

# The Saami Shaman Drums

## Some Reflexions from an Archaeological Perspective

BY INGER ZACHRISSON

The Saami shaman drums from northern Scandinavia can be discussed from many different points of view. For an archaeologist there are other questions of interest than those which generally occupy the historian of religions.

One important question is *how old* the known Saami drums and drum types are.

Relatively little is known about the age of the drums that have been preserved. Scholars have been more interested in how late they were in use. The well known drum from Nordtrøndelag, now in Meiningen, Germany, is said — according to a statement from the first decades of the 18th century — to have an age of four generations, i.e. it dates from the beginning of the 17th century (Manker 1938, 596 ff). The known drums are as a rule assumed to be from that century or the eighteenth, when most of them were collected. It has also been thought that, because of the materials they are made of, drums could not have been preserved any longer. But is that so certain? The older a shaman drum was, the greater trust was put in it (Manker 1938, 600).

No datings by the 14 C method, dendrochronological analyses or the like, have been made for any Saami drum, as far as I know — rightly so, as these methods have until now demanded too much material.

But today there is a new method for 14 C datings; the so called tandem accelerator only needs 0.1 gram of organic material in order to determine age. Would it be of interest and advisable to carry out such tests on some drums? The question which ought to be answered is whether some drums in fact date from earlier than about the 17th century.

Another perhaps more interesting question is how old the known *types* of Saami drums might be. When did they acquire their 'classical' form? What did the Viking Age Saami drums look like, for example?

There is general agreement that the drum as a religious attribute is of great antiquity.

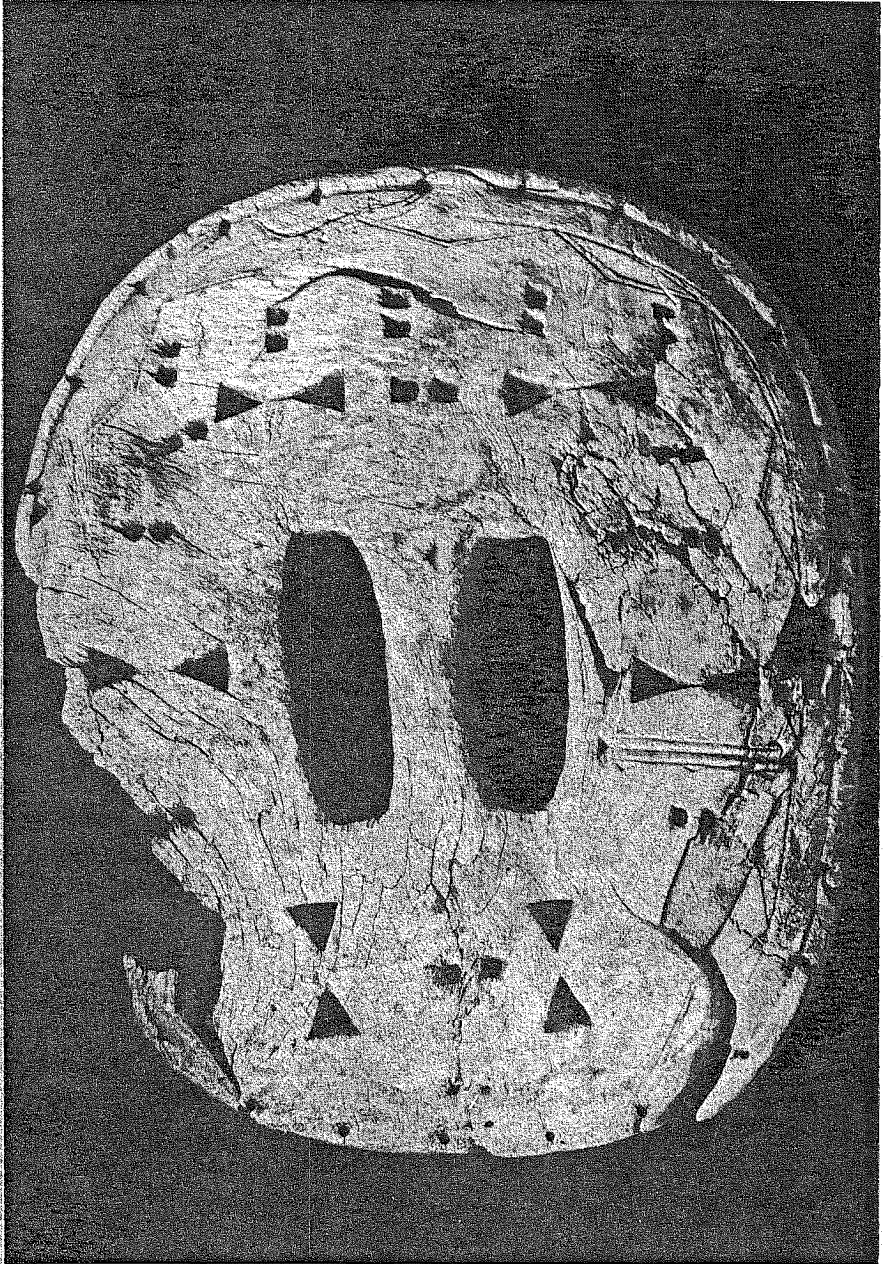
The preserved Saami drums mainly belong to two types. The oldest is considered to be the so-called 'frame (sieve) type', most of which have a frame consisting of a single strip of wood bent into a circle. According to Manker, in the Saami area this type of drum was gradually displaced, principally southwards, but also northwards. In its place came the so-called 'bowl type', which thus seems to have developed from the former, and is known only from Saami culture. Already at the time of the first reliable illustrations of drums, the 'bowl type' was more widely dispersed than the 'frame' one. The replacement of the latter is therefore thought to have taken place at an early date (Manker 1938, 167 ff.)

