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PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURAL HERITAGE AND SEASCAPES IN UNJÁRGA

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INTRODUCING THE SETTING – CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES IN UNJÁRGA AND THEIR TEXTUAL HISTORY

The cultural heritage sites located in the small municipality of Unjárga (SaaN.), Nesseby (No.), have been of continuous interest to Norwegian archaeology and other academic disciplines. Already in the first half of the 19th century, trained and amateur archaeologists, such as J. Fritzner, E. Saxlund, and A. Nordvi, conducted examinations of scree graves and other sites in Unjárga. Nordvi especially conducted excavations in the vicinity of his home in Ceavccageadge (Mortensnes) (Schanche 2000: 24–8). These sites were of interest to both secular and religious authorities even earlier, as surviving texts from the 17th and 18th centuries – authored by participants in the colonisation of Finnmark and the integration of the Saami to the national church of Denmark – discuss sites in Unjárga as places of ‘idolatry’ or ‘superstition’.

In the early 20th century, J. K. Qvigstad (1926) wrote an extensive study on the “sacrificial stones and sacred mountains in Norway”, including several ones in Unjárga. Archaeological contributions include a description of the “Saami sacrificial sites in Várjjat” by Ø. Vorren and H. K. Eriksen (1993), an extensive study of the scree graves – many of them in Unjárga – by A. Schanche (2000), and a study of “Sami circular offering sites” by M. Spangen (2016). It should be added that Photographer A. Sveen (2003) published a book about “mythical landscape” in Sápmi, including several sites in Unjárga, and a foreword by historian of religions H. Rydvig.

Already this superficial listing shows that archaeologists and other scholars have contributed to the knowledge and dissemination of the sites in Unjárga by publishing academic texts. This is not the only medium of impact, however, as several scholars have been involved in the management and exhibition of cultural heritage in Unjárga in different roles. Scientific reports, applications, and other official documents have been written by archaeologists and other academics working in public offices or commissions. One can also add public documents, such as exhibition texts, websites, and brochures to the list of documents produced about the heritage sites in Unjárga.

In a sense, the different cultural heritage management processes and applications since the 1980s have culminated in the intention to include the sites in Ceavccageadge on the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites, a process commenced already in 2004 and still very much active. During a visit I made to an opening ceremony in Ceavccageadge in 2021, the will to forward the process to gain the world heritage status to Ceavccageadge and two other sites in the vicinity was strongly expressed by politicians and others involved in cultural heritage management.

ITINERARIES

My postdoctoral research project in Unjárga is part of a larger project funded by the Research Council of Norway. The project is called “The Governmentality of Indigenous Religions (or GOVMAT)”. Its website (en.uit.no/project/)



Figure 1. Murggiid gahperas as seen from Gassanjuorra. (Photo: Konsta Kaikkonen.)

govmat) introduces the project by asking “How are instances of indigenous religions and related objects assembled, and what do they do?” and answers: “The GOVMAT project researches materialisations of indigenous religions and their roles in contemporary cosmopolitics.”

Exploring and tweaking the concept of governmentality, introduced by Michel Foucault (2008; 2009) in the late 1970s, will be one starting point for theorising in the larger project, which also draws on Isabelle Stengers’s (2010) concept of cosmopolitics. Another possible point of entrance for the project is the Actor-Network Theory (or ANT), developed by, among others, Bruno Latour (2005). In practice, this could mean tracing connections between different actors, which could include people, material objects, non-humans, buildings, etc., and discussing these connections in relation to indigenous religions, cosmopolitics, and governance.

Based on these premises, in my ongoing research I use the concept of ‘governmentality’ when tracing connections between people,

features in the land/seascape, resources, documents, organisations, political bodies, and other material and immaterial entities related to the sites in Unjárga. My approach employs several types of methods and multidisciplinary approaches to a relatively limited geographical area and a relatively long timespan. The application of the ANT framework and the concept of governmentality to the sites in Unjárga allows me to plan different connection-tracing exercises, and in the following, I will discuss two emerging perspectives.

A MARINE PERSPECTIVE – SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM 2021

The first exercise starts with acknowledging that Unjárga has, first and foremost, been an area dominated by the ocean, especially Várjjatvuonna (the Varanger fjord). The area is characterized by a strong coastal Saami culture. Nevertheless, as far as I know, the sites relating to cultural heritage along the coast have never



Figure 2. *Guolleipmil* with the hilltop *Láhtačohkka* to the right on the other side of the fjord. (Photo: Konsta Kaikkonen.)

been approached or photographed from the sea, as researchers have rather held on to a land-based approach. In my first fieldwork period in the summer of 2021, I tried to reverse this approach by seeking new perspectives. (Fig. 1.)

Concentrating on sites introduced as ‘Saami sacrificial sites’ (No. *samiske offerplasser*) by Vorren and Eriksen (1993), I utilised a map of Saami place names in Unjárga (baikenamat.no) to find fishing shallows (sg. *njuorra*) in the fjord. Based on this, I marked some of the *njuorras* on a map application on my mobile. Travelling by kayak, I looked for these shallows with the help of a sonar and photographed chosen sites from different perspectives – from the *njuorras* themselves and from the courses between them. I call this approach ‘a marine perspective’.

