

Bear bones at Sámi offering sites

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Abstract: Saami traditions related to bear hunting and bear burials are quite well known, both from written and archaeological sources. However, the Saami also included bears in their repeated rituals at offering sites, which has been less explored. In this article, we present the archaeological sources for this offering tradition. Further, we discuss the chronology and geography as well as the content and context of such archaeological finds. As with bear burials, the deposition of bear bones at offering sites has not been a uniform tradition in all Saami communities, which gives an interesting insight into how rituals can both bind a community together and create boundaries with other groups.

INTRODUCTION

There are hundreds of recorded Saami offering sites in Sápmi, the Saami areas of Fennoscandia and northwest Russia. The sites have been identified through oral traditions, ethnographic and historical sources, place names and archaeological surveys, and they testify to a cohesive Saami ritual tradition and animistic world view (HELANDER-RENVALL 2010). The sites are usually related to natural features such as cliff formations, boulders or peculiar rocks, but, in the past, offering sites could also be related to trees, rivers and lakes or “altars” built of wood with roughly shaped wooden idols (JESSEN-SCHARDEBØLL 1767; FRIIS 1871; OLSEN 1910; QVIGSTAD 1926; HALLSTRÖM 1932; MANKER 1957). Contemporary reports on 17th and 18th century Saami offering traditions describe offerings of mostly reindeer but also birds, fish, wild animals such as bears, and domesticated animals such as cows, sheep, goats, roosters, cats, and dogs (MEBIUS 1968). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these sources are time-specific, that the information they convey is drawn from particular regions, even if the sources do not always specify this, and that the authors (usually Christian priests and missionaries) mix local knowledge with generalised accounts from other authors (cf. RYDVIK 1995). Before the 17th century, there are few written sources with reliable descriptions of the culture and social life of Saami groups; thus we have relatively little knowledge about changes in the offering traditions over time. It is therefore interesting to see

that the written sources we have do not always coincide with the archaeological material available (MANKER 1957, 40–45).

Very few known offering sites have been investigated through archaeological excavations, but we have information about observed and collected offering matter from quite a few. A series of recent studies of previously collected animal bones from offering sites in Sweden and Finland have discussed species variation and chronology and suggest that the earliest offerings were of wild animals such as bear and swan, with radiocarbon dates of bear bones from the famous offering site of Unna Saiva in northern Sweden (Fig. 1) stretching back to the 6th century AD. Only in the late 12th century do the first reindeer bones occur (SALMI et al. 2015; 2018). It is difficult to deduce whether these were bones from wild or domesticated reindeer. However, there is a marked increase in the amount of reindeer bones at the offering sites between the 15th and 17th centuries. This coincides with the first confirmed offerings of reindeer belonging to the genetic lineages of present-day domesticated reindeer, which may indicate an increased economic, and thus cultural, importance of this animal, related to more extensive domestication (SALMI et al. 2018; HEINO et al. 2021). In the same time period, ovicaprid bones were introduced at the offering sites, supporting the notion that domesticated animals became more important in the Saami economy. In the 17th century, the offering of animals was drastically reduced, probably because of the intensified Christianisation and severe punishments for maintaining pre-Christian rituals of this sort (SALMI et al. 2015; 2018). The deposition of shed reindeer antlers, foodstuff, and minor objects such as antler spoons and jewellery at known Saami offering sites has continued throughout the centuries up until today. In some places, this has also included the occasional deposition of animal parts, particularly of reindeer (QVIGSTAD 1926; MEBIUS 1972; ÄIKÄS/SALMI 2013; ÄIKÄS/SPANGEN 2016; SPANGEN/ÄIKÄS 2020). Generally, one may say that the offering matter found at Saami offering sites more or less consciously represents what was available and was of economic and cultural importance at any given time and place.

In large parts of the Saami area, bear hunting has been of importance until modern times for cultural and economic reasons and to decimate the population of this feared and respected animal. Intricate rituals related to the hunt are described in several sources, as are the deposition of the bear bones in “bear graves” after eating the meat (e.g. PETERSEN 1940, 159; FJELLSTRÖHM 1981). There is less mention in known historical or ethnographic sources of bears being deposited at specific offering sites (see PAULAHARJU 1941, 7). Nevertheless, the archaeological material tells a different story.