Why and when, therefore, did a specific type of drum develop in the Northern Saami area, if this theory is correct? The question is of interest in a wider perspective. There are other differences between the Southern and Northern Saami areas of Sweden, regarding both the language and certain aspects of religious life during the pre-Christian era. Examples in the archaeological material of religious differences may be seen in grave customs during the Iron Age, the way of depositing bear bones at least at the beginning of the post-medieval period, and perhaps also in sacrificial sites from the Viking Age—Early Middle Ages (see Zachrisson 1988; Zachrisson & Iregren 1974, fig. 79; Zachrisson 1984).

Such differences may have developed gradually at various times. One reason why Saami culture evolved along different lines in different parts of Scandinavia might be the geographical situation. In the Southern Saami area there were probably many opportunities for culture loans between the Saami and Nordic cultures. Many Iron Age Saami graves in this area reflect Nordic grave customs. Further north, Finnish culture may have played the same role.

On the other hand, it is well known that the borderland of a culture tends to retain more ancient traits than the central area. Accordingly, one would expect the Southern Saamis to preserve older traits longer than the Northern Saamis. This seems to have been the case as regards traditional dress. It could also explain why the drum types — as well as the language — reveal a connection between the Southern Saami area of the Scandinavian peninsula and Finland.

Now I would like to present a *new find* of a drum. It is of the 'bowl type', the skin missing, and decorated with open 'hour glass' motifs. Through these holes the spirits were thought to pass in and out. It



*Fig 1* Saami drum of the 'bowl' type from Sepirjokk, Jokkmokk parish, Lappland, found in 1983 Photo: G Jansson

