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## THE IMPACT OF MATERIALITY ON SÁMI BURIAL CUSTOMS AND RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS

### Abstract

The belief in cognitive processes has for a long time been an unquestionable *a priori* in the investigation of Sámi religion. The role played by materiality, however, have to a large extent been ignored, and at best judged as mere side effects of cognition. An examination of Sámi Christian cemeteries demonstrates that a number of pre-Christian features were present long after Christianity became the main religion. Sámi burial sites reveal an unknown part of conversion, indicating that materiality may work as a silent and incorporated 'actor' of its own. Given this condition, human dependence on and affection for materiality may be significantly more important for processes and practices in a society than generally conceived. The archaeological evidence of the Christianization of the Sámi strongly indicates a different story than hitherto presented of the process in question.

Keywords: Sámi graves, Sámi religion, Christianization, burial customs, landscape, materiality

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### INTRODUCTION

In the late 1950s, the Swedish ethnographer Ernst Manker investigated a Sámi summer grave at Mörttjärn in the forests of Swedish Lapland (Manker 1961). Summer graves are temporary graves of reindeer nomads established during summer season. The deceased were later carried to churchyards during the winter and buried there.<sup>1</sup> The summer grave in question consisted of a pit in the ground and had according to the local tradition once contained the corpse of an infant who had later been taken to the churchyard and buried there. In the vicinity of the grave is a pine tree, upon which a memorial carving was engraved (Manker 1961: 144–5; cf. Hedman 2006). The carved figures seem to have been made by the father, and were engraved with the departed's initials, year of death (1864), two reindeer, and at the top, two crosses on each side of a ring-shaped symbol (Fig. 1). Manker noted the resemblance between these figures and those on Sámi shaman drums, and how the ring-shaped symbol mirrored the symbol of the sun, an element of vital importance in the pre-Christian Sámi universe.

Also central in the Sámi universe are reindeer, which are always depicted on the shaman drums. As well as being one of the shaman's helpers in making journeys to the beyond, reindeer were sacrificed as part of mortuary practices in both pre-Christian and Christian times (cf. Itkonen 1946; O. Pettersson 1957; Manker 1961; Mebius 1968; Storå 1971; Schanche 2000; Zachrisson 2009; Svestad 2010).

The grave in question dates at least 100 years later than the supposed end of the Sámi religion around 1750 (see e.g. Rydving 1995a). In general, archaeological assessments of surviving Sámi Christian graves suggest that a vibrant pre-Christian religious practice may have continued long after the traditionally dated conversion, although the picture is not clear (Svestad 2007; 2010). Nevertheless, Manker makes a convincing argument in his comparisons of the carved figures found in the grave and those on shaman drums. He also notes another interesting feature: two wooden sticks which had been put in the tree for the suspension of containers during reindeer milking – a common feature within Sámi reindeer herding (Manker 1961: 144; cf. Hedman 2006).

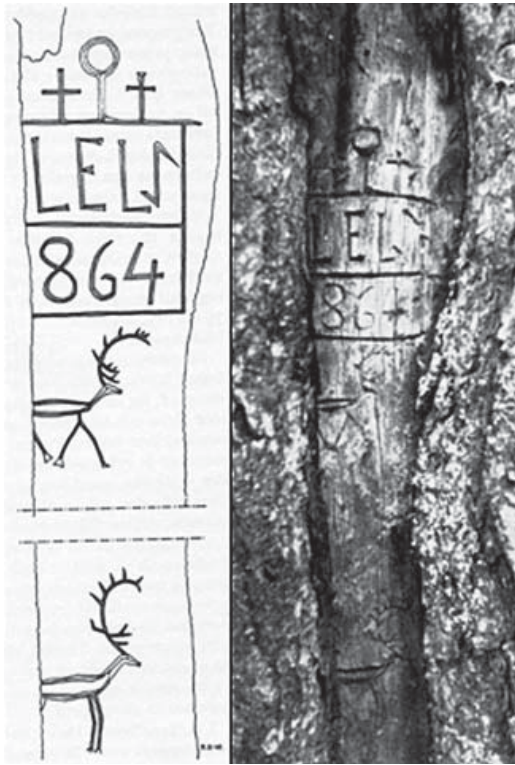


Fig. 1. The carved figures at Mörtjärn, Lomträsk, municipality of Arvidsjaur, Norrland, northern Sweden (drawing and photo after Manker 1961).

The wooden sticks in question may signify, in a subtle way, an association between the living and the dead. In the pre-Christian Sámi universe there was no clear division between the living and the dead. According to this way of thinking, the dead could be useful in the everyday activities of the living, such as those related to reindeer.

