

# Bone deposits and reindeer luck

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## Abstract

*In the past, it was common in reindeer Sámi society to place bones from daily meals in special deposits. Reindeer bones in particular were treated this way. One reason for doing this was that the bones could injure the tame animals if they were lying on the ground close to the dwelling. However, bones were also deposited for sacrificial reasons, to secure reindeer luck.*

### Keywords:

reindeer Sámi, reindeer luck, bone deposit, sacrificial sites.

## Introduction

I have participated in a research project called *Etniske relasjoner i nordre Nordland i historisk perspektiv* (in English: Ethnic relations in the north of Nordland in a historical perspective) (Evjen & Hansen 2008). The work was a collaboration between the University of Tromsø, Lofotmuseet, and Árran lulesamisk senter and was carried out from 2002 to 2006. The focus of the project was on Sámi history in the north of Nordland. My part of the project researched the age of reindeer husbandry in the Lule Sámi region. To investigate this, I excavated cultural monuments from the reindeer culture in the mountains (Fig. 1) (Andersen 2005a; 2008).

In this project I looked at a particular type of cultural heritage sites located close to dwellings, namely bone deposits. Some of these deposits have been excavated. I carried out excavations and wondered why bones have been put in the deposits. To answer this question I interviewed reindeer Sámi and consulted the relevant literature. This article presents both the results of the excavations and my discoveries related to the traditions. The discussion focuses on how we can differentiate between a sacrificial place and a bone deposit. Furthermore, I ask whether the tradition is unique to the reindeer culture or whether it can also be traced back to the hunting culture. First, however, I present some earlier work done by other researchers.

## Previous excavations of bone deposits

Reindeer Sámi used to place bones in caves, in crevices between rocks, under big boulders, and in cairns (Manker 1957: 24; Schanche 2000: 271). Such sites were often found on stony ground or in rough terrain, and they could be close to dwellings. Usually these cultural relics are regarded as sacred, but some of the sites could also be considered as deposits. The differences between these two types are vague, so it can be difficult to make a clear distinction between them.

In northern Sweden, bone materials had already been collected from sacrificial sites by

the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Manker 1957: 24; Schanche 2000: 271). Osteological analyses have documented reindeer bones and antlers at several of these locations. In addition to reindeer bones there were bones from other animals, such as goats, cattle, bears, wolverines, and birds. Also, an island in the Enare Sea or Lake Inarijärvi in Finland contains a sacrificial site where bones of reindeer and other animals have been found (Schanche 2000: 271; Okkonen 2007: 29–38).

In Jokkmokk, Rolf Kjellström has differentiated between bone deposits and sacrificial sites. He says that bone deposits often occur in the vicinity of hearths and remains of Sámi huts, or near the physical remains of dwelling places (Kjellström 1985). They have been found protected by stones, in a hollow between two stones, in a crevice between blocks of stones, between

two solid rocks, and on top of solid rock. He has documented 20 such bone deposits on the Swedish side of the border, in Jokkmokk parish. These sites contained bones and antlers, but antlers were found at four of the sites only. At the other sites, only bones were found in the deposits. The bones were split, showing that both meat and marrow had been removed before deposition.

Inger Zachrisson (1985: 83–88) has examined bone deposits in southern Sámi areas. She has classified them into four different groups:

- 1) The first type of deposit consists of all of the bones and antlers of a reindeer placed in a certain order beneath a cairn, beside a large boulder. This could be defined as a reindeer grave.
- 2) The second type is described as reindeer bones from one or more animals laid in a



Fig. 1. Location of the sites discussed in the text.

crevice in a cleft or boulder. Both ends of the crevice may be closed by stones. This type of monument also looks like a grave.

3) The third type consists of a collection of bones with many hooves, laid inside a stone wall and under a large boulder.

4) The fourth category consists of bones found under a large boulder. The reindeer bones from the deposits studied by Zachrisson were radiocarbon-dated. The results prove their age to be less than 250 years.

Kjell-Åke Aronsson (1993: 237–253, 323) has excavated bone deposits in an area called Thomsvollen in the southern Sámi region. This is known as a main dwelling place for the reindeer Sámi. The material remains are manifold: hearths, meadows, storage pits, and bone deposits. The deposits lie in stony terrain, close to the dwellings. Radiocarbon dating indicates that they have been used from the Iron Age onwards.