Finds of bear bones in Saami landscapes may of course sometimes be from bears that have died of natural causes, but finds of bears that have clearly been slaughtered and eaten, for instance assemblages of gathered bear bones, often with some elements missing, are usually suggested to be bear graves. However, the distinction between such individual depositions and offerings is not straightforward, since the sources we have for the bear hunting rituals and burials are time- and place-specific and may not cover all the alternative practices that were

acted out in the past (MYRSTAD 1996, 4). Even if offerings were often placed on the ground surface, on or near a focal point of the offering site, such as a rock formation, offerings of animals could also be buried in the ground (MEBIUS 1968, 19). Furthermore, the division between bear burials and bear offerings may have been entirely irrelevant to the Saami groups performing ritual depositions in the past. One example of the difficulty of defining finds as one or the other is a bear skull that was discovered tucked away, but not buried, under a large rock near Mjösjö village in Junsele parish, Ångermanland, Sweden. Since no postcranial bones were collected, it has been suggested that this possibly represents an offering rather than a burial (ZACHRISSON/IREGREN 1974^[GL1]^[MS2], 34, 96). The case demonstrates how finds of bear skeletal remains within Saami contexts will have to be evaluated on a case-to-case basis.

The same is true when considering so-called bone deposits. In one case, informants in the South Saami area describe that they have observed bear bones placed on platforms in trees. This is explained as an alternative to the traditional hiding of reindeer and bear bones in the ground or under rocks, a feature called *daktsie*, i.e. “bone deposits”. The informants’ interpretation was that, in this instance, placing the bones in a tree was a more practical solution in winter because of the snow (PETTERSON 1946, 148, cited in MANKER 1957, 268).¹ This suggests that, at least in some times and places, the deposition of bear bones was conceptualised in a similar way as *daktsie* depositions of reindeer bones. It has been debated whether the deposition of reindeer bones is to be considered as a kind of offering practice, or whether it had more practical reasons, in terms of disposing of meal remains and keeping dogs from eating sharp pieces of marrow-split bones. Recent studies conclude that practical and ritual intentions are difficult to separate based on the archaeological material, as these are not separate spheres but tend to be interwoven within Saami culture. A ritual aspect of this practice is probably also time- and place-specific (e.g. RYDNING/KRISTOFFERSEN 1993; ANDERSEN 2009; LJUNGAHL 2012). Burials of entire individual reindeer, which occur both in South Saami areas in Sweden (ZACHRISSON 1985, 84–86), and possibly in the scree burial field in Mortensnes, northern Norway (SCHANCHE 2000, 297), should probably be interpreted as more certain ritual depositions. The same ambivalence may of course be discussed concerning the described practice of depositing bear bones, and thus even the tradition of bear burials. When placed by an offering site, the religious connotations of a deposition are more obvious.

In this article, and as an operational category, we will define “bear offerings” as bear bones found on sites that are known from other sources to be offering sites, finds of bear bones from more than one individual gathered at a defined site, or bear bones found together with bones from other animals in contexts that indicate repeated ritual depositions at a site. Thus, we

¹ The site in question is Trettondagsberget (Idvatnet) in the Saami village/area of South Vilhelmina, Sweden, MANKER 1957, cat. no. 453.

exclude most bear graves and other bone deposits, whether or not these have been religiously motivated or are related to rituals.

GEOGRAPHY AND CHRONOLOGY

In the present study, we have looked at the reported and collected archaeological materials from offering sites that include bear bones. The investigation results suggest a regional variation that is quite interesting considering the ubiquitous bear and its importance in Saami culture. There is no doubt that traces of bears at offering places are most frequently found in the inland areas of today's northern Sweden (Fig. 2). Ethnographer Ernst Manker reports on the finds of bear bones at 15 of the Swedish locations listed in his seminal work on Saami offering sites, though only 13 are actually counted in the overview table (Table 1; cf. MANKER 1957, 45 and table 3).² For one additional offering site, at Akkavare, there is recorded information about the observations of bear bones (*ibid.*, 165).³ In comparison, the neighbouring areas in today's Finland have only one example of bear bones at an offering site at Näkkälä, Enontekiö (ÄIKÄS 2015, 294), apart from uncertain information about one previously recorded find on the island of Äijihsuálu (Ukonsaari) in lake Inari (OKKONEN 2007, 30). In today's Norway the examples are also very few, and the ones we include here have previously been defined as bear burials. One is a find of bones and a bear cranium in a cave near a large boulder traditionally said to be an offering site on the island of Årøya in the Alta fjord, Finnmark county (QVIGSTAD 1926, 340; MYRSTAD 1996, 31). Another accidental find was made in 1970 on the headland in Seines in the Herjangsfjorden, Nordland county. This was an assemblage of bear bones, especially cranial bones, and teeth from eight bears. These were found together with cow, sheep/goat and reindeer teeth near a conspicuous rock formation, suggesting that this was an offering site. The rock is called "Dead Man's Rock", because bones were found by the rock. It is not unusual for bear bones to be confused with human bones, and most likely the myth related to the rock was based on this confusion (MYRSTAD 1996, 9, 38–39). Very little is known about Saami offerings in Russia, and to our knowledge there are no accounts about offerings of bears here, even if we know about burial rituals related to the hunting and slaughter of bears (see below). In Table 1, we have included

