
Sámi bear graves in Norway – hidden sites and rituals

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Keywords: Sámi, brown bear, ritual, burial, graves, Sámi drums

Abstract: This paper presents a research project on bear-human relationships, focusing on the Sámi bear grave rituals and burial customs in Norway. The background to this project is a study of 30 bear burial sites, of which several were archaeologically recorded. Based on this information, a typical feature of these sites are burials in natural rock cavities, caves and in scree and under large boulders. In general, these date to between c. AD 300–1800. This makes the Sámi bear burial custom one of the longest surviving burial customs of any kind known in northern Europe.

INTRODUCTION

The brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) was feared, and at the same time appreciated by and sacred to the Sámi, and it was hunted for several needs and purposes. It was normal for the Sámi to worship and praise the animal, although it could be scary, in order to succeed in hunting and to ensure the bear's return and its rightful place in nature. Sámi is an extremely rich language in terms of concepts for nature, animals, hunting and fishing (GASKI 2020). The way the bear was worshipped and understood is strongly attached to the Sámi term and concept of *lihkku* (happiness and prosperity). This term, *lihkku*, possesses an aesthetic dimension with certain rules and rituals, and success in hunting was an important matter in the old Sámi hunting culture. The recognition and understanding of the term, *lihkku*, are evident and continue in the Sámi society today, especially in the reindeer herding society (in North Sámi), where they call it *boazolihkku* “reindeer happiness” (SOMMERSETH 2009b, 158). According to the Sámi philosopher, Nils Anders Oskal, reindeer or hunting prosperity lasts from the cradle to the grave but may change over time (OSKAL 1995). You can influence your own reindeer or hunting prosperity through actions and thoughts, and to a certain degree you can improve your own happiness, but you can also spoil it. How your *lihkku* develops depends on how you live as a person, not only on how you treat animals.

The traditions and hunting rites around the Sámi bear hunt in Scandinavia are well documented in ethnographical written sources, through stories of the bear hunt and other human-bear relations that are still preserved in living traditions and in place names to this day. This article aims to present the archaeological sites and ethnographical sources of the Sámi bear hunt in parts of northern Norway. In general, brown bear bones are found inside natural caves and beneath large boulders, and the bear grave sites are often located along the coast, on islands and in the fjords. These graves are therefore interpreted as a specific practice that relates to pre-Christian Sámi belief and cultural context (PETERSEN 1940; MYRSTAD 1996; SCHANCHE 2000; DUNFJELD-AAGÅRD 2005; SVESTAD 2018; SOMMERSETH 2021). The practice around the Sámi bear hunt is often recorded in the older ethnographic and

written records that describe the hunting traditions and rituals. Evidence is found in some of the missionary accounts from the 17th and 18th centuries, from priests who sought to convert the Sámi to Christianity (NIURENIUS 1905 [originally published 1645]; RHEEN 1897 [originally published 1671]; SCHEFFERUS 1956 [originally published 1673]; DASS 1992 [originally published 1739]; FJELLSTRÖM 1981 [originally published 1755]; LEEM 1975 [originally published 1767]; FRIIS 1871). Later, throughout the 20th century, living traditions and old stories told by the Sámi themselves were recorded, adding new knowledge of the historical context of the bear cult (TURI 1911; BJØRNSON 1916; EDSMAN 1994; RYD 2007; BORGOS 2013; 2020).

THE DISCOVERY AND DATING OF BEAR GRAVES IN NORWAY

A total of 30 bear burial sites are known in Norway. Many graves have been archaeologically recorded where the bones of brown bears, along with traces of ritual burial, were found in specific places in the landscape (Fig. 1; Table 1; cf. MYRSTAD 1996; DUNFJELD-AAGÅRD 2005; SVESTAD 2018; SOMMERSETH 2021). A common feature of the graves is that they are discovered in natural cavities and screes, where the bones have been placed in dry and airy places directly on the surface. Only five out of 30 burials sites appear to have constructed elements, such as stone slab covers and other traces that show that the cave has been rearranged by humans. Only one grave, the Salfjella grave, which is the southernmost bear grave in Norway, was arranged as a burial in the ground covered with stone slabs and gravel. This grave, which is dated to between c. AD 1471–1681, also contains the only artefact found in connection to a bear – a brass chain attached to the right cheekbone of the cranium (PETERSEN 1940, 158; DUNFJELD-AAGÅRD 2005).

