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WHAT MAKES A STONE A *SIEIDI*, OR HOW TO RECOGNIZE A HOLY PLACE?

Introduction

Landscape is filled with meanings we cannot see. Places have been meaningful to people, depending on their life history, memories and personal experiences. Other places are important for groups of people as loci of shared experiences and cultural affiliation. The places regarded as holy can have meanings that are important both on personal and cultural levels. But these meanings might not leave any tangible traces. Not all holy places are marked by temples and altars. Some are acculturated via stories, memories and action. If the meanings and intangible traces have been lost, then how can we as modern viewers recognize a holy place?

The Sámi people in Northern Fennoscandia and the Kola Peninsula experienced the landscape as intertwined with memories and stories (*Magga*, 2007, 15; *Näkkäläjärvi*, 2007, 36–37). The landscape was also a web of holy places. There were holy mountains that could be seen from a long distance and places of offering close to home. Other offering places were connected to the means of livelihood. Here I concentrate on a group of holy places called *sieidi* (North Sámi).

A *sieidi* is a wooden object or a stone on which offerings were made. Surviving wooden objects are, however, rare. The stones were typically unshaped by humans. *Sieidi* offerings were connected to the livelihood of the Sámi. Fish was given as an offering when fishing success was hoped for, and reindeer given for success in reindeer herding (*Collinder*, 1953, 173). But one could also petition intervention to cure an illness or for good health during pregnancy. The ways of offering varied. The offering could consist of a living reindeer, other meat, bones, or smearing the stone with blood or fish oil. Other gifts such as coins, metal objects, cheese and alcohol could also be left as offerings. The relationship between a *sieidi* and a human was a reciprocal one. If the *sieidi* didn't give what was asked for, the *sieidi* could be broken. On the other

hand, the *sieidi* could seek revenge if it was not treated well or honoured (Paulaharju, 1932, passim; Itkonen, 1948, passim).

A short review of the research history

Our information about the *sieidi* sites is mainly based on written sources collected in and after the 17th century. In 1671 Magnus Gabriel De la Gardie supported the collection of information about Lapland. This was due to the accusation that the Swedes had used sorcery to help them attain victories during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). This led to a book by Schefferus called *Lapponia*, where he used religious information from old written sources and from the priests who had a post in Lapland. There are later works as well, written by the priests, who describe their stay in Lapland (Rydving, 1995, 19).

At times, especially during the Age of Enlightenment, there were priests who learned the Sámi language and were sympathetic to Sámi culture. But there were others whose work was biased by prejudices against pagan religion (Fossum, 2006, 12–14). In some cases the same priests who collected information about the old religion also destroyed the old holy places. It is therefore probable that some information was lost as a result. Not all holy places were revealed to the priests, however, and in some cases they were directed to the wrong places.

The time period when the data was collected is also relatively late when compared to the long use of *sieidi* sites. The first dated finds from *sieidi* sites refer to their use in the late Iron Age. On the other hand, there are written sources telling about the use of *sieidi* sites even in the 20th century (Fossum, 2006, 108; Kjellström, 1987). During this long period of use the places of offering might have changed. Some sites may have been destroyed or no longer used, while new sites for offerings were created. There were also different kinds of sites. Some of them were known to a big group of people who travelled a great distance to sacrifice, while others were only used by a family or a single individual (Rydving, 1993). Not all of these sites were actively in use when the data was collected.

For these reasons the data we have does not include all the *sieidi* sites that were used by the Sámi. There are sites that are not known to the researchers and there might be sites of which we are inaccurately informed. In this paper I will present ways to help to determine which of the stones in woods or on lakeshores is a *sieidi*.

How to recognize a *sieidi*?

Sieidi stones are described as stones with a peculiar shape or size (Paulaharju, 1932, passim; Itkonen, 1948, passim). They have also been described as landscape dominants, i.e. features that stand out from the surrounding landscape (Mebius, 2003, 24; Pentikäinen, Miettinen, 2003, 46). Anthropomorphism or zoomorphism has been seen as a typical factor in identifying *sieidi* stones (Manker, 1957, 34; Mulk, 1996, 52). There have even been attempts to recognize *sieidi* stones in southern Finland based on the anthropomorphism of stones (Pentikäinen, Miettinen, 2003, 56–59; Koivisto, 2008). It is nevertheless hard to prove anthropomorphism objectively. If we look at the places where anthropomorphism is mentioned in written records, it doesn't seem to be a definite criterion (a personal observation). Zoomorphism might not be easily distinguishable either (Fig. 1). Neither are the *sieidi* stones always the only stones in the landscape. In the case of a lakeshore, where there are several adjacent stones, one cannot distinguish by eye which of the stones is holy (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. A *sieidi* stone at Säytsjärvi, Inari is said to resemble the snout of a fish (photo: T. Äikäs).



Fig. 2. At Seitavuopio, Enontekiö the shore of the lake is covered with stones (photo: T. Äikäs).

