Archaeology of sieidi stones. Excavating sacred places

Tiina Äikäs

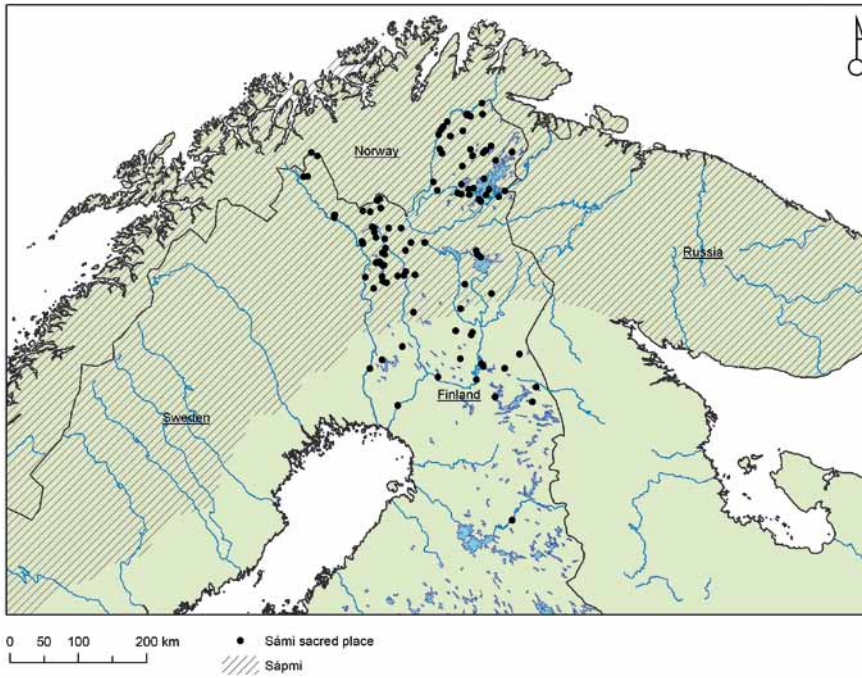
Introduction

The sacred places of the Sámi indigenous people take myriad forms. They include sacred mountains and fells, lakes, and islands. The most well known phenomena are the offering stones called *sieidi* (in North Sámi). Offerings connected to livelihoods, such as fishing, hunting, and reindeer herding have been left to these stones. Archaeological research at *sieidi* sites has revealed a continuum of a living and changing offering tradition. Nevertheless, while excavating sacred sites, certain things need to be taken into consideration. These include the possible reburial of finds, the returning of knowledge, and respect to the places. Discretion is in place, since Sámi sacred places are still important for different groups of people. This raises questions about the use and protection of these places.

Sieidi – an offering stone of the Sámi

This paper offers an archaeological perspective on the study of the sacred sites. The author is an archaeologist writing her dissertation on the sacred landscape of the Sámi. As a part of the project, fieldwork has been conducted in Northern Finland excavating Sámi offering places. This has led the author to reflect on the ethical issues concerning archaeology of the sacred places.

< Researcher at the Sieddesaiva sieidi.



A map of the distribution on Sámi sacred sites in Northern Finland and the present Sámi area, Sápmi.

The Sámi are the indigenous people of northern Finland, Sweden, Norway, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Traditionally, they have subsided on hunting, fishing, gathering food from nature, and later, reindeer herding. The ethnic religion of the Sámi was, in general terms, characterised by personal as well as communal spirituality and its interconnectivity with one's own daily life, and a deep connection between the natural and spiritual worlds. The term ethnic religion is used since it describes best the worldview that was not pre-Christian, but survived also after contacts with Christianity. Another possible term would be indigenous religion, but it has connotations to a static belief system that could not have been preceded by another. There are also problems concerning the term religion itself. It is a theoretical concept given from outside the culture by researchers and might not be the best term to describe the Sámi worldview.