The grave at Mörtjärn is a prime example of the complexity of the Sámi conversion to Christianity. Through all its materiality, the emptied grave, the landscape in which it is found, the tree, the carved figures containing both pre-Christian and Christian symbols, and the wooden sticks, pre-Christian religious conceptions and practices still seem to have been kept alive in one way or another. Recent research also demonstrates that practices of Sámi pre-Christian religion such as offerings at sanctuaries did not end by 1750, but existed side by side with Christian religion even into the 20th century (Fossum 2006: 108; Mulk 2009: 130; Zachrisson 2009; Äikäs et al. 2009; see also Kjellström 1987). Hence, maintaining

the concept of a Sámi pre-Christian religion does not seem adequate describing the process in question.<sup>2</sup>

This opposes scholarly opinion as presented within history of religion; there, the discussion often becomes narrow and inadequate when addressing questions of material culture. To quote the most influential scholar in recent historical studies of Sámi religion, Håkan Rydving, from his highly acclaimed *The End of Drum-Time*: ‘... among the three most important interethnic markers that distinguished Saami from non-Saami, *only language and dress remained when religion no longer functioned ...*’ (Rydving 1995a: 161, my italics; cf. Mebius 1968: 35). Rydving’s conclusion is primarily based on an investigation of Christianization among the Lule Sámi in northern Sweden, but the statement still demonstrates a limited view of the material culture of the Sámi. Consider the things and materiality belonging to everyday practices, such as the *lavvu* (Sámi tent), *àrran* (the Sámi fireplace), reindeer sledges, reindeer ownership marks, different knives, Sámi *duodji* (Sámi arts and crafts), not to speak of the sacred mountains, sacred rocks, sacred lakes, sacred forests, and sacred trees – just parts of the vast materiality, much of which is still in use.<sup>3</sup>

The problematic called to attention here, often present in historical analysis of Sámi religion, represents a general neglect and ignorance of archaeology, archaeological remains and materiality. For instance, when dealing with different source categories on Sámi religion, Rydving (1995a) differentiates between verbal and non-verbal primary and secondary sources. Illustrative of my argument is that very little space is given to non-verbal primary ethnographic and archaeological sources, only half a page on Sámi shaman drums, and five lines on sacred places, human graves, and bear graves – just parts of the relevant archaeological material (cf. also Rydving 2010). However, as Rydving (1995a: 31) notes – in accordance with the late ethnographer Ørnulf Vorren – sacrificial places have been used to a very small extent by historians of religion (cf. Mebius 2007). The general neglect (or ignorance) of archaeology and archaeological sources in particular, is even more present in the following statements: ‘Nearly nothing is known of Sámi religion before the encounter with Christianity ...’ (Rydving 1995a: 18), and in a later work: ‘There is almost no knowledge about Saami culture and history among the non-

Saami majority of the Nordic countries. In the schools, very little – if anything – is taught. And the same is true for the universities’ (Rydving 2004: 100). These statements are mostly true concerning schools and knowledge in general, especially in southern part of Fennoscandia, but may be conceived as quite ignorant compared to research and teaching on Sámi archaeology, history, culture, and language at the universities of for instance Tromsø, Umeå, Oulu, Oslo – in some cases for several decades.

As will be demonstrated in this article, the impact of archaeology and materiality on the study of Sámi religion and societies is highlighted through analysis of Sámi burial customs and how they are embedded in the sacred landscape. The sacredness of the Sámi landscape seems to have been a crucial prerequisite, epitomizing the Latourian ontology or concept of *nature-culture*. Bruno Latour argues that since the time of Descartes there has been an asymmetrical condition reigning in our so-called modern societies (Latour 1993: 7–15; 1999: 8–9; 2005). The material world has been silenced as either a passive reflex of cognitive processes, leaving everything to culture, or a *Ding-an-sich*, leaving everything to nature. Latour desires to change the ‘regime’ in a more symmetric way, recognizing things and nature as an *active other* of our being in the world (for a somewhat similar view, see discussion on ‘animism’ and relational epistemology, Bird-David 1999).

The investigation of Sámi religion and the effects of Christian conversion (mainly carried out within the history of religion) have quite unambiguously (and asymmetrically) been conceived with regard to cognitive processes. The material world or materiality has been judged as a mere sideshow or epiphenomenal to the religious interplay of ideas and conceptions and not ascribed any impact of its own on the process in question. As will be argued, this is fallacious when analyzing the relationship between Sámi burials and sacred landscape where materiality seems to play an active part. Thus, the impact of materiality adds a new dimension to understanding the (functional) dynamics of Sámi religion.

Several scholars have emphasized the lack of consideration of variations in Sámi history, ethnicity, culture and religion (Pentikäinen 1973; Rydving 1995a: 19–23; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 355–8; Olsen 2004; 2007). As a consequence, scholarly characterizations and presentations

have often been too idealized and generalizations about Sámi culture as a whole have been based on region-specific material. According to available archaeological, oral and written sources they provide reasons to be cautious of maintaining the idea of Sámi unity in time and space. This has to be taken into consideration when viewing Sámi religion, including this article, which for practical purposes is a rather general presentation.

