Interpretation of historical and archaeological sources in the South Sami coastal area in Norway

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Abstract

This article summarises some focal points of my graduate degree (hovedfag*) in archaeology at the University of Tromsø (2005). My thesis was entitled* Sørsamiske kystområder – tolking av fortidig samisk tilstedeværelse i Ytre Namdal *(South Sami coastal areas. Interpretation of a past Sami presence in Ytre Namdal). I have examined how our ways of defining a cultural landscape are based on our expectations of what an area should include in terms of cultural artefacts. Further, I ask how the use of many other criteria could broaden the concept of cultural landscape in the case of the South Sami in Norway.*

Keywords:

place names, stone constructions, sacrificial sites, burials, Coastal Sami, South Sami, settlement history.

Introduction

The South Sami coastal area constitutes a cultural landscape that has never really been considered a Sami cultural landscape. This is illogical because reindeer husbandry is prevalent in large parts of this area today and, in a manner of speaking, the economic base alone defines it as Sami territory. In my opinion this is a forgotten cultural landscape. The focus has been almost exclusively on inland and mountainous regions, which are South Sami areas based on a joint economy adapted to reindeer husbandry.

I have explored the South Sami concept of cultural landscape by focusing on a coastal area that features qualities quite different from what is usually found in a typical reindeer-herding landscape (Fig. 1). To illustrate this, I have focused on the cultural artefacts. Some of them might be introduced to the group of remains indicating South Sami culture along with objects that have traditionally been viewed as such.

South Sami archaeology

Archaeological research on the South Sami past is a very recent phenomenon. The main factor that has distinguished the tradition of South Sami archaeology from other archaeological research in the area is the assumption that the Sami simply had not had any prehistory in this area. Ever since 1891 when Yngvar Nielsen defined the South Sami as immigrants by applying what has been called *framrykkingsteorien*, the research of the South Sami past of this area has been no more than a field of history (Nielsen 1891; Sandnes 1965). Nielsen assumed that there had been no Sami south of the Nordland County border until the early 1500s.

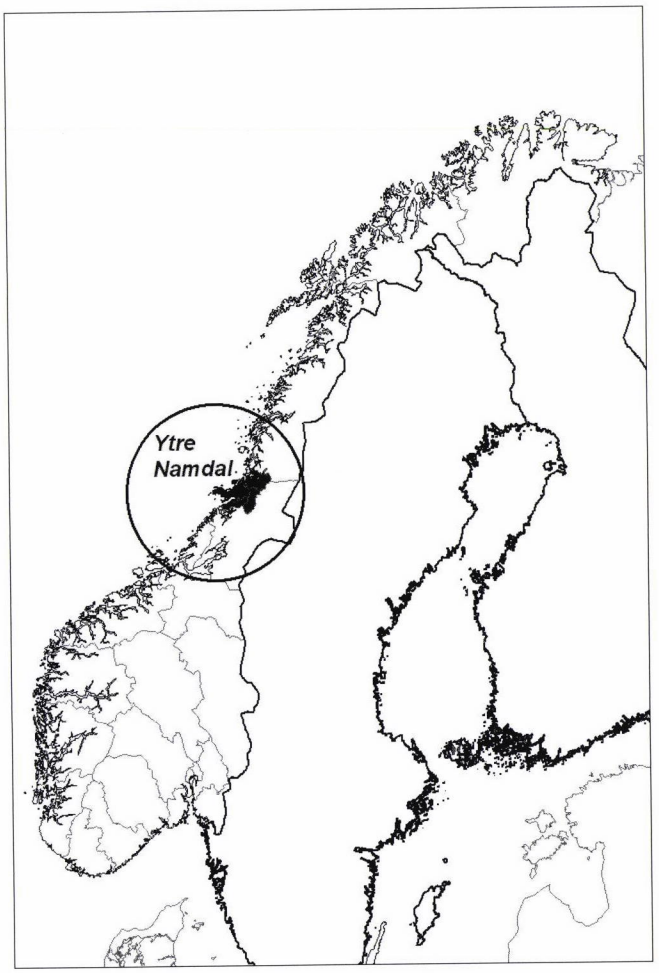

Fig 1.
Ytre Namdal is the north-west part of Nord-Trøndelag County (Dunfjeld-Aagård 2007).

This attitude has changed since then. We witnessed the beginnings of South Sami archaeology in the early 1980s. In my view, the real breakthrough came in connection with the excavations at Vivallen in Jämtland. Here Inger Zachrisson (1997) identified archaeological material from the Viking Era as Sami.

However, Yngvar Nielsen's theory has had a major impact on South Sami archaeology. As mentioned, the South Sami past has generally been work for historians, usually based on written sources. Consequently the time perspective has remained on the past few centuries. Focusing solely on the reindeer husbandry was decisive for the generalization of what the South Sami culture is. This has led to a dichotomisation of central Norwegian cultural history: the Sami sphere is merely one aspect of post-reformation history. The most curious aspect of this dichotomy is that it seems to be acceptable to most people. And no wonder, given the way it reinforces the romantic stereotype of South Sami culture. That is the image that is familiar to us, and it tallies with what has been presented to us as our history.

I wanted to go beyond reindeer husbandry and wild reindeer trapping as being the presumable economic adaptations of the Sami. In other words, I wanted to go beyond the examination of areas with relatively late non-Sami settlements on one hand and places that used to be known as purely Sami territories anyway, on the other hand.

Source material

I have reviewed available sources to try to shed light on past Sami presence in this coastal area all the way back to the end of the Late Iron Age, i.e. the Viking Era. I have reviewed three different categories of sources: 1) written sources, 2) place names, and 3) archaeological material.

