Saami prehistory, identity and rights in Sweden

Noel D. Broadbent

Professor, Archaeologist, Department of Anthropology, Arctic Studies, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

Abstract

Recent archaeological finds, including a ritual bear grave dating to the Viking Period, provide new evidence of Saami settlement based on sealing in northern coastal Sweden. This is especially interesting as Saami identity and land-rights have been limited to reindeer herding in Sweden. Saami territory and economy were formerly more extensive and varied in Sweden than historical sources suggest. There are strong grounds for considering the displacement of the Saami from these regions as a consequence of Scandinavian expansion in the Late Iron Age and Medieval periods (AD 800 – 1300). This period also corresponds in time to the widespread transformation of Saami hunting and fishing society into the nomadic herding society we recognize today. Archaeology can make major contributions to our understanding of the pre-historic, pre-Christian and pre-reindeer herding Saami in Sweden.

Introduction

The Saami number approximately 60,000-80,000 people living in Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. About 17,000 Saami live in Sweden.
For historical reasons Saami territory and economy in Sweden have been explicitly defined on the basis of reindeer exploitation and this characterization is deeply institutionalised by Swedish government policy (Lundmark 2002).

Although Nordic archaeology has been ongoing for a century, relatively little archaeological research has been directed towards the Saami past. As pointed out by Bjørnar Olsen (1994), the Saami past has been defined by ethnology and history, not prehistory. One reason for this is that Nordic archaeology was specifically developed to define Scandinavian, particularly Germanic, prehistory. Added to this is the fact Saami territory was primarily based on government-defined boundaries relating to herding in the 16-20^{th-} centuries. This has *de facto* limited the prehistory of the Saami to mountain and interior regions rather than the coasts or more southerly regions outside of herding areas.

A closer look at this issue reveals that there are in fact both historical and oral-historical references to coastal Saami in Sweden. For instance, Johannes Schefferus, quoting Olaus Petri Niurenius (1580-1645), wrote that the Saami had formerly had their camps on the Bothnian coasts, *but they had been driven away from there* (Schefferus 1673:30 plus references). In the Västerbotten region, the three first settlers of Holmön Island are known from oral history as the "Fishing Saami" Hakars, Klemens and Kerstorps. Their farm sites are known and believed to date to the early medieval period.

Place-names with the prefix and ethnonym *Lapp* can reflect Saami land-use prior to the 13th century. These names extend along the whole Swedish North Bothnian coast down to Stockholm and are even scattered in southern Sweden. Over 390 such names are known in

Västerbotten County alone. The idea of prehistoric Saami in this coastal region has, nevertheless, been scoffed at (cf. Westerlund 1965). A serious project examining this issue using interdisciplinary evidence is therefore needed.

A new peer-reviewed project, funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation, is investigating ancient Bothnian settlement complexes, ritual sites and place-names from the perspective of Saami prehistory. The project is based at the Smithsonian Institution. The principal investigator is Professor Noel D. Broadbent. Britta Wennstedt Edvinger is also supported by this grant and is carrying out parallel archaeological studies in Hälsingland, as well as addressing issues regarding Saami archaeology, ethnography and land use.

Project Objectives

The overarching objectives of the coastal Saami project are as follows:

1) Presentation of new material relevant to the prehistory of coastal Sweden with special attention given to Saami identity as manifested by household structures, ritual sites, settlement organization and economy.

2) Use of linguistic, historical and ethnological sources for defining and testing models of settlement territories in the coastal zone.

3) Assessing the interactions of coastal Saami and other groups in terms of material culture, ritual behavior, settlement organization and economy.

4) Comparisons with northern Norway, northern Finland and northwest Russia regarding long term adaptation and change in Saami prehistory.

The legal background

The current situation of the Saami in Sweden has been contingent on the recognition of Saami identity (ethnicity) and land-rights as defined by Swedish law and government policy. The foremost element in this context is that Saami rights are based on the so-called *renbeteslag* (Reindeer Grazing Act) of 1928 that explicitly links Saami rights to reindeer ownership. This legal definition was not based on a desire by the State to limit rights but to protect the Saami. It was believed that the Saami were in danger of extinction and needed protection. As a people they were believed to be suited to a nomadic lifestyle. According to Lennart Lundmark (2002:74), this was an offshoot of race biology in Sweden and the idea that "Lapps shall be Lapps." Similar attitudes had earlier led to the creation of the Lapmark Border in 1751 and to the Agricultural Limit of 1867. The latter was intended to keep settlers out of the herding territories. While perhaps based on the good intentions of the Swedish state, this is a rare, perhaps unique, case of an ethnic identity being limited to a specified economic activity.