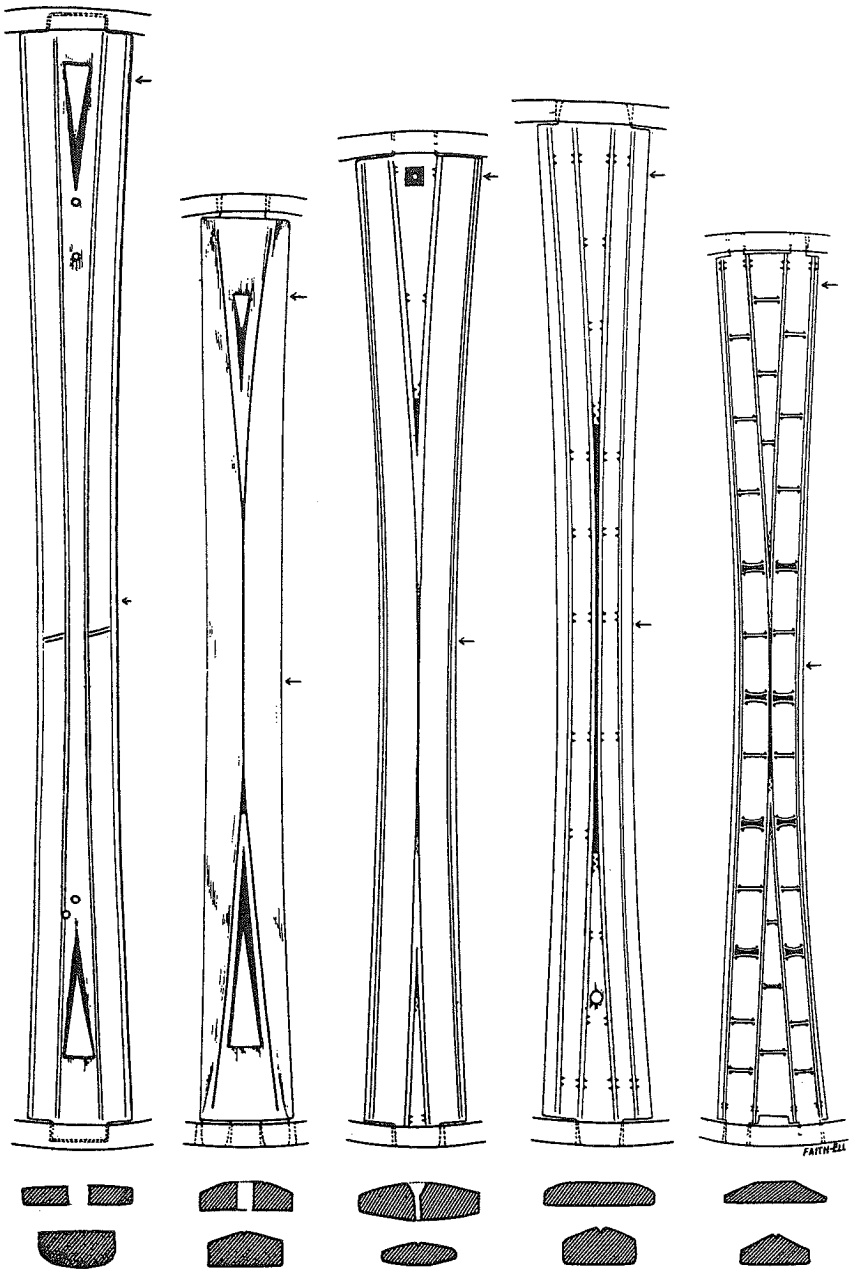
was delivered to the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm in 1983 (Fig 1). It was found hidden in a cave-like opening among lime stone rocks at the outflow of the River Sepirjokk into Lake Kutjaure, Jokkmokk parish, Lappland. It has now been deposited in Ájtte, Swedish Mountain and Sámi Museum in Jokkmokk.

An indication that *drums of the 'frame type'* may have been made wholly according to traditions stemming from at least the Viking Age is given by *the ornamentation of their handles* (Fig 2; after Manker 1938, 226–266, Abb 85–91, Abb 256–262). Several of them are decorated in what can be called the Saami Geometric style, the earliest known examples of which can be seen on objects of antler/bone from two Saami dwelling sites on the island of Kjelmøy in the Varanger Fjord, Finnmark, northern Norway. This style continued on Saami objects of antler, wood and pewter, but was more or less totally replaced by the plaited band motif some time during the Viking Period or Early Middle Ages (A D 800–1300). The latter motif became dominant on such objects from then on until the present time (see Zachrisson 1984, 86 ff, 123).

