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Common ground. Saami-Norse interactions in South Norway during the Late Iron Age and early medieval period

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Abstract

Archaeological material said to confirm a Saami presence in South Norway during the Iron Age includes settlement sites, sacrificial sites, and stray finds as well as so-called 'hunting ground graves'. I argue that the diversity among hunting ground graves is too wide-ranging for them to be classified as one single phenomenon. Instead, I believe they indicate that Saami identity took many forms and presented itself in a range of different contexts and situations.

Iron Age Saami groups have often been interpreted as the antithesis of Norse Iron Age society, most commonly as hunters as opposed to sedentary farmers. Despite this dichotomy, several different sources presume that Saami people were an integrated part of Norse society. Archaeological material gives us the opportunity to study Saami and Norse interactions and networks. Through two different case studies, I demonstrate a complexity of expressions and a variety of perspectives within the material that represent Saami presence.

Key words: South Saami archaeology, ethnicity, Saami drum hammer, comb maker

9.1 Introduction

For quite some years, at least since the 1980s, there has been a growing interest within the field of archaeology to find, document, and understand South Saami prehistory. During this time, the attitude towards the assumption of a Saami presence in South Norway and mid-Sweden during the Iron Age has become more positive. The change in mindset is caused by extensive research on possible Saami archaeological material and the continuous challenging of established truths (Fredriksen 1983; Zachrisson 1987, 1992, 1997; Bergstøl 1997, 2008; Bergstøl and Reitan 2008; Amundsen 2011; Amundsen and Os 2015). The debate, however, is still focused on whether the archaeological material can be 'proven' to be Saami.

The archaeological material that confirms, or at least indicates, a Saami presence in South Norway includes settlement sites, possible sacred and sacrificial sites, and a few stray finds, as well as so-called hunting ground graves. In my doctoral thesis, I argue that the category of 'hunting ground graves' has become difficult to grasp and use in archaeological interpretations (Gjerde 2016). Nevertheless, the graves themselves are still interesting. I believe that they can help us understand some of the com-

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plexity of Iron Age society. A range of sources provides convincing evidence that Saami culture and identity played a central role in Iron Age and medieval society throughout Scandinavia, including the South Norwegian areas. In this paper, I argue that Saami presence should be taken as a premise for archaeological reasoning and interpretation in further studies of South Norwegian material instead of having to prove the ‘Saaminess’ of every specific site, context, artefact, and so on. To this end, I explore Saami-Norse interactions taking place in the Iron Age and early medieval period by looking into some of the material connected to Saami culture in South Norway.

Two case studies are presented here. The first case deals with a specific artefact dated to the early medieval period, namely a drum hammer (*vietjere* in South Saami). The other case concerns a particular set of artefacts found in several of the Iron Age graves known as ‘hunting ground graves’, namely combs and comb making tools. Through these case studies, I reveal an ambiguity in the material, as well as a potentially rich and diverse understanding of it, that can open our stories about the past to include Saami culture and, even more importantly, a Saami past that goes beyond a stereotypical or fixed representation.

9.2 The archaeological material representing Saami presence

Though contested, the amount of archaeological material reflecting a Saami presence in South Norway in the past has increased during more than thirty years of research on this topic. It was primarily Inger Zachrisson who dared to challenge the ethnic affiliation of the individuals buried at Krankmårtenhögen and Vivallen in particular, but also of the inland Iron Age graves in general (Ambrosiani et al. 1984; Zachrisson 1987, 1992, 1997a). The discussion of the ethnic affiliation of these graves soon spread across the border to Norway. Here, the question of Iron Age graves that were disconnected from an agrarian settlement was well-known and widely discussed. Arne Skjølsvold (1969, 1980, 1981, 1983) had investigated such graves, previously known as ‘mountain graves’, but he refused to use ethnic labels (Skjølsvold 1980). Skjølsvold considered whether Eastern Norway could have been inhabited by hunter groups that were separate from farming communities. Later, Jostein Bergstøl (2008) has argued that the hunter groups that have left archaeological traces should be interpreted as Saami people.

