

Viewpoints on the disintegration of the Late Iron Age and early medieval Sámi societies and the emergence of reindeer herding in Northern Fennoscandia

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Abstract

The inland Sámi societies were very homogeneous in terms of material culture and site structures during the Late Iron Age and early medieval period (ca. 700–1300 CE) covering a very large area (over 1000 km at its furthest points). These societies disintegrated during the 14th century and almost at the same time, in the same area, large-scale reindeer herding emerged. What were the reasons for disintegration of the Sámi societies and the emergence of reindeer herding, and what kind of historical events were in the background of these processes? Moreover, were the processes interconnected or not?

Keywords: Northern Fennoscandia, hearth-row sites, reindeer herding, stallo foundations, inland Sámi societies.

17.1 Introduction

The Late Iron Age and the early medieval (ca. 700–1300 CE) Sámi inland societies in Northern Fennoscandia are known for their very homogenous material culture and dwelling site structures, although there was some local variation. So-called row-organised hearths were formed in winter villages and sites for other seasons. They have been discovered over an area of more than 1000 km at its furthest points, from southern Norway all the way to the Kola Peninsula. Other kinds of Sámi societies are also known from outside this area.

Many studies have dealt with the nature of societies, what they were like and what their subsistence strategy was. It is relatively clear that the inland Sámi were reindeer and fur animal hunters, who used domesticated reindeer as decoy and draught animals, and small numbers of sheep for meat production and probably for wool production as well (Halinen et al. 2013; Hedman et al. 2015; Jerand & Linderholm 2019; Olsen 2019; Salmi in press). There are still many aspects of the Sámi societies that remain to be studied.

Little is known about what the causes of the disintegration of the inland Sámi societies were. The use of rectangular hearths declined in the late 13th century, and in many areas their use completely ended. What happened and what were the consequences of this disintegration?

17.2 Inland Sámi societies in the Late Iron Age and the early medieval period, 700–1300 CE

Sámi inland societies are best known for dwelling sites with large row-organised hearths. The material culture, which consisted of imported metal artefacts and locally produced artefacts, was very homogenous. The hearths were most probably constructed in connection with light conical huts or tents. No traces of solid dwellings have so far been found. The hearths were usually located in rows of 2–4 or 5–10, but sometimes their number was higher. There are also individual hearths. Larger hearth-row sites have usually been interpreted as winter villages. Earlier dwelling sites were located by larger bodies of water, but these sites were located further away from waterways, near swamps or smaller lakes and brooks, in completely different places. These kinds of sites have been found in inland areas of Fennoscandia, from southern Norway to the Kola Peninsula, in a region over 1000 km long from their furthest points. Many of the artefacts from the era originate from the east or they have Scandinavian, Finnish or Baltic origins. These artefacts are quite the same in different parts of the region. Also, the ritual expressions in different parts of the region have a similar pattern in large areas, but not in every corner of the region. Even though the environmental and topographical conditions varied in this large area by a large amount, and there are of course some minor regional differences in material culture, in the big picture the culture is quite homogeneous. (Halinen 2009; 2016; Halinen et al. 2013; Hansen & Olsen 2014; Hedman 2003; 2015; Hedman & Olsen 2009; Hedman et al. 2015; Olsen 2019; Schanche 2000.)

Most of the hearth-row sites are in forest areas, but in the Scandinavian mountains there were slightly different types of sites (see map of distribution areas of hearth-row sites and stallo sites in Hedman 2015; Murashkin & Kolpakov 2019: 76). The fell area sites are called stallo (*stållo*) foundations, which are the remains of dwellings. The distribution of the stallo foundations and hearth-row sites overlaps in the border areas. The preserved and visible remains are the hearth and shallow embankment surrounding the sunken floor area. They usually occur in rows like row-organised hearths, and the number of stallo foundations varies between two and five. Mostly they have been dated to ca. 850–1050 CE, but the dates range between 640–1178, which means a shorter use period for them than for the hearth-row sites. However, there are also some more recent dates connected to the stallo sites. It has been suggested that stallo sites were used for both wild reindeer hunting and reindeer herding, but there is currently no clear answer to whether this is true so far. (Bergman et al. 2008; 2013; Liedgren & Bergman 2009; Liedgren et al. 2007; Mulk 1994; Storli 1994.)

