

# FROM FELL TOPS TO STANDING STONES: SACRED LANDSCAPES IN NORTHERN FINLAND

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## Abstract

In this article, I present sacred places in northern Finland. The sacred places differ greatly from those in southern Finland. This is due to the different cultural tradition. Sacred sites in the north can broadly be divided into three groups: terrain formation, natural objects and structures. I concentrate on offering places, called *sieidi* (SaaN), which were used by the ancestors of the modern Sámi. Meat, antlers and metal, and in later times alcohol, were offered in order to gain success at hunting. A prominent feature in *sieidi* places is their heterogeneity and the long tradition of use attached to them.

Key words: sacred landscape, *sieidi*, Sámi, northern Finland.

## Introduction

When it comes to types of sacred places, the northernmost part of Finland differs from the rest of the country. The area north of Kuusamo and Rovaniemi is defined by offering sites that were used by the ancestors of the modern Sámi people. There is a clear dominance in their northern distribution, but written records also refer to one offering site as far south as Hyrynsalmi (Itkonen 1946, p.36) (Fig. 1). These Sámi offering sites are called *sieidi*, and they consist of natural objects that are usually unshaped by humans. Offerings of meat, antlers and metal (Itkonen 1948, p.318), and in later times alcohol (Sköld 1999), were given to *sieidi* in order to obtain, for example, success at hunting. They worked as a medium to contact supernatural forces. The dating of *sieidi* sites is difficult, but there are finds from the Iron Age and Medieval times, and there is an oral tradition indicating their use even in the 20th century. I will return to the problem of dating at the end of this article.

Sámi sacred sites can broadly be divided into three classes. According to Christian Carpelan (2003, pp.77-78), these are terrain formations, 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 last mentioned are objects which have been modified by people. The *sieidi* offering sites usually consist of a rock or a rock formation.

The Sámi people have attracted interest for a long time. Texts from antiquity mention nations that were connected to the Sámi, such as ‘*fenni*’ (Tacitus 46.3), ‘*phinoi*’ (Ptolemaios II.11.19), ‘*skrithiphinoi*’ (Procopius vi.xv.16-25) and ‘*scirefennae*’ (Jordanes III.21-22).

But the ethnic content of these ethnonyms has also attracted criticism (Wallerström 2006; Hansen, Olsen 2007, pp.45-51; Ojala 2009, p.83). It is misleading to describe past ethnic groups in modern terms. And in the case of the forefathers of the Sámi people and texts from antiquity, the geographical distance between the writers and those described is also great. A more organised collection of information did not begin until the 17th century, when the Swedish Crown ordered priests and missionaries to write down their experiences from Lapland, in order to dispute the rumours of Swedes using Sámi witchcraft in their warfare (Rydving 1995, p.19). The work of priests was later continued by laplogists, who also described the culture from an outsider’s point of view (Lehtola 2000, p.157). In Finland, most of the ethnographic data derives from the writings of Paulaharju. Samuli Paulaharju (1875–1944) was a teacher who dedicated his spare time to collecting folklore. He has described *sieidi* offering places in many of his writings, but concentrated on them in his book *Seitoja ja seidan palvontaa* (‘*Sieidis and sieidi Worship*’).

In the early 20th century, Sámi religion and the use of *sieidi* offering sites was often approached from an evolutionistic and animistic perspective (Bäckman, Hultkrantz 1985, p.8). Later, most studies concentrated on identifying and grouping *sieidi* sites, and fitting together ethnographic observations and archaeological finds. Recent studies have aimed at a more holistic view, where offering sites have been studied as part of a wider world-view (Schanche 2000; Mulk 2005; Fossum 2006; Mulk 2009). Also, the connection of the Sámi religion to the environment and subsistence strategies has been stressed (Mulk 1998; Mebius 2003, pp.11-12).

## Offerings at *sieidi*

*Sieidi* offerings were strongly connected to the subsistence strategies of the Sámi. The main purpose of the offerings was to maintain or achieve success at hunting. Other reasons for the offerings were, for example, to help or cure illness, or help during pregnancy (Mebius 2003, p.141). Offerings could take place according to seasonal or yearly cycles, for example, in connection with the autumn slaughter. Other offerings were made during crises, like an epidemic among humans or animals. In some cases, offerings might have taken place as part of daily life in connection with meals,

or while passing a *sieidi* place (Mebius 2003, p.141; Rydving 1993, pp.104-107). Offerings could also take place among different groups. There were *sieidi* sites that were used by one person, a family or a *sijdda*, and some *sieidi* sites were visited from far distances (Rydving 1993, pp.104-107; Mulk, Bayliss-Smith 2006, pp.90-91).