There have been different approaches to the problem of identifying an offering place. Ø. Vorren and H. K. Eriksen have emphasized the role of written sources for recognizing an offering place (Vorren, Eriksen, 1993, 203).

H. Rydving and R. Kristoffersson have also used old written sources as evidence of the meaning of a stone, but they also emphasize place-names and bone finds as indicators of offerings. They are of the opinion that only unbroken bones can indicate a holy place. The idea is based on evidence in written sources emphasizing that the offered bones were not to be broken (Rydving, Kristoffersson, 1993, 197–198). B. Wennstedt Edvinger and N. D. Broadbent (Wennstedt Edvinger, Broadbent, 2006, 46) include historical land use and archaeological finds on the checklist of features for recognizing an offering place.

E. R. Myrvoll (Myrvoll, 2008) adds archaeological finds (other than bones) and oral tradition to the list of indicators. Archaeological finds include offerings

and constructions, such as stone rings. Constructions connected to *sieidi* stones are rare. Written sources mention wooden platforms that were built close to the *sieidi*. To the best of my knowledge, however, there are no archaeological traces of these. In Northern Norway there is historical evidence of circular offering places, where a *sieidi* may have stood in the middle of a circular stone construction. In recent years similar constructions have also been found elsewhere (Vorren, 1985; Wennstedt Edvinger, Broadbent, 2006). However, in most cases a *sieidi* is unmodified by human hand. The stone itself is a natural feature that is acculturated by the ritual actions performed around it and by the stories, memories and beliefs attached to it. We may find traces of meaning even when a particular stone looks just like any other stone around it.

The use of written sources and place-names

There are crucial questions to consider when it comes to using written sources to identify *sieidi* sites. In addition to the temporal limitation arising from the relatively short time span they describe in comparison to the long use of *sieidi* sites, there are also spatial limitations. Written sources do not cover the whole Sámi area evenly (Rydving, 1995, 63). For example, North-Western Finland has not received much attention. In the wide area inhabited by the Sámi there have also been areal differences. Just as there are differences between the Sámi languages today, so there have been differences in ritual practices. This is why the written sources from the South Sámi area, for example, cannot directly be applied to other areas. *Sieidi* sites have been called by different names in different areas. In the South Sámi area, the term *storjunkare* is used to refer to phenomena resembling the *sieidi* (Rydving, 1993, 20–21). Also, the ritual practices may have varied. This is easiest to observe in relation to different subsistence strategies in different places. Reindeer herders used different *sieidi* sites than fishermen, or sometimes they used the same *sieidi*, but gave different offerings.

The use of *sieidi* sites has also varied over time. Some of the information about their use was already lost by the time of the written sources. For example, the Finnish teacher Samuli Paulaharju (1875–1944) who travelled through Lapland with his wife collecting folklore, has described some places with uncertainty. For example, his description of Seitalompola (*seita* is the Finnish word for a *sieidi*) is based on the place-name. He supposed there had been a *sieidi* here because of the name of the lake – *Seitalompolo* (Paulaharju, 1932, 43).

The oral tradition collected as late as the 20th century raises the question: How old must an oral tradition be for it to be considered evidence for the existence of a *sieidi*? There are *sieidi* sites that are mentioned in the local oral tradition, but are not known from any older written sources. On the other hand, as noted before, not all *sieidi* sites were revealed to the authors by the informants. Because some of the places were still being used in the 20th century, one cannot rule out the possibility of living oral tradition.

As we can see from the example of Paulaharju, place-names have been used as indicators of *sieidi* sites from the earlier times. There are many place-names that refer to a holy place or a possible *sieidi* site. In some cases the name includes the word *sieidi*, for example *Seitasaari* (Sieidi island) in Inari. Other names, for example, refer to holiness, with the word *bassi* (North Sámi) or *Aailáš* (Inari Sámi, e.g. *Karegasnjarga-Ailigas* in Utsjoki). Sometimes the name of a god or goddess is mentioned. This may be the female *Áhkká/Áhkku* (North Sámi, e.g. *Golle-ahkku* in Inari), or the male *Äijih* (Inari Sámi) or *Dierpmis* (North Sámi, e.g. *Tiermasvaara* in Kuusamo), the god of heaven and thunder. *Sáiva* (North Sámi) refers to a lake that was believed to have two bottoms, providing a way to the Underworld. In some places there are *sieidi* stones connected to a *sáiva* lake. But these place-names do not always refer to a *sieidi* stone. There were holy places without *sieidi* stones, and mountains and headlands where the stone has been lost (*Äikäs*, in print). Also, there are *sieidi* sites without place-names that indicate holiness.

Bones that were broken

The bones that are found in the vicinity of a stone are seen as indicating its use as a *sieidi*. But not all bones are considered to have the same evidence value. H. Rydving and R. Kristoffersson (*Rydving, Kristoffersson, 1993*) are of the opinion that offered bones have to be unbroken.