Vidjavári is a sacrificial place in Northern Sweden known for its many artefacts, particularly coins dated to 1000–1100 AD (Manker 1957: 134–138). From this site Mulk (2005) has analysed 34 kg of reindeer bones and antlers, mostly from adult female animals. Twelve samples were dated and ten of the dates fell between 1450 and 1650 AD, while one of the samples was dated to 1200–1300 AD.

Bones of tame animals have also been placed inside the house. In a turf house in Northern Troms, two concentrations of bones of tame animals were found (Grydeland 2001: 41–42). The bones were dug into the floor of the house and were interpreted as some sort of sacrifice. The turf house was dated to 1450–1600 AD.

## Vielggisbákke in Hamarøy municipality

I have excavated three bone deposits in Hamarøy municipality close to the Swedish border. Two of the bone deposits are located in the vicinity of dwelling places at Vielggisbákke (Fig. 1). It is located in the mountains at 700 metres above sea level. In this area, there is a meadow with many hearths, which are the remains of Sámi dwellings. Several of these have been radiocarbon-dated, and the results show that this place has been used from 800–1000 AD up to the present. I have argued that this place must have been used by Sámi reindeer herders from the end of the Viking period or the early medieval period onwards (Andersen 2005a; 2006).

**The first examined bone deposit (No. 1)** was located on a slope 80 metres from the dwellings and characterized by a big boulder (Andersen 2006). Under this boulder there was an opening marked with stone walls. The place was used as an overnight shelter for a short period. This is indicated by a fireplace in the opening and the discovery of a clay pipe. It was probably used by reindeer herders in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Underneath the boulder and on the ground there were a lot of stones of different sizes and shapes. There were some bones between the stones, but most bones were only revealed when we removed the stones from the ground. There were also bones in the sand layer under the stones. In total 147 bones were collected (Table 1). Classification indicated that 6 bones could be positively identified as reindeer bone while a further 12 were possibly from reindeer or a cloven-footed animal. There were two bird bones and two rodent bones. The rest of the bones were identified as being from mammals, but more detailed classification was not possible (Bratbak 2003).

Table 1. Bones in Bone deposit no. 1

Mammal	121 bones
Reindeer	6 bones
Cloven-footed animal	5 bones
Possibly reindeer	2 bones
Size reindeer	5 bones
Bigger than sheep/goat	4 bones
Rodent	2 bones
Bird	2 bones
<b>Total</b>	<b>147 bones</b>

Table 2. Bones in Bone deposit no. 2

Mammal	683 bones
Cloven-footed animal	2 bones
Size reindeer/deer	2 bones
<b>Total</b>	<b>687 bones</b>

**The second site (No. 2)** was 100 metres from the excavated dwellings, in the middle of a slope. It was marked by two big boulders leaning against each other and forming a “room” underneath. In this room, the bones were placed on one side, both on top of the turf layer and in the sand under the turf. There were also some bones under a stone. The bones were very fragmented. Altogether 687 bones were found (Table 2). There were only 4 bones of the size of reindeer or deer bones that were identified as coming from a cloven-footed animal. The rest of the bones were from mammals (Bratbak 2003).

**The third site (No. 3)** was on a ridge over 500 metres from the excavated hearths, higher up in the mountains (825 metres above sea level). It was marked by two big boulders with an opening

between them. This site was excavated in three places. Bones were documented in two fields (B and C; Table 3). In field C there were 5 bones from reindeer, and 25 bones were probably from reindeer. In addition there were 6 mammal bones that could not be identified more accurately. In the middle of the site, on field B, there were reindeer bones only. These bones seemed to come from one single animal (Bratbak 2003).