Ethnographic evidence describes how different gods were given different animals. For example, *Sáráhkka*, the goddess related to childbirth, was given female reindeer (Mebius 2003, p.142). The colour of the animal played a role, too (Læstadius 2000 [1845], p.175).

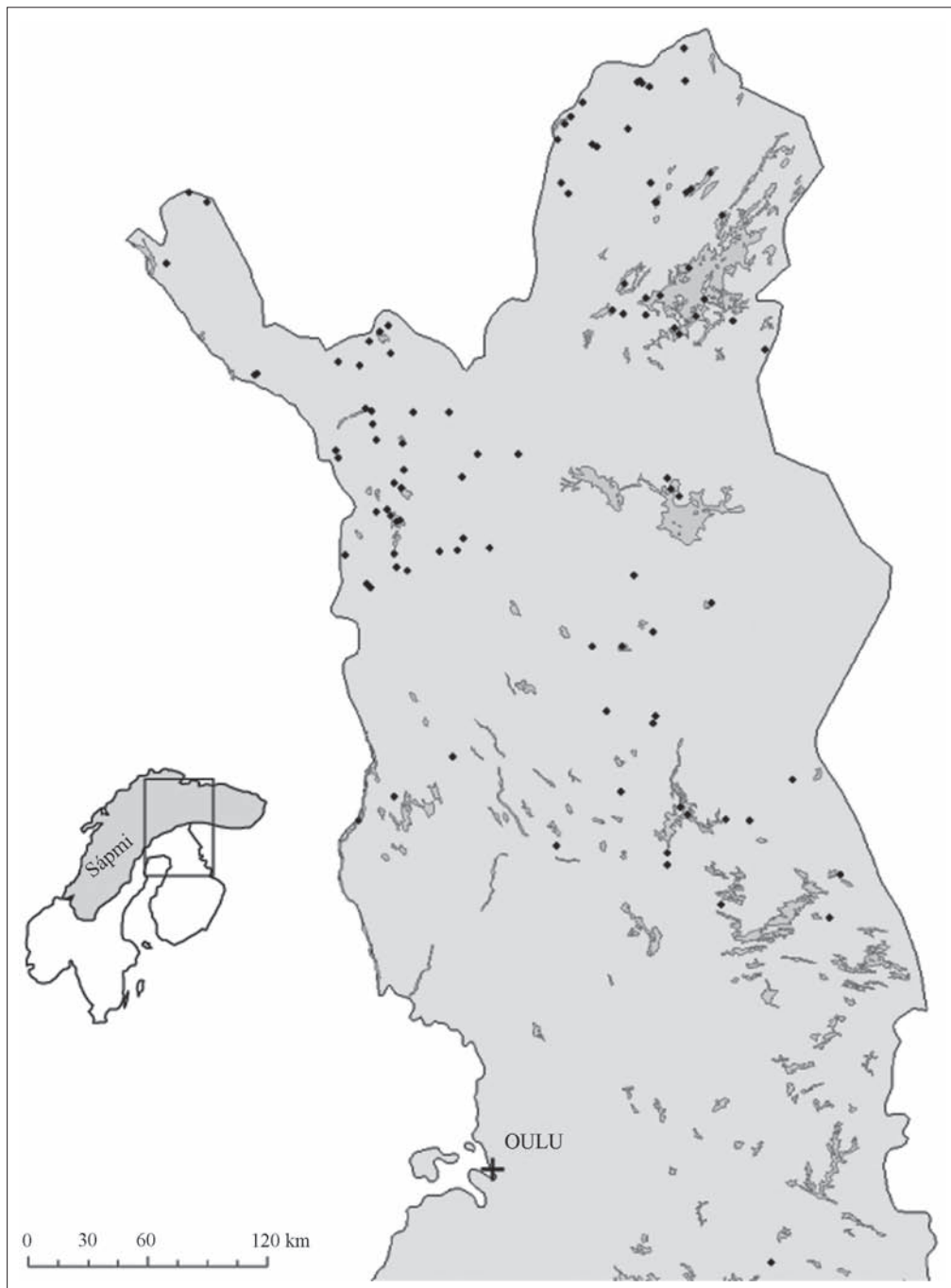


Fig. 1. The distribution of Sámi sacred sites in Finland (drawn by the author).