² There seem to be some inconsistencies in the information given by Manker concerning offering sites with bear bones. In his table 3, he notes finds of bear bones in the Saami village/area of Jákkákaska, but going through his descriptions of the offering sites in this area, we have not been able to deduce what site he means. He also mentions five sites with bear and bird bones: Vieksa, Paddustieva, Haltenjarka, Vierronjarka, and Abelvattnet (MANKER 1957, 45 cat. nos. 28, 89, 110, 137, 429). However, bear bones have neither been recorded in the further description of these sites nor in the osteological study performed on the material he discusses (GEJVALL 1956).

³ Other finds of singular bear skeletons in Auttejaure, Vesken and Gammgårdshobben in Vapsten, and Värkaren in Frostviken, all in Sweden, are called bear graves by MANKER 1957 (cat. nos. 427, 434, 435, 482), and are also defined as such by us.

offering sites from which bear bones are either preserved or where the information about finds of bear bones is specific enough to validate this (Table 1).

Contrary to the geographical concentration of bear offerings in one area, there are records in most Saami areas, from Østerdalen in southern Norway to the Kola peninsula in Russia, of rituals related to the bear hunt and the burial of the bear bones after slaughtering and skinning. Sources describe burials of the bear skeleton in its anatomically correct order (RANDULF 1723; HALLSTRÖM 1922; PETERSEN 1940, 159; KILDAL 1945; LEEM 1975), but archaeological investigations have shown that the mode of deposition varied significantly. In some contexts, there is less attention to anatomical order, and different amounts of individuals, body parts, and other objects and animals are included in the burials (ZACHRISSON/IREGREN 1974; MYRSTAD 1996; SOMMERSETH 2021). As noted, it may be discussed whether or not these should be redefined as offerings. An ethnographic example, from Bjälaja guba, Imandra, on the Kola peninsula, shows a specific variation for this region: archaeologist and ethnographer Gustaf Hallström reports in the early 20th century that the Saami here had rituals related to bear hunting, but they never ate the meat. They only preserved the skin, claws, and teeth, while the rest was buried. If it was not possible to bury everything, they cut off the head with the neck and chest and buried that, sometimes marking the place with a stick (HALLSTRÖM 1922, 176). In both Norway and Sweden, there are accounts that testify to the continued ritual burial of bear bones at least into the 19th century (ZACHRISSON/IREGREN 1974, 13; MYRSTAD 1996, 20).

The variation in bear rituals such as burials and offerings might potentially be due to chronological variation. Contemporary written sources that describe bear graves range from the 17th to the 20th centuries. In the archaeological material, however, the earliest radiocarbon dated bear grave is located in Kjærfjorden on the island of Tjeldøya in Tjeldsund, Nordland, Norway, and has been radiocarbon-dated to AD 235–385 (Beta-538923, SOMMERSETH 2021, 15), while another on Bunkholmen in Lyngen, Troms, Norway, dates to AD 583–881 (T-12020, MYRSTAD 1996; new 2-sigma-calibration in SOMMERSETH 2021). In Sweden, one bear grave in Karats, Jokkmokk, northern Sweden, was AMS-dated to AD 775–1035, based on a bear tooth (Ua-507), while radiometric dating of birch bark from the grave yielded an even older date, AD 437–1014 (St. 11213, MULK/IREGREN 1995). Bear bones from another alleged bear grave at Grundskatan on the island of Bjurön, along the Bothnian coast of Sweden, were dated to AD 709–1160 (Ua-18930, EDVINGER/BROADBENT 2006, 37, with 2-sigma-calibrations performed for this article using OxCal v4.4.4, IncCal20, BRONK RAMSEY 2009 REIMER et al. 2020). However, it is contested whether or not the latter does in fact represent a bear grave (LIEDGREN/RAMQVIST 2012). Concerning bear bones found at known offering sites, only two radiocarbon dates have been acquired from this specific material so far. A bear bone from the offering site by lake Unna Saiva, northern Sweden, was dated to AD 557–774 (Ua-48702, cf. SALMI et al. 2015, 12, new calibration). A bear tooth from the offering site at Näkkälä, Finland, was dated to AD 1174–1267 (Hela-1885/1133, ÄIKÄS 2015, 294, new