On the basis of **written sources,** it was possible to form an impression of a coastal Sami culture. These sources date back to the 1500s, with the 1700s as the main focal point. In contrast to historians, it has not been my aim to use this material for dating the presence of the Sami in different areas in the past. I am using it to corroborate the theory that the Sami were an established people at that time. I assume that it is possible to use the other categories of text sources in order to trace the Sami past even further back in time.

As for **place names,** I have chosen to limit my examination to names containing the name *finn*. It occurs quite frequently in this area and it may be indicative of the distribution of the Sami. I am applying the theory that *finn*-names generally refer to the Norse word *Finn* in the meaning 'Sami' (Olsen 1998). The name *Finn* is evenly distributed throughout Ytre Namdal. Along the coast, for example the names *Finnmoen*, *Finnvika* and *Finnset* appear repeatedly.

A fairly large amount of **archaeological material** is known from my research area. But the problem is the way in which the finds have been classified. Since the 1980s, cultural artefacts that are defined as being of Sami origin have been registered separately. This material generally consists of traces of the reindeer-herding culture, mainly dating from the last 200 years. Accordingly there are objects that are defined as non-Sami cultural artefacts. The latter category has been important to me, because there are a few indefinable cultural artefacts that I now wanted to try to interpret from the perspective of Sami archaeology. In the first place I examined different stone structures in more detail. This is intriguing, since it has been hard to find logical explanations for their shape, function, and location.

Stone circles

In northern Norway, circular sacrificial sites have become increasingly common objects for registration as cultural artefacts, even though a great deal of uncertainty is attached to this category in any area. There are no written sources or traditions related to the use of circular sacrificial sites. In the South Sami region, this category is virtually non-existent in the register. Sacrificial sites are related only to large rocks, often steep-sided slabs.

For me it was interesting to see that there are a number of stone circles in this area, though. Some of them can, for example, be explained as tent circles, but in many cases there seems to be no logical explanation. Obviously not all of the latter are sacrificial sites. But some of them may be, though, and I think that inasmuch as all traditions linked to sacrificial sites are linked only to *sjielegierkieh*, i.e. sacrificial rocks, this may be an older variety not actively remembered any longer.

Erected stones

Another type of artefact studied in more detail is erected stones. This type of cultural artefact exists in the Norse and Sami cultures alike. It is therefore difficult to classify these artefacts based on appearance alone. As a result, the stones are usually defined on the basis of their surroundings or "context".

There are two erected stones in Risvika, in Nærøy. Originally there have been three of them. In the 1980s, these stones were registered as stone monuments, *bautasteiner*. They are located near a farm, Risvik, and thus they are considered as typical Norse cultural monuments. However, oral tradition associates these stones with the Sami. The examination of place names also shows that the area above Risvika is called *Finnhusa* 'Sami houses'. In addition, the parish registers say that Risvika is a Sami settlement (Hermannstand 2005). This shows how introducing previously overlooked types of source material can shed a totally different light on cultural artefacts.

Erected stones can also be found in the tidal zone. One of them stands on the island of Leka where the locals refer to it as the *Sildeguden* 'God of Herring'. Local tradition maintains that fish entrails were sacrificed on the rock to ensure good fishing. Unlike in Northern Norway, there is no tradition of so-called "*sieidier*" ('sacrificial stones') in the tidal zone of the South Sami area. It is therefore strange to meet this tradition in Ytre Namdal. My theory is that this may be a vestige of the **Southern Sea Sami** culture.

Burial cairns and barrows

Some archaeological material that is generally seen as typical artefacts of Norse culture may also be rooted in or influenced by Sami culture. Burial cairns and barrows are among the objects considered to have Norse origins. In terms of ethnic identity, the so-called *fangstmarksgraver* 'trapping-ground graves' (also known as mountain graves and lake graves) are less clear. These were small burial cairns far from farmsteads, and as archaeological objects they are primarily identified on the basis of their location. They often contain imports from the east. They are located on trapping grounds, far from farmsteads, and they are considered as traces of a trapping people. As a consequence they are often considered to be an indication of a Sami presence (Zachrisson 1997; Bergstøl 2004). The problem with using such a localization factor is that it precludes large areas like the coastal area from featuring this type of graves.

In my opinion, if there were indeed coastal Sami in Ytre Namdal in the Late Iron Age, they were trappers and they must have co-existed with Norse settlements. Moreover, if there were trappers here, this would be the area where they practiced their trapping. It must be possible to define areas as trapping grounds without precluding farming. From that perspective, perhaps we need to reconsider other graves from the Late Iron Age throughout the rest of central Norway.

I believe there is evidence of the Sami in the grave material from the Late Iron Age in the barrows and cairns in Nord-Trøndelag County. Guttorm Gjessing (1928) was the first to link eastern jewellery finds in northern Norwegian Iron Age graves with the Sami culture. However, he interpreted the finds as indicative of trade with the Sami. Gjessing divided the material into a northern Norwegian group with Sami connections and an eastern Norwegian-Trøndelag group without Sami connections. For Gjessing this division was natural since the southern locations in question are in an area in which Yngvar Nielsen's theory (1891) had already excluded a Sami presence in the Late Iron Age. Finds of Finnish

and Finno-Ugric ornaments are not limited to northern Norwegian graves. Eastern ornaments are actually quite common in connection with ancient Sami graves and sacrificial sites, even in the South Sami area (Zachrisson 1997). Inger Storli (1991) observes that barrows in northern Norway containing eastern ornaments may be an expression of the formation of alliances through marriage. The penannular brooches in particular have served as ethnic Sami markers / idioms, but this kind of discussion has not been part of the research on South Sami prehistory.

To my mind, Gjessing's geographical division of graves on the basis of eastern ornaments illustrates the circle mentality caused by using Yngvar Nielsen's theory. Departing from this theory may open the door to a number of new interpretations of the archaeological material from this area.

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