The sparse grave material from the northernmost part of Finnmark, such as that from Nesseby, has a similar appearance to the Salfjella grave material. This bear grave was found on the top of a small hillside in a scree area in 1985; it was covered with slabs and gravel and was dated to between c. AD 860–1169 (MYRSTAD 1996). Another important feature of the bear graves is that very few have been found in the high mountains. Only four bear burial sites, mainly located in the south of Nordland County, have been found far away from the coast with no visibility of the sea. Nevertheless, all bear burial sites have some typical attributes in that they have been found in natural caves, under boulders and in screes, which are normal landscape features along the coast of northern Norway (Fig. 2).

Only seven bear graves along the coast are intact, with bear bones, hidden in natural caves in the landscape. One site is situated in the Vesterålen region, four sites are on the island of Spildra, and two more sites are in the western part of Finnmark. These sites are very vulnerable, and they are automatically protected through the Cultural Heritage Act, supervised by the Sámi cultural heritage management. The bear graves on the large island of Spildra in the northern part of Troms County are the only ones that have information signs and posters. These posters are there to inform visitors to take care and not to disturb the unique sites. Three of the bears lying *in situ* at Spildra are dated to between c. AD 1030–1285 (MYRSTAD 1996).

Many bear graves in Norway have been discovered by chance, through the construction of roads and housing or power line routes. Only a few bear graves have been discovered through research and local knowledge. Between 1911 and 1980, most of the bear graves from the coast were incorporated into the collection of the Arctic University Museum. Some of the bear bones from areas that were exploited around the turn of the century are kept in other museum collections, such as the one at the Institute of Basic Medical Sciences, University of Oslo (The Schreiner Collection).

The very first bear grave was found on the island of Senja in 1911, during road works. The bear cranium was discovered inside a small cave that was later destroyed (Fig. 3). A bone sample from this large cranium is dated to the modern period between c. AD 1694–1917, the latest definite date that

can be linked to the Sámi hunting tradition and ritual burial. The bear was probably deposited in the cave according to old Sámi burial practice but was most likely hunted down using new hunting methods, such as firearms, which became more common throughout the 18th century (SOMMERSETH 2009a, 262).

In total, we know of 44 bears from the grave sites, and there is a great variation in the number of bones and teeth that have been preserved and counted. Few sites have finds of bear crania, which are mostly fragmented, and we know of only two sites where almost the entire skeleton has been found – on the island of Spildra and in the Røykenes locality, which have been dated to between c. AD 1645–1800 (Fig. 4). For most of the sites, we have only a few intact skeletal parts documented, which seems to be normal for such finds. This situation can reflect the conservation conditions at the site, and bones may also have been carried away by other animals and later damaged by natural decomposition. Another factor that may have played a role could be the circumstances around the discovery. Information from the museum's archives indicates that bear crania and bones had often been stored for a long time locally in the village before they were collected and sent to the museum. In this way, the information on the site and the conditions around the discovery were missing, and further archaeological investigation became impossible. From the 44 known bear individuals, there are 28 bear crania kept in the museum's collection; only a few are intact while most are fragmented.

In eight of the 30 bear burial sites, more than one bear has been documented, and at two of these sites we have solid documentation of bear cubs (MYRSTAD 1996, 97–100; SOMMERSETH 2021). One of the cubs was found on the island of Ringvassøya in the northern regions of Troms County, during road works in 1985. The site has now been destroyed, but a new study of the bone material revealed a bear cub in addition to an adult bear. The adult one is probably a female, and a bone sample from its humerus is dated to between c. AD 1027–1153 (SOMMERSETH 2021).

Seines, a spectacular bear grave site with eight bears, one of them a cub, was found on an islet near the town of Narvik in Nordland County in 1970. Five bone samples from different jawbones have been dated to between c. AD 1052–1424 (cf. Table 1: Seines), which indicates that the Seines locality was used intensively over a specific period. For several years, many bones were collected from a more or less ruined site, but the central location and appearance is similar to nearby bear graves in the region, indicating that the place must have been most suitable for ritual bear burials. In addition to the many bears, bone fragments from reindeer, cows, and sheep were also documented (MYRSTAD 1996, 98). This indicates that the grave might also be interpreted as an offering site, with other purposes than that of a bear grave (see SPANGEN et al., this volume).

This assumption, though, needs a larger empirical basis through an archaeological investigation. Still, burials and sacrifices can be complementary and may have been performed in the same favourable place in the same period, similar to the bear graves on the island of Spildra further north.

