

The management of Sami monuments and sites in Norway –The right to a past

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Abstract

The article discusses the concept of Sámi monuments and sites. It is important to underline the connection between ancient monuments and Sámi culture in our days. The article further discusses the largely unexplored subject of Sámi prehistory, as well as the management of Sámi monuments and sites carried out by the Sámi Parliament in Norway, and its importance to the Sámi as an indigenous people. The article concludes with some thoughts about what a Sámi past may actually express.

Keywords:

identity, interpretation of ancient monuments, management of cultural heritage.

Sami monuments and sites – a disputable concept in Norway

The history of the Sami in Fennoscandia dates back a very long time. As is generally the case with the distant past, many aspects of the Sami past remain a mystery. Owing to the strong, somewhat systematic campaign for Norwegianification which was conducted from the late 1800s until about 1980 and to the lack of written sources in the Sami language, the relatively re-

cent Sami past in Norway is generally a mystery as well: suppressed and hidden.

Only during the past 30 years or so has there been a growing awareness of an independent Sami past. In Norway, Sami monuments and sites that are more than 100 years old have been protected by legislation since 1979. The responsibility for Sami cultural heritage work has rested with the Sami Parliament since 1994.

The administration is geographically located at five local offices. The establishment of a separate administrative agency for Sami monuments and sites must first of all be seen in light of the fact that it is the explicit responsibility of the Norwegian government to ensure that the Sami get the resources that are needed for protection and further development of their culture on their own terms. Sami monuments and sites serve as a time-related dimension to the Sami identity.

Another important factor for establishing a separate agency dates back to 1979, when Act No. 50 of 9 June 1978 relating to cultural heritage entered into force. Pursuant to the Act, Sami archaeological and architectural monuments and sites that are more than 100 years old are automatically listed for protection. With this time limit, the Act aims at redressing the relative lack of written sources. Monuments and sites are thus elevated to a special status as historical documents. Furthermore, the Act had to provide

legal authority for the listing of all monuments and sites that are no longer functional elements in Sami culture. These may include artefacts that have been in use until relatively recently.

Sami archaeological and architectural monuments and sites, as well as the cultural environment, are indicative of a Sami understanding of the landscape and nature. They indicate the important role that nature plays in the economic, social, and religious areas. Monuments and sites are environmental and cultural resources on a par with other environmental, social, and cultural resources. They carry overtones of knowledge and cognition to us. They show how people have felt about and used their surroundings, and bear witness not least to knowledge and cognition about how we can and should feel about using the habitat around us.

The concept of Sami monuments and sites is broad. First, they cover a vast geographical area and more than a millennium of complex history. Second, they embrace all traces of Sami activities, e.g. settlement, work, religion, travel, etc. Sami buildings also fall into this category. Third, locations without man-made traces are also included in the concept. For example, natural sacrificial sites and other sacred sites, areas, and places belong to the substance from which legends, stories, and traditions originate. It is especially important to note that monuments and sites also embrace more than just the tangible, material objects covered by the Cultural Heritage Act. For those of us who work with Sami monuments and sites, it is a challenge to get people to understand that these traces represent a comprehensive, multi-faceted history and that they cannot be put into a narrow category.

Monuments and sites can be defined as “Sami artefacts” in the case that living or recorded Sami traditions are linked to them or if local Sami knowledge links them to a Sami cultural context.

Another basis for identifying monuments and sites as “Sami” is when research results indicate that they document Sami history and prehistory. Sami monuments and sites are also subject to continuous redefinition and reinterpretation. Of course, the further back physical vestiges of cultures date in time, the more difficult it is to put ethnic labels on them.

Sami ethnicity is a result of particular historical processes and encounters between cultures. In Fennoscandia, different groups of people have joined and melted into a common linguistic and cultural unit that differs markedly from neighbouring groups. In other words, although some early prehistoric vestiges of cultures cannot be defined as Sami in the sense that their progenitors would have with certainty called themselves *Sami*, they may nonetheless be a part of Sami prehistory. They may be a part of the roots from which Sami culture has developed, i.e., its historical background. Furthermore, regardless of whether a monument or site is a result of “Sami activity”, it can fall under the concept of Sami ancient remains in case Sami traditions and notions have been attached to it.

The cultural environment can also be ascribed different types of significance depending on the cultural point of view of the viewer. Often the same landscape has been used in different times by people with different cultural affiliations. As an extension of this, one must allow for the fact that different cultural groups have had and/or have a sense of belonging to the same area. Naturally, they will have different ideas about and views on the meaning and importance of the area, and these views may be at loggerheads with each other.