The Sámi ethnic religion was visible in the landscape in myriad ways, and sacred and profane activities were intertwined (Äikäs et al., 2009). Carpelan (2003: 77–78) has divided Sámi sacred sites broadly into three classes: terrain formation, natural objects, and structures. The first group consists of

fell tops, rock formations, islands, lakes, and headlands. Natural objects are stones, springs, and small caves or clefts. The third group includes carved stubs, erected stones, wooden poles, and stone circles. The latter are an exception since Sámi sacred places usually have not been modified by human hand, as the Sámi saw sacredness in the landscape as it was.

The feature that has raised most interest in the Sámi sacred landscape are the offering stones called *sieidi*. They consist of wooden poles or more often of stones unshaped by human hand. The stones could vary in size and form. They could be ten metres high rock formations or less than a metre high small stones. Sometimes they were anthropomorphic or took other peculiar forms. *Sieidi* stones were often situated on the slopes of fells or by the shores of lakes (Äikäs, 2011). Sacrifices at *sieidi* places were strongly connected to the livelihood of the Sámi (Mebius, 2003: 11–12). Fish was sacrificed before fishing expeditions, game meat before hunting, and reindeer meat was offered by reindeer herders. In addition, cheese, porridge, alcohol, and metal objects were offered and sacrifices also took place when help was asked, for example, during sickness or pregnancy (Äimä, 1903: 115; Itkonen, 1948: 312; Manker, 1957: 88; Rydving, 1993: 104–106; Sköld, 1999: 66; Mebius, 2003: 141). The relationship between a *sieidi* and a human was reciprocal (Schanche, 2004: 5). Hence sacrifices were usually promised before the hunt or fishing trip, and

A wooden pole on top of Kussuolinkivaara in Sodankylä.

if the trip was successful, the offerings were taken to the *sieidi*. But if the trip was not successful, the *sieidi* could be destroyed (Paulaharju, 1932: passim).

The archaeological material that is left from the ritual activities at a *sieidi* usually consists of animal bones mainly from the same animals that were also important for livelihood. In the material from Finland e.g. reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*), sheep (*Ovis aries*) or goat (*Capra hircus*), capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*), and fish bones, including pike (*Esox lucius*), trout (*Salmo trutta*) and perch (*Perca fluviatilis*) were found (Äikäs, 2011; Salmi *et al.*, 2011). In Sweden and Norway metal objects, including jewellery and coins can also be found, but in Finland there are only

A *sieidi* stone with anthropomorphic features in Porviniemi, Muonio.

rare examples of metal finds from *sieidis* (Hedman, 2003: passim; Fossum, 2006: passim; Okkonen, 2007). The only metal finds from Finland come from the Inari area. There are also instances when ritual activities leave no traces in the archaeological material (Salmi *et al*., 2011).

During the period 2008–2010 excavations were carried out at seven *sieidi* sites as a part of the project *Human-animal relationships among Finland's Sámi 1000–1800 A.D.* (Academy of Finland:1122623). The sites excavated in 2008 were Sieiddakeädgi in Utsjoki, Näkkälä in Enontekiö, and Taatsi in Kittilä; in 2009 Koskikaltiojoen suu in Inari and Porviniemi and Kirkkopahta in Muonio, and in 2010 Dierpmesvárri in Enontekiö. In addition, a survey was conducted around a sacred lake or *sáiva* called Äkässaivo in Muonio.

Ethical consideration on the studies of sacred places

Even though sacred places are not always strictly set apart from, in Western terms, profane activities (Äikäs, in press A), sacredness is usually something that demands special rules and ways of behaviour. The use of sacred places can be controlled by norms and rules. For example, for the Australian aboriginals some places are so sacred, powerful, and dangerous that people should not visit them. Hence, archaeologists may give offence just by wandering around them. Even more disturbing are excavations, where earth is removed and hidden objects are revealed. (Colley, 2002: 75.) This raises the question whether archaeologists can do research on sacred sites on an ethically sound basis.