One of the goals of the project was to initiate new datings of some of the material, since the first radiocarbon datings were performed more than 25 years ago. The aim was to test older data and compare them to new ones, to see if the sites' timelines match with more accuracy. A total of 22 bears in Norway have been radiocarbon dated, and the results are surprising, as the new datings indicate a burial practice that was in use over a long period of time, c. AD 236–1917. The oldest Sámi bear grave found in Scandinavia is from a cave on the island of Tjeldøya in Nordland County. The site was discovered in 1961 and is unavailable due to its location by steep mountains and large boulders. The find consists of 11 bone fragments, including jawbones from a small cranium, which indicates that it was a young animal. A bone sample from a femur yielded a date between c. AD 236–385.

A newly discovered bear grave site was investigated on the island of Hovøya in 2005, in the southern part of Nordland County, which yielded a bear cranium with a sensationally old dating (DUNFJELD-AAGÅRD 2005). The remains of two bears were found, one of which consisted of a large bear cranium that was already linked to a local story from more recent times. It is said that the bear died

in a forest fire, and the roar could be heard by everyone in the village. A dating from the other bear turned out to be much older; it is the only one that goes back to the Stone Age. The bone yielded a date between c. 1294–1021 BC (DUNFJELD-AAGÅRD 2005, 96). The bear bones were collected by locals, and the provenance is therefore uncertain, as is the assumption that this bear corresponds to the emergence of Sámi burial customs (SVESTAD 2018, 22).

Most bear graves in Norway date to the Late Viking Age and medieval period between AD 900–1400. The radiocarbon datings from this period are from 12 bears that were geographically located along the coast from Nesseby in Finnmark County in the north to the south of Nordland County. The large concentration related to the medieval period may indicate that bear hunting was at its most intensive and had great relevance for the Sámi both in the north and in the south. The bear hunt was probably a specialised Sámi hunting tradition along the coast, and it was also well-established and accepted among non-Sámi communities (SVESTAD 2018). There were probably few restrictions or taboos associated with the ritual aspects and participation in the bear hunt, even though missionary work was in progress in this period. The ritual burial practice and regional traditions must have taken place uninterrupted until well into the 16th century.

Throughout that century, we find a marked decrease in the number of dated Sámi bear graves, and this observation corresponds with the historical emergence of the intensive missionary work aimed at the Sámi people (HANSEN/OLSEN 2014). A small group consisting of seven bear grave sites is dated to between c. AD 1500 to the 1800s, which marks the end of the ritual bear grave tradition. The majority of the latest bear grave sites have been found in the Vesterålen and Lofoten regions in Nordland County, except for one that was found in Salfjella in Trøndelag County. Through the radiocarbon dating of the bear bones in context with the localities, we have been able to document a feature that is unique to Sámi history; the longest surviving burial customs of any kind known in northern Europe, from the Iron Age until the 20th century.

THE BEAR IN RELATION TO SÁMI COSMOLOGY AND RITUALS

It is very likely that the presence of the bear and the act of hunting it were of great importance to Arctic people in prehistoric times, as can be seen in the many hundreds of bear motifs at rock art sites in northern Scandinavia, dating from the period between 10,000–1700 BC (Fig. 5; cf. HELSKOG 2014). The bear has also been treated with respect by other societies such as the Finns and the northern peoples further east on the Eurasian continent and in the circumpolar region (EDSMAN 1994). In Norway and Sweden, there are historical written sources that provide good descriptions of the Sámi bear hunt and the various rituals around the burials (see RYDVIK, this volume). These sources were recorded by missionaries and priests who sought to convert the Sámi to Christianity. The accounts have later been the subject of thorough studies and critical interpretations, especially in the matter of the subjectivity of the compilers who attempted to convert the Sámi (HULTKRANTZ 1985).

The review of the material and the new dating results suggest that the regional customs around the bear hunt probably varied, as well as the custom of creating the graves and handling the bones. There are very few bear graves in Norway and Sweden that contain all the bones intact or have bones arranged in the correct anatomical order, such as the Gällholmen bear grave in Sweden, displayed at the Länsmuseum in Umeå (ZACHRISSON/IREGREN 1974; see IREGREN, this volume). Most of the graves, especially in Norway, have been documented with small amounts of bones and only fragments from the crania. The scarcity of bones and other finds such as birch bark that, according to the sources, were used to wrap the bones, can be explained by natural decomposition processes on the exposed sites. There are reasons to suspect that crania and bones have disappeared from bear graves over time. In some cases, we learned from reliable sources that crania have been removed or stolen from the sites

and later returned, as is known for the Ånestein and the Juvika bear sites in the Vesterålen area. The graves also vary slightly in terms of appearance and choice of caves, boulders, and screes. The differences can only be understood as local adaptations within an overall cultic burial tradition.

