[64] Damm, 'Archaeology, Ethno-history and Oral Traditions', p. 77 with references.

[65] Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore*.

[66] Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, p. 195; Eriksen and Selberg, *Tradisjon og fortelling*, p. 22.

[67] Bakhtin, *Rabelais och skrattets historia*.

who is ascribed the role as protagonist or villain in otherwise seemingly stereotypical stories.[68]

The way indigenous people and other local groups relate to their own traditions versus scholarly narratives about the past vary both between groups and within communities. The encounter between two knowledge systems can be more, or less, problematic. Studies show that in some cases new and even contrasting archaeological evidence and interpretations may be incorporated as parallel storylines into local discourses without diminishing existing narratives.[69] However, we should be wary of reproducing a stereotypical opposition between the local or indigenous worldview or discourse and the (predominantly Western) academic narratives. In Sámi contexts, the rather harsh assimilation measures during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have partly resulted in alienation from previous traditions and relatively extensive integration of academic knowledge. Despite examples of oral traditions that are clearly of substantial age, many older narratives have been preserved primarily through academic recording.[70] Again, different individuals and communities will necessarily be differently influenced by traditional and academic narratives, respectively, and this affects the maintenance and adjustments of oral traditions.

Understanding oral traditions therefore includes exploring the changing cultural and historical context and significance of any given myth, and the role that different groups and individuals have in maintaining, but also in changing, these traditions over time. Importantly,

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[68] Eriksen and Selberg, *Tradisjon og fortelling*, p. 221.

[69] For example, Solli, *Narratives of Veøy*; Nilsen, *Brytninger mellom lokal og akademisk kulturminnekunnskap*.

[70] Qvigstad, *Lappiske eventyr og sagn*.

even enduring and widespread folklore and traditions are usually less unchanging or uniform than they may seem at first glance.

As is evident from the literature cited above, a focus on fairytales and myths as extremely old remains of cultural facts preserved in the 'people'[71] is an outdated understanding of folklore in general. However, there is still a tendency to implicitly view indigenous oral traditions as especially archaic and well preserved, and thus as better sources for historical facts than traditions in what is understood as contrasting, modern, Western communities.[72] It is all the more important to emphasize that Sámi worldviews and values, and in turn their myths and folklore, have obviously varied, developed, and changed over time, too. The chronological and geographical variations in ideas about, for instance, medieval monuments may still be interesting to explore as potential sources for historical facts about these sites, but equally as sources for the Sámi (local) social and cultural situation, worldview, and self-understanding over time.

Sámi Myths, Medieval Realities, and Modern Stereotypes

The examples described in this article illustrate that the Sámi have constructed legends and myths about remains from the past and enigmatic features in the landscape in a variety of ways. Some of these traditions include elements of historical facts, but overemphasizing the historicity of the narratives equals an implicit understanding of the Sámi as more 'traditional' than other people. Hence, it is important that the historicity, as well as the multilayered and

[71] Dundes, 'The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory', p. 6.

[72] Eriksen and Selberg, *Tradisjon og fortelling*, p. 45.

complex purpose and context of local narratives about monuments and the past, are evaluated in each specific case.

The myths and legends related to the Stállo house grounds, reindeer pitfall traps, and 'circular offering sites' describe different aspects of the Sámi pasts and Sámi understanding of the world and themselves. In general, the Stállo myths can be seen to articulate chaotic forces that the Sámi have dealt with in different ways. Stállo is somewhat undefined and has a changing character in different stories, but he represents a definite danger that has to be avoided, usually through wit rather than force. Relating this figure specifically to a group of Norse tax collectors or roaming villains in the Viking Age is not a plausible understanding, even if elements such as the notion of an 'iron shirt' may have derived from meetings with warriors in chain-mail at this time, or at some later point in history.