Hunting ground graves have been interpreted as Saami graves due to their grave goods, morphology, and location, and also because they are seen as anomalies in the general Scandinavian Iron Age burial customs. Different researchers have emphasised different criteria and characteristics. Until my doctoral thesis (Gjerde 2016), no compilation had been made of the graves defined as hunting ground graves in Norway. In my attempt to do so, it became clear that the different criteria used in previous research, such as certain types of grave goods, a specific morphology, or a type of location, were not suitable for deducing which graves should be included in this category. Some graves and grave finds were frequently used as examples in the literature, but the content of the category remained rather unclear. Through a systematic study of the available information about the graves previously defined as hunting ground graves, including their morphology, grave goods, and other issues, it became clear that the diversity of these graves is too wide-ranging to classify them as representing one single phenomenon (Gjerde 2016).

The argument for a Saami population in South Norway during the Iron Age has suffered from a lack of proven settlement sites. The lack of settlement sites can be taken to prove that these areas were uninhabited and that the graves here may belong to the more centrally located Norse agrarian settlements. Nonetheless, a few settlement sites have been discussed in this context. There are three excavated turf hut foundations in Innerdalen in Kvikne, Hedmark county, which Gustafson (1988) compared to the Stållo foundations found further north along the border between Norway and

Sweden (see Storli 1991b, 1994; Mulk 1994; Liedgren and Bergman 2009; Hedman 2015). The similarities between the Innerdalen turf huts and the Stállo hut foundations consist mainly of the oval shape and the lowered inner floor. The Innerdalen huts are dated to the 15th and 16th centuries AD, which is the late Medieval period in Norway. They are therefore younger than the main period for most Stállo foundations, though some of these have been in use up until the 16th century, either continuously or with a separate later period of use disconnected from the Late Iron Age to early medieval period (Mulk 1994; Storli 1994). I do not claim that the Innerdalen settlement site is a Stállo site, as that is a very specific phenomenon known from a relatively restricted area. However, it is interesting that the Innerdalen remains have characteristics associated with Stállo hut remains, which also make them different from other types of settlement sites in South Norway in general (see also Aronsson in this volume).

In Valdres, Oppland county, there are two settlement sites with probable Saami affiliations. Close to the Grøv mountain farm in Vang municipality, there is a settlement site consisting of several hut foundations linked to iron production and hunting (Tveiten 2012). One hut foundation was round, but it was never excavated. Another was an oval-shaped turf hut foundation excavated in the 1940s and typologically dated to the Merovingian period (Helmen 1949). During the excavation, a Z-shaped scraper made of iron was found. This type of artefact is associated with eastern fur treatment and is hence related to Saami practices (Zachrisson 1997b; Bergstøl 2008: 93). The other settlement site in Valdres, excavated by the author in 2009, is situated by Lake Rensenn in Vestre Slidre municipality. It consists of four turf hut foundations in a row, of which especially the two to the south resemble round or oval Saami turf hut foundations. It is also interesting that the huts were placed in a row, as this is a very common feature in certain other Saami settlements. However, the two foundations to the north differ from the others in that they have an opening towards the lake and are shaped more like a horseshoe. The datings are a bit peculiar, as we found several layers on top of each other with first cooking pits, then a smithy, and then the dwelling phase. The dwelling phase of both of the round turf huts can be dated to the very early medieval period. This settlement phase is interpreted as a Saami settlement based on the type of house construction and the shape of the fireplace (Gjerde 2011, 2016: 135–138).

In Hallingdal, Buskerud county, there are several round or oval turf hut remains that have been interpreted as Saami settlements. I excavated two of the sites as part of my PhD, and both sites have datings to the Viking Age (AD 800–1000) and the 12th–13th centuries AD. The sites have not yet been definitely interpreted, but they represent round turf hut foundations in a mountain area where this kind of building technique was not common.

The latest addition to the settlement material is the Aursjøen settlement in the mountain area of Dovre in Lesja municipality. While surveying the drawdown zone at Lake Aursjøen in 2006, archaeologists found four big rectangular hearths in a row (Reitan 2006; Bergstøl and Reitan 2008). The hearths were all dated to a time span from the Merovingian period to the Viking Age (600–900 AD). This is a very characteristic feature of Saami settlement sites (see e.g. Hedman 2003, 2015; Hansen and Olsen 2014), and this settlement is considered to be the most convincing southernmost Saami settlement from the Viking Age.