The 'hour glass motif', characterizing the ornamentation of several of the drum handles, is also to be found on the antler plates of the hilt of a Nordic sword from Rösta in Ås, Jämtland, dateable to the 11th century (Fig 3; after Kjellmark 1905). Here the motif dominates over the simple plaited bands along the edges. It is probably Saami work because of the ornamentation as well as the technique that has been used, viz the lines of the pattern are filled with a dark substance. The use of such a special technique is probably more decisive for the interpretation of ethnic affiliation than is the ornament itself.

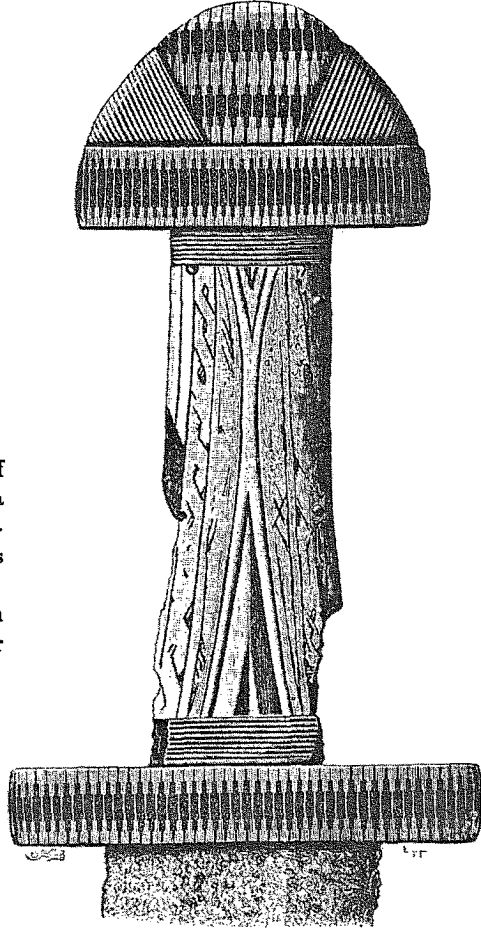
The filling of the lines of a pattern with harpax in order to highlight it has characterized typical Saami objects from at least the Middle Ages, and it is especially typical of the plaited band motif, for example on bag snaps. The technique is described in the written sources on the Saamis from the 17th and 18th centuries. Among the many combs from the Viking Age centres of Birka in Lake Mälaren and Hedeby in Schleswig (northern Germany) there are a few which are decorated with the plaited band motif. Only those seem to have had the lines of the patterns filled with a black substance (Zachrisson 1987d).

It is not advisable to draw far-reaching conclusions from ornaments only. It could be interesting, however, to test the hypothesis that the plaited band motif is not found on the handles of drums of the 'frame type' — and not on Saami drums in general either (Manker 1938, 262) — because the handles of this type had already acquired their



*Fig 2.* The ornamentation of some handles of Saami drums of the 'frame type'  
 Note the 'hour-glass' motif After Manker 1938

*Fig 3* Antler plate on the hilt of a sword from the 11th century, a grave find from Röstas, Ås, Jämtland, decorated with the 'hour-glass motif' and a simple plaited band. The lines of the pattern have been filled with a dark substance. After Kjellmark 1905



definitive form *before* the plaited band motif became dominant within the Saami culture.

In the well-known report of an ecstatic Saami shamanistic seance in *Historia Norvegiae*, written down in c. A.D. 1170/90, there is a description of a drum, like a sieve and with some simple figures painted on the drum skin: a whale, a reindeer, a ski and a small boat with oars. With the help of these, the 'gandr' of the shaman, his free soul, could travel over fell and fjord. He held the drum high, we are told, danced and sang 'galdrar' until he fell down. Through their 'gandr' Saamis could also make prophecies which came true (Nesheim 1970, 7 ff).