Nevertheless, not in all cases do the locals want to ban archaeologists from sacred sites. Sometimes people are keen

to know more about the way their ancestors have used the offering places and welcome the information that archaeological research can provide. There can be different opinions about how acceptable archaeological research is, even within the same community. This is why it is important that archaeologists take a moment to consider the ethical framework of their research before they charge to study sacred sites.

Before the fieldwork of the above-mentioned project started, the Saami Parliament (*Sámediggi*) was consulted. It was agreed that the local media should be primarily informed about the results and that all bones were to be returned to the *sieidis* after the project. The reburial of the bones has been much debated especially where human remains were concerned (e.g. Ubelaker & Guttenplan Grant, 1989; Goldstein & Kintigh, 1990). The cultural context is also vital regarding sacrificed objects which are left at sacred sites. For example, the Zunis of Pueblo tribes, USA, demanded the returning of their sacred objects called *Ahayu* from museums to their sanctuaries, for they believed that the turmoil of the world was due to the removal of the *Ahayu* from their place (Ladd, 2001). In the case of the *sieidi* sites, the attitude towards sacrificial remains might have been more situational. There are examples of *sieidi* stones from which the offered bones have been cleared away. For example, in Sieiddakeädgi the majority of the bones were found downhill further away from the *sieidi* and not directly by the stone where the offerings were most often placed (Salmi *et al.*, 2011). Written sources give information about the removal of the bones, for example, in cases where there was no more room for new offerings. But there are also examples of misfortunes that followed those who had removed offerings from *sieidis*. (e.g. Paulaharju, 1932: passim.) In the case of archaeological research, the returning of the bones was seen proper. An osteologist participated in all excavations, and the identification of archaeological animal bone material was conducted in the field, aided by the osteology atlases and a photograph reference collection. Then, some bones were left at the sites, but when the number of finds was big, all the bones were taken and samples for further analyses were selected at a later time. The bones that were re-

A concentration of bones and the *sieidi* stone in Sieiddakeädgi, Utsjoki.

Osteologist Anna-Kaisa Salmi identifying the bones with archaeologist Eeva Miettinen photographing them in Koskikaltiojoen suu, Inari.

moved from the sites will be returned to the *sieidis* when fieldwork comes to an end in the summer of 2011.

During the excavations, the work was aimed at preserving as much of the site as possible intact. The interventions were limited to small areas of approximately one square metre. While studying the area of the ritual practices in Sieiddakeädgi, 30x30 cm test pits were made around the stone. The excavations were stopped whenever the researchers came across a bone. In this way the project researchers obtained the information about the location of the bones without moving them.

Prior to the excavations, students participating in the fieldwork were advised to behave appropriately at the sites. The project team wanted to show respect to these places. During the excavations, the local media was informed of the interesting findings. The results of the fieldwork were also shared with locals in public seminars. However, still more could be done to reach the locals more effectively, also in the Sámi language. Informing the local population of the results of a research is an important aspect when studying indigenous cultural heritage. Otherwise scientific colonialism may be considered as another form of colonialist practices (Kupiainen, 1997: passim; Nicholas & Hollowell, 2007: passim).

Different visitors at sieidi sites

Sieidi sites are of interest also to other groups than the local Sámi. During the excavations many marks were found, a sign of recent visits to these sites. The bone finds evidence ceased in the seventeenth century (Äikäs, 2011; Salmi *et al.*, 2011) but the sites were not abandoned by that time. The written sources indicate that people left, for example, coins to the *sieidis* even in the twentieth century (Paulaharju, 1932: passim; Kjellström, 1987: 24–33). There are no finds from Finland indicating the use of *sieidi* sites during the eighteenth century, but from the nineteenth century onwards the finds appear again. The green bottle glass from Sieiddakeädgi and four coins from the end of the nineteenth century indicate that these sites were used during that time. The more recent, post-1950s, finds are more varied. They include coins, personal ob-

jects, cigarettes, alcohol, candles, and quartzite. These modern finds can broadly be divided into two groups: some of them continue the old offering tradition and others seem to mark new practices (Äikäs, 2011; Äikäs, in press B).

