

Without a trace?

The Sámi in the Swedish History Museum

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Abstract: *Around 2005, the Swedish History Museum (SHM) in Stockholm reworked their Vikings exhibition, aiming to question simplistic and erroneous understandings of past group identities. In the process, all references to the Sámi were removed from the exhibition texts. This decision has been criticised by experts on Sámi pasts. In this article, it is argued that we can talk about a Sámi ethnic identity from the Early Iron Age onwards. The removal of references to the Sámi in the exhibition texts is discussed accordingly, as well as the implicit misrepresentations, stereotypes and majority attitudes that are conveyed through spatial distribution, choice of illustrations, lighting, colour schemes and the exhibition texts. Finally, some socio-political reasons for the avoidance of Sámi issues in Sweden are suggested, including an enduring colonialist relation to this minority.*

Keywords: Sámi pasts, exhibitions, Vikings, past group identities, ethnicity, stereotypes, Sweden, politics of the past, colonialism.

This article discusses the dissemination of Sámi culture and history in the Swedish History Museum (SHM) in Stockholm. The background for the study¹ was work on an article about the Sámi offering site, Unna Saiva, from which some of the archaeological finds are displayed in the museum. Unna Saiva, in Gällivare, Norrbotten, northern Sweden, is an almost iconic Sámi offering site, mainly due to its rich find material of about 600 metal objects, including jewellery, arrowheads, coins and a pair of scales, among other things. The site is one of twelve, or possibly thirteen, Sámi

offering sites in northern Sweden² where such objects have been found. In addition, early twentieth century excavations revealed large amounts of animal bones and reindeer antlers (Hallström 1915, 1932, Manker 1957:167–168, Salmi *et al.* 2015). The general dating of Sámi metal offering sites has been app. AD 800–1300 (Hedman 2003), while the metal offerings at Unna Saiva have been dated to app. AD 900–1000 (Serning 1956, though see Lund 2015). However, the latest investigations of the osteological assemblage indicate that the animal offerings at Unna Saiva date back to the

18 sixth or seventh century (Salmi *et al.* 2015:12). The new analyses show a development from offerings of wild animals to offerings of domesticated animals during the Middle Ages. This change probably reflects an important socioeconomic transformation, but at the same time the fundamental structure of the offering practices seems to have been sustained (Salmi *et al.* 2015).

The Unna Saiva offering site has been much discussed, including the cultural and ethnic background of its users. Some researchers have suggested the finds could be related to Kven merchant activities (von Rosen 1916, Fjellström 1962:248–251). Today, however, it is widely accepted to be a Sámi offering site (Zachrisson 1984, Wallerström 1995a, Hansen & Olsen 2014:113–114). Like many of the hundreds of recorded Sámi offering sites in northern Fennoscandia, it is identified as such not only by the find material, but also through local traditions, landscape context and the place name, which means “small sacred lake” in Lule Sámi. The Sámi context is not, however, reflected in the presentation of the offering site at the SHM.

A SHORT EXHIBITION BIOGRAPHY

The display case with objects from Unna Saiva, including some of the bone assemblage (fig. 1), is part of the exhibition *Vikings*, which opened at the Swedish History Museum in 2001. The showcase was originally labelled “Sámi religion”, identifying the material as remains from a Sámi offering site. The accompanying text was written by an expert on Sámi metal offerings, archaeologist Inger Zachrisson (Zachrisson 1984). Zachrisson has since retired, and only a few years ago she discovered that all references to the Sámi had been removed from the texts in the *Vikings* exhibition (personal

communication, I. Zachrisson, 5 September 2014). This change happened around 2005, though the exact time is difficult to establish, as the exhibition was continuously revised and still is (personal communication, Fredrik Svanberg, 18 November 2014). Following complaints from several researchers working with Sámi cultural history (Grahn *et al.* 2013), the texts have been changed again in parts of the exhibition, but not for the Unna Saiva exhibit.