According to studies of the hearth-row sites, societies formed from regional entities, which included larger winter villages, smaller dwelling sites used for other seasons, hunting grounds (good hunting areas), *sieidi* sites (sacrificial sites), burial grounds and so on. In other words, everything a society needs to live and survive (e.g. Halinen 2016). Such regional entities, which can probably be called *siidas*, are located next to each other, and the network of societies covered a wide forested area. In such a society there would also have been a chief, even though the village societies seem to have been quite egalitarian. In a hearth-row village, the hearths in the middle were among the biggest and, in terms of artefact finds, most abundant, both of which imply higher status in the middle of the row

(Olsen 2019). The row-organised villages were a way for Sámi societies to consolidate the cohesion of the societies against outside forces, such as Scandinavians, Karelians and Kvens, or Birkarls. It turned out to be a successful way to organise a society and maintain their way of living for at least several centuries (Halinen 2016).

The Sámi maintained lively contacts between different parts of the region, and in that way, they maintained a unified cultural area. Usually, connections were seen to be maintained along river valleys, between the Sámi in the fells and middlemen in the coastal area, which had a gateway position. The rivers of northern Sweden and northern Finland flow from the fells and higher areas down towards the sea, and the inland areas seem to have been controlled by societies on the coast. The mobile population could not have had commercial contacts without these gateway societies (Kuusela 2014). A large and culturally homogeneous area maintained trade and interacting connections in different ways: from one river valley to another along the land connections, and not along water connections. Instead of boats for connecting people, the inland Sámi people used sledges pulled by reindeer (Halinen 2016). This change from water to land connection took place in the Late Iron Age, 700–1200 CE. Before 700–800 CE dwelling sites were located close to rivers and lakes, but after this the inland sites were located far away from water, in locations more suitable for reindeer herding (Hedman 2003). The oldest known sledges of the Sámi type are from the 10th or 13th centuries (Carpelan 2003: 66–67; Schanche 2000: 192–217). Of course, there were differences in means of communication during summer and winter, but the winter connections were more important in the winter village context from the point of view of maintaining the unity of the region.

The means of livelihood of the inland Sámi societies was based mainly on wild reindeer hunting, but they also hunted fur animals and other animals, and they fished mainly for small lake and river fish. Sheep husbandry was practised in some areas. (Halinen 2016; Halinen et al. 2013; Hedman 2003; Hedman & Olsen 2009; Hedman et al. 2015; Olsen 2019; Vretemark 2019.) What role did reindeer herding play in the nutritional economy of the Sámi in the row-hearth societies?

In recent years, based on ancient DNA studies, it has been suggested that reindeer herding emerged in the Middle Ages (Bjørnstad et al. 2012; Heino et al. 2021; Røed et al. 2008; 2018). However, reindeer were first domesticated in the Late Iron Age, and possibly much earlier, as a draught animal to pull sledges and as decoy animals, but also on a small scale for food. Reindeer herding was small-scale and intensive, and the animals were kept near people. (E.g. Aronsson 1991; Halinen 2016; Halinen et al. 2013; Hedman et al. 2015; Jerand & Linderholm 2019; Olsen 2019.) Later, in the Middle Ages, new reindeer populations replaced the earlier reindeer, which were tamed from local wild reindeer populations.

