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## 'IT COULD BE ONE THING OR ANOTHER' – ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CATEGORY

### Abstract

This article explores the history of the archaeological category *Sámi circular offering sites*, which refers to certain dry wall structures in Finnmark and Troms in northern Norway. In recent years the term has been used more frequently outside this geographical area too, at times to refer to structures vastly different from those originally labelled as *circular offering sites*. Such interpretations may be questioned, but perhaps it is the category itself that needs to be re-evaluated; a study of the research history suggests that the term is a result of a mid-19th century hypothesis that was established due to a lack of other plausible explanations rather than based on indicative finds or on local traditions. This interpretation has later been adopted by key researchers and has never really been challenged by any alternative hypothesis. This article proposes that the stone structures in question could represent other cultural phenomena, and that this needs further investigation.

Keywords: Sámi circular offering sites, northern Norway, stone circles, research history, archaeological categories

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### INTRODUCTION

In this article the origins of the archaeological category of *Sámi circular offering sites* is discussed. A lack of descriptions of such circular dry wall structures in older written sources and the scarcity of local traditions related to them have initiated a need to investigate on what grounds these structures have been labelled *offering sites*. Recent discoveries from field observations and previous archaeological finds indicate that this type of monuments may be in need of reinterpretation, even if there are signs of a more recent offering practice related to them.

The present case study serves as an example of how archaeological categories, especially categories with long traditions, tend to become archaeological truths that remain largely unquestioned because they are assumed to be already substantiated. Such categories entail interpretations beyond function, including i.a. chronology and socio-political contexts, and they are often maintained through repetition by both local and professional voices (cf. e.g. Myrvoll 2010a; 2010b: 90–1).

The article debates the relationship between the local and the professional view on the Sámi circular offering sites and the relevance this has for the interpretation of these monuments. The focus will be mainly on the stone circles in Finnmark and northern Troms (Norway) that were first described as offering sites.

### SÁMI CIRCULAR OFFERING SITES

Sámi circular offering site is by now a well-known archaeological category in northern Norway, although not all archaeologists have first-hand knowledge of such structures. The monument type has previously been described to consist of circular walls with a diameter of 6 to 9 m and a height up to 100–125 cm, built from stones found in the immediate terrain (Fig. 1). The stone walls often enclose a mound or cairn presumed to have been the equivalent of an altar where the *sieidi*<sup>1</sup> i.e. an offering stone or a wooden figure, was placed (Vorren 1985: 70–2; Vorren & Eriksen 1993; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 222–3).



Fig. 1. Sámi circular offering site by Geaimmejávri, Karasjok, Finnmark. Photo: M. Spangen.

Based mainly on a radiocarbon dating of charcoal, found in the 1970s within a stone circle on the headland Angsnes (Varanger, Finnmark), with calibrated age AD 1425–1615 (420±75 BP; T-9935), the circular offering sites have been assumed to date from this time period (cf. Vorren & Eriksen 1993: 75; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 223). Within an ongoing PhD project about the Sámi

circular offering sites, a sample of woodworks from the Geaimmejávri site in Karasjok, Finnmark (Fig. 2), has been radiocarbon-dated to cal. AD 1260–1390 (682±30 BP; Ua-44725), indicating a somewhat earlier period of use (Spangen 2013).

As the term *circular offering site* indicates, the general understanding has been that these stone structures are Sámi offering sites. This was the initial assumption for the quite extensive studies of these sites by the late ethnographer Ørnulv Vorren between the 1950s and 1990s. Unfortunately, results and finds from his site inventories and small excavations in at least 20 structures were only partly published (e.g. Vorren 1956; 1958; 1982; 1985; 1987; Vorren & Eriksen 1993). Following his general conclusions, it has been assumed that circular offering sites are mainly associated with the northernmost areas of Norway, more specifically Finnmark county and northern parts of Troms county. Yet, apart from mentions in publications concerning other subjects (e.g. Schanche 2000: 283–4), the sites have so far received little attention from archaeologists in northern Norway in terms of further research or interpretation. Only the archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen has attempted to

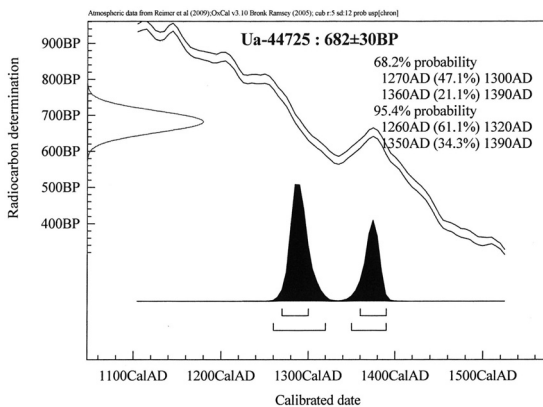


Fig. 2. Calibration curve for radiocarbon dating of a piece of wood (worked pine) from the Geaimmejávri site.

include them into a broader socio-political context, proposing that the stone circles were Sámi reactions against the increased church building and missionary activity in the northernmost Sámi areas in the Late Middle Ages (Olsen 2002: 47–8; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 222–3).

