

# Sacrificial Sites, Types and Function

BY ØRNULV VORREN

Much has been written and said about Saami mythology and pre-Christian religion. There is, however, considerably less documentation of concrete cultural elements in scholarly descriptions. Nonetheless, some does exist and I would like to mention J. K. Qvigstad *Lappische Opfersteine und Heilige Berge in Norwegen* and Ernst Manker *Lapparnas heliga ställen*.

In his work Qvigstad provides a description of hundreds of sacrificial sites about which he collected information from local informants, from archives and from old literary sources. He locates most of the sites by means of references on official Norwegian maps. In addition to this, he also includes sacrificial sites and holy mountains described by his informants. The book also contains numerous legends associated with the sacrificial sites and the traditions surrounding them.

Ernst Manker's major opus deals with the sacrificial sites in the areas in which the Swedish Saamis travelled—including those parts of Norway visited by the Swedish mountain Saamis. It is a massive piece of research with detailed descriptions of each individual "holy place". Manker's celebrated skill as a photographer is also well in evidence in the book. This impressive work was published as one of the volumes in the series *Acta Lapponica* which Manker started at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm.

Many others have made minor studies of sacrificial sites and published them in short papers. Mention may here be made of Carl Johanson, a Saami schoolteacher, with wide academic interests.

Since the 1950's the Saami ethnographic section of the Museum of Tromsø has been engaged on studies of the sacrificial sites in northern Norway, both on the coast and in the hinterland. The first objective has been to visit some of the places identified by Qvigstad on the maps and to document them carefully. As the work has progressed, however, more and more new information has emerge about sites not described by Qvigstad, provided by the local population.

These investigations are considered important not only because they aim to provide documentation that can be used for studies of Saami mythology and pre-Christian religion. They also provide material that can throw light on the function of the holy places in a social context through analysis of their origin, their connections with certain families and persons, their

associations with the siidas, their location within the areas where the Saamis from these siidas gained their livelihood, etc. The materials collected about the sacrificial sites also play an important role in studying the course of events leading up to the differentiation of Saami hunting and gathering culture.

A question that has frequently arisen in the course of this work is with what powers or deities the different sacrificial sites were associated. This is naturally connected with their origin and their form. This, in turn, is reflected in the traditions and legends recounted concerning them. It is also reflected in their location in the physical environment and in the kinds of offerings that have been found.

In the materials so far collected it is possible to distinguish between about eight different types of sacrificial site and holy mountain or fell according to their form and location:

1. Holy fells
2. Rock formations
3. Stone boulders
4. Holes
5. Cracks in fells
6. Springs
7. Lakes
8. Ring-shaped sacrificial sites

I shall describe some examples of most of these sacrificial sites with the aid of slides and I shall also recount something of the traditions associated with some of them. This paper is intended as a lighter contribution on the topic outside the programme proper of the congress; it is not an academic paper.

The "holy fells" are of such dimensions that they cannot really be compared with the other sacrificial sites. They are usually isolated and topped by a peak or ridge that reaches up into the clouds or the blue sky. "Halde" west of Kåfjord in Alta is a good example. It lies in the middle of a large complex of mountains. However, the best example of all is perhaps the one illustrated, "Sieidde" on the lake Laksvatn some miles south of Tromsø, easily visible from the Tromsø-Nordkjosbotn road (Fig. 1).

Many people have often asked themselves where the actual cult site, the sieidde or sacrificial place, lies on this mountain.

Traditions recorded in various written sources suggest that there need not in fact exist any special sacrificial site. The very fell itself is accorded a certain veneration by the Saamis when they passed by. Such fells are often situated by trails where the wild reindeer used to pass and where the Saamis in more recent times drove their herds of tame reindeer. "Sieidde"

on Laksvatn, for example, stands on a narrow neck of land between Laksvassbukta on Ullsfjord and Laksvatn. The reindeer had to pass this way on their migration from the hinterland and the peninsula of Stuorranjarga between Balsfjord and Ullsfjord.

