

Árran – Sámi hearths

A millennium of settlement in a reindeer landscape in the interior of northern Norway

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Abstract

In the interior of Troms County, Norway, the cultural diversity provided by the Sámi and the resident population is reflected today in various types of sites, in the oral traditions, and in place names. For several centuries the Sámi have migrated annually with their reindeer from the interior east of the Swedish and Norwegian border (settled in 1752) to the coast.

Archaeological investigations have been carried out by the author in the interior of Troms County: around Lake Devdjesjávri in Målselv municipality and in areas connected with the development of military weapons testing grounds at Mauken and Blåtind. Several Sámi residences with árran were excavated. Radiocarbon dates indicate that the transition period between reindeer hunting and reindeer pastoralism can be dated from the 15th century AD. The radiocarbon dates from stallo sites also provide, for the first time, evidence of Sámi settlement in the interior of Troms County from the Late Iron Age.

The aim of the on-going archaeological investigations is to see what occurs in the transition from hunting-based reindeer herding to the nomadic reindeer herding culture. Will new archaeological data confirm or refute knowledge about Sámi reindeer herding and cultural encounters in the interior of northern Norway taking place already before the existing historical documentation?

Keywords:

reindeer pastoralism, *siida*, hunting, fishing, trade place names, oral tradition, use of space, historical times.

Introduction

In 1999 I started a long period of engaging fieldwork focusing on Sámi cultural remains in the interior of Troms County in northern Norway. I first worked as a project manager for the Cultural Heritage Council in the Sámi Parliament, and later the archaeological material became part of my Ph.D. project. The most important aspect of my project is the cultural diversity provided by the Sámi and the Norwegian resident populations in the interior of Troms County. Today it is reflected in variations in the use of space, in the types of monuments and sites, in the oral traditions, and in the place names.

For generations, the Sámi reindeer herders have moved along the migratory routes from inland Sweden to the coast of Troms. Stories and events are linked to the migratory routes and with the social and economic practices related to specific sites. The past and future are connected to the landscape (Fig. 1). In other words, whole areas with their residential localities (Sámi: *oro-hat*) represent a social meaning, and the landscape is a deeply rooted reference for the mobile



Fig 1.
Devddesvuopmi and
Lake Devddesjávri,
interior Troms.
Photo: I. Sommerseth.

families that constitute one of many *siida* groups connected to the region. I define the term *siida* **group** as a territorially autonomous social unit consisting of a collection of households.

Empirical bases

I started my field studies in the project carried out in Mauken and Blåtind. The area is located between the fjords and the interior of Troms municipality. Today Mauken and Blåtind are used as military training fields and they are closed to the public. During the 1990s the Ministry of Defence planned to expand the military training field and connect different artillery ranges around

Mauken and Blåtind. These plans required thorough investigations of Sámi sites within the planned field. The investigations were undertaken and led by the Sámi Parliament (Sommerseth 2001). Hundreds of legally protected sites such as *árran* (open stone-set hearths), *gieddi* (milk-ing grounds), *borra* (food-storage pits), *goahti* (turf huts), calving areas, slaughter enclosures, fishing grounds, migration routes and above all the sacred places were located and surveyed. Many of these localities were exposed to hard wear or threatened by total destruction, and they were therefore also examined by means of archaeological excavation.

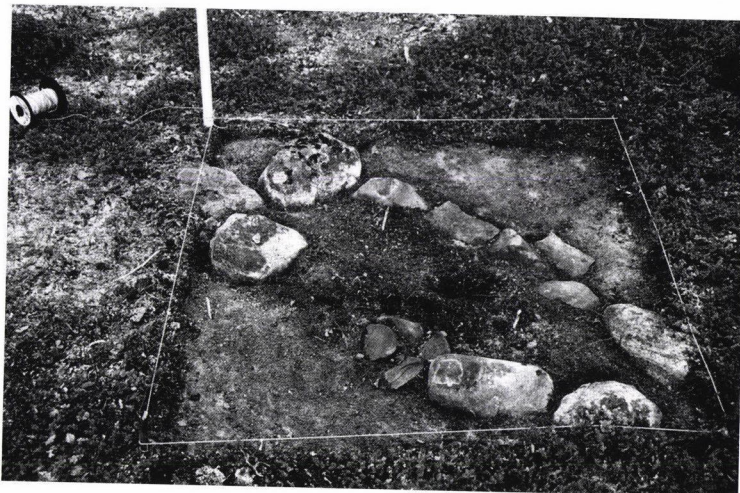


Fig. 2.
Árran R14, from Lake
Devddesjávri,
radiocarbon-dated
between AD 1310–1450
(T-16278).
Photo: I. Sommerseth