The changes in the *Vikings* exhibition were motivated by a wish to correct a dualistic and essentialist presentation of Sámi and Germanic culture in the original exhibition. For instance, a map was presented with a straight line across Scandinavia and a simple labelling of “Sámi” to the North and “Germanic” to the South (personal communication, Fredrik Svanberg, 18 November 2014). This rather simplistic understanding of cultural and ethnic identities in the Viking Age contrasted with the movement towards constructivism, deconstructionism and postcolonial approaches in archaeology and other social sciences around the turn of the millennium. These theoretical trends had a particularly strong impact on archaeology in Sweden, where the debate about identity, nationalism and the use of cultural heritage had to relate to a very visible and currently growing far-right political movement (Gustafsson & Karlsson 2011). At the beginning of the 2000s, then SHM senior curator Fredrik Svanberg was one of the spokesmen for exploring a less unified Viking culture in Scandinavia and rather highlight the multiple collective identities that are traceable in the archaeological material (Svanberg 2003). Hence, the intention of the changes in the *Vikings* exhibition was to deconstruct ideas about stereotypical Viking Age identities that have been used to promote nationalist, right-



Fig. 1. The Unna Saiva showcase is placed in a section of the Vikings exhibition that focuses on religious faith and includes metal objects and bones from a Sámi offering site in Gällivare, northern Sweden. Photo: Marte Spangen.

wing, fascist and (neo-)Nazi ideologies, as well as to question ideas about Viking Age unity and essentialist identities in general.

INFORMATION VERSUS SILENCE

While sympathetic to the debate and intention described above, I find the “deconstruction” of the Sámi identity in the SHM exhibitions highly problematic. There have been lengthy discussions in the Scandinavian archaeology community about the racist and imperialist reasons for the almost complete lack of archaeological research on Sámi pasts until the late 1970s (e.g. Schanche & Olsen 1985,

Hansen & Olsen 2014:2–6). After centuries of oppression and forceful assimilation, a general Sámi cultural and political revival has developed during the last 40 years in interplay with an increased interest among archaeologists to explore this missing part of Nordic history. Still, even if it is now less controversial to discuss a Sámi past in Scandinavia, the burden of proof is usually on the minority side, both in general archaeology and in actual law suits concerning land use and rights. Archaeological evidence has been used in harrowing land use court cases considering the age of Sámi presence in Middle Scandinavia, and archaeologists have been called as witnesses for both sides (Bull

20 2004, Zachrisson 2004). This has added to the sensitivity of discussing Sámi identity and ethnicity in the past, perhaps particularly in Swedish archaeology.

The fact that researchers have usually had to defend any identification of archaeological material as remains of past Sámi presence has dichotomised the academic debates and encouraged essentialist explanations for material expressions of group identities in Sámi archaeology. Today, however, there is a wish to move beyond the question “is it really Sámi?” to other questions such as how Sámi identity has been articulated at different times and places (Ojala 2009:175–176, Hansen & Olsen 2014:8). Following constructivist theories, Sámi culture and identity have always been changing, in the same way as any culture and identity, contrary to the previous ethnographic view of the Sámi as a static “nature people” (Hansen & Olsen 2014:2–4). This complexity obviously needs to be communicated to the broader public, since we know that many old stereotypes about the Sámi are still very much alive. This is not achieved, however, by the removal of any reference to Sámi identities in a Viking Age exhibition. Indeed, following decades of research that has tried to establish that the Sámi *are* people with a past and a culture in constant making, this is rather a step backwards. For empirical reasons that I will return to below, it is also a kind of disinformation. In this context, silence makes a very loud argument.

The editing of the SHM exhibition may have been done in order to generate reflection, but people are in need of knowledge-based information to be able to draw any conclusions whatsoever. In a different part of the museum, in the exhibition *Prehistories I*, there is a presentation on the famous burial site Krankmårtenhögen in northern Sweden, in particular a skeleton of a male individual

dating to app. AD 0–400. The accompanying text presents this as “The man from the inland”. Life in the North was different from life in the South, it says, and concerned hunting and fishing, but also contacts with other areas. Until recently, the text added that there had been fervent discussions about the graves at Krankmårtenhögen and whether they can be called Sámi or not. The text ended with the question, “Can we talk about Sámi people from a thousand years ago?” Apart from the fact that the material concerned is at least 1500–2000 years old, the rhetorical question represented, in my opinion, a misguided attempt to make visitors “think for themselves”, without providing any additional information. This is illustrated by the following conversation of a young student couple in front of the described poster, recorded in 2006:

Daniel: “*Can we talk about Sámi people a thousand years ago, can we?*”

Disa: “Well, where did they come from, then, the Sámi, why are they not included?”