More recently, a number of variously shaped structures elsewhere in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia have also been suggested to be Sámi offering sites, in part comparing them with the circular offering sites of Finnmark and Troms. In addition to circular dry walls quite similar to the last-mentioned, these sites include circles and ovals of a single layer of rocks or slabs, and semi-circular, rectangular, triangular, or pentagonal stone and/or earth structures of various sizes (e.g. Stenvik 1983; Pareli 1991; Huggert 2000; Vik et al. 2000: 42–3; Wennstedt Edvinger & Winka 2001; Manyukhin & Lobanova 2002; Zachrisson 2004: 25; Dunfjeld-Aagård 2005: 81–2; Wennstedt Edvinger & Broadbent 2006; Karjalainen 2007; Bergstøl 2008: 107; Broadbent 2010; Saloranta 2011). These sites and their interpretations accentuate certain fundamental questions about this category of cultural heritage, such as the geographical and chronological distribution of this phenomenon, and what morphological criteria should be indicative of a Sámi circular offering site. In addition,

previous research has yielded scarce details about what activities were related to these stone structures, or the significance of these activities in their cultural and socio-political contexts.

New surveys and control inventories within the PhD project ‘Sámi circular offering sites’ (Stockholm University) indicate that the previous registrations within this category include a range of different monuments that probably represent a variety of cultural phenomena (Spangen 2013; forthcoming a). Among them there are structures like shooting blinds and caches, but also some monuments that are more difficult to understand and interpret, including the ‘typical’ dry wall structures in Varanger that were first labelled *circular offering sites* (Fig. 3). The function of these monuments may not be immediately apparent. However, using the evidence currently available, the interpretation of them as offering sites may also be brought into question.

#### REASONS FOR RE-EVALUATING THE SÁMI CIRCULAR OFFERING SITES

There is a range of reasons for re-evaluating the interpretation of Sámi circular offering sites. Firstly, if these stone structures are to be understood as offering sites, they represent something quite



Fig. 3. Sámi circular offering site at Čiesti/Fugleberget, Nesseby, Finnmark. Photo: M. Spangen.

unusual in the Sámi ritual context as we know it, being a substantial man-made delineation of a sacred site. Usually, pre-Christian Sámi offering sites known from older written and ethnographical sources, as well as from preserved traditions, are related to specific topographical elements, for instance, more or less anthropomorphic cliffs, split boulders, entire landscape features such as mountains or lakes, etc. The sacred areas around these are usually not clearly delineated (cf. Myrvoll 2008). It may, however, be argued that this only shows a variation in Sámi rituals and religious expressions over time, which would be very interesting in itself. If the stone circles do, in fact, represent delineations of offering sites, the main questions would be when and why a need emerged to fence in certain offering sites with stone walls, sometimes of a considerable height and width, which also make them quite conspicuous in the landscape. Why would such substantial buildings be needed at offering sites, during a seemingly limited time period? Certain sources do describe other more perishable forms of delineation at some offering sites, such as placing reindeer antlers around a *sieidi* (e.g. Qvigstad 1926: 345; Schefferus 1956 [1673]: 140 [ill.]). Still, this is hardly comparable, as it is a much less laborious task, and it may indeed be seen as a ritual act in itself, as antlers were also offering matter (e.g. Tornæus 1900 [1672]: 27; Fellman 1906: 15; Olsen 1910 [c 1715]: 12; Schefferus 1956 [1673]: 146).

Another peculiarity of these assumed offering sites is that despite the previously mentioned mound or cairn in the middle that has been suggested to represent a foundation for the *sieidi*, no such offering stone or wooden figure has ever been found standing within a circular offering site. Admittedly, at the mentioned site of Angsnes, Vorren found three pieces of a broken stone, which he interpreted as the *sieidi*; the fragmentation coincided with the traditional explanation for the lack of *sieidi* stones in these structures, namely that they had been destroyed by missionaries (Vorren & Eriksen 1993: 201). Yet, this notion is also disputable. Even if the Sámi had been exposed to Christianity since the conversion of their Norse and Russian neighbours during the end of the Viking Period and the Early Middle Ages (c 1000–1200 AD), and even if some Sámi individuals and communities had adopted Christianity or Christian beliefs and rituals during the