The loss of hunting and fishing rights in the mountains by the Swedish Saami in 1993 was quite the opposite. The courts ruled *against* exclusive rights by the Saami, a legal challenge by non-rural hunters and fishermen in northern Sweden. Sweden has likewise refused to endorse the international convention on indigenous rights (ILO nr. 169 (1989). Article 14 states: "Rights of ownership and possession of …the lands which they traditionally occupy… shall be recognized." Sweden has been unwilling to accept this convention, one can surmise, because of what it might entail regarding land-claims.

Archaeology became directly involved in Swedish Saami land-rights issues in the 1995 reindeer grazing case in Härjedalen in which 30 Swedish farmers sued five Saami herding villages. The farmers challenged the customary winter herding rights of these villages. Dr. Inger Zachrisson, State Historical Museum, argued for the Saami in their contention that they had been in this region during the Iron Age at a minimum. Professor emeritus Evert Baudou of Umeå University did not feel comfortable assigning an identity to this archaeological material. The court accepted Baudou's arguments and the Saami lost the case in 1996, and then at the Swedish Court of Appeals in 2002. The herding villages consequently lost their customary rights to winter grazing in the region and are now expected to pay rent for such land-use.

It is for precisely these reasons that archaeology has an obligation to better define Saami prehistory and more accurately determine Saami land-uses over time. The coastal archaeology project presented here, which is nevertheless motivated by science not politics, can contribute valuable information about former Saami land-

uses in Sweden, in particular outside of the limits of the Lapland Border.

The cultural context of coastal sealing settlements

The Seal Hunting Cultures Project, undertaken in the late 1980s, has set the stage for the present investigation; it involved archaeology, ethnology, history, geography, Scandinavian languages and Saami languages. The project demonstrated the existence of seal hunting villages on the outer coasts of northern Sweden during the Late Iron Age, ca. AD 500 – 1300. Seal hunting had been an integral component of coastal economics from at least 5000 BC, and there is much to suggest the long-term continuity of these sealing societies (Broadbent 2000).

Hut complexes (sealing villages) were mapped and sampled along a 300 km stretch of the Bothnian coast from the Finnish border down to the area south of Umeå in the Province of Västerbotten. Interestingly, these huts often occur in clusters of three to five structures. The oval dwellings average 4 x 5 m and usually have centrally placed hearths. These small villages are very suggestive of collective, village-based, activities, directly comparable to Saami hunting organization (cf. Mulk 1994).

In addition to dwelling huts, there are smaller huts (3 x 3 m) that were probably used for keeping sheep/goats or reindeer. These are well known among the Saami in Sweden (Manker 1944; Stoor 1991). There are also low cobble walls, sometimes attached to dwellings, which could have been livestock enclosures/corrals.

Calibrated radiocarbon dates showed that the Bothnian huts belong primarily to the Viking Period, AD 800 - 1100. Osteological analysis demonstrates that these people were specialized in the taking of ringed seals. Sealing was undertaken on the ice of late winter (February through April), but was also practiced in the fall using nets, a technique going back to the Mesolithic period in this region (Broadbent 1979).

Other stone features, dated using a combination of radiocarbon, shoreline displacement and lichenometry, fall into later periods: stone labyrinths to AD 1400 – 1800; fishing harbors and chapel sites to AD 1300 – 1700; Russian (baking) ovens to AD 1400 – 1700, and compass roses to AD 1500 – 1700 (Broadbent 1987b). These features are associated with distinctive areas of the coastal landscape, especially sites with harbors. The sealers' huts, by contrast, were situated on exposed points, islands and beaches from which hunting expeditions could be launched.

The locations and the dates of these features suggest that there was a discontinuity between an older hunting and fishing society in the region, as represented by the hut complexes which ceased to be used by ca. AD 1300, and the expansion of a Scandinavian population that brought, among other things, state control of trade, taxation, Christianity and Hanseatic mercantilism, especially herring fisheries. The nature of and reasons for this discontinuity are major research questions in the proposed coastal Saami study.

A Bear Grave at Grundskatan

With new resources from the Northern Crossroads Project (Broadbent 2001b), the osteological material from Iron Age sealing sites could for the first time be systematically analyzed (Storå 2002). Not surprising, bones of ringed seals dominate along with a few bones from sheep/goats, large ungulates (moose or reindeer), hare, fish and birds.