Also a few stray finds with eastern traits and a possible eastern origin are included in the South Norwegian material related to a Saami presence. Zoomorphic pendants originally from Karelia, Finland, are found almost exclusively in Saami graves when encountered in North Norway (Storli 1991; Hansen and Olsen 2014). In South Norway, three such pendants have been found, but unfortunately their contexts are mainly unknown. Two of them were found somewhere in the municipalities of Lesja and Skjåk, which are located in the mountainous areas of South Norway. The third was found by metal detectorists in a crop field by the Oslo fjord. It is difficult to perform any kinds of conclusive analysis based on these objects, but they still add an interesting dimension to the South Norwegian material in terms of the presence of and interactions with Saami groups (Gjerde 2010, 2016: 174–178).

A certain kind of arrowhead has also been associated with Saami hunting, namely the Wegraeus type B (Wegraeus 1971), which is the main medieval type of arrowhead found at Saami sacrificial sites in Northern Sweden (Serning 1956, 1966; Zachrisson 1997b). In South Norway, 10 to 12 type B arrowheads have been found. The Z-shaped scrapers known from eastern fur treatment are included in this material as well. There are very few of these, only the one mentioned above from Valdres and another one, which was found right outside one of the so-called hunting ground graves by Lake Vesle Sølensjøen ('the small Sølen lake') in Rendalen (Bergstøl 2008: 93). Finally, there is one more artefact that shows a connection with Saami culture and presence in South-Eastern Norway. This is a Saami drum hammer dated to the 12th century AD. This exceptional object is my first case study for exploring the many associations and implications that one single such item may encompass.

9.3 Case 1: The drum hammer – *vietjere*

The drum hammer (Figure 9.1) from the Nordset farm in Rendalen, Hedmark county (Gjessing 1945), stands out in the South Norwegian material and has been referred to repeatedly during the last decades (Zachrisson 1997a; Bergstøl 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2008; Hansen and Olsen 2014; Amundsen and Os 2015). However, we still do not fully understand this artefact and what it meant and to whom. Who owned it and used it? Have there been several different owners, and did they use it in the same way? Rather than trying to find a singular meaning for this object, I wish to highlight its inherent complexity, which opens it up to a wide range of associations.



Figure 9.1: The drum hammer from Nordset, Rendalen, Hedmark. (Photo: Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.)

Strictly speaking, the hammer is not a stray find, though very little information about it is available. It was found in a midden along with fire-cracked stones and a mix of artefacts from the medieval period up to historical times, signifying accumulation over quite a long time. The find context might give us a reason to view the drum hammer as litter, since it has been thrown away together with other worn-out things that eventually piled up as a midden. The other artefacts were five spinning wheels made of stone, a couple of iron arrowheads, one fragmentary iron spur, one pair of iron scissors, one iron chandelier, and a couple of cut bone fragments. Though Gutorm Gjessing (1945) interpreted this collection of artefacts as a sacrificial find, the very ordinary character of all the other objects except the hammer points to a less religious explanation.

The fact that this is a Saami object is not questioned (but see Haarstad 1992). Due to its well-known significance within traditional, pre-Christian Saami religion, the hammer has a rare unambiguous ethnic affiliation compared to other potentially Saami archaeological evidence in the area. Nevertheless, most other aspects of the artefact and its biography remain unclear. The radiocarbon dating of the hammer to the 12th century AD and the typological dating of the other artefacts in the assemblage to approximately the 15th century AD and later indicate that the hammer's period of use lasted at least a couple of hundred years. Could it have been taken away from a Saami shaman, a *nåejttie* (SaaS), because it represented a heathen religious practice, or was it worn out through generations of use in Saami religious rituals?

In any case, the hammer's combination of ornaments is the feature that has attracted the most attention. On one side, it has a panel with ornaments in the 'Ringerike style', named after a certain type of decoration on runestones from Ringerike, Buskerud county. On the other side, the drum hammer has a panel with plate interlace ornamentation. During the Iron Age, and especially during the Viking Age, plate interlace ornamentation was used in all Norse and Scandinavian areas on a wide range of different materials and objects. In the medieval period, plate interlace ornamentation became particular to Saami handicraft (Zachrisson 1997b). The reason for this change has not been properly investigated, but eventually plate interlace becomes a traditional and recognisable ornamentation type especially among the South Saami. Because of the hammer's dualistic appearance, with the two ornament styles as oppositional features, the drum hammer has been used as a symbol of Saami-Norse binary society.