The way in which the mountain was revered was, according to the missionary Jens Kildal, that when the Saami passed the mountain, he donned his "Sunday best" so to speak. Qvigstad also refers to the tradition of singing a "juoigos", a traditional Saami song when passing. The custom of removing one's hat or bonnet to show one's reverence for a mountain, cliff or rock is associated with many sites along the coast from Lofoten north along the coast of Finnmark.

However, there are some holy fells on which were located one or more cult sites. Mention might here be made of Gudfjellöya on the lake Limingen in Nord-Trøndelag. This is a mountain over 800 m high shaped like a foreshortened ninepin. There is a crack in the mountain reaching from the summit right down to shore level. In this crevice was placed a live reindeer which was tied fast and left to die of hunger. There are also mentions in Qvigstad's book of other places where it was the custom to offer up a live reindeer.

Ernst Manker writes that in the past it used to be customary to make an offering to Horragalles, the god of thunder, by burying a live reindeer in the ground so that only the antlers could be seen above the ground.

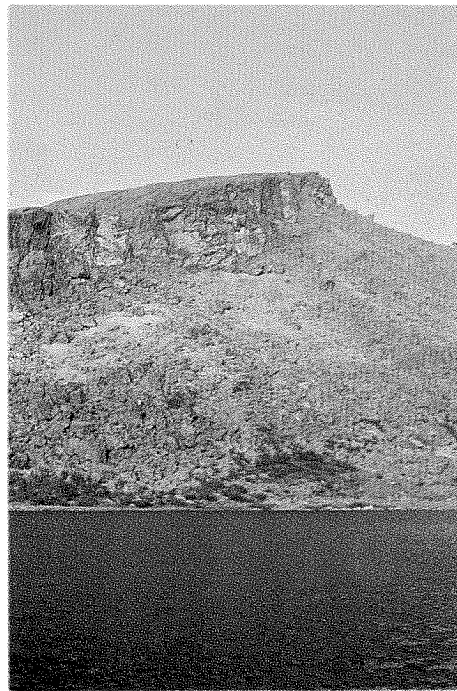
The second figure shows a fell in Finnmark. It lies near Sieidde-javri and is called Vaddasbakke in the Saami language, in Norwegian Offerberget, —and was reported to be a holy mountain by the missionary Isach Olsen as early as about the year 1700. This mountain, too, has a wide deep crack running across the top of it. Report has it that nobody should say the name of mountain when passing it or else there would soon be bad weather and storms.

A third fell, somewhat smaller this time, that I would like to mention is Muorjegappir on Varangerfjord, shown in Fig. 3. Of this fell it is said that the missionary Isach Olsen had seen offerings made there and Bishop Gunnerus mentions that there were holes on the fell where bones were once burned. In 1719 a large number of reindeer horns were found there. Just over 100 years later Professor Keilhau reported that on his expedition to the mountain he had found a quantity of halibut bones there. Off the cape on which Muorjegappir stands there is a very rich halibut fishing ground.

Muorjegappir resembles a rock formation rather than a real mountain, which brings us on to those types of sacrificial sites which are more like rock or cliff formations that stand isolated from the mountain they once formed part of. Such formations have sometimes been known to be called



*Fig. 1*



*Fig. 2*



*Fig. 3*



*Fig. 4*



Fig. 5

“finnkirker” in Norwegian. Frequently there is considerable doubt as to whether they were ever really Saami sacrificial sites, e.g. “Finnkirkene” outside Kjøllefjord in Finnmark. There are, however, a large number of free-standing formations, especially along the coast, that are reported to have been offering sites. I shall mention some of them: “Hornet” on the North Cape, “Galgo” on the island Nökklan in Kvenangen and “Sima-Lango” farther out in the same fjord. Figs 4, 5 and 6 are “Ahkkanjarg-stabba” near Kvalsund, Ahkko (old woman) at the foot of Komsa fell in Alta and “Ålbmai” (man) outside Gandvik on the south shore of Varangerfjorden respectively. Finds of fish bones and reindeer bones, the remains of offerings, have been made at both the first two sites. “Ålbmai” has undoubtedly played a similar role to “Hornet” on the North Cape, for example. Not far from “Ålbmai”, which is Saami for man, in the bay Gandvik stands an “Ahkko” (old woman). It is a corresponding rock formation high up in the precipice of a mountain.