The bone deposits were radiocarbon-dated. Two of the results indicated that the bones from field C in bone deposit No. 3 could not be more than 50 years old or younger. It is not clear whether the sample was in some way contaminated or whether the bones really are this young. The bones from field B in bone deposit No. 3 were dated to 1660–1950 AD (T-17008). Bone

Table 3. Bones in Bone deposit no. 3

Field B		Field C	
Reindeer	21 bones	Mammal	6 bones
		Reindeer	5 bones
		Probably reindeer	25 bones
<b>Total</b>	<b>21 bones</b>		<b>36 bones</b>

deposit No. 1 was the oldest. This is shown in the results from the radiocarbon dating of the samples taken from the lowest layer of the deposit. The oldest sample was from 890–1060 AD (Tua-4593), while the other sample was from 1020–1210 AD (Tua-4594). This bone deposit was clearly used at the same time as the oldest hearths that have been excavated in this area.

### How can we interpret the bone deposits?

This brings me to the question of how we can interpret these deposits. The question is whether these sites should be seen as sacrificial places or as bone deposits. Audhild Schanche (2000: 273) says that the relationship between sacrifice and deposit, or between bone deposit, reindeer grave and sacrificial place, can often be vague, so that it is difficult to define clear categories.

Håkan Rydving (1995) differentiated between cultic sites used by the whole society, cultic sites along migration routes for people who were travelling together, and sacrificial places used by one family only. The reindeer was an important sacrificial animal. Mainly bones and antlers were sacrificed, although other parts of the animal, such as the blood, were set on the sacrificial stones or *sieidi*. Also other parts of the reindeer were sacrificed, such as the nose,

eyes, heart, or lungs, as well as other animals. The sacrifice could be performed by burying the animal into the ground or hanging it up in a tree. If the animal was buried in the ground, the sacrifice could consist of the whole body or just some parts of the animal (Mebius 2003: 142; 1968: 49, 74–76).

Kjellström (1985) argued that cultic sites were chosen with careful consideration, as they are more uniquely situated and contain a diverse collection of bone and antler. In investigations in Jokkmokk he found that cultic sites were situated higher up in the mountains than bone deposits. Bone deposits located near dwelling places were made because the reindeer people did not want their dogs to get the bones. This is also mentioned by Sigrid Drake (1979: 58). She explains that reindeer bones were hidden in stony places or under water. The reason for this was that after splitting the bones had sharp edges and thus it was necessary to avoid any injuries, especially to prevent the dogs from eating them.

Hence the bone deposits seemed to be made for practical reasons, but as Kjellström (1985) points out, if this was the only reason for hiding the bones, one should expect to find only bone marrow, skull bones and certain ribs. However, the deposits also contain bones that are not dangerous to animals, so there must be other reasons

for the deposits. As a consequence he does not preclude that the bones were also placed there because of a cultic tradition. He explains this by referring to personal information that describes how it was important to keep the bones together in the deposits, so that the reindeer would also be kept together.

In a source from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the southern Sámi area, Kristoffer Sjulsson says that the Vapsten Sámi called such deposits *Jårtesie*. He explains that they were rubbish heaps for the waste from daily meals. Such rubbish heaps were placed near the main dwellings. They consisted of bones from animals and birds that the Sámi had eaten. Afterwards the refuse was covered with stones and sand. The Sámi were not allowed to throw the bones anywhere else. He said this tradition could be considered as sacrificial (Bäckman & Kjellström 1979: 60–63).

For my own project, I spoke to reindeer Sámi about the tradition of hiding reindeer bones in deposits. On the Swedish side, in Lule Lappmark, there were several reindeer Sámi who knew about this tradition. They said that you should not throw reindeer bones anywhere, especially not into fireplaces or onto the ground. One person said that he used to put the bones from daily meals under a big stone or boulder, into what is called a *helle* in Norwegian, or in the Sámi language a *slahpa*, meaning 'a room under a stone'. He would also put bones in a cave, or under a tree, such as a spruce. In response to the question of why he did so, he explained that it was to secure reindeer luck (Kuoljok & Andersen 2003: 19–20). In this way we can understand the bone deposits as a kind of cultic site.

In my own material, different excavated sites could be interpreted in different ways. At Vielggisbákta the, deposit No. 3 is located far away from the dwelling place, higher up in the mountains. Using Rydving's (1995) definition,

this place could be considered as a cultic site for a bigger group of people who were perhaps migrating together. The discovery of parts of a reindeer in the middle of the site suggests a connection with reindeer graves. This tradition has been described in the literature as a sacrificial rite (Mebius 2003: 150).

