



## **Ethnicity – conflicts on land use**

### *– Sámi and Norse in central Scandinavia in the Iron Age and Middle Ages*

The Sámi are the ‘Native Americans’ of Sweden, and their situation in many respects comparable to that of the aboriginal population of North America or Australia.

In the invitation to this conference, the following statement is made: ‘In Northern Scandinavia a Sámi population existed at least from the early Iron Age, may be as early as the Bronze Age. Some time during the Iron Age or the early medieval period the Sámi established themselves as an ethnic group in Central Scandinavia. They used the *utmark* for hunting and herding small flocks of reindeer.’

The history of the Sámi *in the north* is fully acknowledged. The South Sámi in central Scandinavia have, however, a much more complex situation in this respect. They still have to fight for their history and rights as an indigenous population.

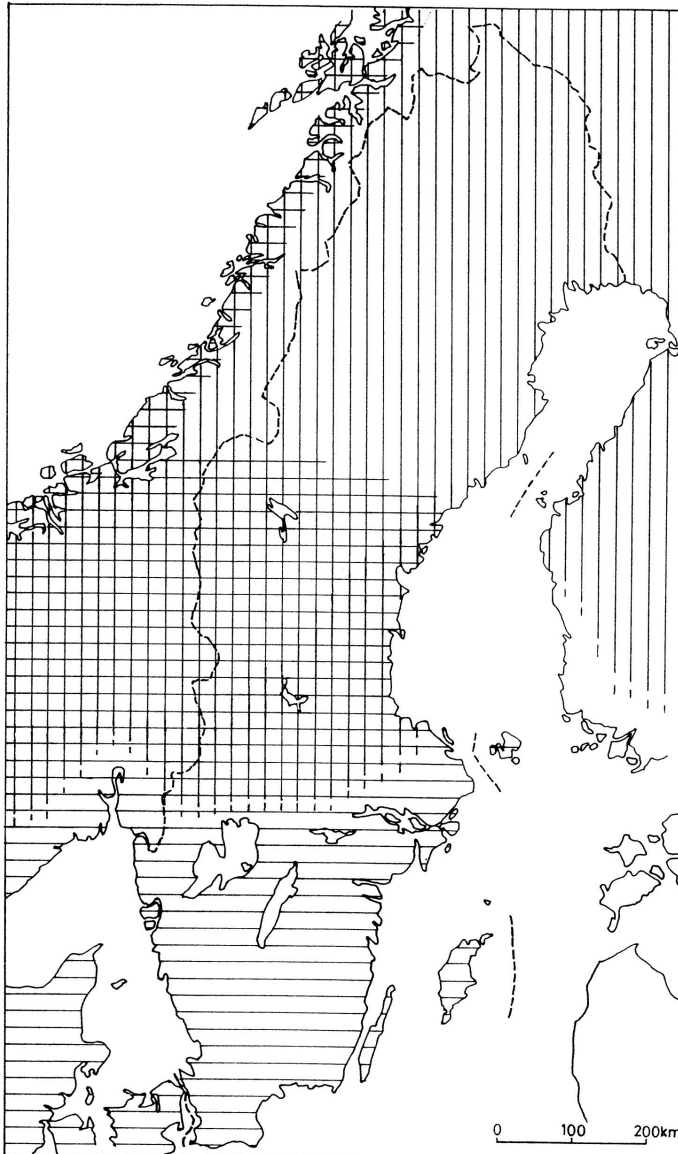
Since 1970, I have worked with Sámi archaeological material and its relation to ‘Scandinavian’ finds, initially with material from the undisputed Sámi culture area, which in Sweden is north of the river Ångermanälven (Zachrisson 1993). However, in 1984 I was able to demonstrate that a cemetery dating from at least the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD which is situated much further south, at Vivalen in north-western Härjedalen (excavated in 1913), must be interpreted as of Sámi origin (Zachrisson 1985). This conclusion roused the academic community to indignation. Over the 20 years I have worked with the ‘South Sámi question’, its inherent problems have become obvious, culminating in the employment of archaeology and the results of recent research as part of the supporting documentation for a major legal proceeding.