The perilous past

Norwegian (pre)history, Sami (pre)history

Who owns the past and who manages monuments and sites that bear witness to the past? This is a matter of great importance! Discussions about whether or not certain monuments and sites in the Sami territories are actually Sami bear witness to the fact that monuments and sites are closely associated with identity. Sami cultural heritage initiatives are part of a cultural struggle revolving especially around the question of ownership of one's own past – a question that will not lose its importance. The most salient points of reference of a culture are absolutely essential for sustaining its cultural identity. For indigenous peoples, this comprises the traditional use of monuments and sites, as well as use of the landscape. From this perspective, monuments and sites play a profoundly important role since they are evidence of a people's "belonging" to the landscape. For indigenous peoples, geographical knowledge forms a physical and mental map that has no established borders. Rather, it consists of countless locations where tangible and intangible monuments and sites are related to places and areas on the map. Traditions and stories are related to these locations. The landscape therefore expresses indigenous peoples' cultural identity and embodies their sense of belonging. One manifestation of this is that the cultural identity of individuals and their affiliation are often related more to their sense of belonging than to any actual formal or legal ownership of a particular area.

In Norway, a great deal of emphasis was attached to identity management when it was decided to implement a separate scheme for Sami cultural heritage work. Monuments and sites add the dimension of time to the Sami identity and

thus they are important for cultural legitimacy and maintenance. The relationship between the people of today and cultural vestiges of the past is perceived as an emotional dimension related to understanding and maintaining one's own culture. Accordingly, people's historical and cultural legacy constitutes an important repertoire upon which they draw for their distinctive character and identity. The point is not simply to "win back" their own history, but to create and recreate their own distinctive character and identity.

Research on Sami prehistory and history is highly relevant to today's society, and it can engender formidable debates. Some would argue that it does not bear any scientific merit to trace Sami ethnicity further back than to about the time of the birth of Christ. This used to entail an implicit acceptance that prehistory was "Norwegian" – even in Sami territories – since we are all Norwegians. These days, however, the reasoning is somewhat different. We are now told that Stone Age monuments and sites in particular cannot be ascribed any ethnicity because so *many ethnic groups* have always inhabited *Sápmi* (the Sami name for the area occupied by the Sami). But where are the traces of all these "ethnic" groups? Large parts of the areas currently used and occupied by the Sami have never been the site of any other known culture except the Sami culture. It is therefore natural for the Sami to feel a sense of ownership of the prehistory in Sami territories, just as Norwegians do in Norwegian core areas.

Continuity on the rock

One type of monuments and sites attracts considerable attention from many viewpoints. I am referring to rock art. It is all too easy for today's society to imbue rock art with symbolic mean-

ing and content. On the global scale, indigenous peoples participate actively in setting the terms for the documentation, management, and appreciation of rock art. In Australia and South Africa, for example, this is taken for granted.

In the Nordic countries, however, it is still a formidable challenge to get people to acknowledge and understand that the Sami should have a natural place in the management of rock art. Most rock art has been viewed as so old that it has not been relevant to relate it to any particular ethnic group. The result of this type of depoliticisation of rock art is that this category of cultural heritage is understood and represented as non-relevant for Sami culture. This is despite the fact that certain types of monuments and sites from early prehistory can be understood as being the precursors of Sami and non-Sami cultures alike. One serious and necessary challenge for the Sami Parliament in Norway therefore involves promoting a binding, inclusive cooperation on rock art. In this connection, we should facilitate understanding of the fact that rock art is a natural and important part of Sami prehistory.

The Sami Parliament in Norway is encouraging the Norwegian government to allow for the possibility that rock art can be part of an ongoing cultural process where more focus will be placed on its non-economic value. Examples include cave art and rock paintings.

The “discovery” of rock paintings in Ruksesbákti in the Sea Sami village of Billávuotna in Porsanger in 2001 focused attention precisely on this aspect. Immediately the Sami Parliament in Norway took responsibility for providing information about the discovery, as well as for the coordination of the work for documentation and protection, not least by actively involving the local Sami community. In Billávuotna, the villagers do not hesitate to express how this has given depth to their own history. The discovery of the rock paintings “spoke” to the local population

directly. They feel that it legitimised their existence as Sea Sami. Several local residents also pointed out that some of the painted figures bore a striking resemblance to the four main female goddesses in the pre-Christian Sami religion: *Madteraahka* (the symbol of the Earth Mother, important in the genesis of man), *Saraahka* (the goddess of spinning and protector of children, the midwife that helped man into the world), *Ok-saahka* (the goddess of the door; she protected mothers against disease and let the children grow and thrive), and finally *Juksaahka* (the goddess of the bow, she helped determine the sex of babies). All these goddesses had a very central role in the conception and birth of man, and they are linked to the division of rooms in the turf hut (*gamme*).