The author of *Historia Norvegiae* provides far more information about Eastern Norway than any other part of the country. The

chronicle therefore seems to have been written by someone specially familiar with this part of the country, Østlandet (Halvorsen 1987, 62) It is possible that he also knew best the Saamis of this area, such as those in the then remote Opland The drum described was evidently a drum of the 'frame type'

In the 17th century Schefferus distinguishes between the drums of the Finnmark Saamis, which were 'of another kind and meant for another purpose' and the drums in Sweden What did he mean? In both cases he seems to refer to drums of the 'bowl type', with a hammer (drum-stick) and pointer (index) How could they be used in different ways? The drum as a teller of fortunes is always secondary to the drum in its function as an instrument of exaltation Its use in Sweden might have represented a 'new' emphasis on this secondary function

Or was the difference that the Finnmark drum skins had 'various artless figures' (according to Ole Worm) while the Swedish ones had a swarm of figures, with Christian and Swedish symbols prominent (Schefferus 1956, 165 ff)?

This adoption of Christian and Swedish symbols can also be seen as a result of the confrontation between the Saamis and the overwhelming Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish cultures The Saamis may have wished to magically incorporate their opponents' symbols of power into their own culture in order to gain access to these same sources of power (Odner 1983, 63 ff)

The pointer could perhaps have been used in a 'new' way, as a fortune-teller instead of a sound amplifier No hammer or pointer is mentioned in *Historia Norvegiae* At least the former, however, is probably of some antiquity; there are two finds of early *hammers* from Norway It is difficult to find a reason to doubt their attributions, as some have done (orally)

The decorated object of antler, found in 1939 at Nordset in Øvre Rendal, Hedmark, Opland, East Norway (Fig 4), was interpreted as a Saami drum hammer by Gjessing (Gjessing 1945) and Manker (Manker 1950, 442, Abb 156) Gjessing dated it to the 11th century on the basis of the Nordic style pattern on one side; the other side is decorated with a plaited band motif of Saami character Today's foremost expert on Nordic ornamentation, Signe Horn Fuglesang, dates the object to c A D 1000-1200 (Fuglesang 1980, Cat No 95 and personal communication)

The dating of this object as well as its Saami affiliation thus seems to be certain A similar object, from Myklebostad, Sørsjøna in Nordland,



*Fig 4* Saami drum hammer from Øvre Nordset, Rendalen, Hedmark (Norway), dated to c A D 1000–1200 Photo: Universitetets Oldsaksamling, Oslo



has been interpreted in the same way (Gjessing 1945; Manker 1950, 442, fig 155)

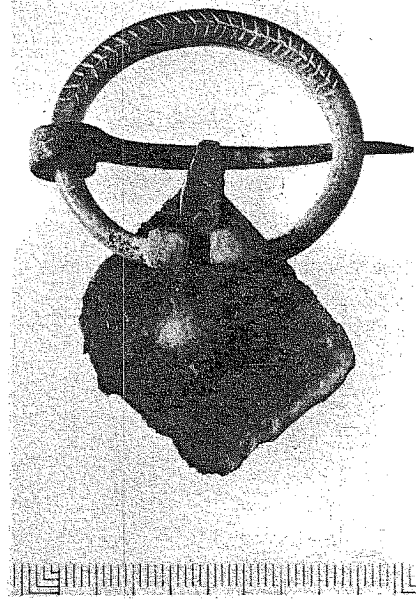
The Nordset hammer was found in a cairn of fire cracked stones. Other things in the cairn have been dated to the 15th century (Gjessing 1945, 103 f, cf Manker 1950, 442 f, Abb 157). Stones cracked by heat are often the main component of prehistoric and medieval rubbish heaps.

The minor excavations later carried out on the site strengthen the impression of an early dwelling site. The Norwegian archaeologist, Guro Syversen, also interprets the Nordset cairn as a rubbish-heap from the 15th-16th centuries, not as a sacrificial site, as was suggested by Gjessing and Manker. She emphasizes that the heap had been situated beside a church, moved in c 1660. The presence of the hammer in this particular spot might have had a connection with the proximity of the church. There are reports that when the Saamis were christianized, everything belonging to their pre-Christian religion was either burnt or buried in the earth. If the burial of the Nordset hammer was the result of christianization, it assumes that Saamis were living in the vicinity. About one kilometre to the south lies a valley named 'Finndalen'. Finds in the district of iron arrow heads of Saami type from c 1000-1200 might also be indications of the presence of Saamis (all according to Syversen, see Fredriksen 1983).