## THE SÁMI RELIGION AND ITS RELATION TO LANDSCAPE

Evidence concerning the Sámi religion and its religious practices have survived from written accounts recorded by missionaries and priests who sought to convert the Sámi during 17th and 18th centuries. The accuracy of these accounts has been criticized for several reasons (see e.g. Mebius 1968: 37–8; Storå 1971: 188, 194; Pentikäinen 1973: 135–6; Bäckman 1975: 37–8; Rydving 1995a: 31–4; 1995b; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 338–9). First and foremost, the validity of these documents is clouded by the subjectivity of the individuals who wrote about the Sámi religion, as these compilers were missionaries and priests who attempted to convert the Sámi. Secondly, the documents only describe certain areas and then generalize to the whole of the Sámi area. Moreover, many missionaries also copied the ideas and perceptions of their contemporaries, creating (in written form) the idea of a homogenous religion, which seems not to have been the case. Furthermore, the accounts were recorded many years after the Sámi religion ceased to exist in its ‘original’ form. Finally, these sources do not even qualify as primary sources.

There seems to be scholarly agreement that, despite regional variation, Sámi religion has a common structure (Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1985: 9; Rydving 1995a: 22; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 315–8). There are also certain characteristics and similarities between the Sámi and other peoples of the northern areas of the Eurasian continent and their religious practices and conceptions, such as shamanism, the departed and the world of the dead, sacrifices, the bear cult, hunting rituals, etc. Thus, comparisons have been of crucial importance for the comprehension of Sámi religion (Holmberg 1987 [1915]; Karsten 1952; O. Pettersson 1957; 1987: 70; Mebius 1968; Storå 1971: 186–93; Bäckman 1975: 147–50; Bäckman

& Hultkrantz 1985: 62–89). The Sámi religion has traditionally been viewed as more mythology than a religion, having been compared with Norse mythology (e.g. Fritzner 1877; Reuterskiöld 1912; Wiklund 1916). Norse mythology obviously influenced Sámi religion, but the influence was probably more mutual than one-sided, a view that has been asserted by recent scholarship (Mundal 2000; Price 2002: 233–9; Solli 2002: 169–97; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 62–3; Steinsland 2005: 24–6; cf. also Kusmenko 2004).

According to current scholarly opinion, Sámi religion could be characterized as a religion of practice and nature worship with shamanistic elements (Hansen & Olsen 2004: 315–6; cf. Mebius 2007: 11–8; Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1985: 9; Pentikäinen 1985; 1997: 324–6; Rydving 1995a: 19–23). Furthermore, Sámi religion lacked a fixed liturgy, ‘scripture’, and priesthood. Instead, its rituals were exercised through actions, myths, narratives, and material utterances. The Sámi shaman – *noaidi* – possessed an important position as an executor of rituals and a mediator between worlds, but did not monopolize rituals and sacrifices. It was a dynamic religion that was open to individual interpretations, sometimes including the adoption of customs and rituals from other religions, namely Norse mythology, pre-Christian Finno-Ugric religions, and Christianity. Crucifixes and other Christian symbols found in pre-Christian Sámi graves are prime examples of this (cf. Schanche 2000; Hansen & Olsen 2004). Material surroundings and mythical landscape were also an important part of Sámi religion (Mulk 1995: 17–20; 2009; Schanche 1995: 43; Rydving 1995a: 96–103; Pentikäinen 1997: 102–4; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 224–25; cf. Mebius 1968; 2007).

With the exception of some ethnographic and archaeological studies, scant attention has been paid to the physical realm and its significance in Sámi religion (see e.g. Qvigstad 1926; Itkonen 1946; Manker 1957; Vorren 1985; 1987; Vorren & Eriksen 1993; Äikäs 2009). The Sámi universe was, according to extant sources, divided into three spheres: the world of divinity, which lay above the second sphere, the terrestrial or earthly world of the living, which in turn lay above the world of the dead. It is questionable whether this cosmology represents a reliable record of Sámi perceptions. This may have been a projection of the missionaries’ own ‘Christian’ ideology (Han-

sen & Olsen 2004: 340). Nevertheless, a tripartite universe is presented on some shaman drums, which have generally been viewed as a microcosm of the Sámi universe. This idea of the universe helped to form a very specific attitude towards the physical reality, one in which the landscape was made alive by a vast number of forces and powers, as well as the spirits of ancestors. In this way, the surroundings constituted a sacred space where relations to gods, powers, and ancestors were maintained. This seems to have created a major problem for the missionaries during Christianization of the Sámi, even with regard to those who had abandoned their indigenous religion (Rydving 1995a: 142). The religious engagement with this landscape was carried out both through collective and individual religious rituals and practices. Thus, there were individual or family based sacrificial places as well as communal sacrificial places (Rydving 1995a: 96–103; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 316; for overviews, see Qvigstad 1926; Manker 1957; Vorren & Eriksen 1993).