However, loose boulders as sacrificial sites seem to be most common, sometimes extremely large in size. I might mention “Landbenstein”, which is 20 m high, in Ullsfjord in Troms and “Jettanagirko” in Smalfjord in



*Fig. 6*



*Fig. 7*

Finnmark, which is some 10 m high. In some places there are collections of boulders, albeit not quite so large but easily seen from a great distance.

As examples I can mention the sacrificial site at Stödi on Saltfjellet. A site of the same type can be seen in Fig. 7—Fallegiedgit, situated on the treeless plateau some distance east of the Alta valley. There are recounted a number of stories about this site. Some of them, for example, tell of finds of newly slaughtered reindeer calves or of parts of reindeer in the large crevices of the boulders. Another story describes the nomad Saami Stuurra-Piera (Big Pete) who lived about the middle of last century; he is reported to have always made a point of sacrificing to the sieidde whenever he passed with his herd in the course of his wanderings. One year he omitted to do so and his herd stampeded and died in a bog. Garra-Rastus (Tough Rasmus) took part of a reindeer horn that lay on the ground and as a result his lead reindeer immediately ran away when it was set out to graze at the next resting place. On another occasion when some nomad Saamis rested by the offering stones, one of them spat on the sieidde and then his best lead reindeer disappeared. It was found again the following autumn as a pile of bones.

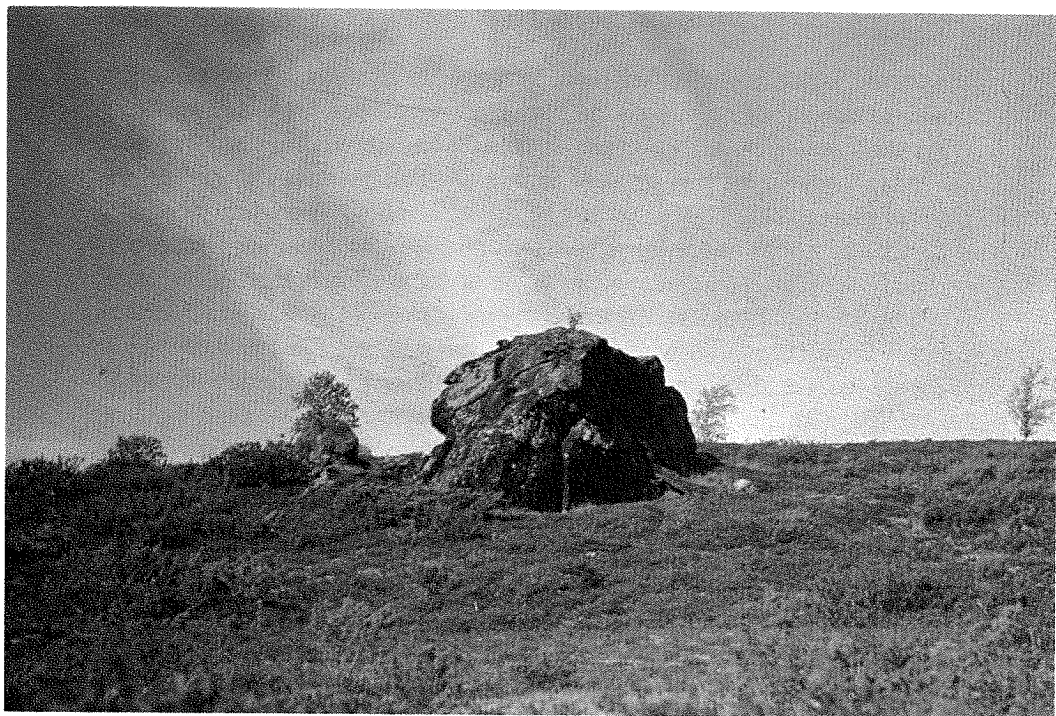
There are many sacrificial sites as boulders with cracks or crevices in them. One of them stands beside the old route from Kautokeino to Østfjellet. It is white and stands at the approach to the pass that leads over the Beljaš group of mountains. Offerings were found there in the crevice when I visited the place and there was also a great pile of charcoal from a lot of fires on the eastern side of it.