A total of 214 cultural remains were registered in Mauken and Blåtind. Of these, altogether 140 sites were spring, summer, and autumn residences with *árran*, the latter defined as stone-set open hearths, and 35 of the *árran* were excavated (Fig. 2). Many identified *árran* have been located on top of small hillsides near water sources and bogs. Most of these sites are related to the *orda*, the upper forest zone, and they are close to the high mountains. These locations also provide a view, abundant building materials, firewood and other necessities for a good *orohat* (residential localities).

The archaeological excavations revealed many interesting results that expand our previous, fairly poor knowledge. Before the late 1990s, hardly any archaeological research on Sámi history related to different Sámi reindeer settlements had been undertaken in Norway, except for the extensive work of Sverre Fjellheim (1999) and Oddmund Andersen (2002). In addition to their work, my investigation in Mauken and Blåtind, being the first study to depict different seasonally-based migratory systems covering a long period of time, forms a basis for understanding and interpreting the diversity of the regional patterns in the archaeological material. Within the framework of understanding the reindeer landscape in my area of investigation, the research also turned out to be a starting point in understanding the *árran* as an arena of knowledge, memory, and communication.

Radiocarbon dating showed that on a single site there were several *árran*, the chronology of which may cover several hundred years from the 14th century AD to the beginning of the early 20th century. For example, in Návdevaggi (Nergårdskaret), the oldest excavated *árran* dates back to the beginning of the 15th century. Nearby in the same area we found several *árran* that are interpreted as recent on the basis of oral information.

These archaeological records are also consistent with the records that verbally describe the numerous activities around Mauken and Blåtind, and thus they form a supplement to the interpretation of the reindeer history. My data also suggest that the annual migration circuit was established in this area earlier than it has been documented in written sources (Renbeteskommissionen av 1907; 1913 (Reindeer Pasture Agreement of 1919 between Sweden and Norway); Qvigstad & Wiklund 1929).

In my Ph.D. research, I have been interested in determining whether the migratory routes and sites near the national border between Sweden and Norway could be compared to the results obtained from Mauken and Blåtind. These reindeer areas near the national border are well known in the written sources in connection with the various pasture agreements and pieces of legislation produced between 1850 and 1920. Bearing this in mind, I wanted to focus on archaeological excavation and radiocarbon dating of *árran* at both previously registered locations and new ones that I have discovered. I concentrated my fieldwork around Lake Devdjesjávri, a large mountain lake 400 m above sea level. Today this area is a favourable summer pasture for the Lainiovuoma Sámi district. It has been used for centuries; this is thoroughly described in the Reindeer Pasture agreement of 1919 as well as in oral information (Reindeer Past. Agreement 1907; 1913; Birkely 1993).

During the fieldwork a large number of *árran* similar to those in Mauken and Blåtind were identified in the area, and eight *árran* were excavated around Lake Devdjesjávri. The radiocarbon dates cover periods from 600 AD to the end of the 19th century, thereby confirming the impression from Mauken and Blåtind: the annual circuit migration route was established earlier than documented in written sources. However, the new results also indicated periods

of use linked to an economy based on wild reindeer hunting and fishing, and this in turn extends back to the Iron Age.

