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# Sami *Sieidis* in a Nordic Context?

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**ABSTRACT** In the present article, the author discusses two Old Norse texts that may indicate that the Sami cult of *sieidis* had spread to the neighbouring Old Norse culture in the period before the Christianization of Norway. One of these texts is found in the Older Eidsifaving law, the law of the inland part of Eastern Norway. According to this law, it was prohibited to believe in (the power of) the *finnar* (Sami), and among their powerful objects, *rót* (the root of a tree) is mentioned. This root is in all likelihood a Sami *sieidi* that was sought out by Norwegians for help, probably for medical reasons. The other text is a notice in the Icelandic *Landnámabók* in which it is mentioned that a settler from Northern Norway worshipped some stones in the outfields on the border of his settlement, called *Gunnsteinar*. There are closer parallels to this outfields cult in Sami culture than in Old Norse culture.

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**KEYWORDS** Sami *sieidis*, *Gunnsteinar*, Eidsifaving law, *Landnámabók*, Sami cult, Old Norse cult

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Sami people are frequently mentioned in Old Norse sources, and it is obvious from these sources that they lived in close contact with their Scandinavian neighbours. It is therefore reasonable to think that the two peoples had rather a good knowledge of each other's cultures and religions, both before and after Christianization.

Since the Scandinavian and Sami peoples lived in close contact with each other, at least in parts of the Scandinavian Peninsula, we should expect that religious ideas were passed from one people to the other. We

are used to thinking of the Scandinavian culture as being the culture of the majority and the dominant culture, and ideas normally spread more easily from the dominant culture of the majority people to the culture of a minority people. We should, however, not forget that in some regions, especially in the North, the Sami may have been in the majority. Even in Southern Norway, in the mountainous districts and in the inland areas less densely populated by Norwegians, the two peoples may have been more equal in number than we usually think, and the passage of influences in both directions may have happened more easily than has previously been recognised.<sup>1</sup>

In the present article, I will discuss two Old Norse texts, one Norwegian and one Icelandic, which indicate that the Sami's Norwegian neighbours sought help at Sami *sieidis*, and argue that it is even possible that the cult of *sieidis* was borrowed into Old Norse culture.<sup>2</sup>

The first text is a decision in a Norwegian regional law, the older Eiðsifaþing law, which contains a prohibition on believing in the powers of *finnar*, the Old Norse word for the Sami. The Eiðsifaþing law was the law for the inland parts of Eastern Norway. We know from Old Norse sources that Sami people lived in at least the northern parts of this law district. Even in the law of the district south of the Eiðsifaþing, the Borgarþing law district around the Oslo fjord, there is a prohibition on contacting the Sami, in this case for the purpose of obtaining knowledge of the future (NGL I: 350–51, 362, 372). From these laws, we can conclude that Norwegians used to seek help from Sami people, and the text of the Eiðsifaþing law indicates that Norwegians sought out their Sami neighbours for help at their *sieidis*. In chapter 45, recension I, of the law (NGL I: 376) the wording is:

Engi maðr a at trua. a finna. eða forðæðor. eða a vit. eða blot. eða rot. eða þat. er til hæiðins siðar hoeyrir. eða leita ser þar bota.<sup>3</sup>

[‘No person should believe in [the power of] the Sami, or sorcery [‘forðæðor’ can also mean ‘sorcerer’], or in a drum, or sacrifice, or root, or in that which belongs to heathendom, or seek help there.’]<sup>4</sup>

The context of the prohibition on believing in the power of the Sami makes it reasonable to assume that the other things listed that no person should believe in are also connected to Sami culture. *Vit*, normalized *vitt* or *vett*, is used about any remedy used in sorcery, but in some contexts it is obvious that the word means ‘drum,’ and there is little doubt that the law refers to Sami drums. Seen in connection with Sami holy places, the most interesting word in this enumeration of things that people are forbidden to believe in is *rot*. The normalised form of the word is *rót*, and the meaning is ‘root [of a

tree].<sup>4</sup> There is little doubt that in this context we are talking about a Sami holy place of sacrifice, a *sieidi*.