In the vicinity of the church in Kautokeino there stands a boulder with a large crack in it. Here there have been found quantities of bones and reindeer horns. One man told me that “[. . .] my grandfather’s brother once passed by this way and took some reindeer horns that lay there with him. But then he turned dizzy and had to put them back” (Fig. 8).

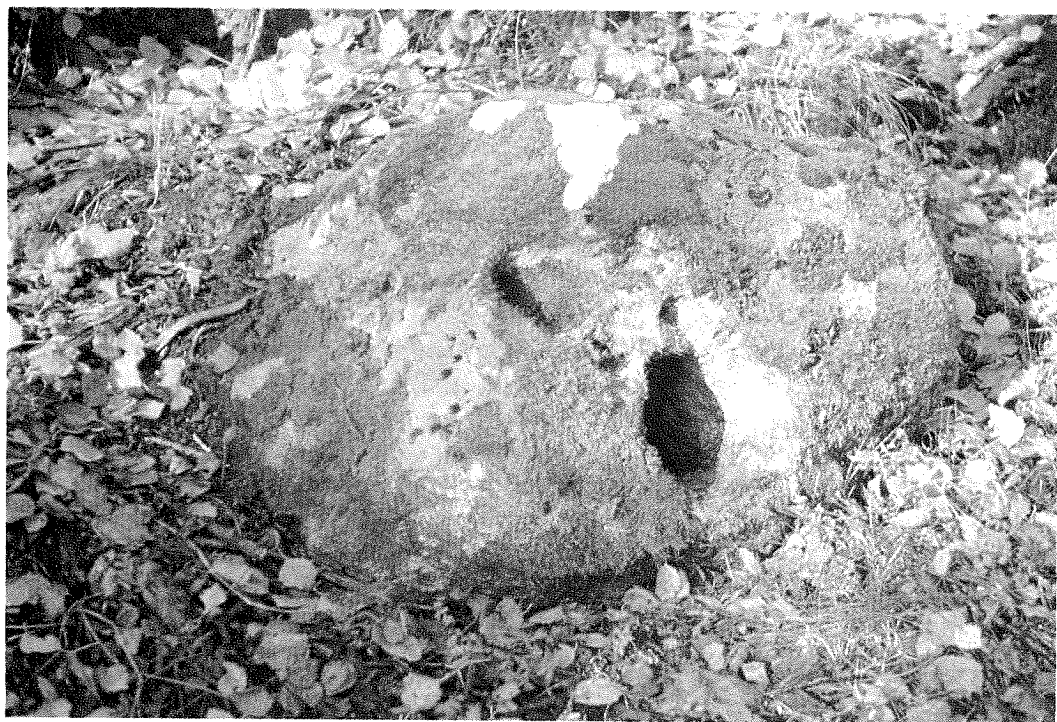
There are many such tales about these stones. One of them dating back to the days of wild reindeer hunting, is about the sieidde on Baes’kadas. A hunter of wild reindeer came to the sieidde and said: “If a couple of large reindeer bucks come now and I can shoot them, then I will give the sieidde the horns and the entrails.” Shortly after two bucks came past. The hunter thought to himself: “Now I have something to kill but I don’t want to serve an evil spirit.” Then the two reindeer ran away and the hunter was left empty-handed.