Daniel: “They came from Russia, of course.”

(after Insulander 2010:163, my translation)

Daniel’s answer reflects an enduring myth, based on nationalist and racist research in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, that the Sámi were late immigrants from the east (Hansen & Olsen 2014:16–18). The exhibition text here evidently did little to challenge this understanding, and failed to provide new knowledge or reflections on ethnicity and identity. The text still remained in November 2014, but by June 2015 it had been revised by an SHM project group that had been implemented to review the Sámi content, though primarily working with the *Vikings* exhibition (personal communication, I. Ullén, 23 June 2015). Oddly, the revision in this instance was, again, merely

to remove the paragraph mentioning the Sámi and the debate about the identity of the buried people at Krankmårtenhögen.

SÁMI ETHNICITY IN THE PAST

Ethnicity in the past is a difficult subject. In archaeology, there is always an overhanging risk of reproducing a simplistic cultural historic understanding of the distribution of certain artefact types or styles as reflecting the distribution of a “people”, an ethnic group and often also a language. When earlier arguments in Sámi archaeology have promoted the paradigm of essentialist group identities with consistent material expressions, I assume this has been done in part to gain acceptance for the idea that we can talk about a Sámi past at all. In part it also resonates with the empirical evidence, since the distribution of certain material culture, such as Iron Age jewellery of eastern origins or Early Metal Age asbestos ceramics, coincides with the historically known main settlement areas of the Sámi in Scandinavia. However, while such shared material culture may have been one source for practices that led to social differentiation into various group identities in the past (e.g. Jørgensen & Olsen 1988), the introduction of constructivist understandings and new anthropological theories on ethnicity from the 1960s onwards means that self-identification has become the necessary hallmark of an *ethnic* identity (e.g. Barth 1969). This condition has made many archaeologists highly sceptical of whether such identities can be traced in archaeological material at all, even if common cultural practices may be evident (e.g. Werbart 2002, Wallerström 2006).

To substantiate the existence of a Sámi identity from the Early Iron Age onwards, mentions of groups that have been identified

as the Sámi, such as *fenni* or *finnoi*, in various contemporary written sources have been quoted (Zachrisson *et al.* 1997). However, these probably refer to less specified hunter-gatherer groups in the North. The sixth century *skritiphinnoi* is more certainly related to the Sámi and the Norse exonym *skridfinner*, which reflects a stereotype of the Sámi as people who skied, as in *skrida* a *skidum* (Hansen & Olsen 2014:36–37). Still, such ancient terms cannot be directly translated into current ethnic group definitions, as they may refer to other group identities, such as specific professional or economic organisations, or joint designations for groups that in fact perceived themselves as different from each other (Wallerström 1995b, Hansen & Olsen 2014:35). We do, however, also know that the self-identifying words *sábme* and *sábmelaš* existed already in proto-Sámi language, which has been dated back to the Pre-Roman Iron Age (Korhonen 1988, Aikio 2006:39–40). Though it is discussed when these words gained meaning as endonyms, this supports the existence of a Sámi ethnicity from the last centuries BC onwards, and more certainly in the early centuries AD (Hansen & Olsen 2014:31, 39–48).

What this ethnicity consisted of is a different question, in terms of what groups identified as Sámi, where they stayed, and how this identity was constituted and expressed at any given time and place. It is of course unlikely that the same material elements have served as ethnic markers for all Sámi throughout their history. This makes tracing a geographical distribution of Sámi past identity far more complex than is sometimes assumed. However, based on the historically known distribution of Sámi groups and languages since the Middle Ages, I find it highly likely that the hunting and fishing population in today’s northern Swedish inland could and did identify as Sámi in situations

22 where that was relevant by the time the earliest dated offerings at Unna Saiva were made, i.e. AD 540–770 (Salmi *et al.* 2015:12). It is in this context that the presentation of the material from Unna Saiva in the Swedish History Museum appears very peculiar.