Most of the written sources and interpretations emphasise that the act of handling bones relates to perceptions of the deceased's skeleton, which was considered crucial for a new bodily existence in the afterlife (FJELLSTRÖM 1981; EDSMAN 1994; SCHANCHE 2000; SVESTAD 2018). The importance of handling the bones correctly probably had a great relevance to the entire community in ensuring its good reputation, as well as to the individual hunter who could personally ensure further prosperity (*libkkeu*) in hunting and in life itself. Some old accounts are explicit that the bones should not be broken or damaged, and that they should be buried according to certain rules (DASS 1992; FJELLSTRÖM 1981). The old sources partly correspond with the bones in the museum collection. A new review has adjusted the number of bones that show signs of splitting and marrow extraction. Out of 30 bear sites in Norway, there are only 11 sites that have bear bones with signs of cutmarks.

According to Sámi burial customs, the natural cavities used as a burial places for the bears were intended to function as open passages to the various worlds that were inhabited by gods and spirits. All cavities and openings under large boulders could be suitable places for transformations and travels between the different worlds (Fig. 6; cf. MYRSTAD 1996, 66–67). This connects with the bear's natural hibernation, one of many reasons why the bear was considered an animal with secretive powers. The bear is an animal that disappears in the winter and comes back after hibernation when spring arrives, and the chosen burial sites for bears have great similarities with bear dens, as if the hunters wanted to bring the bear back to the place where it was born (SVESTAD 2018, 26). The slight differences of interpretations do not have to be in opposition to each other but can provide for extended descriptions of criteria for why the hunters chose the bear burial sites.

THE BEAR IN RELATION TO THE SÁMI GODS

The bear is often depicted on the *goavddis* (in North Sámi), the sacred Sámi drum, and often in relation to the other gods and animals displayed on the drum skin. As part of the hunting preparations and other important social events or personal matters, the drum was used to invoke the goodwill of the gods. It was very important to seek advice from the gods with the help of the drum before the bear hunt (SCHEFFERUS 1956, 255). The figures painted on the Sámi drums represent a microcosm of the Sámi universe, and all the old drums in Sápmi (the cultural region inhabited by the Sámi) vary greatly in design and choice of motifs. Most of the Sámi drums were interpreted by the missionaries, so the accuracy of their interpretation must always be looked upon with a critical approach. What is interesting to notice is that the bear is often portrayed on the drums, probably reflecting the intimate and complex relationship between bears and people in Sámi pre-Christian society and cosmology (SVESTAD 2018, 27).

Some of the gods and animal figures on all the old drums have common features that are known, while other figures are distinct for the region in which the drum was used (STORM/FONNELAND 2022). Nevertheless, there are several indications that the bear and the Sámi god *Leibolmai* (in North Sámi) belong to the same cosmological level, because *Leibolmai* is the leading hunting god and considered the bear's protector and leader (FRIIS 1871, 40). According to a Norwegian missionary, Johan Randulf, who lived in Nordland County in the period 1718–1727, it was explained to him by the Sámi that the bear was also considered the *Guds hund* (Gods' dog; QVIGSTAD 1904, 27). In the same transcript of the Nærøy manuscript by Randulf, he further states that good hunting fortune (*libkkeu*) depended on a good sacrifice to the god, *Leibolmai*, so prestigious objects such as the bow and arrow were sacrificed. It was especially important to get *Leibolmai*'s permission for a successful hunt so

that you were not killed by the bear yourself (SCHEFFERUS 1956, 255). This is supported by the fact that on one of the Sámi drums we can see the bear walking towards its protector and leader, the god *Leibolmai*, both on their way to the sacred mountain (Fig. 7; cf. FRIIS 1871, 40).

THE BEAR HEARS AND UNDERSTANDS EVERYTHING!