As we know from later times, Sami *sieidis* were most often stones or rocks with an unusual and characteristic shape, but they could also be made from wood, either from a block or from a root. In the Older Eidsifaving law, the *sieidi* is made from the root of a tree, and since only a root, and not stone, is mentioned in the enumeration of things in which people were forbidden to believe, it is likely that the *sieidis* of the Sami people with whom the Norwegians in the Eidsifaving law district had contact were normally made from tree roots.

The prohibition on believing in the powers of the Sami and seeking help from them, which includes going to their holy places, tells us that such things actually happened. The *sieidis* were not places to which everyone had access; women, at least in later times, were not allowed to go to them, and this was most likely also the case in the Middle Ages. Since these places were so holy that Sami women were not allowed to go there, visits must have been prohibited for Norwegian women, too, but the law indicates that Sami men must have taken Norwegian men with them to their *sieidis*. This is not explicitly stated in the law, but the mention of a drum, sacrifice, and a tree root indicates a knowledge of Sami ceremonies which most likely was based on personal experience. The ritual at the *sieidi* must have been performed by Sami men, but it is most likely that Norwegians who had contacted the Sami for help were also present, and perhaps even assisted, at the ritual that was performed on their behalf.

The fact that Norwegians sought out the Sami for help, most likely medical help, and that the Sami allowed their Norwegian neighbours to accompany them to their holy places, indicates that the two peoples had close contact, were good neighbours and trusted each other.

The quotation above from the Older Eidsifaving law is from the Christian section of the law, which is the only part of this law preserved. No extant manuscript of the law is older than the fourteenth century, but many decisions in the law are likely to stem from the first few decades after Christianization, if not in form, then at least in content. The Church would of course have condemned all kinds of witchcraft and behaviour connected with heathendom. However, among ordinary people, so-called white witchcraft, which was used for healing and helping, was most likely judged more mildly than black witchcraft, and probably hardly as a sin. The contact between Norwegians and Sami described in the Older Eidsifaving law where the Norwegians sought their Sami neighbours' help, reveals a practice that most likely stretches far back in time and that was well established in pre-Christian times. The practice seems to have continued after Christianization, but then probably in secret.<sup>5</sup>

The quoted text from the Older Eidsifaving law documents the fact that Norwegians knew about the holy places of the Sami, that they had faith in what could be achieved by visiting such places, that they had most likely witnessed rituals performed at Sami holy places, and that they perhaps even assisted their Sami hosts when they performed rituals on their behalf. The next step in the development towards the inclusion of Sami cult in Nordic culture may have been that Norwegians borrowed the *sieidi* cult and took it up in their own culture. In the following, I will discuss the possible evidence in Old Norse sources for whether this development took place. There is especially one text that is of particular interest as possible evidence for the borrowing of the Sami *sieidi* into Old Norse culture, a notice about a settler from Northern Norway in the Icelandic *Landnámabók*, found in chapter 241 of *Sturlubók* and in *Hauksbók* in chapter 206. The text reads as follows:

Loðinn ǫngull hét maðr; hann var fœddr í Ongley á Hálogalandi. Hann fór fyrir ofríki Hákonar jarls Grjótgarðssonar til Íslands ok dó í hafi; en Eyvindr son hans nam Flateyjardal upp til Gunnsteina ok blótaði þá. (*Landnámabók* 1968:273)

[‘Loðinn ǫngull was a man called, he was born in Ongley in Hálogaland. He went to Iceland because of the tyranny of Earl Hákon Grjótgarðsson and died on the voyage. But his son, Eyvindr, took land in Flateyjardal up to the Gunnsteinar, and made sacrifices to them.’]

In his book, *Úr landnorðri. Samar og ystu rætur íslenskar menningar*, Hermann Pálsson lists the Icelandic settlers who are said to have come from Hálogaland, and he mentions this notice in *Landnámabók* as a possible example of Sami influence (Hermann Pálsson 1997: 81). He, however, sees this example of stone cult in *Landnámabók* in connection with a cult of spirits living in stones that is mentioned in other Old Norse texts. This cult resembles Sami cult to a lesser degree than the cult of the Gunnsteinar, and no doubt is a cult of a Nordic type. Nevertheless, the cult of the Gunnsteinar far out in the outfields on the border of Eyvindr’s settlement arouses the suspicion of Sami influence for Hermann Pálsson, and it is worth taking a closer look at this short notice in *Landnámabók*.