I find the interpretation of the Stállo house grounds as specialized medieval Sámi hunting stations convincing. The main phase of use for the houses was the ninth to the fifteenth century. The construction, placement, and internal row organization would have represented a relatively foreign social and economic adaptation by the seventeenth or eighteenth century. This, and the mere size of the houses, may explain the association with mythical giants, a typical explanation known from other cultural contexts, too. Hence, this mythical connection probably falls within a category that is not especially useful either to specific archaeological studies of the house grounds or the historical context of the Sámi at the time.

The myths about the pitfall traps as hiding places from the *Čud* have not been used in archaeological interpretations of these sites; they have only been noted as a local historical background. The regional variations are noteworthy, as some Sámi in the early twentieth century were cognizant of the historical information that these pits had been used for trapping

reindeer (or elks). It could be interesting to compare these variations with traces of actual Russian / Karelian medieval activity, compared with the age of the pitfall traps in each area. It is, however, similarly interesting to evaluate whether the (early) modern situation of the Sámi have been particularly difficult in areas were the legend of the *Čud* connection has been maintained, for instance, due to harsh measures during the intensified Christianization and state integration in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or the assimilation processes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such contemporary hardships may well have made these legends about past difficulties more relevant in some regions than others.

The background for the understanding of the 'circular offering sites' as ritual sites is unclear, as it may have been based on local Sámi traditions or a scholarly interpretation. It has certainly spread and become general 'knowledge' today because of scholarly and popular scientific discussions, publications, and other dissemination. In any case, the increased use of the categorization over the last few decades has to be seen in the context of a socio-political situation where the Sámi have been under pressure to prove their past use of certain landscapes through archaeological means, in scientific, political, and legal contexts, including court cases.[73] Durable ritual sites present a particularly efficient argument in this discourse, due to a lasting stereotype, and auto-stereotype, from the Viking Age onwards of the Sámi as particularly 'prone to magic', or today rather as spiritual people in close contact with nature. These stereotypes are so prevalent that they can be argued to be part of the Sámi 'central myth',[74] which influences the view and understanding of their history, including their 'medieval selves'. Without diminishing the importance of rituals and sacred landscapes in

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[73] Bull, 'Samisk forhistorie og samiske rettigheter i et juridisk perspektiv', pp. 40-49; Zachrisson, 'Fanns det samer i Härjedalen i äldre tid?', pp. 56-61.

[74] Schanche, 'Kulturminner, identitet og etnisitet', p. 55.

Sámi culture, I would claim that the promotion of this sort of explanation may obscure the diversity of Sámi landscapes, culture, and history.[75]

Conclusion

The materiality of archaeological remains, especially large, clearly visible, and enigmatic constructions, tends to generate myths and legends among the people who interact with them in the landscape. This may involve historically accurate traditions, since place and specific landscape features are aids to maintain such common memories over time. These are actualized every time individuals or groups encounter the same or similar features.

However, the repetition of myths and legends include a constant renegotiation of these traditions, since a story is never only retold, but reconfigured and reintroduced to the audience. In addition to individual influences, oral traditions are also shaped by group dynamics, current hardships that highlight certain topics, and other time- and place-specific conditions. The multilayered information contained in myths therefore has to be interpreted in view of the local social and historical context. Only from such a contextual understanding is it possible to identify in what way and to what extent myths can inform archaeological interpretations or questions.

Without denying the occurrence of ancient traditions, I find it important to oppose a lingering notion that indigenous oral traditions in general are particularly well preserved and therefore better sources for ancient historical facts than their 'Western' equivalents. On the contrary, indigenous folklore is, of course, equally dynamic and contextual, functioning as a

[75] Spangen, *Circling Concepts*; Spangen, 'Anomaly or Myth? Sami Circular Offering Sites in Medieval Northern Norway'.

multileveled instrument of self-identification and social negotiation. The examples in this article demonstrate this point in terms of how Sámi myths about their medieval cultural heritage sites are also constant reinterpretations of their past and present identities, including their 'medieval selves'.