The material remnants of Sámi religion are of crucial importance. The sacred places and sanctuaries, referred to as *sieidi* in Sámi, are scattered throughout the landscape, in the form of holy mountains and forests, and rock or wooden idols. In some cases *sieidi* only refers to wooden or stone objects. These sanctuaries are characterized by their distinctiveness in the surrounding environment, either being naturally formed (such as anthropomorphic or zoomorphic stones and rocks, a white quartz rock, a cracked boulder, a distinctive mountain, a large tree), or partially man-made, for example, wooden idols. Furthermore, the sanctuaries and idols not only seem to represent a god, a power, or a spirit, but their factual (material) presence seems to be a statement in itself – a material manifestation of the being of that entity.

## CHRISTIANIZATION OF THE SÁMI – A SHORT REVIEW

Extant written sources suggest there were some attempts to convert the Sámi during the Middle Ages, although there is no clear indication that this had any overall significance. Archaeological evidence does, however, indicate that some Sámi in western Finnmark incorporated aspects of Christian burial customs during the later Middle Ages (Svestad 2006: 13–6). But it is more correct



to view the period of conversion of the Sámi from ca. 1550 to ca. 1750 (cf. Helland 1906: 319; Reuterskiöld 1912: 4; Holmberg 1987 [1915]: 13–6; Steen 1954: 10–1; O. Pettersson 1957: 12–7; Mebius 1968: 9–14; Storå 1971: 142, 281; Bäckman 1975: 138; Bäckman & Hultkrantz 1978: 36–9; Widén 1980: 263–4; Niemi 1994: 309–10; Rydving 1995a: 167; Pentikäinen 1998: 20–21; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 318–37). There are, however, chronological differences with regard to the conversion of the Eastern Sámi and Western Sámi. The Eastern Sámi in Norway, Finland, and Russia (i.e. the Skolts, Kemi Sámi, Kola Sámi etc.) are perceived (more or less) as one unit according to common features, as is the case for grouping of the Western Sámi in Norway, Sweden, and Finland (i.e. Northern Sámi, Lule Sámi, Pite Sámi, Ume Sámi, and Southern Sámi). Both terms serve practical purposes in this context, but disguise significant differences within the two groups (cf. Tegengren 1952; Storå 1971; Niemi 1994).

The Eastern Sámi were converted by Russian-Orthodox missionaries or monks from around 1550. These missionaries had a conciliatory attitude towards the religious customs and practices of the Eastern Sámi, as a result of resemblances with their own symbolic, ritualized, and patriarchal form of Christianity (Storå 1971: 382–3; Olsen 1984: 239–40; Berg 2001: 108–9; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 184; cf. Charuzin 1922; Hallström 1922; Itkonen 1946). The Eastern Sámi were able to maintain their religious customs and practices to a large extent, as may be observed, for instance, in churchyards still in use (Sevetijärvi, municipal of Inari, northern Finland). This eastern conversion was a strong contrast to the overall aggressive conversion of the Western Sámi, which took place between 1650 and 1750. The Lutheran missionaries and priests who led these conversions partly suppressed the ‘pre-Christian’ rituals and religious practices. Among several tactics, Lutheran missionaries tried to dupe or threaten the Sámi to reveal information about their sacrificial places and hidden shaman drums in order to confiscate or destroy them. However, the western conversion had its nuances. In some occasions Sámi even destroyed *sieidi* sites themselves and some priests were also tolerant towards Sámi religion, especially in the 18th century. (Mebius 1968: 36; cf. Rydving 1995a; Hansen & Olsen 2004)

## PRE-CHRISTIAN SÁMI BURIALS AND THE QUALITY OF LANDSCAPE

Pre-Christian Sámi burials have been thoroughly investigated only in parts of northern Fennoscandia (Manker 1961; Schanche 2000). They are primarily associated with the so-called *talus* or *scree graves* (urgraver), which date from 900 BC to AD 1700/1800 (Schanche 2000). Their origins are associated with the emergence of Sámi ethnicity in the 1st millennium BC (Schanche 2000: 315–17; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 116–22; cf. Olsen 1984). The earliest of these graves, most dated prior to 900 BC, are located in the Varanger area of Finnmark in northern Norway (Schanche 2000: 188–9). As indicated by their name, they appear in talus or scree deposits as constructed chambers covered with stone slabs, but also as stone piles or cairns, or in cavities and underneath boulders without any constructed grave.

There is, however, a significant variation with reference to placement on or in the ground and other construction details, some of which is mentioned in the written sources. Some archaeological parallels to the documentary descriptions have been recorded on the Kola Peninsula and in northern Finland (Leppäaho 1937; Gurina (Gourina) 1956; 1997; Kopisto 1971; Ruohonen 2002; 2005; Shumkin et al. 2006) indicating a larger distribution area of pre-Christian Sámi graves as well as a greater variation in form, particularly in areas bordering other cultures in south and east (Zachrisson 1997; Bergstøl 1997; 2008a; 2008b; Taavitsainen 2003).