In recent written and oral sources from the Sámi themselves, the bear is still a noble animal who enjoys respect, but this is not totally unconditional (TURI 1911; EDSMAN 1994; RYD 2007). The bear was considered to be big and strong, but not too smart and not cunning at all (see GRIMM et al., on Bears – fact or fiction, this volume). In several of QVIGSTAD'S (1928, 1–28) notes on old Sámi legends and stories from Troms and Finnmark County, it is emphasised how the fox always fooled the bear, even though the bear was the stronger of them both. According to ancient myths, the partnership and cooperation between humans and bears was about equality and respect for each other (TURI 1911). Similar stories are found in 18th-century sources, where the consideration for the bear and its place alongside humans is reflected in the language, the hunting traditions, the ceremonies, and in burial rituals.

Sámi is a rich language in terms of its concepts for nature, animals, hunting and fishing. As GASKI (2020, 14) explains: “There are several hundred distinct terms for different aspects of snow and ice, and a similar abundance of terms for different aspects of reindeer, including the animal's appearance, age, sex, and color of fur. In the past, Sámi also employed many metaphorical terms for predators like bears and wolves, because these were regarded as so intelligent that they could understand ordinary human language”.

The real name of the bear in the Sámi language is *guovža* (North Sámi), and *duvrje* (South Sámi). These names are rarely used, because the bear can hear its name and could thus be unintentionally summoned (FJELLSTRÖM 1981). The bear has therefore been given metaphorical names, to avoid the animal overhearing the humans' plans for hunting or trapping. Using the bear's proper name would alert the bear to a hunter's intentions, while employing a metaphor, calling the bear by one of its physical attributes or by using kinship terms, would help the hunter or the community to plan the hunt in secret (QVIGSTAD 1904; GASKI 2020, 14).

The Sámi names and metaphors used for naming the bear are rich and have been used differently from one region to another. Stories and attributes around the names are linked to nature or to kinship among people, for example, *áddja* (grandfather), *áhkku* (grandmother), *dárffot* (turf-like), *muodda* (the old fur), *basse-váise* (the holy, wise animal) *ruomse-gállis* (old moss man), *suohkat* (thick-fur man) (FRIIS 1871; RHEEN 1897; FJELLSTRÖM 1981).

Many of the names describe the bear as a good-natured and pleasant animal, and some names refer to an old relative, despite its fearsome strength. Most of the metaphorical names are known from 18th-century sources, and the names have at least two purposes – first and foremost, to mask the hunter's real intentions and to keep the hunter's plan secret from the bear, and second, to include and relate to the bear as vital to the society. This was perhaps especially important to appease the gods, and especially the hunting god, *Leibolmai*, who was the keeper of the bear and who, on the one hand, protects the bear, but on the other allows the Sámi to hunt it and decides the hunter's success (MEBIUS 1968, 128; LEEM 1975, 413).

In every fjord and mountain area in northern Norway, it is normal to find bear-related place names in the landscape, most of them are mapped in the Norwegian language, but some bear names have survived in the Sámi language. Sámi place names in general are known for their mapping of the cultural landscape, and they are used as a topographic tool built around narratives related to specific landscape features and landmarks (MATHISEN 1997, 120–133). The Norwegian bear names on the map often refer to local stories around the hunt or to rich hunting areas or places where the bear was

seen, such as *Bjørnskaret*, *Bjørnsletta*, *Bjørnsund*, *Bjørnlíkollen*, and *Bjørnknorran*. The Norwegian name, *Bjørnhellarbukta*, which means “the bear-boulder in the bay”, corresponds directly to a bear grave site in Nevelsfjord, which is dated to between c. AD 1030–1274. This name has probably been translated from an old Sámi place name, but due to changes around the bear hunt and the consequences of Norwegianisation during the 19th and 20th centuries, the Sámi name was lost. Only some Sámi place names in northern Norway can be related to the bear and in some cases to the landscape where we have documented old bear grave sites. These places often include local knowledge and stories, such as the *Guovžabákti* (the small bear hill) in Nesseby in Finnmark, located one kilometer from a bear grave site that is dated to between c. AD 860–1169. It is difficult to search for new bear grave sites based on modern maps with Norwegian place names, so it is therefore crucial to study old Sámi place names along with landscape features and landmarks to understand the cultural landscape.

TRACES OF THE SÁMI BEAR CULT IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES

In the area between Nordland and Troms County, a cluster of 15 bear graves with a total of 19 bears have been documented. Some of the graves have been left intact in the landscape; the finds from the other graves are kept in museum collections and described in written sources. The large cluster of bear graves in this particular area is quite special and makes up 45 % of all bear grave sites found in Norway. The question is, why are there so many bear graves in this area? Was the population of brown bears larger here than elsewhere in historical times? Have the hunting traditions and burial customs remained intact over time in this area? Or have the cavities with burials been well hidden and later forgotten until today? Not all of the questions can be answered, but we can try to interpret the sites' presence and time of use.