Still, this is only half the picture. The hammer does not have only two panels with ornamentation, but four: two on each side of the hammer. On the side of the hammer where the Ringerike style can be seen to the right, the left panel has a carved geometrical pattern for which no parallels are known. On the opposite side, where the plate interlace pattern can be seen to the right, the left panel is blank with no carvings. This might indicate that the hammer was never completed. For example, the panel might have been kept vacant for future generations, or rather future situations. If so, the carvings may have been made as part of the rituals in which the hammer took part. Alternatively, the emptiness might have a symbolic meaning in itself. There is a small chance that this panel has been painted, though there are no visible traces of this. Further pigment residue analyses would be needed to establish whether this has been the case.

Based on the above, the hammer does not reflect a clear dichotomy between Saami and Norse identities, but a rather more complex situation. The expressions on the hammer can be seen as a kind of dialogue between different positions, roles, identities, or world views, which may have made it suitable for negotiation and mediation between people or groups. This coincides with the known function of this kind of object in Saami rituals. A Saami drum hammer was the tool that the *nåejttie* or shaman used for falling into a trance. Through the trance, they could travel between different worlds (life and death), communicate with the animals, travel through time, and so on. Thus, the *nåejttie* could transcend given categories, and people with transcending characteristics have been interpreted as shamans within the archaeological literature (Zachrisson 1997a; Price 2000; Solli 2002).

Taking this into account, we should also consider more thoroughly what the Ringerike style represents beyond signifying the Norse population in opposition to the Saami. According to the Norwegian art historian Signe Horn Fuglesang, the best stylistic parallels we know for the kind of Ringerike style found on the drum hammer is the Dynna runic stone and the wind vane from the Heggen church (Fuglesang 1980). Both are found in Christian contexts: the Dynna stone is the earliest Christian memorial in Norway, dated to c. AD 1040, and the Heggen church is naturally a Christian context. Both represent a late version of the style, though the drum hammer is even younger, as it dates to the 12th century. I suggest that the late Ringerike style might be associated with early Christianity in Norway.

The Dynna runic stone is an approximately three-meter-high triangular block of reddish sandstone with a runic inscription along one of the edges. The other sides are richly decorated with carved imagery that depicts the Epiphany, or the newborn Jesus and the three kings (Magi) who came to visit him. The historian of religion Gro Steinsland (2012) argues that the depictions on the Dynna stone represent a 'countermyth' to official Christianity, as it portrays a more common and everyday deity. God portrayed as a poor child contradicts the Germanic heroic stories from the Viking Age that were depicted on earlier runic memorial stones. It also contradicts the contemporary Christian image of God as a royal figure. I therefore suggest that the everyday religious stories and folklore of the Christian population at the time may not have been in such sharp opposition to the polytheistic Saami religion and ritual practice. The seemingly contradictory style elements and their symbolic meanings could be combined in the drum hammer without representing a profound dichotomy.

Keeping this in mind, I argue that the decoration on the drum hammer does not represent two incommensurable identities. Instead, it represents a conversation between different religious expressions and world views, showing that Saami rituals played an important role within such negotiations.

9.4 Case 2: The comb maker – a specialist in between

Saami Iron Age groups have often been interpreted as the antithesis of Norse Iron Age society, most commonly as hunters in opposition to sedentary farmers (Skjølsvold 1980; Bergstøl 2008). The so-called hunting ground graves are part of this hypothesis, and Martin Gollwitzer (2001), who constructed the category, emphasised the hunting equipment among the grave goods. However, a closer look at the grave goods shows that they do not consist solely of hunting equipment, but include a wide range of different tools and weapons. The variation seems to reflect a broader identity than simply that of a hunter, which opens opportunities for discussing a more diverse Saami past.

The Norwegian archaeologist Arne Emil Christensen has argued that the practices of reindeer hunting and comb making were often combined in the Iron Age (Christensen 1986). He argues that the comb maker's tool kit consisted of a saw, a rasp, and a small, trapezoid iron object probably used for carving or scraping (type R 416, Rygh 1885, see also Amundsen this volume). Furthermore, Christensen showed that this tool set could be found in several of what were then called 'mountain graves' and later included in the category of hunting ground graves. One particular grave from Eltdalen is his key example (Figure 9.2). This is an especially rich grave from the Migration Period containing weapons, tools, and animal bones, among other things. Among the tools we find what Christensen called the comb maker's tool kit, as well as a comb. The most striking thing about this find is that the comb and the saw match: the width of the saw's teeth is exactly the same as that of the gaps between the comb's teeth. He therefore argues that the saw in the grave is probably the very same saw that has been used to make the comb.