There are also many stories of how promises of offerings were broken and the negative consequences that followed. These sieidde stones are, as I said, mainly large boulders. By rivers and water, however, there were often small sieidde stones which might be termed fishing sieiddes for offerings





*Fig. 8*



*Fig. 9*



*Fig. 10*

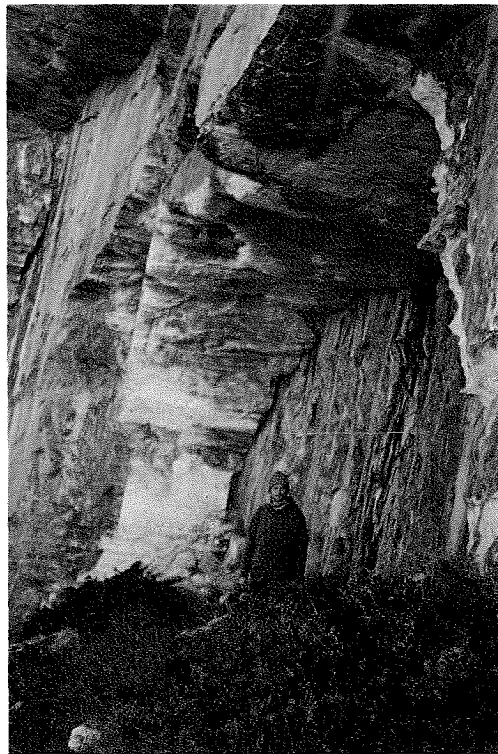
were made to these in the hopes of good fishing or as thanksgiving after a good catch. Two such sacrificial sites on the Tana river are shown in Figs 9 and 10. They are situated near good fishing waters and it was customary to offer the entrails of the fish caught to these stones. This tradition has persisted for a very long time, right up to the present day without it being possible to link it with offerings to the deity that gave good fishing at sea, in rivers or lakes.

Holes and grottos were also often chosen as offering sites. Here is a figure of a small grotto high up in a precipice at Mörsvik in Nordland (Fig. 11). As can be seen, the bottom of the grotto is covered with the bones of different kinds of animals. There was once, so it is said, a sieidde made of wood at this site, but two Christians threw it into the fiord. It sank like a stone.

“Gir’ko” on Bafte-niarg in Kvenangen is, as can be seen in Fig. 12, like a large gateway in the cliff of Kvitberg. Peter Schnitler relates in his “Examinationsprotokoller” of the 1740’s that offerings of reindeer, calf heads, fish, etc. were made at this site. Reindeer-herding Saamis made offerings of reindeer antlers in order to obtain good fortune with their reindeer while the sea Saamis often gave halibut heads in order to get good catches when they



*Fig. 11*



*Fig. 12*

went fishing. "A man who once caught a very large halibut said, when he passed by the site: 'Now the sieidde will only get shit on his nose'. Then there arose a mighty storm from the west, the boat was filled with water and the man only just succeeded in saving his own skin."

The sacrificial sites and sieiddes that I have shown you so far have all been natural formations. They are the most numerous and the most common.

However, there also exist the remains of another type of sacrificial site,—and they seem to have been particularly important—built by pre-Christian Saamis. These are ring-shaped offering sites. So far 19 such sites have been studied; they are spread over the whole of Finnmark and also found at one place in Nord-Troms. They consist of a wall of stones built in a circle with a diameter of 6 to 9 m. The height of the walls varies and is difficult to determine exactly since the uppermost stones have in most cases collapsed. Nevertheless, the highest walls reported have been between approx. 70 cm and 120 cm. These sacrificial sites have normally been constructed from collections of stones from rock falls which have provided

excellent building material. The actual offering site and the sieidde lie within the ring of stones. In some of these circular formations the place where the sacrifice actually took place has been a cairn of stones. But the sieidde itself has disappeared. The reason for this in my opinion is that in the past missionaries were required to destroy these sacrificial sites. In only one of them we have succeeded in finding the sieidde.