Northern *stallo* sites

The documentation of wild reindeer hunting activity around Lake Devdjesjávri also includes newly discovered *stallo*-type house structures and hunting pit systems. **Stallo houses** are groups of shallow pit dwellings. Usually there are 3–10 houses in one group, and each group has a hearth surrounded by a low mound. The spatial organisation of the houses is significant. They are organised in one row and the hearth is always placed crosswise to the row (Storli 1996:104). *Stallo* sites can be found in the mountain region along the border between Norway and Sweden. The area of their distribution stretches from Lake Devdjesjávri in the north to Namdalen and Frostviken in the south. I examined all the *stallo* sites in Devdjesvuopmi by means of archaeological excavation. They are currently the northernmost known structures of this type, and the only ones in my research area. They are situated in the high mountain region,

600 m above sea level. On the other hand, they are located near both older and more recent sites with several *árran* with radiocarbon dates. Four of the *stallo* sites date between 650 and 1000 AD. The main impression is that these sites were used during the summer or autumn period. Their features imply short-term occupation: there were no thick layers of cultural debris on the floors, and the open stone-set hearths had just thin layers of charcoal (Fig. 3).

The archaeological results from these sites situated in the high mountain region indicate that Devdjesvuopmi could have been a target area for small task groups who were responsible for the autumn hunting of wild reindeer. It aimed at the procurement of food resources and formed the basis for the well-organized system of fur trade in cooperation with the Norse population along the coast. Consequently the task group organisation should be seen as an active element in a larger network of social interaction and as a cause for processes of change in the Sámi society (Sommersteth 2009). I agree with I. M. Mulk's (1994) interpretations of how the development of *stallo* sites in the interior reflects a more specialised use of resources in the inland mountain



Fig. 3.
Stallo site R 27 K 2,
 from Lake Devdjesjávri,
 radiocarbon-dated between
 AD 700–1000.
 Photo: I. Sommersteth

zone after 500 AD than before that. In particular, she is right in her view of how the hunting of wild reindeer represented a process of intensification associated with the development of a complex social system both internally and externally. The relationships of the Sámi societies with surrounding Norse societies – as evident in the participation in the fur-trade – become more visible in the Late Iron Age and early medieval times (Hansen & Olsen 2004). These new *stallo* sites provide the earliest evidence of Sámi settlement and use of territory in the interior of Troms County.

The *siida* concept and the transition to nomadism

Siida territories are systems that regulate peoples' access to land, i.e., hunting and fishing areas. In my opinion there is nothing that would contradict the idea that *siida* territories recorded in early written records from the 16th century have a cultural continuity from previous centuries. The *siida* concept is apparent in Swedish tax and public records from around the 16th century (Ruong 1937). Interestingly enough, the zone of mountain *siidas* (like those in Tingevarra and Rounala) extends from my areas of investigation westward to several fjord systems, such as Malangen, Balsfjorden, and Lyngen. Within these territories – *siidas* – there are numerous reindeer hunting systems. Many of them are found near important fishing lakes such as Torneträsk, Altevatn, Leinavatn, Devdjesjávri, and Galgojávri (Fig. 4).

It seems that each *siida* maintained its own hunting systems as an important part of an economy spread out among many interests and actors. The Late Iron Age in northern Norway is a period during which the Norse and the Sámi communities traded and cooperated within a well-organized social and economic system.

Along with the dates back to 600 AD at *stallo* sites and in the case of certain *árrans* as well as the numerous hunting systems registered in the interior, there is strong evidence that the concept of *siida* is far older than the first references to this system in written records. In line with many other researchers, I believe that some form of *siida* was the organisational basis of Sámi society before the onset of pastoralism (Manker 1953; Mulk 1994).

Hunting systems indicate that whole groups of hunters and fishers resided far up in the mountain tracts using *stallo* houses during the late summer or in the autumn. There they waited for the wild reindeer herds as these were moving down from summer grazing land to autumn and winter areas.

Later, when the wild reindeer became extinct, the Sámi developed a fully nomadic lifestyle. Annual circuit migration from the inland to the coast developed in the same areas that had been used before. The transition period between reindeer hunting and full-scale reindeer pastoralism can be seen in the numerous dwelling places in Mauken and Blåtind and in Devdjes at sites dating to the beginning of the 15th century. As time passed, however, internal division of space both within and between the *siidas* occurred. New reindeer herding territories were established. These new territories were long and narrow in shape, and they comprised a number of old *siidas* (Sommerseth 2007). In the interior, their hunting areas appear to correspond with areas that remained in continuous use until the beginning of the 20th century as residences of reindeer herders in late spring and summer.