Today, it is possible to present a new view of the history of central Scandinavia during the Iron Age and Middle Ages, and the role of the Sámi. This is in reality a return to the view prevalent for most of the nineteenth century, namely that the Sámi have a very long history, not only in northern, but also in central Scandinavia.

From around 1880 to 1980, the dominant view was that the Sámi immigrated to the area south of Nord-Trøndelag/northern Jämtland during recent times, and that

they did not reach their southernmost areas until their eighteenth century (Zachrisson 1997:18).

The Sámi area in Scandinavia today (i.e. the reindeer herding area, according to the official definition) extends as far south as Idre in northern Dalarna, Sweden, and Lake Femunden in Hedmark, Norway. Two thousand years ago, it stretched to just north of the large lakes Vänern and Mälaren in the south. The period *ca.* 1-1300 AD, for which we have archaeological material as well as written sources and linguistic evidence, is vital for this interpretation (figure 1; Zachrisson *et al* 1997).



**Figure 1.** Schematic picture of the distribution of Sámi (vertical lines) and Scandinavian (horizontal lines) culture *ca.* 1000 AD (after Zachrisson 1997).

The pattern of ancient monuments in the region suggests that there were two different socio-economic systems in central Scandinavia during the Iron Age and early Middle Ages: a hunter-gatherer culture and an agrarian culture. The members of the former group were more or less synonymous with the *finnar* (the Old Norse word for Sámi) of the contemporary written sources. That the others on the whole represented Scandinavian (Nordic) culture is evident from place names and written sources (Selinge 1979 *inter alia*).

Archaeology is 'total history'. By using and combining all available source materials, we will have a better chance of illustrating the period in question. By tradition, studies of the written sources of the Iron Age and Middle Ages in northern and central Scandinavia have primarily been included in the field of the archaeologist, not that of the historian. Therefore, it is especially important to integrate these sources, for they are not always included with regard to the questions dealt with here. On the other hand, archaeology must play an important role in introducing alternative interpretations to the stereotypical picture of Sámi society in Scandinavia during the Iron Age and Middle Ages, which is often founded on ethnographical and historical sources from recent times.

Ethnic research is very much dependent on the time in which the researcher lives. There is every reason to discuss the value foundations of the discipline of Scandinavian archaeology: what is it that governs our thinking, who shall decide which kind of research is to be given priority and which questions are to be asked? It is necessary to try to understand the world-view of the individual scholar, how knowledge is achieved, and the consequences of this knowledge (Olsen 1986).

Swedish archaeology can be said to have developed during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as a means of demonstrating our national importance. Nationalism has always been the driving force in European archaeology, and the subject has often been used as an instrument for this purpose. Even today, there are attitudes within Swedish archaeology that can be characterised as ethnocentric, nationalistic and chauvinistic. The ethnic pluralism which existed in Sweden has been overlooked in favour of an almost unilateral focus on 'Swedish' prehistory (Zachrisson 1997:14-15, cf. Broadbent 2001). Sweden today has a state ideology characterised by the denial of diversity.

The Norwegian historian Jørn Sandnes wrote in 1973 (in *Historisk Tidsskrift*): 'I det siste har det vist seg tegn til en økt interesse for utforskningen av sør-samenes eldre historie. Med den positive interesse som idag vises studiet av fremmede kulturer generelt, må det være all grunn til å ofre oppmerksomhet på denne fremmede kultur i vårt eget land'. ('Lately there have been signs of an increased interest for the research of the oldest history of the South Sámi. In regard to the positive interest which today is shown for the study of foreign cultures in general, there is reason to give attention to the study of this foreign culture *in our own country*.' - my translation.)