Additional variation or even hybrids can be seen in areas bordering the Norse or ‘Germanized’ settlements along the coast of northern Norway (Simonsen 1959; Sjøvold 1962; 1974; Binns 1988; Bruun 2007; Svestad 2007). Given this geographical distribution and form variation, the fixed category and the very name of the ‘talus grave’ may be seen as a constraint in our understanding of the pre-Christian Sámi burials (cf. Svestad 2007).

One significant feature of many pre-Christian Sámi graves and cemeteries is the presence of sacrificial places and sanctuaries at the site or in its proximity. One famous and well-known example is the cemetery at Mortensnes or *Ceavccegeadge* (The Greasy Stone) in Varanger Fjord, where graves, a sacrificial enclosure, and the sacred Bear Stone are present almost on the same spot



Fig. 2. A sacrificial enclosure (to the right) at the pre-Christian cemetery at Mortensnes/Ceavccegeadge, Varanger, Finnmark, northern Norway. The famous sacred Bear Stone is in the background (the outcrop, upper left). Photograph by A. Svestad 2006.

(Fig. 2). Proximity to water (by a river or on an island) was particularly important for the placing of a cemetery in Eastern Sámi areas (Storå 1971: 197; Luk'jančenko 1985: 202–3). This characteristic is probably related to the belief that a burning river named *Tolljohk* separated the living from the dead.<sup>4</sup> According to the ethnologist Nils Storå (1971) the Eastern Sámi believed that in order to reach 'the heavenly paradise' the dead person had to cross *Tolljohk* on a narrow bridge from which many fell into the river. They could be saved by *Pedar* and his wide meshed net, but that depended on making the sign of the cross correctly. Those who succeeded could enter the kingdom of the dead on the other side of the river. Those who did not, fell through the net and remained in the river forever. Storå notes that 'the mention of a heavenly paradise seems to suggest that the Skolt [Eastern Sámi] ideas of a realm of the dead situated on the other side of a river have been mixed up with Christian concepts' (Storå 1971: 197). Similar characteristics are shared with pre-Christian Karelians and other peoples. Water was a manifestation of the border

between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

There is a striking coherence between different kinds of pre-Christian Sámi graves and the quality of landscape or surrounding environment. Graves literally seem to reflect 'the nature at hand' or the individual and in contemporary terms naturally formed characteristics of the environment. These characteristics may 'randomly' have had a formative influence on rituals, practices, and religious beliefs – regionally as well as locally – as it did for the location and construction of burials and sacred places. Hence, I want to call attention to how landscape or nature and humans bring each other in to being through practices; as mutually constitutive – as nature-culture. Sámi place names, as well as the evidence from extant written sources, support this argument. One example is the meanings of the *Sáiva-* or *Saivo-*concept and its phonetic and semantic variants. In Northern Sámi areas *Saivo* may relate to a sacred lake with no inlet or outlet and a double floor, and occasionally to the dwelling place of the goddess *Saivo Nieida*, who is referred to as 'Vandkvinden'

(‘Water Woman’) in the extant written sources (Holmberg 1987 [1915]: 26; Wiklund 1916: 64; cf. Bäckman 1975: 14). In Southern Sámi areas *Sáiva* (or *Sájva*) may relate to a sacrificial place, or a ‘department’ (or ‘segment’) of the world of the dead linked to particular mountains where the departed or little people dwells (Holmberg 1987 [1915]: 25–7; Wiklund 1916; Manker 1961: 22; Bäckman 1975: 13–7).

A similar variation of meanings is also found in the written sources; although not to the same extent since their authors (missionaries and priests) often copied each other (Bäckman 1975: 56–65). However, the variation or multitude of meanings may be conceived as influenced by a formative dynamic corresponding to that of the pre-Christian Sámi graves. Another related example is the presence of different designations of the realm of the dead in the written sources, such as *Jábmíáibmu*, *Mubbenáibmu*, *Rotuáibmu*, *Fudnosáibmu*, *Kjapsáibmo*, *Sarokkaáibmu*, and *Sáivaáibmu* (O. Pettersson 1957: 131; Storå 1971: 195).<sup>5</sup> These differences may represent various ‘departments’ of the realm of the dead, and may have been partly influenced by conceptions in neighbour religions, such as Norse mythology (Storå 1971: 194–8; Bäckman 1975: 135–7; O. Pettersson 1987: 87; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 121–2). It is possible, however, that the variation implies a mode of material flexibility significant to Sámi religion and religious practice. That is, how ‘nature at hand’ introduced subtle differences in the religious conceptions and expressions, altering them in a natural manner according to the distinctive qualities of the surrounding environment. The differences in meaning attached to concepts such as *Sáiva* or the categorization of the realm of the dead are likely to have been influenced by such processes.

It is obvious that a range of formative processes had a crucial impact on the structuring, interpretation/re-interpretation, and modification of the divisions of the surrounding environment (sacred vs. non-sacred), as well as for the actions of gods, powers, and spirits reigning there. This is a crucial feature to understanding the religious concepts and practices of the Sámi, and the way that they came into being and were constantly reinterpreted or modified.