The bone deposits near the dwellings (No. 1 and No. 2) could have functioned as rubbish heaps where bones from the daily meals were disposed. The bones were placed here to ensure that no tame animals were injured by accident. Another reason for hiding the bones was probably to secure reindeer luck.

I now consider whether this was a new tradition that emerged among the reindeer Sámi or whether it goes back to the hunting culture. To get closer to this question, I must first examine what reindeer luck means.

## Reindeer luck

One of my informants among the reindeer Sámi explained reindeer luck to me in the following way:

"The reindeer never disappear; you will always have them from one year to the next. This doesn't mean that you will be rich [...] but you will always find food in the house – this is reindeer luck. You will always find grazing land for the reindeer. This is how my parents explained reindeer luck" (Kuoljok & Andersen 2003: 20).

In addition to taking care of the reindeer bones, there were many ways you could influence your reindeer luck. To obtain reindeer luck, you should never swear at the reindeer, nor kick or beat the reindeer. Such bad behaviour might cause you to lose the luck (Kuoljok & Andersen 2003: 20).

It was important to be good to the reindeer as well as to the land where the reindeer moved, where they had their calves, the summer land and the areas that the reindeer regarded as their own.

Such places had guardian spirits that had to be overcome. It was therefore important to ask for permission or to formulate wishes for the reindeer land, for instance to ensure that the reindeer would survive on the land. These rituals took place when the Sámi moved from one area to another or from winter land to spring land. Some also had the tradition of saying goodbye when they left the land (Oskal 1995: 132, 143–144).

Thus we find that reindeer luck is still a strong tradition among the reindeer Sámi in the Lule Sámi region. This tradition is also documented in older written sources from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. From these sources we can see that the reindeer Sámi sacrificed to the gods in order to secure reindeer luck. One of these gods is known as *Veralden Olmai*. He supported growth, fishing, and the fertility of the reindeer. According to a 17<sup>th</sup>-century story the Sámi from Pite Lappmark sacrificed to *Veralden Olmai* to secure reindeer luck (Graan 1899: 65; Mebius 2003: 65–66). Other sources describe how the Sámi also sacrifice to other supreme beings to enhance reindeer luck.

In conclusion, it is clear that rites enhancing reindeer luck seem to have a long tradition among the reindeer herders. The relics of this tradition can be connected to both cultic sites and reindeer graves, and the bone deposits can also be included in this tradition.

## Comparison with hunting culture

How can we understand this tradition in relation to the hunting culture? Can this tradition be traced back to the hunting culture and, if so, how was it expressed?

Åke Hultkrantz (1975: 369–374; 1982: 162) has defined the typical characteristics of the arctic hunter culture, in which he includes the Sámi religion. These are “animal ceremonialism” and belief in the “supernatural master” of the ani-

mals. Each species can have its own supernatural master, or there can be only one for the animals and another for the fish, or even one single master for the whole animal world. The master may allow the hunter to kill the animal, or he may keep animals safe, out of reach. In this way, the master can be described as the prototype of the animal species, its soul.

In Sámi society there are supreme beings or supernatural masters for the animals which were hunted, as well as for fish. Sacrifices were made to one such master, known as *Leib Olmai*, in order to obtain hunting luck. This master was particularly important for bear hunting. There was also a supernatural master called *Sjatze Olmai*, who was important for fishing luck. Another name for this deity is *Saive neide* or *Träske-råån*. Inside the dwelling, a deity called *Boassjoáhkká* was sacrificed to for hunting luck (Mebius 1968: 42–43). I have not found any sources confirming that the same supreme beings which were connected to reindeer luck would have also been important for hunting luck, but we cannot preclude this possibility either.

The Sámi also had a supreme master for each animal. In the Sámi language, this deity was called a *máddo* (Andersen 2005b). A *máddo* is the keeper of an animal species, and it seems that many species were known to have their own keeper. For instance, it is known that some of the fish had their own *máddo*, and if someone took too many fish, the *máddo* might come and drown him. However, it is not known whether the wild reindeer had their own *máddo* or supernatural master.