It appears, quite simply, that these circular sacrificial sites were common to the siida or siidas within whose area they were situated and they are often to be found near the places where wild reindeer were caught. The hunting of wild reindeer was, of course, a joint operation for the whole or even several siidas.

Fig. 13 shows the sacrificial site at Offerholmen on the lake Øvrevatn, which lies along the course of Lakselv. You can see the edge of the site in the bottom right-hand corner on the island. Knud Leem reports in his book published in 1867 a tradition associated with this site. He also has an illustration portraying this tradition. Wild reindeer were driven into the water by Saamis on the shore and forced to swim towards the island where there were hunters in boats hiding. At the appropriate moment the hunters approached the swimming animals and killed them with their lances and spears. Reindeer antlers and bones could be found at this site until well into the present century. The link with the hunting of wild reindeer seems to be quite obvious.

Some kilometres from this site at the upper end of Nedrevatn, which lies farther downstream, there is yet another circular offering site. In the middle of the site there is a hollow cairn of stones constructed in such a way that it is possible for a man to stand in the hollow in the cairn. Professor Friis visited the site on his journey to Finnmark in 1867. He describes the cairn and says that bones, antlers and pieces of wood were found at the site. The pieces of wood were from tree trunks that were built in the form of a fence along the top of the stone walls. I have also found remains of wood, horns and bones at the same place and can verify the use of such wooden structures since I had studied a ring-shaped offering site at Storfossen in Karasjokka. The wooden remains were so well preserved there that it was possible to ascertain that the fence surmounting the stone walls was made of tree trunks in two rows. This could be seen from the very join that we also found.

Fig. 14 shows a ring-shaped sacrificial site which also seems to have been associated with wild reindeer hunting. It lies in an area of not too many square kilometres where there are thousands of fallpits for wild reindeer. There is a large autumn camp for the hunters at Gollevarri (Gold fell) some miles away. At the site numerous finds have been made that prove that the



*Fig. 13*



*Fig. 14*



*Fig. 15*

camp was connected with the hunting of wild reindeer. However, there have been no finds at the actual sacrificial site that indicate the same.

The next two pictures, however, provide less evidence of having been associated with hunting for wild reindeer; they both lie on the shore of Varangerfjord. Fig. 15 shows the ring-shaped site up on Čieste (Bird mountain).

Qvigstad refers to the fact that this site together with three other “stone circles” on Varangerfjord are mentioned in the records of Nesseby parish. This and yet another “stone circle” a few kilometres away lie in an enormous burial ground dating back to ca. AD 100–400 where the graves are chests of flat stones.

Yet another circular offering site on the shores of Varangerfjord receives no mention in the parish records. This site is situated some hundreds of metres from the brick wall stone on which the first church in Varanger once stood. It lies on the edge of an ancient settlement with dwelling sites going back to the iron age and right down through the ages until our own century (Fig. 16). It is almost the only ring-shaped sacrificial site where the sieidde stones have been found. They were found lying inside the circle of stones but had been broken into pieces. However, they had been broken in such a



*Fig. 16*



*Fig. 17*



Fig. 18

way that it was relatively easy to piece them together again; they are shown in Fig. 17.

I mentioned earlier that missionaries were urged to destroy the offering sites and here we have proof of their activities in this respect.

Finally, one more sacrificial site from the latitude of Varangerfjord, Cevcagiedge at Mortensnes (Fig. 18). This is more or less a bauta stone surrounded by 12 stone circles that lie about one metre from each other.

Mortensnes is also an ancient settlement with the remains of dwellings covering the period from the earliest stone age down to sea Saami communities of the present century. The stone still bears traces of the fish oil that was smeared on it. However, the origin of the stone and its function are debated by the experts.

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