Middle Ages (in Norway defined as the period 1050–1536 AD), missionary activity focusing specifically on the Sámi population was only intensified in northern Russia in the 16th century, in Sweden in the 17th century, and in Norway at the beginning of the 18th century. In Norway, where the Lutheran reformation was enforced in 1536, the focus of the missionary activity was to convert each individual Sámi through persuasion, which included convincing the converts of their previous gods' demonic qualities. Another main method was to destroy paraphernalia such as drums – and offering sites (cf. Rydving 1995: 62ff, 92). In order to do this, knowledge about the old Sámi religion and gods was needed, as well as knowledge about the offering sites and their whereabouts.

The main written sources we have to pre-Christian Sámi religion, especially in northern Norway, are mostly compiled to this end. It is very peculiar that these sources do not mention circular offering sites at all, not even in the areas with the highest frequency of such structures, like Varanger and Porsanger in Finnmark (e.g. Olsen 1910 [c 1715]; Leem 1975 [1767]). Isaac Olsen, teacher and missionary in Finnmark from 1703 to 1716, and Knud Leem, a priest and linguist working in Finnmark from 1725 to 1734, have been cited as sources for information about circular offering sites (cf. e.g. Vorren & Eriksen 1993: 69, 201, 203), but, in fact, these writers only mention two place names in Varanger and Porsanger respectively where they knew of offering sites, and where stone circles or similar structures have later been found (Olsen 1910 [c 1715], Leem 1975 [1767]: 439–40, cf. Vorren & Eriksen 1993: 69; 203). They do not mention stone circles or circular offering sites *per se*.

This lack of mentions by Olsen, Leem, and other writers has been explained by suggesting that the circular offering sites had already gone out of use when these sources were written (Vorren & Eriksen 1993: 201), but that would mean that all the *sieidi* in the circular offering sites in northern Norway were destroyed before the intensified Christianization during the early 18th century, which seems implausible given the irregularity of earlier missionary enterprises. Reports about sacrilege of this kind rather suggest that this activity was particularly common among Norwegian missionaries in the 1720s (Vorren & Eriksen 1993: 201; Rydving 1995: 65). There are sources telling



*Fig. 4. View from one circular offering site to two others in Kramvik, Vardø, Finnmark. Photo: M. Spangen.*

about the Sámi's own destruction of offering sites, performed both by converted Christians and those maintaining the indigenous religion. The latter group could destroy and abandon offering stones and sites when unsatisfied with the effects of the sacrifices (cf. Rydving 1995: 66). Still, that this kind of destruction should have affected all of the circular offering sites in the vast geographical area where they are to be found would be a rather astounding coincidence.

Among other peculiarities that support the reassessment of the circular offering sites is the frequency of such structures in the area of Kramvik and Grunnesbukt, Vardø, on the northern side of the outer Varanger Fjord in eastern Finnmark. There may be a relatively high occurrence of other types of offering sites in certain areas, especially if we combine well-known larger 'official' offering sites related to conspicuous landmarks with more inconspicuous 'private' offering sites related to smaller stones and other topographical features, as well as offerings made at occupation sites, etc. The smaller private offering sites, however, are often related to spirits guarding limited landscape spaces, such as fishing lakes, parts of rivers or woods, etc., which means they are also likely to be distributed accordingly.

In the Kramvik and Grunnesbukt area there are ten circular offering sites registered so far within a small area of about 2 square kilometres, partly within viewing distance of each other (Fig. 4). Given the size and pronounced demarcation of these assumed offering sites, I would have expected them to be mainly used as such in larger communal ceremonies, rather than on a family or personal level. Continuing this interpretation, the density of these circular structures in this area could suggest a cluster of holy sites that all deserved their own fenced-in offering site, or that the area itself was sacred, and that large congregations met regularly and had to be divided into several groups to perform offerings. Nevertheless, based on knowledge about the distribution of other Sámi offering sites, I find it more likely that the stone structures in Kramvik and Grunnesbukt represent some other frequent activity in this area. It has previously been noted that at least some of the structures could be related to a number of scree graves in the area, but the number of circular offering sites still seems to be very high compared to the number of recorded graves. Besides, most of the structures are actually more closely related to shooting blinds and caches than to graves (Vorren & Eriksen 1993: 204; Spangen 2013).