The region of Vesterålen stretches from the outer coast fjords to the inland coastal areas. The graves are present from Tysfjord to the large islands of Hinnøya and Senja, an area between Nordland and Troms County. This region is also represented by some of the latest ¹⁴C-dated burial sites, suggesting that the cultic and ritual traditions lasted longer here than elsewhere in Sápmi and long after the Sámi were Christianised. The time span between the earliest and latest site in this region is substantial, and the oldest bear grave in Tjeldøya, as mentioned earlier, dates to between c. AD 236–385 and, close by in the same area, is the Djupfest site, which is dated to between c. AD 1442–1690. The distance between these two burial sites is only five kilometers and they are situated in the same type of landscape; they have the same appearance and the physical remains of ritual burial practices. From oral and written sources, we know that ritual bear burials were practiced in this region until the beginning of the 19th century (BJØRNSON 1916).

This area is a geographically limited one, as mentioned above, where we find some of the latest ¹⁴C-dated bear graves in Norway. Statistics on the number of bears hunted in Norway in 1850 show that 60 brown bears were hunted down, with an estimated population of 3,000 individuals (www.skandobs.no). This suggests that there was a large population of bears in the 19th century. The brown bear must have been very numerous even before the 1800s, as it is mentioned in much older sources. In the 16th century, it appears from the missionary sources of the priest Peder Claussøn Friis (1545–1614) that there were many bears ravaging small fishing villages in the Vesterålen and Lofoten regions (STORM 1881, 375). The authorities saw it as necessary to organise a municipal bear hunt, which was paid for and carried out by skilled hunters. It does not tell us who the hunters were, but recent research has revealed the historical presence of several Sámi fishing villages in the Lofoten and Vestårelen areas (BORGOS 2020).

One of the stories that is known to local people concerns a famous Sámi bear hunter named Åne Ånesen (1745–1811), who is said to have killed over a hundred bears as an authorised hunter (BORGOS

2020). Throughout the 18th century, it was common in many coastal areas to have a scheme for “bear tax”, where the Sámi hunters could be paid by the local farmers for their services. It is said that the payment took place when the bear hunter rowed with his boat from farm to farm with the felled bear visible in his boat. This was to show that the bear hunter was skilled and trained and ready for his reward and new assignments.

To complete the story of the bear hunter from Vesterålen, a large boulder named Ånesteinen, after the same famous hunter, Åne Ånesen, is documented (Fig. 8; cf. BORGOS 2013). Today, this large boulder has many local stories and myths associated with it and its location, and the bear hunter’s name is a topographic tool used to keep the narratives alive in the local community. The boulder itself and the site represent also a very strong and visual landmark. Best of all, there is a bear grave under the boulder, registered around 1979, but unfortunately many of the bear bones have been disturbed and moved inside the cave. The bear bones were therefore examined and documented by The Arctic University Museum of Norway, and they originate from one bear, from which three different bones were dated as belonging to the period between c. AD 1726–1815 (SOMMERSETH 2021). The historical sources about the bear hunter Åne and the places where he lived represent actual events. He lived in the Vesterålen region with his family at the end of the 1700s, and one story is about the bear that injured Åne’s face with its claws, just before he managed to kill the bear. It is said that he carried the scars on his face with pride and great honour (BORGOS 2013).

FINAL REMARKS

During the course of the 19th century, the traditional knowledge around the Sámi bear cult and the bear graves disappeared (MYRSTAD 1996; SCHANCHE 2000). The ritual traditions changed to practical explanations, and bear bones found under boulders and in screes around local communities could not be explained, so alternative stories arose. Some stories about the bones are explained by and connected to strangers that have perished, or robbers who have starved to death, or bears that have died in forest fires. This was easily done because some of the bones from the brown bear are very similar to those of humans and are easily misinterpreted by non-professionals. Other stories are, for example, that the bear was buried as a food store for use in bad times. Such stories are many, especially along the coast of northern Norway. The loss of knowledge, memories and traditions around the Sámi bear hunt and grave rituals is also a consequence of Norwegianisation during the 19th and 20th centuries (SOMMERSETH 2021; cf. SVESTAD 2018).