I  
NATURAL HOLY  
PLACES IN  
ARCHAEOLOGY  
AND  
FOLKLORE  
IN THE BALTIC  
SEA REGION

There were also beliefs concerning the treatment of bones. Written sources from the 17th century onwards emphasise that the bones of the sacrificial animal were not to be broken. But already at the beginning of the 18th century, there are sources telling how among the southern Sámis the meat of the sacrificial animal was eaten together with the marrow from the bones. Split bones have also been found in excavated material from Sweden dating from the 17th and 18th centuries (Högström 1980 [1746/1747], p.191; Zachrisson 1985, pp.87-88; Iregren 1985, p.105). Split bones are also found at *sieidi* sites in Finnish Lapland (Äikäs *et al.* 2009, p.118). Zachrisson (1985, p.94) has suggested that sources might describe what people should have done, not what they did. The careful handling of the bones was related to the thought of the new animal that was to be created from the bones by adding new meat to the skeleton (Mebius 2003, p.143).

The reciprocal relationship between a human and a *sieidi* has been emphasised. According to Audhild Schance (2004, p.5), offerings to *sieidi* should not be seen as sacrifices, but as the return of a gift or a request to take something from nature. If someone was not satisfied with the way the *sieidi* worked, it could be broken. However, the *sieidi* was believed to be able to avenge this kind of behaviour. Paulaharju (1932, pp.23-24) tells how a fisherman who was too proud to give the *sieidi* a share of his catch became blind and deaf for a long time.

### How to count *sieidi* sites

The number of *sieidi* sites is uncertain. Most of the information about Sámi offering sites was collected by outsiders, in many cases priests (Rydving 1993, p.29). At the same time, priests were seen as persecutors of

the old faith. We can assume that not all sites were revealed to them, and even some of those shown might have been false. Even nowadays, there are stories about local people who know sacred places but are not willing to talk about them.

As archaeologists, we can only work with sites of which some information has survived. For a site to be treated as a *sieidi*, I believe it has to possess at least two of the following characteristics: a place name indicating sacredness, an oral tradition, finds indicating offerings, or, in some cases, a connection to a Sámi dwelling site. There are just over a hundred *sieidi* sites of which the location is known with some certainty. In addition, there are dozens of sites which could not be located with sufficient accuracy. Most of the sites, both identified and unidentified, are situated in the Utsjoki (Ohcejohka), Inari (Anár) and Enontekiö (Eanodat) areas.

The number of different Sámi sacred sites is shown in Figure 2: *sieidi* stones are the main group. The number of sacred fells (this group includes both Finnish *vaara* and *tunturi*) is less than half that of *sieidi* stones, and the other groups are represented by five sites or fewer. There some types of sacred site that are represented by just one site. These include, for example, a brook (at Pasmárova Enontekiö) and a pool (Seitalampi Inari).

Nevertheless, the classification of sacred sites is far from simple. Just as it is hard to tell where a mountain starts, it is hard to define the borders of sacredness. In place names, the word sacred (*bassi/basse-*) often refers to a larger area, such as a fell, but also a *sieidi* could have given a name to a bigger landscape feature. According to Paulaharju (1932, p.8), the whole fell could become sacred if there was a place where offerings were made. Itkonen (Itkonen 1948, p.310) also states that the place where a *sieidi* was located was con-