During his studies, Ørnulv Vorren performed small excavations in most of the circular offering sites he recorded. In some of them he found both bones and pieces of wood that were partly collected and stored in Tromsø Museum. The finds are only briefly mentioned in his publications, and so far it has not been possible to locate any official reports from the investigations, but luckily Vorren's field notes remain in his private archive<sup>2</sup>, making it possible to, at least partially, reconstruct his studies. In these notes Vorren does mention finds of animal bones of various kinds, although the exact species and context within the stone circles are not always described. The interpretation of the finds as offering matter seems to rely entirely on the assumption that these structures are offering sites, though this is not explicitly discussed. Since most of the material was collected during the 1950s–1970s, when radiocarbon dating of bones was rare, the finds are not dated. However, the ones remaining in Tromsø Museum are under investigation within the ongoing PhD project. Osteological evidence, as well as dating and other analyses, will surely enable a better understanding of the activities at these sites.

In addition to bones, Vorren found remains of woodwork, a feature that is described by several writers, either concerning pieces of wood lying on top of the stone walls or woodwork found on or in the ground within the structures (Friis 1871a: 140; 1871b: 91; Nissen 1928: 185; Vorren 1985: 71; Vorren & Eriksen 1993: 201). Judging from these sources, at least some of the so-called circular offering sites have had a wooden wall, rampart, or fence on top of the stone enclosures, possibly supporting a roof or other cover. This indicates a major building effort to create a firm, physical hindrance, rather than merely to outline or seclude an offering site.

Another bewildering fact is the scarcity of ethnographic records and local traditions about the use of circular offering sites. Knowledge about other types of Sámi offering sites has survived in local communities up until today (e.g. Myrvoll 2008: 45–6), and the lack of traditions relating to the clearly visible circular stone structures is particularly surprising in areas where they are quite abundant, such as in Varanger. Admittedly, there are local stories and customs related to a few of the sites, but, as I will argue below, this lore could be of quite recent origin.

## FROM HYPOTHESIS TO FACT

Because of the ambiguous evidence described above, a need emerged in the ongoing project to investigate on what grounds these structures have been labelled *offering sites* in the first place.

In his publications, Ørnulv Vorren includes references to famous written sources about Sámi offering sites and Sámi religion and culture in general, but the main reference for the concept of stone circles as offering sites seems to be a note written by Andreas Georg Nordvi, presumably in the 1850s (Nordvi n.d; Vorren & Eriksen 1993: 194, 202–3).

Nordvi (1821–1892) was born and grew up on his father's trading station at Mortensnes in Varanger, Finnmark. As mentioned, Varanger is an area with plentiful circular offering sites. Nordvi was sent to Løten in the south of Norway to study at the age of 9, moving on to Copenhagen at the age of 11. There he later studied zoology and archaeology under the acknowledged professor, Japetus Steenstrup. In 1840, at the age of 19, he was forced to interrupt his studies; his father died and he had to go back to Finnmark to take over the family business of the trading station at Mortensnes (cf. Kleppe Johansen 1974: 21).

Mortensnes happens to be an impressively dense cultural heritage site, including abundant tent and house grounds from about 10.000 BP up until the Middle Ages, the famous offering stone *Ceavccegeagde*, the 'Fish Oil Stone', which is an impressive raised stone slab situated in the middle of 14 concentric stone circles, several hundred Sámi graves in the vast scree area east of the trading station (now in ruins), as well as a circular offering site to the east of the large scree burial field, and another such site on the hill Čiesti or Fugleberget ('Bird Mountain') somewhat further east (see Fig. 3). With birdlife and archaeology on his doorstep, Nordvi could maintain his academic interests, and performed many investigations and excavations, particularly of the graves in the area. For many years he kept in contact with Steenstrup, who was initially very interested in the human osteological material and objects from the Sámi graves. Nordvi seems to have provided these finds for loan out of a genuine interest in the research, but as he gradually got into financial difficulties he ventured into selling skeletons from graves to several European scientific institutions (Scanche 2000: 27–8, 33–4). Unfortunately, Steenstrup's

interest in this material seems to have decreased inversely with Nordvi's need to sell it to him, and in the end Steenstrup stopped answering Nordvi's letters (Nordvi 1907). Nordvi, however, continued to send reports about monuments and finds to the newly established national antiquities collection in Kristiania (Oslo), Universitetets Oldsaksamling (Schanche 2000: 100–1), today called the Museum of Cultural History. In 1877 Nordvi went bankrupt, partly, it seems, because of his famous hospitality and generosity towards people in need. He sold Mortensnes and moved to Kristiania, where he worked at the museum for a while (Kleppe Johansen 1974: 25).