The Borgarting Law and the Eidsivating Law, the two oldest East Norwegian Christian law sections, thought to have been written down in A D 1120 at the latest, are also the only known Nordic laws which prohibit Norsemen from going to the 'Finns' to have their fortune told (Nesheim 1970, 7). Saami shamanism thus seems to have been a current issue in Eastern Norway at that time.

The object from Nordset with its southern provenience is in any case important as an indication of the formerly wider dispersal of Saami culture in Norway. Other data also support this view. Otherwise, the southernmost reference to a Saami drum on the Norwegian side of the border is from Tydalen in Sørtrøndelag. From Sweden there are oral traditions that drums in recent times were used as far south as Idre in northernmost Dalecarlia, 8 kilometres directly east of Rendalen, and in two places in northern Härjedalen (Manker 1938, 105, Abb 67).

Two other Saami antler/bone objects from Norway, dating from about the same time, might be *pointers* belonging to shaman drums. They were found in excavations at Eiterjord in Beiarn and at Vestvatn in Misvaer, Nordland, both doubtlessly Saami dwelling sites from A D 1000-1200. The objects are decorated with the plaited band



*Fig 5* A possible drum pointer: a pendant of copper sheet has been threaded onto the pin of a bronze penannular brooch from the 11th–12th century. From the Saami sacrificial site at Vindelgransele, Lappland. Photo: G Hildebrand

motif. The larger one, from Eiterjord, still has four trapezoid pendants of sheet bronze; the other has holes for something similar (Munch 1967 and pers. comm., cf. Odner 1983, 68; Zachrisson 1984, 10). They can be compared with two pointers of reindeer antler from Nordtrøndelag and from Sweden, possibly from Åsele (in south Lappland), which exhibit similar decoration and are of similar form and size, with sheet pendants, some of them trapezoid, in the same places (Manker 1938, Abb. 573, 577). Gerd Munch does not regard the two objects as pointers because all the offshoots are perforated and provided with bronze fittings. She may be right, but as long as the objects remain unidentified, the possibility that they are pointers still exists. Some pointers are known to have holes and notches (see for example Manker 1938, fig. 576).

Very reminiscent of another kind of pointer, depicted by Manker (Manker 1938, 365 ff., Abb. 586–588), are two joined objects from the Saami sacrificial site at Vindelgransele in Swedish Lappland (Fig. 5). A large, decorated bronze pendant was threaded onto the pin of a bronze penannular brooch of eastern type from the 11th–12th centuries (Serning 1956, Pl. 56, 4).

Stones could also function as pointers. Tuderus talks of a stone as ‘Los-Instrument’ (pilot-instrument) on the drum (Manker 1938, 373).

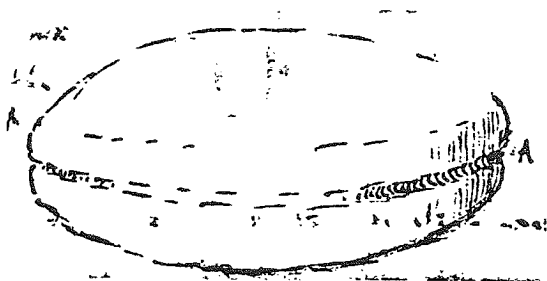


Fig 6 An Iron Age strike-a-light of quartzite, depicted by Schefferus in the 17th century According to him, such stones could function as drum pointers After Schefferus 1956

Emilie Demant Hatt reports from Frostviken (Demant Hatt 1928, 55; cf. Manker 1938, 373): "On the drum *rairengerge*, thunderbolts, were used, most of them red, some grey or brown spotted like ptarmigan eggs, but the size of thrush eggs "