In the Sámi culture, treatment and condition of the offered bones carried important religious meanings. The written sources from the 17th century and before emphasize that the bones of the sacrificial animal were not to be broken. However, from the beginning of the 18th century there are sources telling how among the South Sámis the meat of the sacrificial animal was eaten together with the marrow from the bones. Split bones have also been found in the excavated material from Sweden dating to the 17th and 18th century (*Zachrisson, 1985, 87–88; Iregren, 1985, 105*). Also in the material from Seitala in



Fig. 3. Cut marks on an antler found at Seitāla, Utsjoki (photo: T. Äikäs).

Utsjoki there were cut marks on the bones (Puputti, 2008) (Fig. 3). I. Zachrisson (Zachrisson, 1985, 94) has suggested that the sources may have been describing what people should do, not what they did. The careful handling of the bones was related to the concept that a new animal was to be created from the bones by adding new meat to the skeleton (Mebius, 2003, 143).

There were also beliefs concerning the ritual handling of antlers. According to I. Zachrisson (Zachrisson, 2009, 134–149), it was important that the antlers come from living animals or at least still be attached to the skull. However, the finds from Seitāla indicate that fallen antlers might also have been given to the *sieidi* (Puputti, 2008). T. I. Itkonen (Itkonen, 1948, 318) states that fallen antlers were offered, as well as whole heads with antlers still attached. These might be examples of variation in ritual practices in time and space.

Moreover, in Sámi society it was believed that all bones should be consecrated (Zachrisson, 1985, 84). Hence bones might be buried even when no sacrifice took place. After a meal, bones could be laid in bone catches, for example, and placed under stones. Thus, bones alone are not a reliable indicator of a

sieidi. On the other hand, in contrast to H. Rydving and R. Kristoffersson (Rydving, Kristoffersson, 1993), I am of the opinion that the presence of broken bones does not indicate that a stone is not a *sieidi*. There are broken bones from well-known *sieidi* sites and also written sources that refer to sacrificial meals during which bones were broken.

Traces of other finds

In addition to bones, other materials were offered to *sieidi* stones. Written sources mention quartz, flint, glass, metal objects, coins, cheese, porridge, tobacco, alcohol and domestic utensils (Manker, 1957, 40–52; Leem, 1956 [1767], 428; Äimä, 1903, 115; Itkonen, 1948, 312). The number of offered objects can vary greatly. In Sweden metal objects and coins are common finds at *sieidi* sites. They have been offered since the 8th century AD, but mainly during the period 900–1300 AD (Mulk, 1996, 73; Hedman, 2003, passim; Fossum, 2006, 108). The excavations at three *sieidi* sites in Finland during the summer of 2008 revealed only a few artefacts. There were three coins and pieces of a glass bottle dating to the 19th century, an undated bone ring, and an antler button. Apart from these, all artefact finds were modern. They consisted of coins, an eyeglass lens and an alcohol bottle. The meaning of these finds – whether they represent offerings or tourist behaviour – is a question to be considered in another article. Whatever the intentions of the people who left these objects, they prove continuing use of the site.

In cases when the offering ritual included smearing the stone with blood or fish oil, no visible marks are to be found today. Ancient blood has been detected on stone tools and even identified to species level (Downs, 1995; Fiedel, 1996; Field, Privat, 2008). However, there have been no attempts to find ancient blood traces on big stone surfaces.

Phosphate analyses are one way to reveal human action where no visual marks are left. Phosphate analyses around *sieidi* sites have shown higher concentrations in the vicinity of the *sieidi* stone (Halinen, 2006; Wennstedt Edvinger, Broadbent, 2006, 38). It would be interesting to test whether questionable *sieidi* places could be verified in this way.

Concluding remarks

In some cases the cultural context of the site can be seen as an indicator of a *sieidi*. Closeness to a Sámi dwelling place, or a place of importance for Sámi

subsistence, might, together with other evidence, support the idea that a stone is a *sieidi* site. But one cannot state that all stones close to a Sámi dwelling had a special meaning.

In most cases one aspect is not enough to make a stone a *sieidi*. When there are two sources of information, one is on safer ground with the interpretation. A place-name does not make a *sieidi*, but when there is a place-name and bone finds, the evidence for interpretation is better. In the search for *sieidi* stones, one should remember that not all impressive stones are *sieidi* stones and not all *sieidi* stones are impressive. In addition, there are stones filled with meaning and memories that were not sacred.

Summary

A *sieidi* is an offering site of the Sámi that usually consisted of a wooden object or a stone unmodified by human hand. Because of their natural form they are hard to recognize in the landscape. Usually just one indicator might not be enough to distinguish a *sieidi* from just another stone. Written sources and oral tradition have preserved memories of the use of *sieidi*, but not all *sieidi* sites are still remembered. Sometimes just a place-name has survived. Bones or meat were a common form of offering at a *sieidi*, and there were rules restricting the handling of the bones. Some sources mention that offered bones were not to be broken. Nevertheless, there have been differences in these practices. Also, other finds, including coins, metal objects, and glass, can be recovered at various sites. Phosphate analysis is one way to recognize a *sieidi* when no visual signs of the offerings are left. One or more indicators may survive, telling us about the use of a *sieidi*.

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