Among Nordvi's reports, still to be found in the museum archives, is the short record of eight stone circles in Varanger, mentioned above. In this note Nordvi states that they have 'apparently' (No. *visstnok*) been used in Sámi pre-Christian worship (Nordvi n.d.). The note is not dated, but it was presumably written in the 1850s. Vorren assumes that the interpretation must be based on Nordvi's knowledge of local traditions (Vorren & Eriksen 1993: 202–3), but the note itself gives no information as to why Nordvi gives this explanation of the stone circles. In the given context, the Norwegian word '*visstnok*', could mean either 'according to rumour' or that Nordvi finds this interpretation the most likely one. In any case, he does not state any source for this belief.

However, another handwritten report is filed in the Museum of Cultural History's archives, which includes a section about the circular stone structures in Varanger. Judging from his publications and notes, Vorren does not seem to have been acquainted with the mention of circular offering sites in this report, nor have I seen this part referred to in other publications. The thorough report is written by Parliament representative and bailiff of eastern Finnmark, Even Saxlund, in 1853, following the investigations he performed in Varanger during the autumn of 1852, when he recorded and excavated ancient monuments and particularly scree graves, assisted by A. G. Nordvi (Saxlund 1853). Saxlund's report is partly a reaction to Nordvi's surprising actions succeeding these investigations: for some unknown reason, he took it upon himself to send an account of the excavations to Steenstrup in Copenhagen without mentioning Saxlund at all. Steenstrup immediately had the report published in the Danish Royal Academy's annual report in Nordvi's

name (Nordvi 1853). When Saxlund discovered this, he hurriedly sent a separate report, alongside the finds he had in his possession, to the antiquities collection in Kristiania, where, in his view, all of the finds should be deposited collectively. Erroneously, he thought Nordvi had sent finds from the same grave contexts to Copenhagen, and he saw this as highly problematic. At this point, however, Nordvi still had the remaining finds in his possession (cf. Schanche 2000: 26–7).

While the report Nordvi sent to Copenhagen is somewhat superficial, the report by Saxlund is more extensive and detailed. It mentions several features and investigations that are not noted by Nordvi, although Nordvi continued to send in finds and short reports from the fieldwork to the Oldsaksamlingen for another 20 years (Schanche 2000: 100–1). Hence, Saxlund's report has been an important source concerning the early excavations of scree graves in Varanger, but, in addition, he also devotes several pages to the enigmatic stone circles in the area. Saxlund thoroughly describes three stone circles that he has registered and measured, and discusses what they might be. He also mentions three others that he has not had time to visit, but which are included in Nordvi's presumably later report.

Among the possible interpretations that Saxlund discusses and excludes are functions such as houses, hunting blinds, and pens for milking reindeer, which, as he puts it, 'some' have proposed. He does suggest that the structures could be related to pre-Christian Sámi rituals, but it is obvious that this is a hypothesis based on the lack of other likely explanations, rather than a conclusion drawn from the evidence available. In fact, because of the similarity in their construction with that of the scree graves, he suggests that the stone circles could be large unfinished and unused graves for several individuals (Saxlund 1853). Considering that his investigations were performed in cooperation with Nordvi, this discussion in the report indicates that Nordvi in 1852 was not able to provide conclusive local information as to what these stone circles were. Instead several suggestions seem to have been made by him or other locals and discussed by Saxlund. On this basis I find it possible that Nordvi's description of the stone circles as sites related to pre-Christian Sámi worship was in fact based on the hypothesis presented by Saxlund, rather than on local traditions.

There are other 19th century sources that mention the stone circles as offering sites. The linguist and priest, Jens Andreas Friis, is frequently referred to in later publications (e.g. Qvigstad 1926: 335; Nissen 1928: 186; Vorren 1985). Following a journey through Finnmark, Kola Peninsula, and Karelia in 1867, he published two books in 1871, one about his journey and one about Sámi mythology. The stone circles are mentioned in both, and he says he has seen them all over Finnmark. He also describes seeing decaying woodworks on top of the walls of at least one of them and explains the structures as walls built by the Sámi around their *sieidi* in olden times (Friis 1871a: 140; 1871b: 91).

Had Friis been an independent source it would have increased the likelihood of this explanation being a local tradition, but he visited Nordvi at Mortensnes on his journey and on that occasion went out to look at both the scree graves and the circular offering site in the area together with his host (Friis 1871b: 89–91). Nordvi is not referred to as a source in Friis' book, but it seems very likely that the two men discussed the function of the circular offering sites. Consequently, Friis' explanation could be informed by Nordvi's opinion. As none of the two men disclose any sources for the interpretation, it cannot be ruled out that they did in fact have local information for the stone structures being offering sites. Yet, considering the lack of mention in older written sources and the uncertainty demonstrated by Saxlund as late as in 1853, I find reason to assume that the explanation goes back to his hypothesis.