The modern finds were left for different purposes. Some of the finds including coins, alcohol, personal objects, and meat are related to the old offering traditions (cf. Paulaharju, 1932: 14; Sköld, 1999: passim; Wallerström, 2000: 18; Fossum, 2006: passim). In some cases, the locals might want to respect the old ways of leaving offerings. On the other hand, for example, coins and alcohol could also have been left by tourists. There is a common habit to leave coins as a part of touristic civic ritual to fountains and other special places. Among tourists that go fishing it is not unusual to make alcohol offerings (http://www.eralehti.fi/keskustelu/t4986). Additionally, fishing lures that are left to some *sieidi* stones are most likely left by fishermen – either tourists or locals (Hirvonen, 2007: 85). Pieces of Thermos flask and remains of energy drink bottles at *sieidi* sites on fell region tell about visits during hiking trips.

A slice of cold smoked reindeer meat from Äkässaivo, Muonio

There are also finds that might imply new offering traditions. Three of the most well marked and most easily accessible sacred places, Äkässaivo, Taatsi and Kirkkopahta, revealed finds that can have similarities with neo-pagan customs. These discoveries include cones, a quill, a tied bunch of spray, candles, and quartzite that could be considered as a local version of rock crystal. Finds are similar with those that are used by neo-pagans in Britain (Wallis 2003: passim; Blain & Wallis 2007: passim). Neo-pagans are known to give similar offerings also in Finland and to visit the well known *sieidi* sites (Informant 2009, pers. comm.).

Whose heritage?

The fact that *sieidi* sites have been and still are important for a number of different people raises the question of access: who is allowed to use them and how. As archaeological sites, they are protected by law and this might be seen as contradictory to their modern use. Are the new offerings that locals and tourists leave at the sites rubbish

The participants of the Delos3 Workshop and the wooden constructions in Ukonsaari/Äijih Island, Inari.

destroying the sacred site (cf. Wallis, 2003: 170) or a vital part of the site's biography?

According to tradition, at some sites there might also be limitations concerning who is allowed to visit the *sieidi*. Written sources mention sacred sites where access to women is forbidden and others that were only used by certain individuals (Paulaharju, 1932; Itkonen, 1948). Should modern visitors still obey these rules or should they be only applied to traditional custodians of sacred sites? In some cases visitors can also damage the environment at the sites. In Ukonsaari (Äijih in Inari Sámi), the erosion brought about by the groups of tourists has been prevented by constructing wooden steps and platforms. On the other hand, these might also be seen as unnecessary additions to a sacred site.

Tourists and other visitors can advance the destruction of a sacred place, but in certain conditions they can also give new meanings to a place. Visits to sacred sites can also increase the knowledge of the local culture and lead to more effective protection. Tourism can be seen as part of ethnographic exploitation of the local culture (Ruotsala, 1998: 95) or as something that should be encouraged but only on the condition that the locals consent and in cooperation with them (Magga, 2007: 14).

The use of sacred places evokes strong emotions. It leads to a situation where certain meanings attached to these places are considered to be more valuable than others, and then the value of other meanings is denied all together. Modern meanings attributed to sacred sites should not be contested, because then the sites might be 'protected', not just from 'outsiders', but also from local people (cf. Byrne, 2009: 68). When protecting sacred sites, the rights of the locals to use the

place have been considered important. For example, in Kakadu National Park in Australia the traditional owners have been given a right to re-work on the rock paintings (Mercer, 1995: 136). In the case of *sieidi* sites, the local people do not consist of a heterogeneous group. Finns might also value these places, but they could have different meanings for them than for the traditional custodians, the Sámi. On the other hand, some *sieidi* places were only used by certain families or individuals. Should the traditional custodians in these cases be seen as even a more limited group? Considering the multiple meanings attached to the Sámi sacred places by Sámi and non-Sámi people perhaps also the right of other groups to use these sites might be taken into account. Sámi sacred places have a long history and they continue to be alive and meaningful.

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