Sámi are not uncommonly regarded as 'foreign'. This evidently means foreign in relation to the majority culture, i.e. the Scandinavian. It is an ethnocentrically coloured generalisation, which in principle sanctions only agrarian settled areas and

farms as 'stationary settlement'. It also follows a general Western trend of looking upon hunter-gatherer cultures condescendingly in comparison with agrarian cultures. The mobile range of the hunter-gatherer culture of central Scandinavia during the Iron Age is often characterised as 'outlying land' (i.e. in relation to the settled agrarian areas) or 'uninhabited areas', 'waste land', 'the wilderness' and so on (Zachrisson 1997:14). Thus, asymmetry and invisibility predominate.

An exploration of the need of society and groups within it to go back in time in order to legitimise their modern demands is consequently an important field of research.

The Norwegian archaeologist Lise Nordenborg Myhre has, in her book *Arkeologi og politikk* (1994), stressed the importance of evaluating whether it is prehistory as a phenomenon or archaeological research itself which constitutes the foundation for political use and misuse. She wants to shift the focus from archaeological knowledge as a result to archaeological knowledge as a process, and from the content of archaeological knowledge to its practical consequences – amongst which she counts political use and misuse. Politics is not only theory but also action. She claims that by tradition, practical use of research results is beyond the control and sphere of action of the profession, and thus not subject to the system of sanctions, norms and criteria which apply to a profession.

In Norway during the 1970s and 1980s, there was a heated debate as to whether the Sámi should be regarded as an indigenous population according to the international ILO convention. This has now been ratified in Norway, but not in Sweden. It brought the ethnicity debate within Norwegian archaeology to a head, especially concerning the identification and origin of Sámi ethnicity, and the attempt to differentiate between Sámi and Scandinavian. The corresponding scientific criteria have, however, seldom been put forward for 'the first Scandinavians' (cf. Schanche and Olsen 1985).

The ethical and political dimension of ethnicity research became evident during the so-called 'Alta conflict' in Norway in the 1980s. At this time, archaeology as a discipline found itself confronted with the use of archaeological research in a political struggle for and against Sámi rights (Salvesen 1980b). In 1986, the large Norwegian Sámi rights investigation, *Samerettsutvalget*, extended the commission previously given to two historians to write the history of the South Sámi, to also include linguistics and archaeology. The reason being the results of the new excavations at Vivalen in Härjedalen, mentioned above. This site had become a key element of the local arguments, and similarly in a wider academic arena. It still plays an important role for South Sámi identity.

The issue first arose in 1984, when the South Sámi project, an archaeological-osteological Swedish-Norwegian research project, was initiated. The intention was, amongst other things, to locate and excavate the dwelling site associated with the cemetery investigated in 1913. The cemetery had hitherto been interpreted as 'Swedish'. From varying types of evidence, I could by contrast interpret the site as

belonging to a Sámi group with close contact to high-status Scandinavian groups. Our new excavations have now uncovered the foundations of *kåtor* (Sámi conical dwellings) dating from *ca.* AD 800-1200 (Zachrisson *et al* 1997).

Court cases relating to South Sámi rights have most often made use of historical data. Now, for the first time in Sweden, archaeologists are also involved.

In 1991, a major legal action was initiated in the district court at Sveg in the province of Härjedalen. The proceedings concerned the rights of the Sámi there to let their reindeer graze in winter on private land in the non-mountainous areas. Three large forestry companies and around 700 private landowners brought actions against the five Sámi ‘villages’ in the area. A Sámi village (*sameby*) is a defined zone – a legal organisational unit – for Sámi in Sweden that still practise reindeer herding, a small number of the total estimated Sámi population of 20,000.

This is essentially a conflict of interests between the modern forestry industry and the traditional reindeer herding economy. However, it is also closely linked to the local antagonism, a conflict which has been prevalent for at least the last four centuries between Sámi and some of the non-Sámi in the Härjedalen area. This conflict has in turn been nourished by the prevailing historical and political viewpoints on these matters.

In the legal action, the five Sámi villages cited the prescription law, which they argued had been maintained since time immemorial. A number of expert reports were presented in court, including statements by both historians and archaeologists. The task awaiting the archaeologists was to try to clarify whether Sámi had lived in western Härjedalen before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a period from which written sources contain rich information about them (Zachrisson 1994).