External changes

Around 1750, state politics started to play an important role in the overall conditions for the nomadic reindeer herders. In the archaeological re-



Fig. 4.
Pit-fall systems for reindeer hunting
at Lake Devddesjávri.
Photo: I. Sommerseth

cord, these changes become clearly visible from the end of the 19th century. The interior parts of Norway and Sweden had remained beyond the territory of either of the two sovereign states until 1751. The border treaty between Norway and Sweden in 1751 included the Lapp Codicil. It secured the right of the reindeer herders to cross the border for livelihood purposes. The Lapp Codicil contains detailed rules about citizenship, rights to use land and water, neutrality and internal administration, and justice (Pedersen 2007).

Especially during the 19th century, the Sámi both in Norway and Sweden became involved in the judicial system of the states. This led to new administrative units and limited the grazing rights especially along the Norwegian coast.

The Norwegian farming expansion from the south and the colonisation of interior Troms from the early 19th century onwards had an impact upon the Sámi reindeer societies with which the newcomers came into contact. It often resulted in territorial and cultural conflict and the intentional and unintentional displacement and devastation of different Sámi groups. Old established migration routes were closed down by the Norwegian state after requests by the farmers, first in Blåtind in the late 1880s, and later in Mauken in 1923. The nomadic reindeer herders were therefore forced out of areas they

had been using for centuries. As a result of the dissolution of the union between Sweden and Norway in 1905, the subsequent Reindeer Pasture Commission of 1919 limited the grazing rights in Norway to a minimum. In my opinion this has led to the present situation: the Norwegians do not know about the sites that bear witness to previous Sámi presence or history, nor are they aware of the Sámi place names in the area. Today the regional story of Troms County is based on variations of the heroic colonisation theme – cultivation of no-man's land and taming of the empty wilderness.

However, the archaeological material from the 19th and early 20th centuries in my area of investigation is in line with the historical records concerning sites and migration routes, for example. The dislocation of summer residential localities from one area to another can be traced in each of the new pieces of legislation given by the Norwegian state. In other words, written sources from the late 19th and early 20th centuries correspond with the archaeological material. On the other hand, working with present history also gives the opportunity to relate archaeological sites to known families, since historical records provide accurate information about family members, reindeer herding groups, and place names.

Final remarks

During the past two decades, the development of Sámi reindeer history has received considerable attention. This has led to a number of new insights and theories. One of these new views is that both early Sámi hunting groups and later the nomadic reindeer herders utilized available resources through existing social institutions (the *siida*) – to their own advantage. For the mountain Sámi, the fur trade of the Late Iron Age and early medieval time provided great opportunities to participate in the market economy. Trade could be oriented both to the west and the east. Participation in trade led to more intensive hunting and trapping. During the brief summer months the mountains were used more intensively than before.

In order to consider these theories, archaeological traces needed to be investigated in interior Troms. Four *stallo* sites were located and excavated, and all of them were dated to the Late Iron Age. Dwelling places and numerous hunting systems or trapping pits in Devddevuopmi can also be linked to the intensification of reindeer hunting.

Around the 15th century, a new and well-represented settlement pattern emerged in Mauken and Blåtind and Devddev. Many *árran* have been identified and excavated, and such *orohat* can be seen as suitable for an economy based on small-scale reindeer herding. The dating of these sites to the 15th century and onward provides evidence for a change in settlement pattern and shows the transition to an annual circuit migration from the inland to the coast with tame reindeer herds.

Finally I would like to underline that state legislation is also reflected in the archaeological material. Dislocation of habitation can be followed from one area to another.

However, my contention here is that there was continuity from hunting-based reindeer herding to the nomadic reindeer economy. The same areas and habitations were used, and the sacred landscape and sacrificial sites remained in use. The same kind of technology, i.e. lines of fences and barriers, was used in both wild reindeer hunting and tame reindeer herding. A change in strategy from a hunting-based economy to nomadic reindeer herding can be shown to have occurred around 1400–1500 AD. To sum up, the Sámi sites with *árran* provide important material evidence of different narratives of the past.

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