calibration). This indicates that wild predators continued to have a role in rituals at offering sites into the 13th century, when reindeer became, in general, more and more common as offering gifts. It should, however, be noted that the Finnish Saami areas are distinctive in several ways. For instance, the more extensive reindeer herding known from other Saami contexts was not a widespread enterprise here until modern times (e.g. TEGENGREN 1952; HARLIN et al. 2019; SALMI et al. 2021). A complete lack of bear graves is another peculiarity that sets this region of Sápmi aside.

If the bear bones from Dead Man's Rock on the Seines headland in Norway, which were found together with teeth from cows, sheep/goat and fish, are to be counted as depositions at an offering site, and not a bear burial as previously suggested, their chronology is also relevant. One bear bone from the site has been radiocarbon dated to 755 BP \pm 90 (T-12021). This was previously calibrated to AD 1220–1300 (MYRSTAD 1996, 9, 38–39), while a new calibration suggests a wider time span and dating to AD 1120–1399 (SOMMERSETH 2021, table 1: Seines 5). Samples from several other bear individuals from the site were also radiocarbon-dated. The time spans of the three oldest bear bones overlap in the 11th–13th centuries (Seines 1, 4, 5), while the dating results of the two youngest bones overlap closely in the 14th–15th centuries (Seines 2 and 3, cf. SOMMERSETH 2021). Consequently, depositions must have taken place here on at least two separate occasions.

The chronological range of dated bear graves and bear offerings fits well within the general expected deposition period for animal bones at Saami offering sites, but the dates available do not suggest a specific time period in which bears in particular were deposited more frequently. This is of course in part due to sample size, and possibly several source-critical factors, such as the purely coincidental finding of bear graves, the preservation conditions at individual sites, and the selection of species and bone elements various visitors to offering sites have chosen to collect and render to museums. This may affect our current knowledge about the Saami bear rituals, including its chronology. Based on the fact that the oldest bear deposition's 3rd–4th-century radiocarbon-date is from the bear grave in Tjeldsund, and the oldest radiocarbon-date in Sweden is the 6th–8th-century dating result from the offering site Unna Saiva, we can perhaps hypothesise that the earliest bear rituals among the Saami took place along the Norwegian coast and focused on individual bear graves, while Saami groups in inland Sweden initially placed bear bones at common offering sites such as Unna Saiva, while also taking up the tradition of bear burials from the 8th century. In general, however, the depositions of bear bones in graves and at offering sites overlap chronologically.

THE CONTENT AND CONTEXT OF SAAMI BEAR OFFERINGS

The reported numbers of bear bones found at offering sites vary from a few fragments to 42 identified specimens at the offering site of Unna Saiva, while the minimum numbers of

individuals vary from one to 14 at Unna Saiva (Table 1). The percentages of bear bones are *c.* 1–2 % of the number of identified specimens and *c.* 14–20 % of the minimum numbers of individuals in assemblages from Näkkälä and Unna Saiva, where precise counts are available (ÄIKÄS et al. 2009^[GL3]^[MS4]; SALMI et al. 2015). The finds of bear bones at offering sites consist mainly of cranial bones and teeth (Fig. 3; cf. SALMI et al. 2018, 476). Due to the lack of precise zooarchaeological analysis of the faunal assemblages from many of the sites, the exact numbers of bear bones and their skeletal frequencies at each site are impossible to catalogue at the moment. At Näkkälä, the left and right upper molars of a bear (Fig. 4) were found with decomposed bone material, probably deriving from the maxilla, in an anatomically correct order, suggesting that a complete bear skull was probably deposited at the site. The occlusal surface of the molars was facing up, which means that the skull was probably deposited upside down (ÄIKÄS et al. 2009^[GL5]^[MS6]). At some sites, postcranial bones are also deposited, but the sources often only mention “bones” in addition to teeth and cranial bones, with no further distinction of skeletal elements. A bear vertebral fragment was reported to have been found at Haltenjarka (GEJVALL 1956^[GL7]^[MS8]). At Seines, some marrow-split postcranial bones were found, though the majority were cranial bones (MYRSTAD 1996, 38). The marrow-split bones have later been redetermined as reindeer bones (SOMMERSETH 2021, 19).