A compromise was at last reached between the forestry companies and the Sámi. One reason was that the companies did not want to risk their PR image abroad. The international system for certified forest products (FSC) deals not only with environmental influence, but also shows consideration for indigenous groups. A company affiliated to the FSC is not allowed to have any legal conflict with an indigenous population; if so, its products cannot be sold. The court case is now being pursued by *ca.* 500 landowners.

In 1995, the main proceedings continued, and the Sámi lost the case – as the whole burden of evidence was laid upon them. The case then went further to the court of appeal (Oct. 2001). Again, the Sámi lost. The case might now go on to the Supreme Court of Judicature.

It must be stressed that this is not primarily a difference of opinion between two archaeologists (myself and Evert Baudou acting for the plaintiffs), but between two different generations or schools of thought. A new viewpoint on the process of acculturation has emerged among Scandinavian archaeologists during the 1970s and 1980s, which naturally has had an effect on the way Sámi prehistory and early history is understood.

In 1995, in the district court, the dwelling site and burial ground of VivalLEN, was acknowledged as a Sámi site even by Evert Baudou. He saw it as a temporary emigration from the primary Sámi society in the north (his main view is that there was a cultural border across Scandinavia during a period of two to three millennia from the Bronze Age to the Middle Ages, and consequently a lack of contacts between the Sámi in the north and the Scandinavians in the south) (Baudou 1989 *inter alia*, Zachrisson 1997:33-35). In 2001, however, at the court of appeal, he had changed his mind: VivalLEN was not a Sámi site any more.

Both the Sámi and the landowners consider the Swedish state to have the ultimate responsibility for the situation. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards it has sold or given away Sámi land. Many Sámi are of the opinion that they do not stand any chance of being able to prove their argument until the case is brought to an international court.

Other consequences have followed this court case: landowners in northernmost Dalarna have now opened similar legal proceedings there. The Sámi there, however, do not want to get involved, because they cannot afford it (the lost case in the Sveg district court meant that the Sámi of Härjedalen had to pay several million kronor in costs). This will mean that the Sámi in Dalarna will be left unheard, and will automatically lose their case.

The weakness of the Swedish Government here is shameful, and has a strong influence on public opinion. Law is power, not justice. It is a power game, where archaeology has become politics, and we as archaeologists have become political pawns. As one of the archaeologists involved, I can also see how a court case locks academic positions in a manner uncondusive to archaeological discussion.

The view among the local population varies. It is, however, evident that VivalLEN has become an institution. Even those who do not want to admit that the Sámi probably were the majority population here 1000 years ago, admit today, even if reluctantly, that the inhabitants of VivalLEN were Sámi. Instead, some try to claim that 'the hunter-gatherers' who lived in Härjedalen previous to this period were not Sámi.

As a rule, it is only with regard to minority populations that cultural identity (or ethnicity) is called into question. A minority must always prove its existence with 200% certainty. Even in the interior of the north, every ancient monument that is not clearly Sámi is regarded as Scandinavian by default.

A people without its own written history is defenceless. The Sámi in Härjedalen ironically say that as long as no one finds any stone tablets in the forest, on which the history of their people is written, then they will not be able to prove their case.

I agree that the question 'Who came first?' is unfortunate, but nevertheless I feel that the new results of genetic research are important for a new way of thinking, of looking at the prehistory of Scandinavia as a whole. These results seem to indicate that the forefathers of today's Sámi were the first immigrants to Scandinavia after the inland ice. On the other hand, the critics rightly point to the fact that genetics, language and

cultural identity do not necessarily coincide. If employed by archaeologists they can lead to circular evidence.

Some historians are of the opinion that it is enough to point to the jurisprudential definition of an indigenous population: an ethnic group living in an area immediately before it was colonised by others, and which thereafter has kept its distinctive cultural character. For the southernmost South Sámi this is, however, not sufficient, as long as there are those who still maintain that Sámi did not live there in prehistory.