The Unna Saiva exhibit is an integrated part of a section in the *Vikings* exhibition that focuses on the currents of old and new faith in Scandinavia in the Late Iron Age. As mentioned above, the original title of the showcase identified the material as relating to Sámi religion. At present, however, the title is “Dark forest sacrifices”. The accompanying text mentions thousands of offering sites from “the trapper peoples of the North” and that the area was Christianised only several hundred years after the Viking Age. The name “Saiva” is translated into “the holy lake”, and the offering stone is referred to as a “sijeddi”, a misspelling of the Lule Sámi *siejdde*. All of this without mentioning the word “Sámi”, even if the text clearly refers to Sámi history, religion, language and traditions, and even if current research maintains that this site and the area in general should be perceived as Sámi during the Iron and Middle Ages.

The caution in referring to specific and still existing identities may be understandable considering the debate about whether it is possible to identify ethnic groups in the past at all. It is certainly relevant to explain to the audience that there was no such thing as the current Swedish national identity during the Viking Age. Yet, the exemption of a Sámi identity seems to reflect an assumption that no other present (minority) identity can have existed before the Swedish (majority) identity either, an attitude that is opposed to the data presented above. As mentioned, the removal of references to the Sámi in the exhibition has been met with criticism. As a result, the

museum is currently revising the *Vikings* exhibition with this aspect in mind. The fairly simple laminated texts should be quite easy to update to be in better accordance with research results of the last 20 years. Text revisions will, however, only constitute a minor improvement on the presentation of the (Sámi) “people of the North” in the SHM exhibitions, where more substantial changes are needed to rectify what are currently simply misrepresentations.

RHETORIC BEYOND WORDS

Besides the conspicuous omission of Sámi pasts or identity issues in the exhibition texts, even where this should be an obvious aspect of the material, there are some striking spatial and visual elements that speak just as loudly as this silence about how the Sámi and their part in Swedish history have been understood at the SHM. It should be noted that these elements, as far as I understand, were already part of the exhibitions before the changes in the texts around 2005.

One section of the *Vikings* exhibition was originally labelled “Sámi interaction”, while the 2005 changes resulted in a title with no reference to the Sámi. Due to more recent changes, the section is now labelled “Sámi culture” (Grahm *et al.* 2013, personal communication, I. Zachrisson, 5 September 2014), though the accompanying text still refers to the population in northern Sweden as “the Northerners”. While the (currently non-Sámi) Unna Saiva exhibition is integrated into a broader theme of religious change, this declared “Sámi culture” department is installed in a separate space behind partition walls in a corner of the first exhibition room you enter from the foyer of the museum. Outside the partition walls, the story about the Viking Age has already begun, and there is a lot going on, from the



*Fig. 2. The vibrant introduction to the Vikings exhibition at the Swedish History Museum.
Photo: Marte Spangen.*

wall decorated with large fluorescent runes, to projected excavation drawings on the floor, exhibited objects, and even more strikingly, with people from the past decorating the room (fig. 2). Large portraits show interpretations of what the people buried with the exhibited objects may have looked like, thus giving these individuals a face and a presence. It is impressive and convincing, as they look out into the room in reconstructed flesh, blood and colourful clothes, welcoming you with a glass of something (fig. 3).

Behind the partition wall to the “Sámi culture” you are met with silence; the space is quite dimly lit and kept in neutral grey and brown colours. The end of a wall-covering

greyscale photography of a mountain and sea landscape protrudes past the partition and into the Sámi room, but otherwise there is little decoration apart from a pair of reconstructed skis on one wall and a somewhat diffuse photo of a man dressed in brown clothes on the opposite wall (fig. 4). He is wearing a fur hat and walks through the snow on a frozen lake with a stick in his hand. He is on foot but with movements that indicate skiing. In the showcase on a third wall are remains of a ski, together with a selection of other objects from the burial sites of Röstahammaren in Jämtland and Vivalen in Härjedalen, both in the southernmost Sámi reindeer herding areas in Sweden today. The sites have been



Fig. 3. The exhibition is characterized by reconstructed individuals from the graves, portrayed as hospitable vikings. Photo: Marte Spangen.

hotly debated in terms of the identity of their inhabitants. Inger Zachrisson has interpreted the eleventh and twelfth century objects and grave customs at VivalLEN as indicators of a Sámi medieval presence (Zachrisson *et al.* 1997), a view she has been called on to defend in court cases about Sámi land rights in this area (Zachrisson 2004:59, Ojala 2009:158).