The most intriguing results were, nevertheless, systematically buried bear bones in a sealer's hut at Grundskatan in Lövånger (Broadbent and Storå 2003). The hearth in this hut had previously been dated to AD 780 – 1020. The bear bone was subsequently dated to AD 890 – 1020. The bones from a single adult bear had been gathered together from all body parts, placed on the floor in the southeast corner of the hut and covered with a stone cairn. The radiocarbon dates and stratigraphy coincide and suggest that the hut was occupied, and subsequently ritually used, by the same group. This find can be classified as a ritual bear grave (Broadbent & Storå 2003). This practice is closely connected with Saami and circumpolar shamanism (Hallowell 1926; Zachrisson and Iregren 1974). Some 13 bear graves have been documented in northern Sweden, one of which, the Karats grave, dates to the same time period as Grundskatan, AD 890 – 1160 (Mulk & Iregren 1995). Some 30 Saami bear graves have been documented in northern Norway, four from

the Viking period, and most from the coastal regions (Myrstad 1996). More detailed documentation of the Grundskatan bear grave was undertaken in 2004. Soil chemistry was performed and supports the bear grave interpretation. Additional radiocarbon samples are being analysed.

This find is of immense significance and demonstrates the association of these hut complexes with the Saami. This further confirms the other similarities, including comparisons with the so-called *Stalo* huts in the mountains, which have already been established as being Saami hunting complexes. The bear grave at Grundskatan contextualizes the coastal hut complexes and opens the door to quite new questions regarding the coastal landscape.

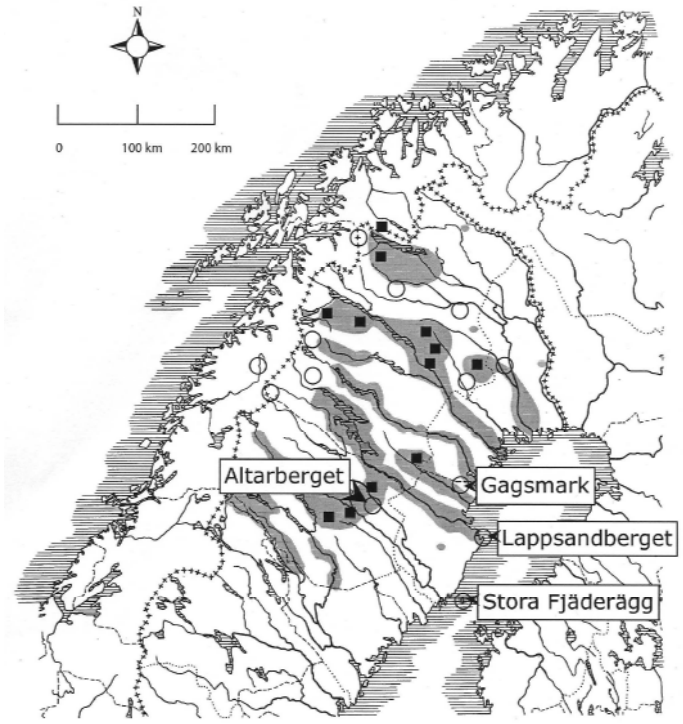
Circular Sacrificial Features

The bear grave might be viewed as an exception regarding the Västerbotten coastal region and it begs the question as to whether or not there is more archaeological evidence of Saami ritual activities in the context of the dwelling sites in the coastal zone.

Recognizing the importance of ritual practice among the Saami, a whole new class of sites are now being investigated in the project. These so-called circular sacrificial features were first noted in the coastal zone in an article by Britta Wennstedt Edvinger (1989). Numerous features at Gagsmark north of Åbyn were discovered in the survey of the coast in the late 1980s. Circular sacrificial features have been previously documented in the interior of Norrland (Manker 1957) and in Northern Norway (Vorren & Eriksen 1993). A feature of this type was more recently documented at Altarberget near Lycksele (Huggert 2000).

In the summer of 2004, we excavated a circular feature of this type on *Lappsandberget* (Lapp Sand Mountain) on Bjurön near Bjuröklubb. It had been previously recorded in the archaeological survey but did not correspond to anything known from Nordic archaeology. As a Saami feature it makes perfect sense, however, situated just below the crest of this mountain and in the vicinity of hut complexes. The place-name *Lappsandberget* suggests this mountain was indeed associated with the Saami. The site lies at ca 25 m.a.s.l. and once had a clear view of the sea.