Figure 9.2: The tools from the Eltdalen grave. (Photo: Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.)

Saws are very rare artefacts in the Norwegian archaeological record, probably because they were very difficult to make. In the making of a bone or antler comb, every tooth must be sawn out individually, and the saw blade must be thin and even. Christensen argued that the making of combs has required specialists in all periods, from the Bronze Age to the medieval period. It is generally thought that comb makers in the medieval period were itinerant, that they travelled between towns providing their expertise (Ambrosiani 1981). In my opinion, this travelling practice is likely to have applied to comb making also in the Iron Age.

The comb maker is interesting as a historical agent but also figuratively, as an idea or even a symbol. This travelling specialist appears to me as a somewhat ambiguous, evasive, and undefinable figure. Zachrisson (2011) has stated that it is impossible for someone to have lived in a void between Saami and Germanic/Norse culture. The comb maker's task, however, is to make *voids*. For a comb to become a comb, it needs gaps. They are the structuring element that creates and forms the teeth: no gaps, no teeth, no comb. It is by making the voids, the emptiness between the teeth, that the comb finds its form. I find this thought inspiring in the discussion of the ethnic affiliation of the so-called hunting ground graves. Researchers before me have suggested that there could have been people in Scandinavia in the Iron and Middle Ages identifying as between Saami and Norse, or even both Saami and Norse (Olsen 2004: 210). The comb maker might provide content to this void in between by being an agent who profits from an open and inclusive structure.

Comb makers may also have had a very symbolic role. They may have been people who actually travelled physically between locations, but also among or back and forth between different groups. Like the *nåejttie* or shaman, the comb maker could be associated with transcending characteristics. Even the liminal location of the graves in which the tool kits are found may imply a certain role of outsider and crossover for the comb makers both before and after their death. The graves are located outside and far away from any known settlement sites, but such locations can also be seen as communication routes connecting places and people.

9.5 Final remarks

The archaeological material said to confirm a Saami presence in South Norway during the Iron Age and early medieval period is limited, but increasing, and it covers a range of different types of structures and artefacts. I have chosen to accentuate the two cases above to show the potential of some of the material to go beyond questions of ethnicity. Ethnic ascription is never straightforward, and even an unquestionably Saami artefact such as the drum hammer can reveal stories much more complex than a dichotomy between Saami and Norse identity. Its indisputable Saami association facilitates such discussions about its meaning and associations beyond that of ethnicity.

The comb maker makes for an image of the undefinable. It is not certain whether comb making was a specific profession in the Iron Age, but the idea of someone who transcends the regular categories of identities is crucial for a fresh perspective. All artefacts can tell more than one story, and sometimes these stories can seem contradictory. Nevertheless, we need to accept these contradictions as enriching our understanding of the past rather than force ambiguous objects into singular, simplistic interpretations. Our understanding of the past gets richer with each additional story we find.

I argue that we should include South Saami prehistory in the stories we tell of Norse Iron Age and vice versa: we should also include the Norse Iron Age in the stories we tell of South Saami prehistory, as it makes no sense to separate them. By this I do not mean that we cannot distinguish between Saami and Norse traditions, objects, rituals, and so on, but rather that we cannot treat them as independent of each other. We should recognise that Norse Iron Age material is part of South Saami prehistory,

even though the archaeological record may not reflect the typical characteristics of South Saami culture today. Saami identities, as all identities, are constantly evolving, and what we recognise as, for example, South Saami culture today, cannot automatically be traced back in time. 'The ethnographic curse', as it has been called, illustrates how Saami culture has been perceived as static and underdeveloped because we let the ethnographic sources dictate what Saami culture really looks like (Olsen 2004; Wobst 2005; Fossum 2006). Since cultural expressions evolve constantly, we should rather try to understand Iron Age society as a time when both the Norse and the Saami identities included other expressions than those familiar to us today.

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