As mentioned, the heading for this section now reads “Sámi culture”, but the following text says that the mixture of typical South Scandinavian and “Sámi” (in quotation marks) grave goods at Röstahammaren “calls into question the idea of artefacts and traditions as being ‘typical’ for specific groups of people” and that the individuals buried here have been labelled “Germanic”, “Jämtlandic” and “Sámi” according to different approaches. Hence, the material is somewhat confusingly both considered to be Sámi (in the title) and questioned (in the text). The VivalLEN material is not presented in terms of ethnic identity, but with a focus on the interpretation of one grave as a buried shaman. This seems rather

like a missed opportunity for a more in-depth discussion of the difficulties of recognising past identities, and the current political and economic stakes surrounding this question.

The seclusion or segregation of the “Sámi culture” to a colourless, empty space behind partition walls, with the presentation of the Sámi population as diffuse and involved in slightly unintelligible activities, here skiing without skis, is in sharp contrast to the vivid, colourful presentation of the active and apparently hospitable population in the rest of the Viking Age. Unconsciously, I assume, the SHM is even reproducing the image of the Sámi, or the “Northerners”, as nature people, the portrait being the only one in the exhibition that shows a person on the move outdoors in a landscape, which is of course also cold, frozen and snow-covered – the ultimate southern Swedish vision of the North.

INSIDE VERSUS OUTSIDE

This dichotomy between the indoors and outdoors people cannot be explained as a pure coincidence, as it is repeated in the *Prehistories* exhibition. Even if the museum is currently not referring to the Sámi at all in the text by the Krankmårtenhögen burial site, the association is easily made, since they reuse a corresponding portrait as in “Sámi culture”. The diffuse man in the fur hat, now shown in profile, is still striding over the frozen snow-covered lake on foot with his stick, though more intelligibly using it as a proper walking stick (fig. 5). The exhibit of bones and antlers from the burial site is placed in-between other exhibits and not secluded like the “Sámi culture”, though on its own corner wall. Yet, the man in the fur hat still withdraws from an immediate encounter by having his portrait placed above the showcase, towards the ceiling, contrary to



Fig. 4. The “Sámi culture” section is dimly lit and separated from the colorful Viking Age by partition walls.
Photo: Marte Spangen.

other portraits in the exhibitions. The colours of the lighting and illustrations on this corner wall are cold greys and browns. The inland man is accompanied by nature here too, as he is heading towards a waterfall that is projected onto the wall to the right. To the left is another wall with two showcases of migration period grave finds from different parts of southern Sweden. Between them is a portrait of a somewhat scared-looking man from a grave in Kvissleby, on the coast of northern Sweden. He is sitting indoors and looks straight into our eyes. A main text in the sections asks: “Did they ever meet, the minor king from Norrland and the man from further inland?” This may be read as if the inland people had no particular status or societal organisation.

In part, there are clear pragmatic problems with bringing the Sámi, or northern inland people, of the Iron Age to life: northern Sweden has been practically a white spot on the archaeological map until the last 25–30 years (Loeffler 2005, Ojala 2009, 67–71), and the archaeological research on Sámi pasts in general is still young and only occupies a small fraction of researchers. A lot of empirical work still needs to be done in order to describe such aspects as clothing, everyday practices and societal organisation. On the other hand, quite a lot of work has been done over the last forty years of Sámi archaeology (cf. Olsen 2004) that could be drawn upon for more detailed interpretations and vivid imagery.

The reproduction of the myth of the Sámi



Fig. 5. The fur hat man above the Krankmårtenhögen exhibit to the right is referred to as “the man from the inland”, while the portrayed man from the Kvissleby grave to the left is called a “minor king from Norrland”. Photo: Marte Spangen.

as outdoors, winter-bound nature people can perhaps be defended by the fact that we know fur trade was an important part of the economy in the North. However, the representative in the SHM exhibitions is not actually hunting, he carries no visible weapons, and he is not encountering a fur monger, but strides along as if to avoid us and run and hide in the woods – not unlike the wild animals he would be hunting. The anonymity and the outdoor setting are striking in an exhibition where even an Early Stone Age hunter like the Bäckaskog woman is provided with a face and a fire. Only the Northerners, the Sámi, are contextualised outside the warmth of a

hearth, rather paradoxically, since hearths are by far the most frequent cultural heritage finds in Sámi areas and a well-researched focal point of Sámi social organisation, culture and mythology (e.g. Ränk 1949, Hedman 2003, Sommerseth 2009).