Today, there are, however, new signals among archaeologists in Norway and Sweden. The state of knowledge about the prehistory of south-eastern Norway is improving (cf. Bergstøl 1997, and Bergstøl this volume). Lars Erik Narmo also indicates that the possibility exists for interpreting the ancient monuments in this area as belonging to the Sámi culture (Narmo 2000).

In Sweden, Neil Price is building upon the data of the South Sámi project in an extensive article (2000b). Already at a seminar at Stockholm University in 1993, he criticised the simplified, current view of the Viking Age, and stressed the presence of a number of groups of people, among them the Sámi (Price 1993), an idea that was crystallised in 2000 (Price 2000a:37-39).

Among most Swedish archaeologists, though, the Sámi question is characterised by a lukewarm attitude, and a lack of interest and devotion (cf. Broadbent 2001). In Norway, it is different – ‘the ceiling is high’. You are allowed, and dare, to state your opinion. Even if there is also a hard nationalistic side.

The archaeological community in Sweden is more conservative than the Norwegian. Most Swedish archaeologists are marked by sets of values from their upbringing, and look upon Sámi culture as static and inferior, or non-existent. If the archaeological material does not coincide with that of the historically known Sámi culture, they find it hard to imagine that it may be Sámi. Many have an over-confidence in physical anthropology. Most Swedish archaeologists live and work in the southernmost part of the country, and are not interested in the north. Northern Swedish archaeology does not have the same status as that of the south – and in the north the interest from researchers is much greater for the remains interpreted as Scandinavian than for those of the Sámi, and thus the former are prioritised for research funding.

As archaeologists, we need to be as unbiased as possible, within the rather illusory limits of objectivity. Because I try to look at the material from a Sámi point of view, I have been characterised as being not as objective and critical as a ‘true researcher’ should be. Similar criticism is, however, never directed towards those who work from a ‘Scandinavian’ position.

The debate outlined above is an example of how one tries to make a minority’s identity and history invisible. We have a great responsibility.

It is interesting to compare this with the situation in Norway. As early as 1980, the Norwegian historian, Helge Salvesen, warned against the reduced demand to identify ancient monuments ethnically. If this demand is weakened, he argued,

the tendency to strengthen ethnic self-esteem among the majority population will increase (Salvesen 1980a).

In 1988, Norway passed a new law on the Sámi cultural heritage. It means that all ancient monuments dated earlier than 1537, and Sámi monuments older than one hundred years, are automatically protected by law.

In Norway, Sámi culture and history is being promoted. In June 2001, a legal process, *Selbusaken*, concerning the rights of the Sámi to let their reindeer graze in winter time on private grounds in eastern Trøndelag, just west of Härjedalen, was at last resolved in favour of the Sámi in the Supreme Court (in June 2001). The judges even went against the historical opinion that regarded the Sámi as 17<sup>th</sup> century immigrants from the north.

Another bright spot is the fruitful collaboration which since 1996 has been continuing in western Jämtland-Härjedalen, between two Sámi villages and two archaeologists of the county administrative board. The aim is to gain knowledge about reindeer breeding and land use from the older generation of reindeer herders, and to use this information to search for and document ancient monuments and cultural remains. As a result of this project, an earlier and previously unknown Sámi cultural landscape has emerged on private land in western Härjedalen. It indicates the antiquity of the Sámi presence in areas outside the mountain snow-line (Ljungdahl 2001).

However, in both Sweden and Norway it will take a long time before the 'new' way of looking at the role of the South Sámi in the historical process filters through to the general public. The museums, and even more so, the schools, have much to do. In local archaeological exhibits, the Sámi are most often presented as an exotic minority of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while the visitor gets the impression that it is the Scandinavian farmer whose cultural links reach back to the Stone Age – not the other way around.

## Summary

The history of the Sámi in the north is fully acknowledged, but not that of the South Sámi in central Scandinavia. Today, it is possible to present a new view of the course of history in this area during the Iron Age and Middle Ages. The prevalent view for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been that the Sámi have a very long history here as well. New archaeological results are presently being employed, in combination with written sources and linguistic evidence, in a major legal action in Sweden. A comparison with the situation in Norway illustrates the weaknesses of the Swedish government.



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