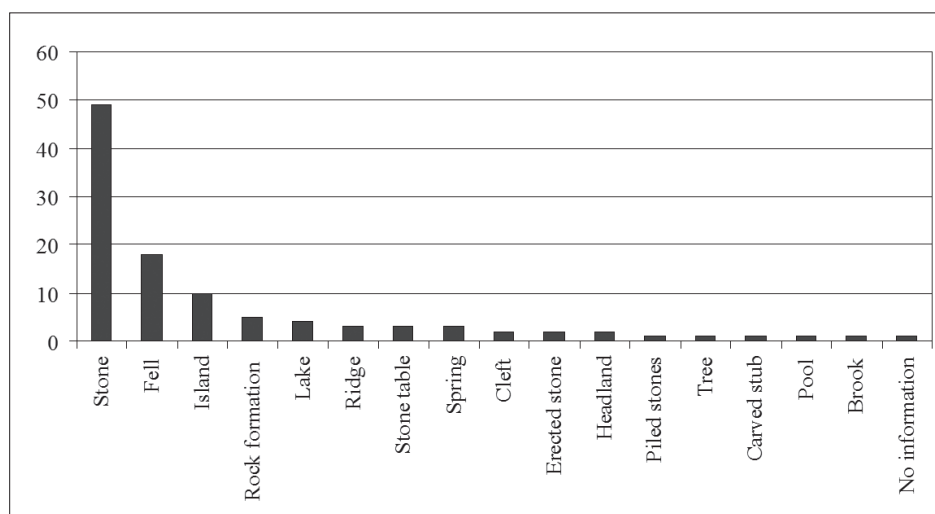


Fig. 2. The numbers of different sacred sites in northern Finland (table compiled by the author).

sidered sacred. Hence, the name of a natural feature, such as Seitasaari (*sieidi* ‘island’) or Seitajärvi (*sieidi* ‘lake’), could have referred to a *sieidi* in that place, instead of meaning that the whole island or lake was seen as a *sieidi*. M.A. Castrén (Castrén 1853, p.123; Manker 1957, p.83) says that the locus of a *sieidi* could have been held sacred even if the *sieidi* itself had been destroyed. On the other hand, not all sacred fells were places of offerings. The fell itself could be respected and considered sacred (Vorren 1987, pp.95-96). In some cases, we cannot separate whether a specific stone or the whole place where the stone is standing is sacred. The name of the island of Ukko (referring to a god) indicates the sacredness of the island (Plate I, Fig. 3). During excavations in the summer of 2007, the offering activities on the island could be located to a single place where a big stone was situated on a ridge (Harlin, Ojanlatva 2008) (Plate I, Fig. 4). This raises the question whether the whole island or just the stone was sacred. On the island of Ukonsaari (with a similar etymology), several offering clefts have been found on the southwest side of the island (Okkonen 2007, p.32). Here, it seems likely that the whole island was sacred (Plate I, Fig. 5). There are also offering stones on the tops of fells. There, a similar case could be made for the whole area being sacred, and not just a specific locus.

### The shaped and un-shaped sacred landscape

From stones, I will now turn to other natural sacred sites. *Sáiva* is a concept that is known across the whole Sámi area, but its meaning varies. In the west, *sáiva* is connected with certain fells or mountains; but, particularly in the traditions of Finnish and Swedish areas, *sáiva* referred to special lakes that had two bottoms. *Sáiva* lakes were inhabited by human and animal spirits that could act as protectors and could help in activities like fishing and hunting. *Sáiva* was also connected with the idea of the world of the dead. Folklore tells us that fishing from a *sáiva* lake required taking special measures. One should move carefully in the vicinity of the lake, take no women, and keep totally silent. The fish in a *sáiva* were considered to be exceptionally fleshy, big and healthy, but hard to catch because they could hide in the lower part of a double-bottomed lake. *Sáiva* lakes were regarded as sacred, and offerings were made on their shores (Læstadius 2002; Pentikäinen 1995, pp.146-147; Pulkkinen 2005, pp.374-375). There are also stones and rock formations that are located in the close vicinity of a *sáiva*.

There are only a few examples of sacred springs in northern Finland. One lies in Pello, on the west side of

Kotavaara hill. In the 1950s, a local informant could still say that the water of the spring ‘softened the eyes’ and was used for healing purposes (Korteniemi 1984, p.29).

Trees were also regarded as sacred. The only still-known sacred tree in northern Finland is a pine growing in an old market place at Enontekiö. Coin offerings were given to the tree (Paulaharju 1932, p.45). The pine, known as Uhriaihki, is still in its natural form, but there are also examples of modified trees and stubs. Carved trees were used for different functions, such as to mark borders, hunting or fishing places, ownership, or a place of death (Kotivuori 2003; Konkka 1999). There are also marked trees on top of some sacred ridges. Ämmänvaara in Kemijärvi was a sacred place called Bessousing. On the top of the hill there are pines with marks and dates carved on them (Appelgren 1881, p.53). A similar phenomenon has been noted on top of Saitavaara in Muonio, where an erected *sieidi* stone was surrounded by trees with cut marks indicating visits to the place from as far as two hundred kilometres away. These marks are not necessarily related to the ritual practices at these sites.