Holy mountains and the cult of stones and rocks are found in many cultures. Such cults sometimes, but not necessarily, involved mythological beings or spirits that people believed had their dwelling places in stones.<sup>6</sup> Cult connected to stones was common both in Sami and Old Norse religion, and there were no doubt similarities between the two, whether the similarities were purely coincidental, had a common origin perhaps far back in

time, or were the result of influence from one culture on the other. Thus, it is not always easy to decide whether a single description of a holy place in a medieval text, as for example the Gunnsteinar in *Landnámabók*, describes one that is Old Norse or a Sami, unless there is some context given or other distinguishing details present that can offer some help.

Sami holy places in the landscape could vary both in appearance and function. The type of holy place that the Gunnsteinar should be compared with are probably places consisting of stone boulders.<sup>7</sup>

The description of the Gunnsteinar is found in a medieval Icelandic text, which points to an Old Norse context, but we cannot be absolutely certain of this as Sami settlers are also mentioned in Old Norse sources. However, as regards the settler who sacrificed to the Gunnsteinar, nothing is said about his ethnicity, something which is very often commented on in Old Norse sources when a settler had a background other than the most common one, i.e. Norwegian. A settler of Sami origin would most likely have been seen as exotic and worth mentioning. Both the father and the son from Hálogaland bear common Norwegian names, Loðinn and Eyvindr. This is an indication that they were probably Norwegians. However, we cannot be sure of this, since Sami people in medieval sources often have the same names as their Scandinavian neighbours, at least as long as they were in a Scandinavian milieu. The stones were given a compound name, the first element of which is an Old Norse noun meaning ‘fight/battle;’ this is another detail that points to an Old Norse context. However, the detail in the description of the two men from Hálogaland that provides the clearest indication that they were Norwegian chieftains is that the men moved to Iceland because of the tyranny of Earl Hákon Grjótgarðsson. Conflicts between the king, or in this case an earl, and a Norwegian chieftain is a standard motif in saga literature, whereas conflicts between a king or earl and a Sami chieftain is not mentioned anywhere in the sagas.

However, even though we can conclude that the Gunnsteinar mentioned in *Landnámabók* are in all probability situated in an Old Norse context, and that the man who made sacrifices to them was a Norwegian settler, the possibility of influence from Sami culture can in no way be ruled out. If the cult of the Gunnsteinar does have Sami influence, it could be that it was only the type of cult place that was borrowed. However, it might also have been the “whole package,” i.e. both the type of place and the cult of Sami spirits. The text in *Landnámabók* gives a few indications as to what kind of place this was, but does not say anything directly about the type of powers worshipped there.

Even though we do not know much about the Gunnsteinar and the cult performed there, there are some details in the description of these stones

that seem to fit a Sami context as well, or even better, than an Old Norse context. These stones and their exact location are not known today, and therefore we do not have a clear picture of their size and shape. However, since they were given a specific name, it is likely that they were stones of some size and of a characteristic appearance. Another piece of information that may suggest that this is a cultic place of a Sami type is that it was located at a considerable distance from the farmhouses, on the border of the settlement, far out in the outfields. The fact that this detail, the cult of stones being located far from the farmhouses, is at all mentioned in *Landnámabók*, indicates that this is something out of the ordinary that people noticed and remembered. This is perhaps the best indication that this cult was not of an ordinary Old Norse type.

In Old Norse culture, the cult of gods and other powers was normally performed at a farm or in its close vicinity. Sacrifices could of course be performed anywhere when needed, for example on a journey, but the established places of worship were found where people lived. In the parallels to the Gunnsteinar mentioned by Hermann Pálsson (Hermann Pálsson 1997: 81) from *Kristni saga* and *Þorvalds þáttur viðförla* (which are variants of the same story) and from the young saga of Icelanders, *Harðar saga*, the stones are located close to the farmhouses. In the latter saga, the stone is even located inside a building (in a *blóthús*). The spirit living in the stone in *Kristni saga* and in *Þorvalds þáttur viðförla* is a *ármaðr*, a spirit of the *garðvörðr* type. This type of cult is closely connected to the farmstead and farming and is therefore, in my opinion, different in principle to the cult of the Gunnsteinar in the outfields.