17.3 Disintegration of inland Sámi societies at the end of the 13th century

Living conditions remained largely the same for a long time, over 500 years, and within the societies only minor changes occurred. But what happened to the inland Sámi societies during the 13th and 14th centuries? Everything seemed to be fine. The societies had developed slowly, and population density had increased. But the coherent and consistent societies disintegrated, the use of rectangular hearths declined and in some areas it totally ended. Gradually the use of fireplaces, which were more suitable for more mobile societies, increased in the medieval period. These fireplaces had rim stones and stone arms heading to the main door and sometimes to the back door as well. The row-organised form of villages changed to single lightly constructed huts or a more randomly organised structure of

villages. In the Inari area the row-organised form of villages remained, but the lightly constructed huts were replaced by more solid huts. In the Pasvik area, the more solid huts were used, but their location remained the same as previously in row-organised villages (Halinen 2009; 2016; 2019; Hansen & Olsen 2014; Hansen & Olsen in press.; Mulk 1994). In different parts of the inland Sámi area the changes were different.

What triggered the disintegration of the inland Sámi societies? Within the societies there was no visible threat, but the medieval warm period starting to come to an end by ca. 1250 (Kultti et al. 2006; Matskovsky & Helama 2016). Did climate change affect opportunities for hunting and fishing? Most probably not much, because cooler temperatures should improve the living conditions of reindeer, wild or domesticated, by increasing the extent of summer pastures of reindeer. This can be seen in the expansion of the reindeer hunt in the Varanger area in the 15th century. This was also seen as one of the reasons for the emergence of reindeer herding (Hansen & Olsen 2014; Munch & Munch 1998). The conditions of inland lake fishing remained positive for the whole of the medieval period and the early modern period as well (Bergman & Ramqvist 2017).

Did the Sámi just change the means of livelihood from hunting to reindeer herding, and in that process the village structure changed? There is always a reason for changing a means of livelihood – people don't just change them. The reason for disintegration must then be something else, in change of external conditions.

In the Norwegian coastal area close to Haalogaland (Lofoten), the relationship between the Scandinavians and Sámi were described as reciprocal; the Sámi are thought to have integrated into Scandinavian chieftain societies through trade. Scandinavian societies had engaged in farming, agriculture and animal husbandry, and fishing. But the trade, which was led by chieftains, was partly dependent on the coastal and inland Sámi societies, which could arrange fur and other animal products from the mountain areas. The Sámi traded with the Scandinavian chieftain societies and paid tax or tributes to the Scandinavians, or *finnskatt*, and without this a reciprocal trade relationship would not have produced such great fortunes for the Scandinavians (Hansen 1990; Hansen & Olsen 2014). This reciprocal relationship lasted for almost 400 years, and in that side the Sámi societies lived and developed. However, this weakened in the 11th century with the growth of the Norwegian monarchy. The ways of interaction changed considerably (Hansen & Olsen 2014). Did the weakening of the chieftains have an influence on the *stallo* societies, which were involved in trade system with the coastal Scandinavian societies? The use of *stallo* foundations also diminished during the 11th century. On the eastern side of the Scandinavian mountains, in the coastal areas of the Gulf of Bothnia, the Kvens (*Cwenas*, *Kvenir*) practised same kind of trade and tax or tribute collection with the Sámi from the 9th century onwards. The Kvens lived in the coastal area and along the major rivers. They practised animal husbandry and hunting and fishing (Vahtola 2020). Although the Icelandic sagas (the Saga of Egil Skallagrímsson) mention Faravid, the king of the Kvens, it is obvious that the king meant a leader or a chieftain. Faravid has been compared to the king of Haalogaland, a local chieftain of the area (Hansen & Olsen 2014; Vahtola 2020). In Eastern Fennoscandia, the Karelians and their allies the Novgorodians also had a strong influence on the societies in the area, especially in the eastern parts of the area and Kemi Lapland.

The relationship between the Sámi and Kven, and Sámi and Scandinavian societies was more reciprocal until the late 13th century, when the Birkarls rose from the Kven societies. Birkarls were farmers and traders who traded with the Sámi and collected tax and tribute from the Sámi societies. They were mentioned in historical records for the first time in 1328 and 1358, when the privileges of the Birkarls for trading with the Sámi were confirmed. The pressure the Birkarls placed on the Sámi societies was much greater than the pressure that the Scandinavians and Kvens had placed. Also, state actors, like Sweden, Norway and Novgorod, were involved in the taxing of the Sámi, but this took place more