Compared to the hundreds of offering sites described by ethnographer Ernst Manker in northern Sweden, the frequency of bear skulls and teeth at these sites is not very high, even within the region where they are most common. Despite being concentrated in the area of northern Sweden, there are also great distances between the known locations of bear offerings. The fact that only two relevant finds have come to light along the extensive Norwegian Atlantic coast could, in theory, be related to the bears’ habitat; in the 19th century, bears were numerous in Norway, but mostly so in the forested inland regions, while a few larger islands did not have bears at all (STENSLI 1993, 40; MYRSTAD 1996, 7). However, estimates suggest that the bear population has been as large as, or even larger, in Norway than in Sweden during historical periods, with about 65 % of the bears in Scandinavia found in Norway (*c.* 3,100 in Norway vs. 1,650 in Sweden) in the mid-1800s (SWENSON et al. 1995). The Prefect’s Office in Norrbotten, northern Sweden, reported that 257 bears were killed in the area during the period 1855–1865 (VON DÜBEN 1873, 26, 80), attesting to the great availability of this prey, which should have been at least as frequently encountered on the Norwegian side of the border. Bear burials are also relatively frequent along the Atlantic coast, which suggests that bears were not hunted less here than in the inland Saami areas of today’s Sweden, but perhaps that there was a difference in deposition practices in different areas and possibly in different contexts. A similar explanation is likely for the lack of bear burials in the Saami areas of today’s Finland and the low frequency of bear bones at offering sites here. Bear bones, teeth and pelts are known from ritual contexts, such as graves and foundation deposits, in Finland from the Iron Age to the 17th century (LEPPÄÄHO 1937;

PUPUTTI 2010; KIRKINEN 2019), and bears were probably hunted in the boreal forests of Finland throughout prehistory (UKKONEN/MANNERMAA 2017). The knowledge about bear bones at offering sites could be biased due to differences in the thoroughness and methods of recording this tradition. However, it is striking that Norway and Finland not only have few archaeological finds, but there is also little information in ethnographic sources about finds of bear bones at known offering sites (e.g. QVIGSTAD 1926, who mentions only one instance in Norway, the location on Årøya, Alta, from where bear bones have indeed been retrieved). This further supports that bears as offering matter were less frequent in these areas.

BEAR HEADS AND PLACEMAKING

It is difficult to know whether the differences in the body parts of the bear that are found at offering sites are related to a specific significance of various elements or to taphonomic processes or sampling strategies. For instance, perhaps only teeth were left at smaller offering sites, while entire skulls and other bones were left at larger offering sites. However, cranial bones are present in seven out of nine sites where such details have been recorded, suggesting a special significance related to the bear head. Similarly, it seems to have been common in northern Sweden to place the heads of male reindeer of considerable size at offering sites, while smaller female individuals are mostly represented by long bones (SALMI et al. 2018, 476). Consequently, and not entirely surprisingly, the most impressive and communicative parts of the animal bodies were used to adorn and honour offering sites, as well as to interact with both in- and out-group human actors who encountered the site. These offerings would provide a variety of information concerning, among other things, the status of the site and the people present in the area, including their religious beliefs and contact with non-human powers. While possibly related to what was seen as a valid and valuable offering (ÄIKÄS et al. 2009^[GL9]^[MS10], 117), the attention to skulls also reflects a persistent cross-cultural fascination with “head-objects”, where human and animal heads are transformed into ritual objects that are deposited in ways that seem related to placemaking (ERIKSEN 2020), i.e. processes that transform nondescript space into recognised places of particular meaning (e.g. SMITH 1998, 32–33, 45; see also TUAN 1977). It is possible that the offerings of bear crania or cranial elements were associated with conceptions about bear personhood and its transformations in offering rituals, particularly because the Saami perceived animals as persons, with animal personhood coming into play relationally in various contexts (HELANDER-RENVALL 2010). The offerings of bear heads and cranial elements may be related to an idea of the head as the locus of personhood, but also to more complex ideas about personhood and its entwinements with places, actions, and events. The ritual head deposition potentially manipulated the identity and personhood of the bear by transforming it into a head-thing, a thing with potency in the ritual place and context, but no longer a social personhood (ERIKSEN 2020).