The bear bones from Ånesteinen in the region of Vesterålen, which are dated to the end of the 18th century, were probably buried there in line with the old Sámi burial customs, to honour and respect the bear and to renew good hunting fortune (*lihkeku*), despite the intense missionary work and Norwegianisation by the church and the authorities. The bear grave at Vesterålen does not stand out from the rest of the material, and this 18th-century grave represents the same ritual practices regarding localisation in the landscape, treatment of bones, and burial practices as those at the much older Iron Age and medieval sites. Burials in natural cavities demonstrate that landscape affordances had a vital impact on the religious concepts and burial practices in Sápmi, the longest surviving burial customs of any kind known in northern Europe. It is said that when Åne the famous hunter was about to die, he heard a bear scratching on the wall outside his home and said: “Now, let it be” (BORGOS 2013). Today, Ånesteinen is a popular hiking destination with spectacular views, and the locals are still telling the story about Åne the hunter. This is a reminder that the bear bones in general and bear graves in particular are still visible narratives in the northern landscape. They have an important role for us all and are a strong reminder of ancient stories that are still alive in Sámi history.

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Fig. 1. Location of the Sámi bear graves mentioned in the text, including a picture of the coastal bear grave site in Nevelsfjord (graphics I. Sommerseth, The Arctic University Museum, UIT).



Fig. 2. A bear grave site in the southern end of the Lofoten archipelago, Moskenes Island. The grave is in the scree area along the shoreline (photo I. Sommerseth, The Arctic University Museum, UIT).



Fig. 3. Bear cranium found in a small cave near the village of Lekangen on the island of Senja in 1911 (photo G. E. Lien, The Arctic University Museum, UIT).



Fig. 4. Bear cranium found at the Røykenes farm in Troms County, belonging to a complete skeleton, dated to between c. AD 1645–1800 (photo I. Sommerseth, The Arctic University Museum, UIT).



Fig. 5. A 6000-year-old hunting scene – a wounded bear and the hunter with his spear. Motif from the panels at the World Heritage Rock Art Centre at Alta, Alta Museum in Troms and Finnmark County (photo K. Helskog, The Arctic University Museum, UIT).



Fig. 6. A typical bear grave site in the Vesterålen area. The bear bones are still in situ inside the boulder, the site is kept secret (photo I. Sommerseth, The Arctic University Museum, UIT).