effectively from the 14th century onwards. This earlier pressure lasted about 500 years, but the Sámi societies did not collapse during that time. In addition to the Kvens and Scandinavians, Karelians and Novgorodians were also involved in trade in the same region in the Late Iron Age and the medieval period. They were also the pressure-inducers in this process. In both cases the taxes can be called tribute or protection money, which was demanded from the Sámi. How aggressive and violent the Birkarls actually were has been discussed animatedly in research history, and their activities towards the Sámi has been interpreted as both interaction in trade and violent tribute-collecting activities (Bergman & Edlund 2016: 54, 73; Enbuske 2008, 95–96; Favorin 1968; Kuusela et al. 2018: 775; Nurmi et al. 2020: 116–20; Steckzén 1964: 274–285; Vilkkuna 1957: 75). Were the Birkarls more aggressive and violent than the Scandinavians and Kvens? The Birkarls had left behind more than just a vile reputation (Bergman & Edlund 2016: 74); their reputation was based on real acts. Anyway, the Sámi societies disintegrated after over 500 years when the Birkarls showed up on the scene. Historical sources about the Birkarls are minimal in the 14th century, and the vast majority of them date back to the 16th century. The Christian ethical codes were on their way to Lapland in the early medieval period, and the area was not Christian at the time. The ethical and moral codes of the Birkarls were the same as those the south Finnish peasants and Scandinavian Vikings had. They were based on a general view of good and evil, but also that the stronger had a right to take advantage of the weaker. It made it possible to keep slaves, and to acquire them in the context of battles and warlike conquests, and in hope of economic gain from the slave trade. The stronger were also able to carry out raids against weaker societies and mount surprise attacks and plundering against enemies in order to gain wealth in their elevated social and economic position. Such raiding expeditions were also carried out earlier by the Kvens in Haalogaland and the Scandinavians along the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia (Vahtola 2020). Historical sources from the 16th century suggest that the Sámi had accepted their position in the Sámi-Birkarl relationship or that they had not made any complaints against the Birkarls (Steckzén 1964: 315) – what can you do or say if you have no choice? The Birkarls had made the Sámi an offer they could not refuse.

The aggressive tribute collection practices broke up the east-west direction trading connections of the row-hearth societies and forced them to get along on their own in smaller societies. The direction of these actions was from the coast to inland, with the long and wide area being subject to plundering attacks from the sides. The wide and homogeneous culture area broke into smaller local entities, with each one attempting to find a way to survive and to pay the tribute.

17.4 The emergence of reindeer herding

In the Inari region, the development from row-hearth sites is clear in the 16th century winter village at Nukkumajoki. Nine winter villages along the banks of the Nukkumajoki have been discovered. The people of the Nukkumajoki villages retained reindeer and fur animal hunting as their main means of livelihood, but to protect themselves against tax/tribute collectors from three directions – Sweden, Norway and Novgorod – they retained the structure of the villages as they used to be, but developed a new, more solid type of dwelling in the place of light constructed huts (Halinen 2019). In locations across northern Sweden and Norway, people developed more successful reindeer herding. Fishing was also an important way of getting food and having something to sell. Because the Birkarls demanded more tribute and fur products, people decided to earn more money and provide natural products in order to meet their requirements. The same kind of causality has been proposed in the past, but in those cases the emerging nation states and intensified reindeer hunting, which was followed by the eradication of wild reindeer stocks, were highlighted (Odner 2001). The Sámi societies in northern

Sweden and Norway adopted larger-scale reindeer herding from the east, probably in the 14th or 15th century. The reindeer, evidence of which has been found at Sámi offering places in northern Finland from the 13th to 15th centuries, were wild forest reindeer (Heino et al. 2021).