THE SÁMI IN THE HISTORY OF SWEDEN

As described, Sámi endonyms date back to the Early Iron Age, and it is hardly controversial to assume that the “Finns” of the Scandinavian medieval written sources refer to a Sámi population. Yet, the Sámi make a very late entrance in the SHM exhibition *History of*

Sweden, which covers the time from the eleventh century to the present day. Unfortunately, this may help to sustain the forementioned obsolete but lasting myth that the Sámi came from the East at a fairly late time in history. The Sámi are first included in the exhibition in a section concerning the seventeenth century, and then only because this is when the King initiates a more systematic exploitation of the natural resources of the Sámi areas in the North through mining. The exhibition text focuses on the Swedish colonisation here and in other parts of the world and states that “the 17th century was the time of the great olden days we sing about in the national anthem, a time when the little country on the outskirts becomes a superpower ... Even in the North, in the Sámi area, Sweden expands” (my translation of the Swedish text).

Though this was in fact the time when the northern inland was more thoroughly integrated into the Swedish kingdom, the King had had economic, political and strategic interests in the Sámi areas through trade, taxation, jurisdiction and Christianisation from at least the early sixteenth century (e.g. Wallerström 1995b). Sámi trading contacts with southern Sweden go back to the Iron Age, when, for instance, wild reindeer hunts in pit fall systems seem to have been undertaken on an industrial scale in the North. Hence, the Sámi played a part in the history of Sweden from the Early Middle Ages onwards, and this could easily have been better reflected in the exhibition.

The fact that the Swedish colonial expansion is referred to as “the great olden days” without considering the consequences for the colonised may actually be perceived as offensive, but you only have to turn a corner from this information sign to find a small showcase that illustrates the colonial meetings in the



Fig. 6. Information about current Sámi culture and issues can be found on a touchscreen by a back door. Photo: Marte Spangen.

North. This includes imported and local Sámi goods, for instance an adorned hammer for a holy drum. The text for the exhibit mentions that Sámi people were forcibly recruited to transport for the mines and that Sámi culture was exposed to “strong pressure”. The showcase is placed on the high end of a giant vertically sloping map that runs down towards the South, and, incidentally, the future, as showed by the timeline running along the exhibition floor. Behind the map, a dim, foggy photo of a pinewood covers an entire wall – again, the Sámi elements are accompanied by unclear and cold natural surroundings, on the edge of the woods, as well as the world.

Current Sámi culture and issues are presented even more obscurely: a half-hidden touchscreen by a backdoor (fig. 6), behind the sloping map surface described above, presents short texts about Sámi religion before the Christianisation in the seventeenth century, as well as presenting more recent Sámi issues, including two examples of the repatriation of human skeletal remains from the SHM collections. One of these texts states that the Swedish History

28 Museum has decided to repatriate 12 crania to Åjtte Swedish Mountain and Sámi Museum (in Jokkmokk, northern Sweden). It says the crania came from an abandoned churchyard in Rounala (Karesuando, northern Sweden) and are about 700–800 years old (in fact they are dated to AD 1300–1720, cf. Fjellström 2011). The text also maintains that it is not possible to decide which ethnic group these individuals belonged to. To those familiar with the debate, this comment reads like an intended last word in the heated discussion about this case and about other repatriations of Sámi remains over the last decade. The controversies are intertwined with the general international debate about indigenous rights and repatriation. It is, however, doubtful if visitors without prior knowledge would understand these implications from the touchscreen presentation.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE EXHIBITIONS

Public debate in Sweden is conducted within a fairly strict framework of acceptable utterances. The focus on multicultural and explicitly anti-nationalist cultural politics is so strong that it has been labelled “contact anxiety when it comes to national matters” (Aronsson 2010:149, my translation). This “contact anxiety” is perhaps reflected in the attempt to “denationalise” the *Vikings* exhibition at the SHM, while the removal of any reference to the Sámi is oddly inconsistent with the general concern for multiculturalism. It is not, however, a unique example of how Sámi topics are avoided in Swedish archaeology. For instance, Swedish researchers have criticised stereotypical presentations of gender, age and race in archaeological exhibitions (e.g. Bünz & Steen 2008), but presentations of the Sámi have mostly been evaluated and published by