*Studying the written sources you often get the impression that religious conceptions, or at*

*least statements referring to them, are coloured by the person’s own fantasy and requirement, whereon a statement from a noaide [shaman] may go astray if applied to the people in general* (Bäckman 1975: 54, my translation).

Although Bäckman arrives at a different conclusion, her argument nevertheless supports the general arguments offered here. As noted, missionary contemporaries wrote of a homogenous religion, which later research has shown to be the converse. It is clear that within the Sámi religion actions, myths, narratives, and material utterances constituted its religious practice. Moreover, individual preferences and perhaps what could be described as ‘mythical fantasies’ were significant for its exercise, especially by shamans. This is a key feature, which helps demonstrate a correlation with the abundant whims of ‘nature at hand’, which here is considered as a material necessity in the formation and maintenance of Sámi religion.

Another important feature of pre-Christian Sámi burials is their construction. Stone or talus graves were built to afford the departed dry conditions and they were designed with apertures and gaps. Inhumation burials were shallow (Gourina (Gourina) 1956: 294; 1997: 152; cf. Shmidt 1930; Manker 1961: 178–80; Schanche 2000: 123; Shumkin et al. 2006; Svestad 2007: 45–7). Some inhumation graves were dug more than 1 meter deep into the ground (Manker 1961: 147; Shumkin et al. 2006; Svestad 2007: 47), but this is relatively shallow compared to the depth of Christian burials (2 m). These features can be employed in connection with the Sámi conception of a dual soul (or spirit), a *free* or *shadow soul* and a *corporeal soul*. The concept of a free soul and a corporeal soul has many interpretations, and it is possible that academic arguments have, to date, been too normative and categorical (Storå 1971: 188; cf. Itkonen 1946; O. Pettersson 1957: 41–6; Bäckman 1975). The concept of a soul, which is applied in written sources and scholarly analysis, seems misleading, since it is so closely related to the Christian conception of a soul and life after death, as it was for those who recorded the Sámi religion, the missionaries. As noted by the folklorist and linguist Toivo Itkonen, the concept of a soul was unknown for the Eastern Sámi and introduced among the Western Sámi during conversion (Itkonen 1946: 161–2). Con-

sequently, Itkonen applies the German concept *Geist* (i.e. spirit) when dealing with the Sámi conception of the departed. This concept seems more adequate for several reasons, especially since it is supported by the term for the world of the dead, *Jábmáiibmu*, that is, the suffix ‘*áibmu*’, which signifies ‘air’ (or ‘spirit’) in several Sámi dialects (see, for instance, Friis 1887; Nielsen 1932; Hasselbrink 1981; Svonni 1990; Kåven et al. 1995; Sammallahti & Nickel 2006; Korhonen 2007). *Jábmáiibmu* should then signify ‘the air of the dead’, but it is important to add, as noted by the historian of religion Olof Pettersson in his comparative study, that a departed’s spirit (or ‘air’) could be represented by, or more precisely materialized in, a shadow, a name, an object, an animal, a picture, etc. (O. Pettersson 1957: 55; cf. Storå 1971: 187–8).

In a similar way as the *Sáiva/Saivo*-concept, Sámi conceptions of the departed may very well have been flexible and even inconsistent, which is to be expected of a non-dogmatic and practice-oriented religion. The situation that the interplay between the living and the dead was a major problem for the missionaries during conversion, as pointed out by Rydving (1995a: 142), may support this argument. Scholars do agree that after death, the free soul gradually released itself from the body for a new existence in the world of the dead, *Jábmeáibmu*. The corporeal soul remained in the grave attached to the physical remains, and maybe the skeleton in particular. From there, the soul could make trips as an apparition or ghost, frightening individuals who encountered it, even causing someone’s death. On the other hand, the soul of the dead could also be useful in everyday life, for instance reindeer herding (Rydving 1995a: 141). This usefulness was dependent upon enacting the correct sacrifices and mortuary rituals, such as sacrifice of a reindeer and the correct handling of its bones (O. Pettersson 1957: 51, 107–9, 117–9; Storå 1971: 189–93; Schanche 2000: 260–4; cf. Mebius 1968). These constraints thus had a significant impact on the construction of graves: the apertures and gaps in the stone graves permitted the souls to move in and out – moving between the worlds of the living and the dead – and the shallow inhumation graves also permitted easy exit. The same constraints also influenced the placement of cemeteries on islands or islets. The Eastern Sámi cemetery *Jámešsuolo*, The Ghost

Islet, in Bugøyfjord in eastern Finnmark, is an illustrative example. The islet’s very name and the physical isolation of the dead correspond to the importance of trying to avoid conflicts with the ghosts. This is of particular relevance given the Eastern Sámi belief that the soul of the dead was afraid of water (Storå 1971: 129).