These finds are paralleled by another hut complex in the coastal region, on Stora Fjäderägg Island, some distance offshore and north of Holmön Island. Not only are there numerous huts and cairns dating to the same time period as Grundskatan, there is a complex of 10 ritual structures lying above the 7 m elevation which would date to AD 1200. One of these features is a circular enclosure with a very distinctive stone, a probably *seite* or sacred stone, embedded in its wall. Plundered metal finds (a silver ring and bells) from the island have direct parallels to finds in the Saami metal sacrificial site of Gråträsk (Serning 1956, 1960).



Map of Upper Norrland showing distributions of Viking Period artifacts (gray), Saami metal sacrificial sites (black squares) and circular ritual sites (circles). The Saami sacrificial sites in the interior were abandoned in the 14th century, in connection with the cutting off of independent trade following the treaty with Novgorod in 1323.

The Västerbotten coast is notably without finds of longhouses or grave mounds and cemeteries, runestones, silver caches, iron ingots, forts or the characteristic Nordic place-names *vin*, *sta* and *hem*. The archaeological material reflects no

hierarchy, as manifested by the Iron Age graves and houses of Middle Norrland, and nothing in the folklore to suggest anything of the *Asa* belief system based on Nordic gods and rituals (Rathje 2001). In other words, while there is evidence that people lived in coastal Västerbotten during the Late Iron Age, most Nordic (Germanic) cultural and religious elements are lacking.

New fieldwork in Hälsingland

Britta Wennstedt Edvinger is developing a parallel study area to Lövånger in coastal Hälsingland, 550 km to the south. This region is only 300 km north of Stockholm. Coastal sites on Hornslandet near Hudiksvall are direct parallels to the hut complexes at Bjuröklubb and Stora Fjäderägg. Remarkably, these sites have already been viewed as being of "Lappish origin" which is reinforced by the local place-names *Lappmon* and *Lappmoberget* (Westberg 1964). Preliminary fieldwork carried out this fall documented, among other things, several circular features similar to those documented in Upper Norrland. There is a possibility that the Germanic settlements along these coasts were in fact enclaves and that customary Saami land-use formed the original settlement matrix of most of northern coastal Sweden. The region will be subject to more intense scrutiny and archaeological investigations in 2005.

Summary and conclusions

Evidence of Saami settlement in the coastal zone comes from a number of sources: oral history, written accounts, place-names, archaeological finds and artifacts, hut complexes, livestock enclosures and storage facilities, radiocarbon dates, osteological material, distinctive ritual features and soil chemistry. This pattern of land-use seems to have changed after AD 1300 and is probably connected with the expansion of Swedish agrarian communities, the expansion of the Church, state control of trade and taxation and the expansion of herring fisheries northward. Worsened ice conditions with the onset of the Little Ice Age might have also negatively impacted sealing. Another negative factor that probably affected the Bothnian communities was the Black Death which reached Sweden in 1342.

During the 14th century this northern region was referred to as *bona vacantia* by the Swedish state. Hunters, fisherman and herders, especially non-Christian peoples, were considered as nomadic and their lands as not settled. This justification was, in fact, used by the Swedish King Magnus Eriksson to encourage Swedish settlement of the North Bothnian coast following the Treaty with Novgorod.

This research project is focusing on sites in Västerbotten and Hälsingland, two coastal regions 550 kilometers apart and extending from Upper Norrland to within 300 kilometers of Stockholm. Beyond archaeology itself, the new project has considerable implications regarding the recognition of the Saami as indigenous people and their antiquity, diversity and former territory in Sweden.

Acknowledgements

This project is supported by the National Science Foundation (ARC 0352249). Special thanks is also given to Britta Wennstedt Edvinger for her expertise and valuable collaboration on this project.

References cited

Baudou, Evert. 1995. *Norrlands Forntid*. Ett historiskt perspektiv. CEWE-Förlaget. Őrnskoldsvik.

Beckman, Lars. 1996. *Samerna – En genetiskt unik urbefolkning*. Institutionen för genetic. Umeå universitet. Umeå
.

Broadbent, Noel D. 2001a. Fulfilling the Promise. On Swedish Archaeology and Archaeology in Sweden. *Current Swedish Archaeology* 9: 25-38. Stockholm.

Broadbent Noel D. 200lb. Northern Pasts. Northern Futures. *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 13: 6-21.Ottawa.

Broadbent, Noel D. 2000. Seal Hunters, Labyrinth Builders and Church Villagers. The Seal Hunting Cultures Project. *Tidsperspektiv* 1/2000:7-21. Umeå.