My marine perspective reveals several interesting aspects of these sites. As Vorren and Eriksen (1993) often mention, many of the sites they discuss have been used as navigation points – *mearka* in Northern Saami and *méd* in Norwegian. Indeed, some of the sites such as stones along the shoreline indicate specific

njuorras, characterised as successful halibut fishing spots. Two sites in particular stand out in literature: the stones named *Guolleipmil* (The Fish God) (Fig. 2) and *Bálddesgeađge* (The Halibut Stone). Both have been related to sacrificial activities, as Vorren and Eriksen (1993) write that after catching a halibut the piscator would bring the head and guts of the fish to the stone.

In addition to these sites carrying similar histories, there are several other individual stones of interest to the project, discussed as sacrificial sites by Vorren and Eriksen (1993). The stone *Guovža* (The Bear) is related to local folklore and a very visible feature in the land/seascape. Seen from a marine perspective, its appearance, disappearance, and reappearance when approached from different angles can easily be related to navigation to and between different *njuorras*. Another *mearka* worth mentioning is the cliff formation *Almmái* (The Man), which appears and disappears on the hillside when approaching a nearby *njuorra*, making it in effect a very useful navigation point.

In addition to stones of particular appearance, there are several larger landmarks that dominate the seascape and function as *mearkas*, the landscape formation Áldda-Áhkku and the hill Álda being examples of such. With both mentioned in texts already over three centuries ago, these spots seem to have had a special purpose for the local communities, judging by the names, as *álda* in North Saami has most often been related to ‘sacred place’ or ‘sacrificial site’. Other highly visible features in the landscape include the hilltop Láhtačohkka and cliff formation Murggiid gahperas, both of which have been used as *mearkas* and are visible even from across the fjord (Nilsen 2010).

Some sites in Unjárga carry material histories of colonisation with them. Nordvi is still known for his questionable affairs, as he extracted bodily remains from graves and sold them to institutions interested in racial biology (Schanche 2000: 32–4). Two stones used as *mearkas* and possibly related to sacrificial activities have been demolished with explosives, while a stone on top of Álda has been rolled down from its original place on the hilltop (Vorren & Eriksen 1993).

My hypothesis is that earlier texts have treated these and other sites mainly as sacrificial sites, although this might not have been their only or even most important function. Approaching the sites instead as nodes in a web of interrelated connections will give a broader view of their uses and functions. Drawing insights from the emerging field of Blue Humanities, I will attempt to contextualize these places in relation to their material surroundings – fjord, fish, and folk. The stories related to sites in Unjárga that are found in e.g., research literature and different archives will, in addition, be important in finding connections between storytelling and materiality.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS AND INTERVIEWS – THE WAY FORWARD

My second tracing exercise will concentrate on connections in different types of documents, approaching them as both material entities and as literary products. I will therefore discuss historical texts, research literature, reports, applications, letters, and other texts as discursive products, but above all, as material actants creating

and maintaining connections between other actants. This will show how the sites in Unjárga, and especially Ceavccageadge, have been connected to other sites locally, regionally, nationally, and globally.

An analysis of different documents will hopefully give new perspectives on the sites in Unjárga and show that the importance of these sites is, by no means, only in the past. The cultural heritage in Unjárga continues to affect, govern, and influence lives, resources, and discourses. I will complement my document analysis with semi-structured interviews with some of the persons involved in the management of cultural heritage and in the UNESCO application process. This results in complementary material that gives a deeper and more nuanced picture of the meaning and importance of the cultural heritage sites in Unjárga.

KEYWORDS AND TERMINOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

As I have written previously, ‘Words organise and create the world around us, and labels have direct consequences on how religious phenomena are perceived’ (Kaikkonen 2020). I will continue to reflect on term use in this project as well. It will especially be interesting to see how the concept and category ‘sacred’ has been applied when discussing the sites in Unjárga, and how other concepts such as ‘sacrifice/offer’, ‘shaman/shamanism’, ‘pre-Christian’ etc. have been used.

Changes and continuities between the oldest texts and subsequent documents will be highlighted and discussed especially as translations. Translation theory (see e.g., Lefevere (1999) 2002; Hanks & Severi 2014), will be applied to ask how cultural and literal translations differ between time periods, genres, governing bodies, languages etc. It will be of importance to ask what new these terminological considerations can tell about the making of indigenous religion as a category and enacted entity, and how this relates to international cosmopolitics, governance, and materiality.

Besides translations, another keyword for the project will be ‘perspective’. I will explore how temporal, spatial, lingual, confessional, personal, traditional, etc. perspectives alter the way

sites and landscapes are seen, experienced, and discussed, bridging these insights to relevant theories and epistemological standpoints.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND COLLABORATIONS

I have begun discussions with employees of the Saami parliament in Norway and the Várjjat Sámi Musea who are responsible for the management and display of cultural heritage in the Unjárga municipality. They have kindly provided me with information about the sites, valuable perspectives, as well as access to documents and other archives. In these discussions, we agreed that my project will only focus on well-known sites and does not include any kind of alterations to the landscape. In effect, this means using especially Vorren and Eriksen's (1993) book as well as several older texts as my point of departure when choosing specific, well-known sites. It will also be important to mediate results and insights gained from the research process directly back to the local communities as the project advances. I hope to achieve this goal with the help of local media, organisations, and officials.

What I have outlined here is clearly not an archaeological project. It does, however, concern archaeologists, and I hope to find resonance in an audience of archaeologists with my work. Most of the previous research about the sites I have visited has been written by archaeologists, as have the applications and other documents that I will be studying. It is therefore important to make archaeologists aware of the project and ask for comments, critiques, and remarks on my approach to the sites in Unjárga.

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