In other contexts, depositions of skulls, or head-objects, are not always visible but may be retrieved from subterranean contexts such as graves and underground building features (ERIKSEN 2020). Thus, bear burials might perhaps be interpreted in the same way, where the bear person is given transformed significance through rituals. However, since more of the skeleton is usually found in bear graves, and written sources emphasise the necessity of preserving the entire skeleton, these contexts appear more akin to human burials in Saami contexts. It also seems significant that bear burials would involve hiding or putting away the skull and bones, while depositions at offering sites could be seen as display. Consequently, offering sites with impressive skulls cannot be seen only as reflections of local economic adaptations or ritual practices within a broader tradition of Saami offerings: They should probably also be seen as possible instruments of power, where successful hunters or patrons could attain recognition both in this world and the other for their achievements and ability to procure impressive offerings.⁴ Furthermore, such offerings would not only have made the place but maintained and enforced it as a vibrant meeting-place in the landscape, in the sense that the (shifting) combination of topography, impressive depositions, and human-animal-thing encounters would have made such sites affect those who came across them, regardless of their prior knowledge of the offering rituals performed there. Other offering sites that were made into distinct places by their users may have later disappeared into oblivion, because they were not the subject of similar attention and impressive depositions during their use. This underlines that offering sites are not static places. In previous studies, we have called this “site biographies” (ÄIKÄS/SPANGEN 2016), but we would like here to emphasise the palimpsestic qualities⁵ this creates in the sites. The sites are not relics but multi-layered and complex actors in the landscape that are transformed over time and simultaneously transform how people interact with them. One result is that some offering sites may be forgotten due to little or changed use of the sites and of the landscape. This is especially true in areas where Saami groups in the Middle Ages went from mainly hunting and fishing to taking up reindeer husbandry, such as in inland northern Sweden and Norway, or fisher-farming, such as along the Atlantic coast of Norway, as important parts of their livelihood. In the process, they would to some extent be leaving previously familiar landscapes less used (e.g. MULK 1994; SOMMERSETH 2011; ANDERSEN 2019). These reflections are relevant when considering that most of the offering sites known today were in continued use until at least the 19th century. They often have quite conspicuous features or large amounts of offering matter (ÄIKÄS 2015; SALMI et al. 2015; 2018). Among

⁴ This is an argument similar to that formerly made concerning the offering of valuable metal objects at, in part, the same offering sites (MULK 1996, see below).

⁵ The term “palimpsest” originally refers to the practice of writing, erasing and rewriting on the same surface, particularly to describe the re-use of medieval manuscripts on parchment. The term has been used in archaeology to describe traces of various processes in historical landscapes and to describe the archaeological record as such. It is here used to describe how material remains of past activities are not only part of the past but remain present and active in subsequent time periods up until today (see e.g. BAILEY 2007).

these are the well-known offering sites with preserved metal objects from the Middle Ages, such as coins, jewellery, and arrowheads (SERNING 1956). At six out of 15 known offering sites where bear bones have been collected, there are also finds of medieval metal objects and/or coins (Table 1). These sites have often been well known locally and sometimes among non-local visitors until the present day. Consequently, there may be other Saami offering sites with deposited bear bones that we are not aware of and whose characteristics might affect the way we understand such sites, especially if bear offerings were more important within the earlier hunting economy that used other terrains. When offering sites are not known from contemporary written sources or oral traditions, we depend on accidental encounters to record them. One example is the find of a piece of reindeer antler, a bear skull and other undefined bones under a frost-fractured boulder in inland Alta, Norway, in 2011, due to surveys for a new powerline in what is today a little used area (CADAMARTERI 2011). This was defined as a bear grave, and it was noted that the bones seemed to have been collected and deposited on a layer of birch bark but, if some of the bones are from other species, it might fall under our definition of an offering site.