Broadbent, Noel D. 1987a. Iron Age and Medieval Seal Hunting Sites. *Center for Arctic Cultural Research. Research Reports 5*. Umeå University. Umeå.

Broadbent, Noel D. 1987b. Lichenometry and Archaeology. Center for Arctic Cultural Research. Research Reports 2. Umeå University. Umeå.

Broadbent, Noel D & Rabbe Sjöberg. 1990. Så gamla är labyrinterna. *Västerbotten* 4:292-297. Umeå.

Broadbent, Noel D. & Jan Storå. 2003. En björngrav i Grundskatan.
Populär arkeologi 21/1: 3-6. Lärbro.

Collinder, Björn. 1953. Lapparna. En bok om samefolkets forntid och nutid. Forum. Stockholm.

Hallowell, A.I. 1926. Bear Ceremonialism in the Northern Hemisphere. *American Anthropologist*. New Series.

Hedman, Sven-Donald. 2003. *Boplatser och offerplatser*. Studie Archaeologica Universitatis Umensis 17. Umeå.

Huggert, Anders. 2000. A Church at Lycksele and a sacrificial site on Altarberget—the two worlds of the Saami. *Acta Borealia* 1-2000:51-75. Tromsø

Lundmark, Lennart. 2002."Lappen är ombytlig, ostadig och obekväm". Svenska statens samepolitik i racismens tidevarv. Norrlands universitetsförlag. Umeå.

Magnus, Olaus. 1555. *Historia om de nordiska folken 1-4*. Gidlunds förlag. Stockholm.

Manker, Ernst. 1944. *Lapsk kultur vid Stora Luleälvs Källsjöar*. Acta Lapponica IV. Stockholm.

Manker, Ernst. 1957. *Lapparnas heliga ställen*. Acta Lapponica 13. Stockholm.

Mulk, Inga-Maria.1994. *Sirkas. Ett fångstsamhälle i förändring Kr. f -1600 e.Kr*. Studia Archaeologica Universitatis Umensis 6.Umeå

Mulk, Inga-Maria & Elisabeth Iregren. 1995.Björngraven i Karats. *Duoddaris* 9. Ajtte. Jokkmokk.

Myrstad, Ragnhild. 1996. *Bjørngraver i Nord-Norge*. Institutt for samfunnsvetenskapp. Universitetet i Tromsø. Tromsø

Olsen, Bjørnar. 1994. Boesettning og samfunn i Finnmarks forhistorie. Oslo.

Rathje, Lillian. 2001. *Amasoner och jägaren. Kön/genderkonstruktioner i norr*. Studia Archaeologica Universitatis Umensis 14. Umeå

Schefferus, Johannes (1673) 1953. *Lappland (Lapponia*). Nordiska Museet. Acta lapponica VII. Stockholm.

Serning, Inga. 1956. Lapska offerplatsfynd från järnålder och medeltid i de svenska lappmarkarna. Acta Lapponica1. Stockholm.

Serning. Inga. 1960. *Övre Norrlands järnålder*. Skrifter utgivna av Vetenskapliga Biblioteket i Umeå 4. Umeå

Stoor, Krister. 1991. Reindeer Herding and Stock Farming in the Swedish Part of Sapmi. *Readings in Saami History Culture and Language II* .(R. Kvist, ed.).Misc. Publications 12:85-92. Umeå.

Storå, Jan (2002).Osteologisk analys av ben från tomtningslokaler i Övre Norrlands skärgård Grundskatan, Bjuröklubb, Jungfruhamn, Stor Rebben. (manuscript).

Vorren Ørnulv. & Hans K. Eriksen. 1993. *Samiske offerplatser i Varanger*. Tromsø museums skrifter XXIV. Tromsø.

Wennstedt, Britta. 1989. Rituella plaster i Övre Norrlands kustland. *Oknytt*. Vol. 3-4: 23-34. Umeå.

Westberg, Hans. 1964. Lämningar efter gammal fångstkultur i Hornlandsområdet. *Fornvännen* 56. Stockholm.

Westerlund, Ernst. 1965. Lapsk bosättning vid kusten ? *Västerbotten* 1965: 203-211. Umeå.

Zachrisson, Inger et al. 1997. Möten i gränsland Samer och germaner i Mellanskandinavian.
Statens historiska museum. Stockholm.

Zachrisson, Inger & Elisabeth Iregren. 1974. *Lappish Bear Graves in Northern Sweden*. Early Norrland 5. KVHAA. Stockholm.