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Figures

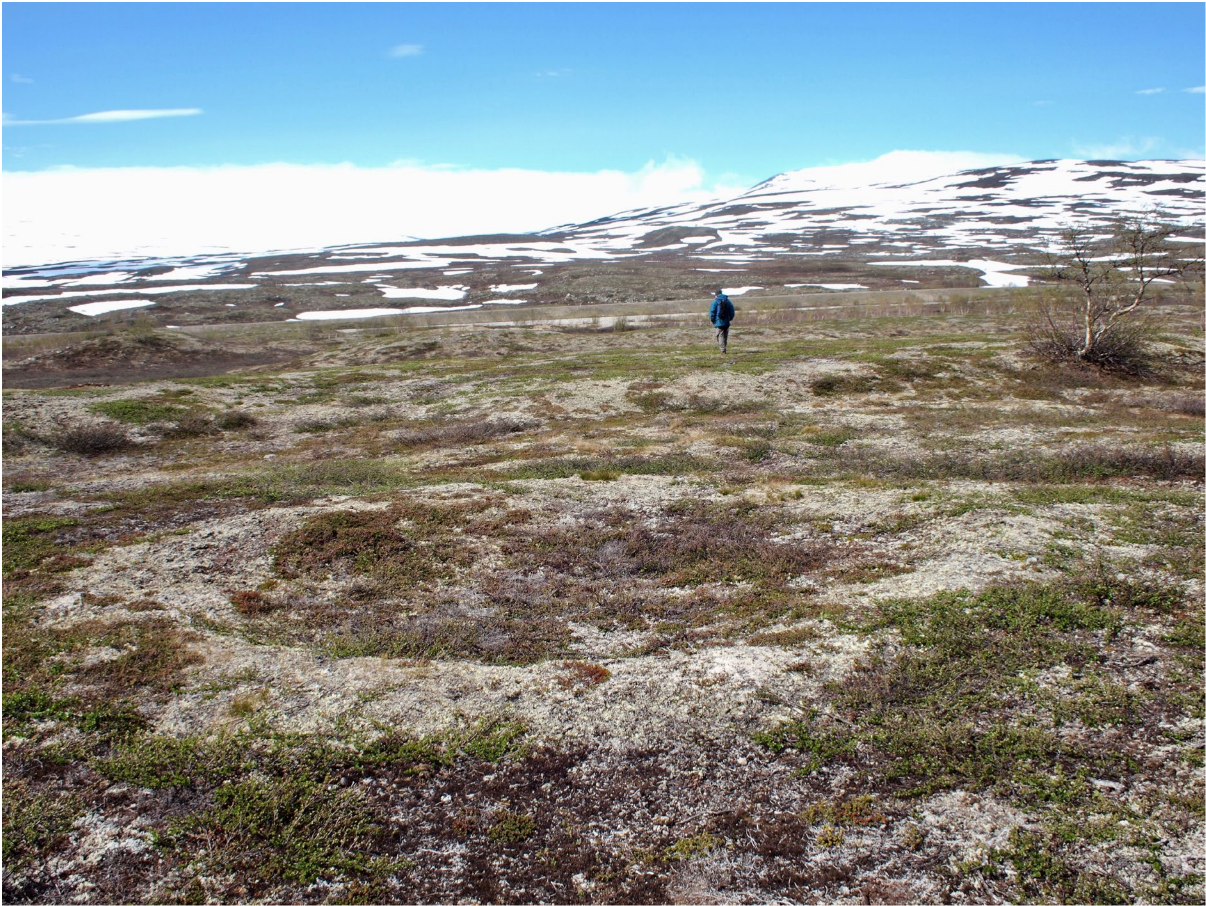

Fig. 1 Stállo houseground in the mountain landscape of Saltfjellet, Nordland county, Norway. Photo: Bjørnar Olsen.

Fig. 2 Pitfall trap for wild reindeer by Lake Láhpojohka in Kautokeino, Finnmark county, Norway. Photo: Anders Vars.

Fig. 3 So-called “circular offering site” by Lake Gálggojávri in Karasjok, Finnmark county, Norway. Photo: Marte Spangen.