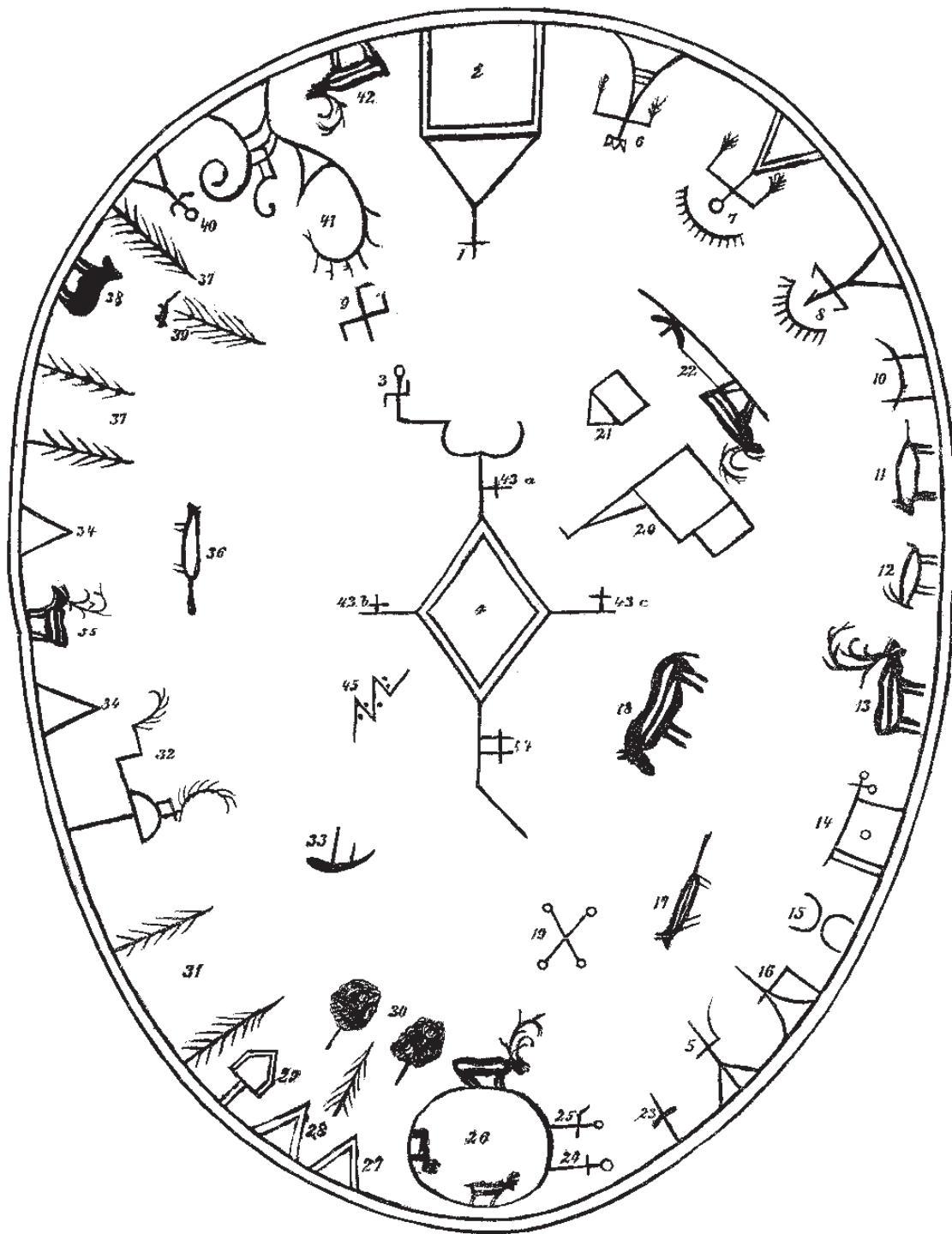


Fig. 7. A Sámi drum (goavddis), documented and interpreted by the missionary Knut Leem in 1767. According to him, the bear (no. 38) is walking to the thick spruce forest (no. 37) and to his keeper, the god Leiboldmai (no. 40), both near the sacred sacrificial mountain (no. 41; graphics E. Kjellman, The Arctic University Museum, UIT).



Fig. 8. The famous bear grave site "Ånesteinen" in Vesterålen (photo I. Sommerseth, The Arctic University Museum, UIT).

Table 1. Bear graves in Norway ($n = 22$) that have been radiocarbon dated.

Locality	County	Year of dating	Lab. no. (result BP)	OxCal v4.4.2 (2020) cal. 95.4 %
Hovøya	Nordland	2005	TUa-5026 (2960±45)	1294–1021 BC
Tjeldøya	Nordland	2019	Beta-538923 (1740±30)	AD 236–385
Bunkholmen	Troms	1996	T-12020 (1330±75)	AD 583–881
Nesseby	Finmark	1996	T-12025 (1030±75)	AD 860–1169
Ringvassøya	Troms	2020	Tra-15653 (970±15)	AD 1027–1153
Skagedalen I, Spildra	Troms	1994	T-11214 (910±60)	AD 1030–1220
Nevelsfjord	Nordland	1996	T-12022 (855±75)	AD 1030–1274
Seines 5	Nordland	2020	Tra-15650 (890±15)	AD 1052–1215
Seines 1	Nordland	1996	T-12021 (755±90)	AD 1120–1399
Skagevågen II, Spildra	Troms	1994	T-11215 (750±70)	AD 1132–1328
Seines 4	Nordland	2020	Tra-15649 (850±15)	AD 1164–1225
Fjellnes, Spildra	Troms	1994	T-11213 (815±70)	AD 1170–1285
Seines 2	Nordland	2019	Beta-538924 (560±30)	AD 1310–1425
Seines 3	Nordland	2020	Tra-15648 (550±15)	AD 1327–1424
Rørmark	Nordland	2005	TUa-4991 (530±45)	AD 1385–1447
Djupfest	Nordland	1996	T-12024 (290±75)	AD 1442–1690
Salfjella	Trøndelag	2005	TUa-5051 (270± 50)	AD 1471–1681
Skrolsvik	Troms	1996	T-12026 (245±55)	AD 1478–1814
Juvika	Troms	2019	Beta-538922 (320±30)	AD 1482–1646
Røykenes	Troms	2020	Tra-15652 (970±15)	AD 1645–1800
Lekangen	Troms	2020	Tra-15651 (100±15)	AD 1694–1917
Ånesteinen	Troms	2016	Beta-450244 (180±30)	AD 1726–1815