However, even though cult of gods and other powers in Old Norse culture normally took place at a farm or in its vicinity, there were also powers that were worshipped in the outfields, at least occasionally. The *landvættir* (spirits of the land) were recipients of cult in Old Norse culture, and they seem to have been worshipped in many different locations. In the Newer Gulaping Christian law (NGL II: 308), it is stated that it is forbidden to believe in the *landvættir*, and that they can be found in groves,<sup>8</sup> mounds and waterfalls. In *Ólafssaga Tryggvasonar*, chapter 33 (*Heimskringla* 1911: 127–128), all mountains and hills in Iceland are said to be inhabited by the *landvættir*. A story in *Landnámabók*, chapter 329 in Sturlubók and 284 in *Hauksbók*, also seems to indicate that they lived in mountains since they are connected to a *bergþúi* (person living in a mountain). In a sermon in *Hauksbók*, it is told that some women took food to heaps of stones and caves and sacrificed it to the *landvættir* (*Hauksbók* 1892–1896: 167). Since the *landvættir* were everywhere, and according to *Hauksbók* could be worshipped at locations such as caves and heaps of stones, which were most likely not located

in the vicinity of a farm, it is not unthinkable that the powers worshipped at the Gunnsteinar were *landvættir*. According to the sermon in *Hauksbók*, the cult of the *landvættir* was performed by women, and the sources seem to suggest that the cult of so-called lower deities was often a female cult.<sup>9</sup> However, it is reasonable to assume that such cults could be carried out by both genders, and it is therefore still possible that the settler who worshipped the Gunnsteinar performed sacrifices to the *landvættir*, which were powers of an Old Norse type. The name of the stones, Gunnsteinar, the first element of which means 'fight/battle,' might indicate that people believed that the spirits living there protected the land, and the fact that the stones were situated at the border of the man's settlement is a detail pointing in the same direction. Protection of the land is a task typically associated with the *landvættir*.

While it is impossible to say whether the powers worshipped at the Gunnsteinar were of a Nordic type, a Sami type, or both, the sacrificial place itself points in the direction of Sami culture. The Gunnsteinar do not correspond fully to other places of worship known in Old Norse culture. Heaps of stones (*reysar*), the cultic place of the *landvættir* mentioned in *Hauksbók*, and the Gunnsteinar are similar in so far as they are made of stones. A *reys* could be man-made, but the *reysar* mentioned in the *Hauksbók* text are most likely natural formations, as are the Gunnsteinar. There are, however, considerable differences between heaps of stones (*reysar*) and stones of a considerable size and with a characteristic appearance such as the Gunnsteinar must have had, as they were even given a name. The *reysar*, on which stupid women, according to *Hauksbók*, made sacrifices to the *landvættir*, were probably just any heap of stones, while the Gunnsteinar was a permanent place for worship, a holy place in the outfields.

It is impossible to draw firm conclusions about the cult of the Gunnsteinar, but in my opinion this cult, or rather the place of cult, most likely points to a Sami influence on Old Norse cult and religion. The fact that these stones were situated in the outfields, that they in all likelihood were big stones easily visible in the landscape, that they were given a special name, and that the cult of these stones seems to have been regarded as something extraordinary as it is mentioned in *Landnámanók*, are all factors that point in this direction. The Norwegian men from Hálogaland, Lóðinn and Eyvindr, may have belonged to a milieu that was influenced by Sami culture, and may have made sacrifices at holy places of the Sami type and taken this cult with them to Iceland.

There are not many written sources that can give us information about Norwegian-Sami cultural relations in pre-Christian times, and those available are not especially good. But perhaps the short notice about the Gunn-