If we interpret the placement of cranial bones, or “head-objects”, in particular at offering sites, as displays of power and as powerful placemaking, the lack of such display could be due to regional and local situations where landscapes were negotiated in different ways. Along the Norwegian coast, this could be related to the necessity of mediating landscape use with non-Saami groups in a more subtle manner, while in today’s Finland such display and demonstration may perhaps have been less called for due to less competition for resources. Here, it is worth mentioning that the geographical distribution of a total of 12 offering sites with metal objects from the Iron and Middle Ages, some of them including bear bones as well, is also limited to northern Sweden, apart from one site just across today’s border with Norway. The metal objects are typologically dated and have been deposited within a restricted time frame from the 9th to the 14th centuries (SERNING 1956; LUND 2015). The distribution of these metal offering sites and the distribution of hidden silver deposits from around the 10th to the 13th centuries along the northern Norwegian Atlantic coastline and in the Finnish areas are mutually exclusive (ZACHRISSON 1984; SPANGEN 2005; 2010).

The chronological variation between known offering sites with bear bones, as well as the bear burials, indicate that bear hunting and deposition has been a persistent activity, and that the geographical variation in the deposition of bears at offering sites is more significant than any chronological variation. However, more radiocarbon datings of the bear bone finds are needed to confirm if this initial chronology of the bear offerings is representative. Bone sampling can also be used to explore the geographical origin of the bears through isotope and DNA studies. While our hypothesis would be that bear offerings are the result of local hunting, the many bear graves on the small island of Spildra in northern Troms might suggest otherwise. At least seven bear graves are known from this 21.4 km² island in the Kvæningen fjord in northern Norway (MYRSTAD 1996). Even if the occasional bear may have swum to the island, it is

unlikely that bears were more frequent there than in other nearby areas with fewer bear graves, which implies that hunted or dead bears were transported to the island for burial. Keeping this in mind, we cannot rule out that bears or bear skulls may also have been transported around before they were deposited at what was perceived as suitable offering sites.

CONCLUSION

Bear bones appear at Saami offering sites from the Early Iron Age onwards, and they continued to be deposited until the Late Middle Ages. Offering sites with bear bones are concentrated in today's northern Sweden, with only a very few examples in either Norway or Finland. Bear burials, on the other hand, are found throughout Saami areas in both Norway and Sweden, though not in Finland. We argue that there is a qualitative difference between the ritual deposition of bear bones underground or hidden in caves or underneath rocks on the one hand and the placement of bear skulls overground and clearly visible on the other. This makes the geographical distribution of the offering sites with bear bones versus bear burials interesting. The choice of depositing cranial bones at offering sites might suggest a display of power and active placemaking, possibly related to territorial rights, which should mean that these processes took on different expressions in different Saami regions, depending on the local economic, territorial, and multi-cultural situation. As described above, valuable metal objects were also deposited in a similar manner in today's inland Sweden, while silver was deposited as hidden hoards along the coast of northern Norway. This might suggest that there was a need for various Saami groups and individuals to visually demonstrate presence and power in inland areas, or that there was more liberty for Saami groups to do so in these areas than along the coast, reflecting different situations of land contestation. Future studies should include more radiocarbon datings to better understand the offering site chronologies, as well as DNA and isotope studies to determine whether the bear skulls represent local hunting or trophies from other places.

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Captions

Fig. 1. This rock served as the focal point of the offering site by lake Unna Saiva, Gällivare, Sweden (photo E. Manker, Nordiska Museet archives).

Fig. 2. Map of Saami offering sites with finds of bear bones or information about finds of bear bones. The numbers in the map correspond with Table 1. Äjijhsuálu (Ukonsaari), Inari, Finland, and Aktse, Sirkas, Sweden, are not included, as the information about bear bones/offerings related to these sites is uncertain (graphics M. Spangen).

Fig. 3. Reindeer and bear bones from the offering site of Haltenjárka, Gällivare, Sweden (photo J. Karlsson, Historiska museet/SHM [CC BY]).

Fig. 4. One of the bear molars from Näkkäla offering site of Enontekiö, Finland (photo A.-K. Salmi).

Table 1. Saami offering sites with finds of bear bones or information about finds of bear bones. MNI = Minimum number of individuals. *MNI is set to two where the sources only state there were bones from “several” individuals. [N/D = no data]_[GL11]_[MS12]ata.