The shrouding (or winding) of the corpse in birch bark and/or its placement in a pulka (reindeer sledge) is another significant feature of pre-Christian burials. While shrouding is present in the earliest graves, it is not clear when pulkas began to be used as containers for human bodies. However, pulka containers seem to have been used at graves on the proto-Sámi cemetery of Bol’shoj Oleniy ostrov (The Great Reindeer Island) on the Kola Peninsula; these are dated as early as the 2nd millennium BC (Shumkin et al. 2006).

Shrouding customs changed through time. During the Middle Ages the shrouding in birch bark was at times replaced with ordinary dress, and in the same period it seems that birch bark sometimes was employed mainly as a cover or layer above or underneath the pulka, a hollowed tree trunk, or a wooden coffin. Burials in coffins and dresses have been interpreted as a result of Christian influences (Schanche 2000: 336), and this may well be the case. However, inhumation burials may also be an influence from Norse or ‘Germanized’ settlements during Iron Age (cf. O. Pettersson 1957). A small cemetery near the confluence of the Kista and Varzuga rivers on the Kola Peninsula contains some of the earliest coffins in Sámi contexts, tentatively dated to the 12th–13th century (Ovsiannikov 1993: 11).

The grave finds consist of various animal bones, shells, potsherds of asbestos tempered ceramic, artefacts of bone and stone, brooches and jewellery (especially of Karelian or eastern origin), weapons for hunting, knives, and occasionally crucifixes and other Christian symbols (Schanche 2000: 192–226, 336). The finds date to different eras, and there are a number of differences regarding the age and sex of the individuals found. Though the graves themselves come in a number of different forms, they do contain a coherent and roughly unified material repertoire. This does not necessarily mean that Sámi society was homogeneous in prehistoric and early historic times, as seems to be the traditional view (for further discussion, see Hansen & Olsen 2004: 36–42; Olsen 2004; 2007; cf. Pentikäinen 1973; 1997),



but there appear to be some consistent material structures within this heterogeneity. This can be related to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of the notion of 'family resemblance'. Wittgenstein uses 'games' as a paradigmatic example. When looking at, but not thinking about all the different game types (board-games, ball games, children's games, etc.), and what they have in common, Wittgenstein found it difficult to end up with a common definition. But instead:

*... we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail ... I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblance'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. (Wittgenstein 1989: 31–2).*

Hence, there is no single feature common to all the games. In a similar way, the concept of family resemblance may be applied to characterize the graves in question and their different criss-crossing features. These similarities in material structures include: the placing of burials or cemeteries on islands, morphological features and the organization of the surface of the grave, construction of burial chambers, the use of pulka, coffins, hollowed tree trunks or no container, the shrouding of the body in birch bark, and other features. It is important to underline, however, the fact that graves of different morphology may appear in the same area, and even on the same cemetery.<sup>6</sup>

#### CHRISTIAN SÁMI GRAVES AND THEIR PREREQUISITES

Pre-Christian graves and sanctuaries are documented within or in the vicinity of many Christian cemeteries, and they seem to have been a crucial prerequisite of how the Christian cemeteries came to be placed in a mythical sphere (Svestad 2007). In 1661 a church was built among the Sámi at the market place of Markkina in northern Finland (the church was moved in 1828). In the cemetery, which enclosed the church, is an old sacrificial tree, where the Sámi used to deposit coins, jewellery, and other things in an aperture by the base of the tree. Deposits were practiced long after the turn of the 20th century (Manker 1961: 74, 220;

cf. Halinen 2007; Mannela 2007). On the middle of the tree a wooden cross arm was attached to form a cross in Christian times, but both the cemetery and the sanctuary are supposedly older than the church (Manker 1961; cf. Halinen 2007). Another illustrative example is the churchyard at Hietasaari (Sandy Island) in Lake Inarijärvi, also in northern Finland. This churchyard was established in 1793 and closed down as late as 1905 (Arponen 1993). On a survey in 2005 the author documented very well preserved but hitherto unknown remains of two wooden *sieidis* next to Christian graves from the turn of the 20th century (Fig. 3).<sup>7</sup> The circumstances indicate that the idols were in use at the same time as the cemetery, and possibly to its very end. Possible pre-Christian graves were also documented on the western outskirts of the cemetery (cf. Arponen 1993). Both the above-mentioned examples strongly indicate the 'continuation' of Sámi religious conceptions and practices long after the end of conversion. The



*Fig. 3. Two wooden idols, Hietasaari churchyard, Lake Inarijärvi, northern Finland. Photograph by A. Svestad 2005.*

material features are not identical before and after conversion, but there is a material resemblance within the same landscape.