Schefferus says that the Saamis 'predict their success in fishing with the drum, but in a somewhat different way than otherwise, for instead of the copper pointer they place on the drum a stone shaped in a certain way When this shows good luck in fishing, it hangs attached to the drum, even if the latter is turned upside down If one immerses the stone in water when one is fishing, half of it will float above water, as long as the fishing is successful But when luck runs out, the stone sinks The Lapps worship the stone by greasing it with fish fat The picture shows what it looks like Litt A indicates the small groove round the stone' (Schefferus 1956, 304 f, a Latin addition to Schefferus' own copy of *Lapponia*)

What Schefferus depicts (Fig 6) is a so-called oval strike-a-light of quartzite These date from c AD 100/300–600/800 and are known from all over northern Europe They could be carried on the belt, by means of the groove along the narrow sides

This is not the only example of such Iron Age strike-a-lights being used by Saamis in recent times A worn one was found on a Saami dwelling site from the 17th–18th centuries at Paulundsvallen on the River Ume, Lycksele parish, Lappland (Zachrisson 1976, 111 ff, 98, 26 f)

At least some twenty oval strike-a-lights of quartzite are known from northern Sweden (north of the River Indals) Most were random finds, but many were found on or beside dwelling sites of Stone Age type, which thus seem to have been inhabited right up to the Iron Age and

the Middle Ages by Saamis. The many stones of the same type from northern Finland were found in similar places principally along the Rivers Ule and Kemı, and they can probably be interpreted in the same way (Serning 1960, 27 f, Zachrisson 1976, 25 f)

Was it the fire kindling ability of such stones that was the secret of their power? Were they also called thunderbolts by the Saamis, like the stones Demant Hatt speaks of? Maybe this is the explanation of this name? This would imply, however, that about one thousand years after the manufacture of the strike a lights, their original function was known. On the other hand, it is not impossible that such stones were already used during the Iron Age by the Saamis for other purposes than fire kindling, magical purposes, for example.

Or was it the material, quartzite, which possessed special qualities in itself? An egg shaped stone of white quartzite, of about the same size as the oval strike a lights, functioned as a *seite* on the Saami sacrificial site at Vidjakuoika in northern Lapland (Manker 1957, 171 f, and furthest to the right on Bild 134)

White quartzite in particular seems to have had a special meaning in the past. There is proof of this from different places in northern Europe from as far back as the Stone Age, as, for example, at the well-known megalithic grave of Newgrange and other passage graves in Ireland (Bergh 1988, 32)

In Scandinavia it is especially in graves from the Migration Period (A D 400-550) that white quartzite with a probable connection to grave rites has been observed. It has been associated with the custom of placing 'sacred white stones' on or in grave mounds. Chosen stone material of other colours might have had similar meanings (Lamm 1973, 47 f, with references given there; cf Zachrisson 1987c)

How old then are the *pendants* of the drums preserved? They are, as a rule, of metal, and seem to have been essential attributes of the drums. They seem to have been hung on the bottom of the drums successively and may for this reason be of different ages. The preserved pendants thus do not necessarily give any reliable information about the age of the drum they belong to. The drums in general once had many more pendants than those that survive today, but most of them were removed when a drum was transferred to the next owner. The Meinngen drum has today 134 thongs, 110 of which are whole and provided with a metal ornament in the end (Manker 1938, 267 ff Abb 365-378, 710-711)

Pendants of metal are especially common on drums of the 'frame type', while they appear less frequently on drums of the 'bowl type'

(Manker 1938, 267 ff) This in itself speaks for the view that the use of such pendants is ancient. It is difficult to date simple pendants of sheet copper alloy, but it is remarkable that many of them are of exactly the same types as the pendants in the Saami metal deposits from around A D 1000–1350 (Zachrisson 1984; cf Serning 1956)

An unbroken tradition from the Viking Period or Middle Ages also seems to be associated with *how the pendants were attached to the drums*. As a rule they hang on long thongs of leather or wool, around which pewter thread is tightly wound (Manker 1938, 267 ff, 287, Abb 351–360). There are also reports of leather thongs with coloured woollen yarn wound round them (Manker 1938, 287, 645, 649 ff and other)