The emergence of reindeer herding, and its development did not follow the same lines everywhere. The process of the emergence of reindeer herding in Fennoscandia can in short be formulated in the following way. The Sámi had been engaged in small-scale intensive reindeer herding in the Late Iron Age and the early medieval period, and probably even earlier, mainly for draught and decoy animals. These reindeer had been domesticated from local wild forest reindeer populations in the Late Iron Age. (Halinen 2016; Halinen et al. 2013; Hedman et al. 2015; Røed et al. 2018; Salmi in press.) During the 15th or 16th century, or even earlier, the Sámi introduced a new population of domesticated reindeer from the east through their trade networks, and it left DNA traces in the Varanger and Inari areas (Heino et al. 2021; Røed et al. 2018). This domesticated reindeer population entered northern Sweden or Norway, where the Sámi societies adopted reindeer herding. They developed it, initially on a small scale, probably in the 14th century, but by the late medieval period it had grown into a more successful, larger-scale reindeer herding economy. In the 14th century reindeer herding spread to Finland, first evidence of small scale herding is from Juikenttä dwelling site in Sodankylä. (Bjørnstad et al. 2012; Heino et al. 2021; Røed et al. 2008; 2018; Salmi et al. 2021; Salmi in press.) Through the output of reindeer products, reindeer herders could pay their taxes and tribute, and they were also able to increase their properties when the herds grew big enough. The economic system turned out to be successful, which also attracted others to embrace the same subsistence strategy. Reindeer herding became an attractive means of livelihood, and it spread wider towards the north, south and east. The emergence of larger-scale reindeer herding dates to the late medieval period, and it extended more during the 17th and 18th centuries when it expanded across the entire northern Fennoscandia region. Extensive reindeer herding occurred in the 19th century when herd sizes grew bigger. The process of extension followed a certain pattern: when new people adopted reindeer herding, they adopted the idea, but the reindeer were brought from another area. The new reindeer population totally supplanted the earlier reindeer population, which had been used as draught and decoy animals, and gradually took over the pastures of the wild reindeer as well. The new reindeer population was used for food, draught animals, hide production, tool production, and so on. The extension was partly based on the movement of people and reindeer, but local people also adopted reindeer herding. The expansion of reindeer herding affected the economic and social power structures of the regions as well, because the older local hunter elite was replaced with the reindeer herding elite. New groups and families developed in the societies.

It is proposed that the triggers for the emergence of reindeer herding were external and internal reasons, especially the development of organisational leadership and individual ownership of reindeer (Hansen & Olsen 2014: 195–206; Heino et al. 2021: 12).

They may have played a role in the multifaceted process of the emergence of reindeer herding. Although there were also other active players in northern Fennoscandia, such as Karelians, Novgorodians and the Swedish Crown, in my view the most important trigger was the activities of the Birkarls towards the inland Sámi societies, the consequences of which were different in different parts of northern Fennoscandia. And one of them was the emergence of reindeer herding.

17.5 Conclusion

The inland Sámi societies developed over 500 years into coherent societies, which had quite a homogeneous material culture across very wide area from southern Norway to the Kola Peninsula. Mainly

these hearth-row societies acquired their food by hunting reindeer, fishing and gathering. The societies had larger winter villages and smaller dwelling sites used during other seasons. The societies maintained their economic contacts in winter by sledges drawn by reindeer – the direction of the contact networks of the whole culture was from east to west, and contacts were maintained inland rather than from inland to the coast along the rivers.

The inland Sámi societies had to face pressure from the chieftains on the Norwegian coast, the Karelians from the east, and from populations along the Bothnian coast. These people, especially the Birkarls from the late 13th century, used aggressive methods against the Sámi for acquiring taxes and tribute. Their actions broke up the large and long-lasting culture into smaller local entities, which had to develop survival strategies from a local point of view. Along with the Birkarls there were also other actors in the region, like the Scandinavians, Karelians and state operators. In this struggle, each area developed their own ways, one of them being larger-scale reindeer herding with a newly imported reindeer population from the east, which replaced the older, locally domesticated draught reindeer population. This happened most successfully in northern Sweden and Norway, and later also in northern Finland, and the Sámi societies that had adapted to reindeer herding could extend their reindeer population and also increase their property after they had paid the tribute. Locally, new families developed in the societies as the wealth of reindeer herders increased.

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