The Sami goddesses and deities were also generally known from the shamanic drum (*runebommen*), first described in *Historia Norvegiae* from the late 1100s. In general, the motifs from rock art generally bear a strong resemblance to the circle of motifs on the shamanic drum. It consists of symbols that are highly relevant in the Sami community today. As a consequence, the Sami Parliament in Norway has placed the rock paintings in a Sami cultural-historical frame of reference.

The excavation report from Ruksesbákti (Tromsø Museum) also points to the rich variety of motifs and the possible interpretation that they are expressions made by an early proto-Sami people who lived in the area at some time in the Early Metal Age. This people must have been the ancestors of today’s Sami nation. Despite this, the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage has signalled early that the rock paintings can hardly be described as Sami monuments and sites and that they do not have any connection with Sami ethnicity. It appears as if the Directorate believed the value of the rock art to be universal, thus emphasising deconstruction

and discontinuity at the expense of cultural continuity and historical identity. Sami local knowledge and their ascribing of monuments and sites attached to it has thus been repressed by the State. Ascribing local Sami value to monuments and sites might stand in the way of the universal national value that the State of Norway, represented by the Directorate for Cultural Heritage in this case, intends to protect.

Such unilateral “subjective” emphasis on the understanding of prehistory facilitates further dominance over the history of the Sami minority. The basis of the Sami perception of prehistory cannot be equated with the almost completely pre-set, objectivised and naturalised Norwegian history and prehistory that has a scope that is virtually inconceivable. In large parts of Norway, acceptance of a Sami prehistory would be possible only at the expense of a seemingly neutral Norwegian (pre-)history. Thus the archaeologist Anders Hesjedal is of the opinion that Norwegian history may be virtually impossible to deconstruct. It remains to be seen whether the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage feels the rock paintings to be so important that in the future they have to be managed by a more “neutral” authority, not by the Sami Parliament in Norway!

Cultural identity and the right to a past

In his doctoral dissertation in archaeology, Anders Hesjedal comments on Sami prehistory in Norwegian archaeology as follows:

[..] “we must acknowledge that large parts of 20th century archaeology in Norway would appear to entail some sort of symbolic violence because it has systematically undercommunicated, repressed, denied and disparaged Sami prehistory and culture. Norwegian prehistory has to such a great extent been constructed

as a uniform national story that people have gradually come to believe that this story is a reconstruction of the only reality that existed”.

Hesjedal also contends that

[..] “one of the most important aspects of Norwegian archaeology will be to attempt to destabilize the picture of ‘the Norwegian’ in prehistory”.

Debates attached to Sami prehistory indicate that certain arguments may be due to a lack of knowledge of Sami prehistory and history and expressions of a lack of acceptance. However, discussion can also be understood to be an active and healthy critical approach to Sami history. All history, including Sami history, entails problems. But what often engenders a skewed impression is that Norwegian history, i.e., the history of the majority population, is not perceived as problematic.

In my opinion, research is not neutral, but rather characterised by different social and power structures that it also characterises further. Consequently, research on Sami history cannot be said to be any isolated special area of cultural history research. Sami history/presence/cultural expressions/social organisation are important for understanding and learning more about the history of Fennoscandia. Debates on Sami history, both previously and today, demonstrate that little is known about Sami prehistory and history. This may be because the results of research in this field are not well known. Furthermore, it is amazing to see how rendering of the Sami prehistory and history apparently evokes strong, somewhat overheated feelings.

The former president of the Sami Parliament in Norway, Ole Henrik Magga, once said:

”Culture is like air. People don’t notice it as long as they have it. But they notice it a great deal when they are in the process of losing it. Many minorities and indigenous peoples have experienced that. Culture comprises non-economic aspects such as language, customs, values, etc., but when thinking about the right to and opportunities for cultural development, one must also examine the economic basis for the culture. For indigenous peoples, this is absolutely essential: Without the earth and the water – no culture! All thoughts about indigenous cultures must take their point of departure in this at the local, national and international levels.”

For many indigenous peoples, the past and the symbols of the past have been among the most important unifying issues in the struggle for self-determination. Self-definition and self-articulation are important for all nation-building. Having a historical and cultural legacy is an important part of the repertoire of a culture in order for it to demonstrate individuality and identities. The point is not only to win back our own history and also the rights to our prehistory, but to continuously **create and recreate** our own distinctive character and identity. That is what **cultural development** means. And that is what is inherent in the concept of having a right to a Sami prehistory and an independent Sami cultural history.