The pendants from the Saami sacrificial sites in northern Sweden have evidently hung on woollen threads. Most can be dated to the 13th–14th centuries, but some are from the preceding centuries. In addition, many of these woollen strings were long and had pewter thread wound tightly around them (Zachrisson 1984; Serning 1956; cf Zachrisson 1987a, 61 f)

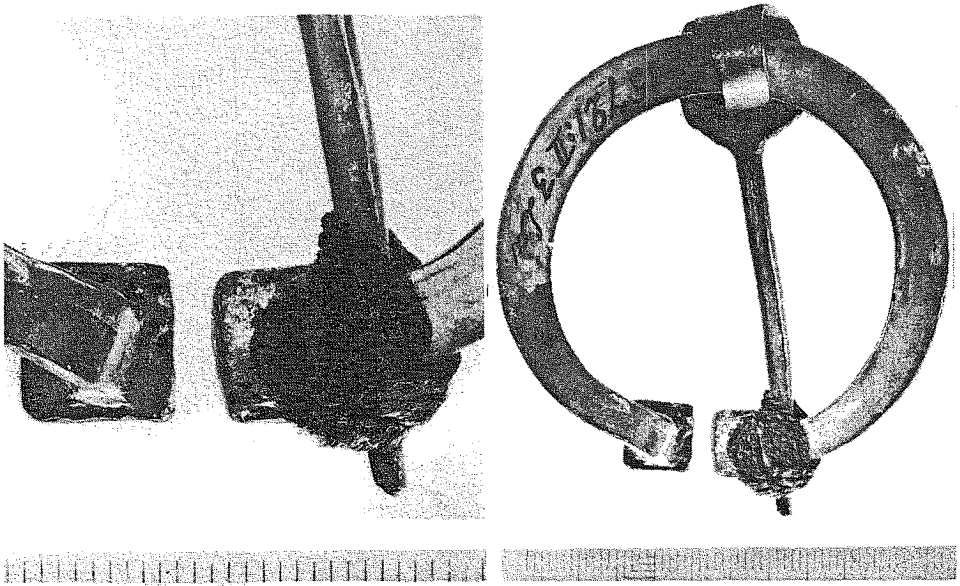
The correspondance between features of the pendants from the sacrificial sites on the one hand and those from preserved drums on the other, in respect of their types and, to a certain extent, their modes of attachment, makes it reasonable to work with the hypothesis that the pendants from sacrificial sites also derive from Saami shaman drums.

Magical power has been ascribed to *woollen thread* in traditional Saami culture (Nesheim 1970, 13, with references there). Coloured woollen yarn could be tied onto the sacrificial animal. The colour white was thought to have supernatural powers. Woollen yarn has been used by Saamis as amulets (Elgström 1922, 332 f), wound around a sick part of the body such as a finger (Anne Janbell Heikka, written communication 1984)

There is also an example from the preserved drums where a collection of small pieces of woollen cloth instead of a metal pendant has been hung at the end of string encapsulated in pewter thread (Manker 1938, Abb 389–390). Small pieces of woollen cloth constitute part of the material from the Saami sacrificial sites in the north (Serning 1956)

During the Viking Age–Early Middle Ages woollen thread was used by Saamis at least in northern Sweden in a special way. It was wound around the point of the pin and the frame of penannular brooches.

In the material from the sacrificial site at Unna Saiva there are woollen threads still left on eight brooches (Serning 1956). On a large



*Fig 7* Pennannular brooch of bronze from the 11th–12th century, from the Saami sacrificial site at Unna Saiva, Lapland. Note the woollen thread wound around the point of the pin and the frame of the brooch. Photo: G. Hildebrand.

silver brooch dating from the 11th–12th century, the thread is wound several times and in a decorative loop (Fig 7).

Another example of the same phenomenon is a pennannular brooch of the 11th century from one of the graves on Långön island in north-west Ångermanland. These graves have been interpreted as Saami (Ambrosiani & Iregren & Lahtiperä 1984, 62 f, Zachrisson 1987b, 78 ff).

All these examples show that archaeology may be able to throw light upon different aspects of Saami pre-Christian religion — or at least pose new questions. And every year more archaeological material comes to light!

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