There are also carved stubs relating to a partially different tradition to Sámi offering practices. Hence, carved stubs are not counted among the Sámi sacred sites. These so-called fish pillars are mainly found in the Kemijärvi region, in the southern part of my study area. They are approximately one to 1.5 metres high, and carved from the top to resemble a knob. They are usually situated on the shores of lakes (Plate I, Fig. 6), and are part of an old tradition to remember a successful fishing expedition, or in some cases fowling or hunting. The tradition has been joined to the southern farming culture instead of Sámi traditions, but it might have its roots in old beliefs concerning success at hunting (Kotivuori 2003, p.26).

### Epilogue: The long tradition

Carved stubs might offer one example of the changing meanings attached to *sieidi*. There is reason to believe that *sieidi* sites are part of a long tradition of ritual activities. In Sweden, metal finds from offering sites date their use mainly to between 900 and 1300 AD; but there are also some finds that are substantially older. On the other hand, when the offering of metal ceases, offerings of bone and antler are still to be found from 1450 to 1650 AD (Mulk 2005; Fossum 2006, p.108). In Finland, the best-known example of an offering find comes from the previously mentioned Ukonsaari island. Sir Arthur Evand found a silver ornament from the 13th century while visiting the site. Excavations

have revealed bones dating from the 14th century and the beginning of the 17th century, and a Russian coin from the 17th century (Okkonen 2007). The oldest bone finds from *sieidi* sites in Finland date from the 13th century, and the most recent ones from the 17th century (Salmi *et al.*, 2011).

Even though bone finds from later centuries are not to be found, this does not mean that the offering practices ceased in the 17th century. Written sources mention people who still made offerings at the turn of the 20th century (Paulaharju 1932, p.45). Modern folklore suggests that a fisherman must bring alcohol to a *sieidi* in order to get a good catch (Erälehti). Tourists bring personal objects, coins, and in some cases candles. *Sieidi* sites can be visited by different groups, such as locals, nature tourists, neo-pagans, or cultural heritage enthusiasts (Äikäs, forthcoming). The tradition of making offerings to *sieidi* is still living, even though the meanings attached to the places have changed over the years.

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## NUO VIRŠUKALVIŲ PRIE STOVINČIŲ AKMENŲ – SAKRALINIAI ŠIAURĖS SUOMIJOS KRAŠTOVAIZDŽIAI

**Tiina Äikäs**

### Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje pristatomos Šiaurės Suomijos šventvietės. Dėl kultūrinių skirtumų jų tipai labai skiriasi nuo šventviečių, paplitusių Pietų Suomijoje.

Samių šventvietės yra skirstomos į tris dideles grupes, tai: įvairios reljefo formos (viršukalvės, uolos, salos, ežerai ir pusiasaliai-kyšuliai), gamtiniai objektai (akmenys, šaltiniai, nedideli urvai, uolų plyšiai) ir tam tikros struktūros (raižyti medžių kelmai, vertikalus akmenys, mediniai stulpai ir akmenų ratai). Pastarosios šventvietės buvo sukurtos žmonių pastangomis.

*Sieidi* yra labiausiai paplitusios samių šventvietės; tai paprastai uola ar tam tikras uolų darinys. Siekiant pasisekimo medžioklėje, sieidi nuo senų laikų buvo aukojama mėsa, ragai, metaliniai dirbiniai, vėlesniais laikais – alkoholis. Remiantis gyvūnų kaulais, rastais tyrinėjant šias šventvietes, aukojimo tradicija apima XI–XX a. laikotarpį.

Sieidi šventvietėse turistų paliekamos aukos rodo, kad tradicija iki šiol gyva, nors su ja susijusios reikšmės bėgant laikui jau pasikeitė.

Vertė Vykintas Vaitkevičius

### I

NATURAL HOLY  
PLACES IN  
ARCHAEOLOGY  
AND  
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