Among other notes on the circular offering sites in the 19th century are the records in the church registers in Nesseby, Varanger, which are explicitly said to be based on information from Nordvi (Vorren & Eriksen 1993: 111). A more intriguing reference is a mention of a stone circle by forest manager Axel Hagemann in his book *Blandt lapper og bumænd* (1889), which compiles various facts and stories from an area much further south in Norway, i.e. Saltdal in Nordland county. Hagemann refers to a stone structure south of [northern] Bjellåvatn that was 1 m high and 4–5 m in diameter. He states that there was no 'idol' in it in his day, and that nobody made offerings to it anymore, but that the nomadic reindeer herding Sámi still had a dwelling place close by their ancestors' old offering site (Hagemann 1889: 61). Despite surveying the area he describes, I have not

been able to locate this structure (Spangen forthcoming a). Neither does it seem to be known to locals today or to have been found during previous site inventories in the same area (Sæther 1975). Unfortunately, Hagemann also fails to give any sources for his interpretation, thus making it difficult to conclude if it was based on information from the local Sámi, or on his own ideas. He could actually have been inspired by reading what J.A. Friis had already published about these structures in 1871. This can only remain speculation, but it cannot be excluded, both because the books Friis wrote were highly popular with the general public and because Hagemann went from being a forest bailiff in Saltdal to becoming the forest assistant in Alta, western Finnmark, before publishing his 1889 book. Hence he would have had particular interest in reading Friis' accounts about Finnmark.

A frequent source when it comes to Sámi offering sites in Norway is the extensive catalogue of these sites compiled in 1926 by Just A. Qvigstad, a Tromsø-based scholar who was highly accomplished and productive concerning all aspects of Sámi language and culture. His compilation was based on the written sources available and on his own observations. Apart from referring to the description of the Varanger stone circles in the Nesseby church book and the work of Friis (1871a), Olsen (1910 [c 1715]), Leem (1975 [1767]), etc., he included several stone circles he himself had recorded during his travels in northern Norway. Notably, he always describes these structures purely as stone circles without reference to local traditions or written sources about their use as offering sites, apart from the stone circle that had previously been published by Hagemann, which he describes as 'apparently an old offering site' (Qvigstad 1926: 354, my translation).

## LOCAL TRADITIONS

After surveying circular offering sites for the last 5–6 years (the interest started before launching the PhD project in 2012), I am left with the general impression that people who live in and use the relevant areas today usually do not have that much knowledge about these sites, apart from what they have heard from visiting scholars, local museums, at school, etc., or read in various publications. It should be noted that although there has been a focus on contact with locals in the



ongoing project, information has usually been retrieved through regular conversations with people I have met in these areas, sometimes seeking out possible tradition holders named by others, but not through systematic interviews or questionnaires. It would be preferable to investigate this issue closer in a more methodical way, not least because gathering traditions often depends on having the time to build a trusting relationship with the tradition holders. Still, it is interesting that very little traditional knowledge concerning the circular offering sites has been revealed so far. On the other hand, the few definite examples of local traditions relating to these structures should not be ignored.

In 1928, Kristian Nissen describes a site at Bejalgnjai, on the southern side of the River Iešjohka in Karasjok, inner Finnmark, which he had visited in 1908. Without further elaboration, he says that both the nomadic and sedentary Sámi of the area have knowledge of this site as an old offering site. It could perhaps be debated if the Sámi were talking about the whole scree area where the features are located, or the specific stone structures that Nissen describes, which include both a 'classical' circular offering site and several smaller stone structures. His record does, however, in the very least suggest that there was an understanding among the Sámi in Karasjok in the early 20th century that the stone circle here was an offering site.

The question is if this was an old tradition, or a new understanding inspired by the scholarly interpretations during the second half of the 19th century. The local Sámi, of course, did not live in an isolated vacuum; rather, they were continuously interacting with officials, researchers, and travellers in Finnmark, and with the opinions these people brought with them. For that matter, there is no reason why the Sámi themselves could not have read or heard the accounts and interpretations of the stone structures articulated by, for instance, Friis, and adopted these as plausible explanations. Still, I find Nissen's observation important and interesting as a possible sign of a local tradition in Karasjok at the beginning of the 20th century.

In a nearby area I have been made aware of another tradition relating to a circular offering site. Following the wishes of my informants, I will not give their names or go into too much detail, but the story is mainly an account about how an

older, now deceased, member of their family was very eager to protect this site from developments in the late 1960s because 'it was not to be messed with'. My informants did emphasize that their knowledge came from older family members, not from something they had read or heard elsewhere, and they clearly understood the information they had been given as an age-old tradition. However, they also told me that their family moved into the area sometime in the second half of the 19th century, which leaves open the possibility that this is a family tradition of a rather late origin. Despite this reservation, I am certainly not dismissing the information given. The fact that there are stories and emotions related to the circular offering site in question today will, in any case, have implications on both the interpretation of the material and on ethical issues that need to be considered in the present research project (cf. Myrvoll 2010a).