The Kola Sámi believed that their tame reindeer had a supernatural master called *pots hozjin* or *potz hozjik* (Hultkrantz 1985: 24–28). Hultkrantz suggests that this deity could be the same as a mistress of the wild animals who roamed the mountains and was called *luot hozjik*. This goddess had a hairy body, just like the reindeer.

She led the tame reindeer to fine pastures and protected them against beasts of prey. In the autumn when the reindeer were herded, the Sámi thanked her for her divine protection of their reindeer. She also helped those who hunted wild reindeer. Hultkrantz believes that this deity could be the same as a master called *Mintiè* – a master of the wild reindeer. He states that the new deity of tame reindeer derives from the introduction of reindeer herding among the Kola Sámi.

Among the Scandinavian Sámi, one of the supreme beings was called *Tjoarve radien*. The name can be translated as 'a leader of the animals with antlers', and he was known as the master of the tame reindeer. Hultkrantz (1985) suggests that this master was once a supernatural master over the wild reindeer, and that he changed into a master for the tame reindeer at the same time as the Sámi reindeer culture developed. If Hultkrantz is right in his hypotheses, this must have happened long ago – the tradition is not known in the written sources. In addition to this, many newer deities emerged and they were prayed to for better reindeer luck.

## Rites among hunters

Returning to the bone deposits, I conclude that the reindeer herders used to place bones in cultic sites in order to achieve reindeer luck. Now I ask whether this was a new tradition or whether it can be dated back to the hunting culture, prior to the herding of tame reindeer. To answer this question, I compare the cultic sites from the reindeer culture with the cultic sites known in the hunting culture.

Animal ceremonialism was widespread in the hunting culture and was connected to the bear cult (Hultkrantz 1975: 372–373; 1982: 167). A characteristic feature of this cult is that the hunter apologized to the animals he had killed, and that there were special rituals like

a sacred meal and a ritual funeral for the bear. In this regard the reindeer graves have parallels among the bear graves. Nevertheless, reindeer graves seem to be unique to the reindeer culture (Zachrisson 1985).

In the hunting culture, one society had several cultic sites (Hultkrantz 1975: 374–375). Sacrifices were made at particular places along the hunting route. They were offered both to the supreme beings and to the supernatural masters of the animals (*máddo*). This tradition seems to be similar to what we later find among the reindeer herders, as well as in the written sources from Lule and Pite Lappmark. The latter relate that the Sámi sacrificed at the cultic sites called *Storjunkeren* in order to secure both reindeer luck and hunting luck (Mebius 2003: 50–51, 134–135).

It is therefore difficult to differentiate between cultic sites belonging to the reindeer culture and the hunting culture. The only way would be to examine the locations of the cultic sites. As Hultkrantz (1975: 373–374) has pointed out, these two cultures used different landscapes, so we should expect the cultic sites of the two traditions to be found in different areas.

In written sources, I haven't found any information on the tradition of taking the bones from daily meals and placing them in bone deposits. Nor would there be any practical reason for hiding bones of wild reindeer. In a written source from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Knut Leem says that the Sámi just left the bones of the wild reindeer in the place where they hunted them (Mebius 1975: 232). Another source provides a story describing how the Sámi would throw the bones into the water (Lappi 1905: 35). And Randulf, a priest in Nordland, says in his manuscript from the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the Sámi would sacrifice bows and arrows to *Leib Olmai*, the hunting god, but not any antlers or bones (Fjellström 1986: 430). This suggests that making bone deposits was a new



practice that started in connection with reindeer husbandry. Nevertheless, more research on this topic is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn.

## Concluding remarks

I have excavated bone deposits in mountains, close to dwellings that belong to the tame reindeer culture of the Sámi. Such cultural relics could have functioned both as deposits and as cultic sites.

One of the excavated sites is situated higher in the mountains and further away from the dwellings than the others. Judging from the location and the bone material, I conclude that this place seems to have functioned as a cultic site for a group that was bigger than just the immediate family. The other sites closer to dwellings could have functioned both as deposits and as some kind of cultic sites.

Reindeer luck was important for the reindeer Sámi. In order to secure this luck, they would place bones from their daily meals in such deposits. It is not known how old this tradition might be. I have suggested that the roots of the tradition do not extend beyond the tame reindeer culture, but further research is needed before we can draw any firm conclusions.

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