foreign researchers (Olsen 2000, Levy 2006, Webb 2006, Mathisen 2014, though see Bünz 2015).³ The repatriation of human remains is another issue where Swedish authorities have been slow to acknowledge Sámi concerns (Broadbent 2001:29). In contrast, the famous Alta conflict radicalised Norwegian archaeology in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The conflict started as an environmentalist demonstration against a hydroelectric power plant in Alta, Finnmark, northern Norway, but the protests simultaneously raised awareness about the infringement on traditional Sámi land use. They subsequently evolved into protests against the suppression of Sámi culture, identity and rights in general, eventually leading to intended corrective measures such as the establishment of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament in 1989 and the ratification of the ILO Convention 169 about indigenous rights in 1990. The Alta case also gave momentum to the development of Sámi history and archaeology, especially at the then newly established University of Tromsø in northern Norway. The situation of Sámi politics in Norway today, including museum presentations, is by no means free from problems, but Sámi issues are certainly discussed.

While the Alta case had a defining impact on this discourse in Norwegian politics and academia, Sweden seems to have lagged behind in acknowledging responsibility or concern for the Sámi minority. This may be related to certain unresolved issues when it comes to the nationalist and colonialist history of the country (Fur 2013, Nordin & Ojala 2015). Though not necessarily a measure in itself, it is telling that the ILO convention 169 has not been ratified by Sweden, even if the Sámi are recognised as an indigenous people (Mörkenstam & Lantto 2008). The Swedish Sámi Parliament receives limited funding and has little

influence compared to the Norwegian sister organisation. Ongoing court cases between the Swedish state and Sámi local communities over land rights for instance for reindeer herding and hunting are still causing bitter conflicts, as when state judicial representatives recently aggravated both local and academic parties by presenting obsolete and erroneous racist group definitions and research as arguments in such a trial (Fröberg 2015). In the past few years, large areas in northern Sweden have been offered by the State to international mining companies for exploitation and to foreign military forces as training grounds, promoting a notion that these areas are entirely uninhabited (Sternlund 2013). Parts of the local populations, which consist of both Sámi and non-Sámi people, welcome mining and other enterprises for the employment opportunities, but many locals oppose the developments because of the environmental consequences, health risks and interference with reindeer herding, as well as the issue of Sámi rights to self-determination (Ojala & Nordin *in press*). In this current socio-political context it is highly unfortunate that the national history museum seems to mute and obscure the Sámi presence within the borders of Sweden, both in the past and the present.

CONCLUSION

The exhibitions at the Swedish History Museum have been revised with good intentions of deconstructing imagined past identities. The result, however, is strikingly out of tune with current research on Sámi pasts and the critique raised during the last few decades of similar presentations of the Sámi and of other indigenous groups and minorities in museums. The lack of mention of the Sámi in the exhibitions underlines the

majority hegemony in the portrayal of Swedish history. The texts and presentations help to maintain outdated myths about Sámi origins and identity, such as their alleged immigration from the east, and their perceived status as a static, strange nature-dwelling people to be found only in a winter landscape. This places the Sámi outside both in a physical and a metaphorical sense, and portrays them as without archaeological remains and a past. While texts can be easily changed and museum objects are currently rearranged and added in the “Sámi culture” section (personal communication, I. Ullén, 26 September 2015), the Swedish History Museum has a far greater challenge in revising the exhibitions as such, since the spatial organisation, colour schemes, lighting and choice of illustrations only enhance the impression of a surprisingly old-fashioned attitude towards, and presentation of, any issue related to the Sámi. Contrary to the expressed objective, the result obscures the multicultural and diverse pasts that could have been discussed. Whatever the rationale for this, I can only encourage a more proactive debate about Sámi culture and identities at the SHM. The ongoing process of revising the Sámi-related aspects of the exhibitions shows a commendable willingness to listen to and act on criticism. It also provides a great opportunity to engage the visitors in the ongoing and intertwined discourses of recent archaeological research, theoretical perspectives and current socio-political questions.

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NOTES

1. The study for the present article was performed in November 2014 and June 2015.
2. Apart from one site that is situated just across the border with present-day Norway.
3. Swedish researcher Eva Silvéén has, however, published evaluations of the ethnographical exhibitions of Sámi culture at the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm, which include archaeological elements (e.g. Silvéén 2008).

UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

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