The only other tradition I myself have been made aware of so far stems from Karlebotn, Nesseby, Varanger, where a local Sámi man (now c. 60 years old) has recounted how his uncle taught him to throw berries into the circular offering site on Biekkanoaivi, which is situated on the isthmus between the Varanger Fjord and the Tana River valley, on his way home from berry picking. As he pointed out, this was not called *offering*, as that kind of thing had been banned for centuries, it was just something you were supposed to do. My informant also thought it was usual among several locals at the time, not only his uncle. This is clearly an indication of a local tradition that could be seen to acknowledge the stone structure as an offering site. Yet, this is also one of the sites that Nordvi, certainly an influential local voice, includes in his report on stone circles as offering sites as early as the 1850s.

Interestingly, the same informant told me that the Biekkanoaivi stone circle had been used for the storage of hay harvested on the surrounding bogs. This behaviour is ambiguous, compared with the reverence often shown to known old Sámi offering sites, although the disrespect for and suppression of traditional Sámi culture in general and specifically anything related to their pre-Christian religion, was undeniably well established and pronounced by the first half of the 20th century. In the same category of information is the description Nordvi himself gives in his 1850s note about another circular offering site by the village



*Fig. 5. Altered circular offering site in Karlebotn at the bottom of the scree, and the village in the background. Photo: M. Spangen.*

of Karlebotn (Fig. 5). It had, he says, been partly destroyed because stones had been taken from it to be used as building materials. Although it is not stated explicitly, it seems likely that the stones were taken by the local Sámi living in Karlebotn, as the area at large is quite rocky with many screes and there is no obvious reason for anyone else to go here to get building materials. Again, it seems to indicate a less respectful attitude than would have been expected had it been known as an old offering site among the locals.

In general the known local traditions are few and of somewhat uncertain origin. Considering the lack of mention of circular offering sites in the written sources from the 17th and 18th centuries, it is possible that the traditions are of a later date and perhaps inspired by scholarly interpretations of these stone structures during the 19th and 20th centuries.

### CONSTRUCTING AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUTH

When Vorren started his investigations of the circular offering sites in the 1950s he had texts by both Qvigstad and Friis, the records in Nesseby

church book, as well as Nordvi's original 1850s note stating that the stone structures were offering sites, and he had no obvious reason to distrust these sources. Knowing that Nordvi was a local himself, it is highly understandable that Vorren assumed Nordvi had this information from the Sámi in Varanger, and hence based his work on these sites through almost 40 years on an interpretation of them as offering sites. His excavations were performed mainly to find offering matter and datable material (at the time charcoal was thought to be preferable). The bones that he retrieved were from reindeer and canids, which mainly coincided with written sources descriptions of sacrifice of reindeer and dogs by the Sámi. Wooden remains were thought to be parts of palisades or fences on top of the stone walls, or in some cases the remains of a wooden idol or something to place the offerings onto (Vorren 1985: 75–6). The relative proximity to hunting facilities, such as pitfall systems and to graves, led to an interpretation emphasizing their use in rituals related to hunting and burials.

Vorren travelled extensively in northern Norway while doing this research and published several articles and books where the interpretation

was maintained. I find it likely that he and other archaeologists working in northern Norway have been the main source of local knowledge about these sites during the last six–seven decades. Until now the interpretation has not been contested, and the starting point of the ongoing PhD project was also an understanding of the stone circles as offering sites. However, I believe that the facts and inferences referred to above are, in the very least, enough to initiate a rethinking of this paradigm. The conclusion so far is that we do not have convincing archaeological, ethnographical, or historical data to substantiate that the stone structures in question were originally built and used as Sámi offering sites. It remains a hypothesis that needs to be tested, and perhaps contested.

Interestingly, similar structures in Finland have traditionally been given other explanations, i.a. as meat caches, graves, and wolf traps. Only recently have they been compared with the material on the Norwegian side of the border, and suggested to be offering sites. However, the studies in question have been quite limited, and conclude that further research is needed (Karjalainen 2007; Saloranta 2011).

The ongoing PhD project is focusing on Norwegian and Swedish material, but the results will, of course, be highly relevant for the interpretation of the Finnish material. The current studies include at a macro level surveying, description, and mapping of a large number of structures in a vast geographical area, as well as at a micro level small-scale excavations and case studies. As said at the beginning of this article, the category includes a range of morphologically varying stone structures that probably represent a variety of cultural phenomena. Among the hypotheses that have been developed and which are now being investigated further are functions as caches or storages, traps, places for processing hunting produce, foundations for seamarks – and ritual sites.