steinar worshipped in Iceland by a settler from Northern Norway indicates that in areas where Norwegians and Sami lived in close contact, Sami cult had spread among their Norwegian neighbours, and perhaps even a kind of mixed Norwegian-Sami culture developed in such areas.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A good overview of research up to the 1980s on Scandinavian-Sami religious connections is found in Håkan Rydving's article "Scandinavian-Saami religious connections in the history of research" (Rydving 1990). See also Hans Mebius 2003: 64–69 with references. Both before and after these publications, the focus has usually been on influences from Scandinavian religion on Sami religion, but in the last few decades, the possibility that influences and loans went both ways has been emphasized by many scholars. For comments on the present situation, see Rydving's book *Tracing Sami Traditions* (2010), Part I.
- <sup>2</sup> The term *sieidi* is a North Sami word. In the present article, this term is used for holy sacrificial places both in North Sami and South Sami culture.
- <sup>3</sup> There is a parallel text in chapter 34, recension II. This text is less detailed, but *rot* (normalized *rót*) is also mentioned in this text.
- <sup>4</sup> The translations from Old Norse, both here and later, are my own.
- <sup>5</sup> It has often been taken for granted that the Sami mentioned in the Older Eidsifaping law were heathens. That is something of which we cannot be sure. There are prohibitions against witchcraft and heathen practices amongst Norwegians in all Norwegian laws from the Middle Ages. Such practices do not characterise Norwegians as heathens, only as "bad" Christians. This may also be the case when Sami people performed ceremonies that were forbidden by the Church. As I have argued previously, the general picture presented in Scandinavian text books and history books, namely that the Sami were Christianized after the Reformation, is wrong; at best this is an extreme simplification of the situation (Mundal 2006 and 2007). Judging from medieval sources, it seems that the Christianization of the Sami people started more or less at the same time as the Christianization of their Scandinavian neighbours, but it was a long process that continued throughout the Middle Ages, and in the northernmost areas it was still going on around the time of the Reformation. The Christianization of the Sami in the Middle Ages did not, however, root out their previous indigenous religion. The two religions seem to have existed as parallel cultures in the Sami societies the whole time up to the so-called Christianization of the Sami in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This parallel culture in Sami societies probably had its beginnings in the custom—one also widespread amongst their Scandinavian neighbours in the early period of Christianization—of going through *prima signatio*, the preliminary baptismal instruction, in order to be able to have contact with Christians whilst simultaneously continuing to practise their own religion. Among the Sami, this seems to have become a more or less permanent situation which lasted for centuries, also after baptism, probably due to the fact that the Christianization of the Sami in the Middle Ages was not a Christianization by the sword but a process that was carried out rather gently both by King and Church. The heathen practises of the Sami were of course not approved of, but they seem to have been tolerated, at least as long as they took place in the Sami's own milieu on the outskirts of the Christian Scandinavian societies and the Sami behaved like good Christians when they mingled with their Scandinavian neighbours. This means that the

description in the Older Eidsfåping law of Norwegians seeking the Sami for medical help, most likely describes a practice that had gone on for centuries, and that Christianization—amongst both peoples—did not change this practice much.

- <sup>6</sup> In Old Norse culture it was a common belief that mythological beings or spirits lived in stones, which were, for example, the dwelling places of dwarfs. However, as far as we know, dwarfs were not recipients of cult.
- <sup>7</sup> An overview of different types of Sami holy places, including stone boulders, are found in Ørnulf Vorren's article "Sacrificial sites, types and function" (1987). See also Håkan Rydving's book *Tracing Sami Traditions* (2010), especially Part II, chapter 2, and Part III, Chapter 8. In Old Norse religion, the *hørgar* (sg. *høgr*) were important places of sacrifice. These seem to have been heaps of stones or stone altars located outdoors, but they could also be buildings. Since we do not have exact knowledge about the shape of the *høgr*, it is difficult to say how different from, or how similar to, Sami holy places these Old Norse sacrificial sites were. However, one fundamental difference was that the Sami holy places out in the landscape were forbidden areas for women, while the Old Norse *hørgar* seem to have been places for female cult.
- <sup>8</sup> Some manuscripts have instead of "in groves" (*i lundum*) "in lands" (*i lǫndum*).
- <sup>9</sup> Another example of women performing a *blót* to "lower deities" (in this case *álfablót*) is found in Sigvatr skáld's *Austfararvisur*, stanza 4–5 (Finnur Jónsson [ed.] 1912–1915, BI: 221). When the skáld and his followers arrived at a farm in Värmland, they were met by a woman who would not let them in because they were celebrating *álfablót* at the farm. From stanza 4, we can see that both men and women were present (the form *þau* denotes a plural consisting of both men and women), but the women seem to have been in charge.

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