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The repatriation of Soejvengelle

The paper describes the repatriation of a Sámi grave in Tärna parish, Västerbotten from the fifteenth century, as well as the original excavation in the early 1950s, whereupon the remains were brought to Stockholm. It also discusses the ideas behind racial studies and human physiognomy which were the theoretical backdrop for this kind of undertakings in the 1800s and early 1900s.

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Introduction

During the so-called *Lapland surveys* in the 1940s and 1950s, the curator of the Nordic Museum, made an excavation of a Sami grave in Tärna parish in the northwest of Västerbotten, which 50 years later was in focus when the first repatriation of Sámi remnants took place in Sweden.

The interest in Sami graves linked to the development of archaeological research and their connection to the development of society. In the mid-1800s the zoologist Sven Nilsson launched theories of how the prehistoric society had evolved, theories influenced by Darwin's evolutionary theories (published in "The Origin of Species"). In his book *Skandinaviska nordens ur-invånare* (1838-1843), Nilsson presents four stages of development in the prehistoric society; hunter and gatherer society, pastoral and nomadic stage, the agricultural stage and the stage of civilization. The stages were then connected to the evolutionary theories, ie, society had evolved from a primitive hunter and gatherer society to a civilized industrial society. In these theories the Sámi culture was found in the nomadic stage and was regarded as relatively primitive. About the same time theories advocating that primitiveness could be inferred through the study of human



Fig. 1. The holy Mountain Atoklimpen.

physiognomy emerged, particularly the study of human skulls, and it is now that the measuring of skulls begins and the classification of them into long skulls and short skulls. All this were linked to the evolutionary theories, long skulls were thus more developed (civilized) than short skulls. This physical anthropology had a great impact on the archaeological research and was also the starting point of desecration and excavations of many Sámi graves in the northern parts of Scandinavia that were to go on for decades. The interest in skulls and eugenics reached its peak during the interwar period in connection with the formation of racial institutions in the early 1920s along with the fascist tendencies that prevailed in Europe during this time. After World War II came, however, archeology to approach social anthropology and in doing so it began to study man as a social individual with different patterns of behavior that were due to genes, environment and nutrition and it were now that concepts such as ethnicity and cultural patterns began to be discussed.

Soejvengelle's grave

In 1950, during the so called *Lappmarksundersökningarna* (*Lapland surveys*), a Sámi grave in Tärna parish in the northwest of Västerbotten, named as Soejvengelles grave, was excavated by Ernst Manker, an ethnologist



Fig. 2. Soejvengelle's grave at the excavation in 1950.

from Stockholm, in cooperation with Gunnar Westin, director of the County Museum in Västerbotten and Nils Axelsson a local resident from Ström (Fig. 2). There are several stories and a rich tradition around Soejvengelles grave and in the Sámi language Soejvengelle means “Shadow man”. The name Soejvengelle or “Shadow man” came from a legend going back to the late eighteenth century. The legend tells us that Soejvengelle was a very tall man, “he was as tall as his shadow” He was very young when he died and he was buried downhill Atoklimpen. Nearby the grave a man called Nortman had his dwelling site and his storage space made of stone blocks that Soejvengelle protected. However, Soejvengelle was disturbed by Nortman and his family and tried to drive them away, and eventually the family took off (Manker, E 1961:156ff).

In the literature the grave was first mentioned by the ethnologist O. P. Pettersson in the early twentieth century (Manker, E 1961:158). He mentioned that two boys in the late nineteenth century lifted up the cover of slab stone and found a coffin of wood, an axe and a knife.

The grave is a type of stone grave, built up of slab stones, originally upraised to one another in a tent form, probably resting on a longitudinal log of wood. Inside the grave and directly on the ground rests the body, often in an *Ackja* (a Sámi sledge) or wrapped in birch-bark. This type of grave can be dated back to the thirteenth century.



Fig. 3. Soejvengelle's grave before the excavation in 2001.



Fig. 4. Soejvengelle's grave during the excavation in 2001.



Fig. 5. Soejvengelle's grave after the reconstruction in 2002.

The results from the excavation show that the grave was 250 cm long and approx. 125 cm wide. In the bottom of the grave there were birch-bark and wooden remains of what Manker interpreted as an Ackja. After the excavation “an appropriate amount of bones” from the skeleton were brought to Stockholm for analysis. The osteological analysis, which was done ten years after the excavation, shows that the skeleton belongs to a man approx. 30-40 years of age and approx. 160 cm long (Manker E 1961:160).

After the excavation, Ernst Manker also promised in a letter to Nils Axelsson that the remains of Soejvengelle will be brought back after the analysis. The promises were forgotten and the bones stayed in Stockholm.

Fifty years later, in 1999, Vadtejen Saemiej Sijte (Vapsten Sámi association) brought up the question and wrote a letter to the National Heritage Board (were the skeleton had been stored since 1973) and reminded them of Manker's letter. A year later the museum gave their sanction to the Sámi association to return the skeleton to the original

site, on one condition, that the grave must undergo an archaeological excavation before a reburial and that the forms for the reburial were defined. During a week in September 2001 the County Museum in Västerbotten together with Vadtejen Saemiej Sijte (Vapsten Sámi association) did an archaeological excavation of Soejvengelles grave. Before the excavation the skeleton remains were analysed for ^{14}C and the bones were dated to the late fifteenth century.

The results of the excavation in 2001 shows that the grave had been disturbed several times over the years, which means that the original shape of the grave would be hard to reconstruct. The finds from the grave consisted of an axe, a knife, 13 coins and several bones and teeth. The finds would of course be put together with the other remains within the reburial (Fig. 3-4).

And on a very beautiful day in the fall of 2002 the reburial were accomplished. After the burial the grave was reconstructed (Fig. 1 & 5).

What did we learn from this project?

Archaeologically speaking, the study and the excavation gave us a lot of new knowledge, for example of the grave. We learned more about the typology of these graves. We got suggestions of the reconstruction. We obtained information about the human remains in the grave, and the finds which we can use for comparative studies of other similar, excavated graves.

But most important is the question of repatriation. In many museums in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany, France, England, etc. there are hundreds and hundreds of Sámi human remains, whole skeletons and skulls. These human remains were collected for many reasons, and the methods in this collection campaign were, in many ways, ruthless and without respect for the people who lived in the area or permission from the relatives. You could say that a large quantity of the human remains that is kept in certain museums is stolen goods.

Today, when indigenous peoples more and more become aware of these historical assaults, and of the hundreds and hundreds of human remains that are kept in the museums, demands and claims are raised to the museums and other institutions to repatriate the remains.

It is about time that the representatives of the museums and the representatives of the Sámi people begin to discuss these questions, and find out solutions to solve these problems.

In 2010, the Board of the County Museum of Västerbotten, established a policy that regulates the museum's handling of repatriations.

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