Results from this work will be presented in forthcoming publications, but in the present context it should be mentioned that at least one of the structures that were partly excavated in 2013, a site by Gálggojávri in the inner part of the Skibotn valley in Troms county, shows very obvious signs of a later tradition for using it as an offering site: a range of coins from the 1960s to the 1990s, and one earlier coin from 1929, were retrieved, as well as a silver necklace still not oxidized, and some other clearly modern items<sup>3</sup>. There were also a

few bones in the same layers as the modern coins, presumably from the 20th century, though they have yet to be dated (Spangen forthcoming b).

Such modern reuse is well-known at Sámi offering sites (e.g. Äikäs 2012; Äikäs & Salmi 2013). In this case, however, there were no immediate signs of previous offerings before the 1960s, apart from one coin from 1929, which because of its context is thought to have been brought out from a drawer especially for this purpose. It seems the visible sacrificial activity is restricted to the 20th century, and possibly even to the time after Vorren had visited and defined this structure as a circular offering site in 1973 (Teigmo 1973: 17). It is worth noticing that Vorren, himself an ethnographer, makes no mention of modern finds in any of the circular offering sites he investigated, which he surely would have done had they been found. Thus, it could seem that he unwittingly created a new tradition.

The late sacrificial activity from the 1960s or 1970s onwards must be seen in relation to the revival of Sámi identity and cultural expressions in Norway during these recent decades, after a very long period of suppression and racist policies from the Norwegian government. Despite the recent dating of the coins, the consequence of these finds is that the registration of this site today should actually include the definition *Sámi offering site*. While respecting this present meaning and the possibly deep-rooted political and personal identity issues related to this activity, it is a thought-provoking aspect that such a new tradition may have been established on wavering pretences, as the offering site hypothesis does not seem a satisfactory explanation for all the evidence related to the initial construction and use of the sites. It accentuates issues such as what we count as an ‘authentic’ past, and who is to define the value and meaning of various monuments.

The circular offering sites would not be the first archaeological category to become, on closer inspection, something different to that previously presumed. Similar examples in northern Norway include so-called *hellegrøper*, slab pits, that for a long time were assumed to be graves both by archaeologists and local people, but on investigation turned out to be pits for the extraction of oil from sea mammals (Henriksen 1996; Nilsen 2003: 108, Myrvoll 2010b: 87–8), so-called *Assebakke graves* that were for a long time presumed to be graves, but which turned

out to be large stone-filled hearths (Hedman & Olsen 2009, Myrvoll 2010b: 87), and so-called *mangeromstuffer*, multi-room houses, which had been perceived in early sources as Sámi kings' castles and later, i.a., as Norwegian fishing villages, but which have now been reinterpreted as multicultural trading and taxation stations (Olsen et al. 2011).

The list could go on to include phenomena in other areas of Scandinavia, as well as the rest of the world. The examples above display characteristics of axioms that are verified through repetition, partly by influential professional or local voices. I will give an example from my own material of how such 'truths' can become established: quite far south in the historical Sámi area in Norway, in Rennebu, Sør-Trøndelag county, there is a small rectangular stone structure that has been claimed to be an old Sámi offering site. The source for this belief seems to be a 1945 account by a local historian, who, after hearing such suggestions from local people, asked an old Sámi man in the area if the structure could be an offering site, and got the answer: 'It could be one thing or another' (Rokkones 2006 [1945]: 69, my translation). The site has later been described as a Sámi offering site by other local historians and also been investigated by archaeologists under the same assumption, based on the local topography and the supposed tradition (e.g. Vik et al. 2000: 42–3). It is now listed in the national database Askeladden as an offering site (Id 141090-1). In my opinion it may be in need of reinterpretation.

New methods, as well as recent turns in archaeological theory and the understanding of the social contexts in question, can play a significant role in some reinterpretations, but considering the instances mentioned above there is reason to note the extent to which conventional archaeology constantly uncovers new material that sometimes contradicts present beliefs. There are multiple levels of analysis and it cannot be expected that all archaeologists should go back to all primary sources every time we set out to answer a question. Still, the present case may perhaps serve as yet another example of how even the most familiar of categories, terms, interpretations, and topics deserve a critical revisit from time to time.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Northern Sámi orthography has been used in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>I extend my gratitude to Tromsø Museum and especially Dikka Storm for making this material available to me.

<sup>3</sup>These finds were documented and put back when the structure was reconstructed after the excavation.

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