Christian graves appear in cairns, cavities and underneath boulders, in much the same manner as pre-Christian graves. The majority of Christian graves, however, appear as inhumations in regular and exclusive Sámi churchyards, such as that found at Markkina. In both cases, the dead are placed in pulkas, hollowed tree trunks and coffins, but the latter seem to dominate in post-1750 graves in Western Sámi areas. In some instances, it is difficult to distinguish between pre-Christian and Christian Sámi burials, particularly in Eastern Sámi contexts, as noted by Storå (Storå 1971: 86; cf. Holmberg 1987 [1915]; Charuzin 1922; Hallström 1922; Itkonen 1946; Simonsen 1959). At the Churchyard of Vilasund in Västerbotten in the interior of northern Sweden (in the Western Sámi area) which may date to 1723–61 (the chronology is somewhat uncertain; cf. Steen 1954: 133–4), there are examples of inhumation burials in pulka in which the bodies were shrouded in wool fabric and a small knife was placed beside the departed (Meschke 1977: 80; cf. Holmberg 1987 [1915]: 20–1). In the mountains approximately 20 kilometres further east, at *Tjatjetievva*, an almost identical pre-Christian inhumation grave is documented and dated to around 1650 (Manker 1961: 144–9).<sup>8</sup>

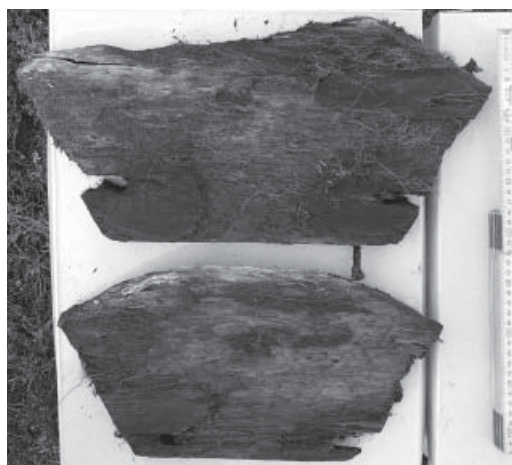
Comparisons between cemeteries within Western Sámi areas indicates that despite variation in grave form the archaeological evidence suggests that the conversion to Christianity did not impact Sámi graves or burial customs to any great extent. As has been shown, there seems not to have been any consistent break or discontinuity with regard to Sámi burial customs (Svestad 2007; 2010; cf. O.P. Pettersson 1912; Manker 1961: 178–98; Schanche 2000: 340–3). Hence, it is possible to view the different features of Christian graves as a continuation of a general development beginning in early Medieval times. This development is characterized by the incorporation of Christian symbols and an incipient use of inhumation graves and wooden coffins. Further, the use of birch bark gradually changes from shrouding to just a cover or layer above or underneath the coffin or pulka. The latter occurred at the same time as shrouding or ‘wrapping’ appears in cloth, fabric, or dresses. This signifies a situation where new features were incorporated as a result of interaction between the Sámi and their Christian and non-Christian neigh-

bours, but not as any straightforward adoption of the ‘foreign’ culture in question. It is important, however, to emphasize that Christian Sámi graves just as pre-Christian graves demonstrate a significant heterogeneity. Some graves for instance, show evidence of coffins and shrouding of the body in birch bark, others of pulkas and shrouding replaced by a dress, yet others of coffins and shrouding in fabric (Svestad 2007; 2010; cf. Leijonhufvud & Hallström 1909; Cajmatz 1950; 1951; Backman & Lindgren 2004; 2005). The variations are many and even multiply if one includes the objects appearing in Christian graves, which will be briefly touched upon in this context.

Grave finds are not documented in all the investigated graves. As noted by archaeologist Audhild Schanche (2000: 110–5) in her investigation of pre-Christian Sámi graves, the lack of grave finds in many instances must be seen as a consequence of excavations being carried out by ‘unprofessionals’, such as physicians and other non-archaeologists. This is also the case when dealing with Christian Sámi graves. One striking feature, however, is that different objects of metal seem to be the most frequent artefacts whenever documented, such as knives, strike-a-lights, jewellery, bracelets, coins, buttons, crucifixes, and other items of silver, copper, iron, or alloys. The sacred character of metal was a commonly held belief among the pre-Christian Sámi, ensuring protection of the dead entering his or her next life (e.g. Mebius 1972: 107–9; 2007; Storå 1971: 183; Bäckman & Kjellström 1979: 181; Schanche 2000: 268–9). Without going into further detail, the appearance of metal objects in Christian graves seems to be significant, conceived as a continuation of the ‘pre-Christian’ belief.

An important feature of Christian cemeteries is the overall shallowness of inhumations, although this practice seems to have changed sometime post-1800. Shallow inhumations, which also existed in pre-Christian times, probably served the same purpose as gaps and apertures in pre-Christian talus or scree graves – to avoid conflicts with souls of the dead by not hindering movement in or out of the graves. Recent excavations at Sámi churchyards in Finnmark have revealed traits, which may indicate that this custom also existed among the Christianized Sámi until the mid 19th century. One of these churchyards, Gullholmen in the municipality of Tana, was established as a result of the missionary activity of

the so-called Sámi Apostle Thomas von Westen between 1719–39; it was abandoned in 1868. The excavations have only documented burials in coffins, and have noted several peculiar and subtle features. One feature present on most coffins is the small, drilled holes at the short end of each coffin. The purpose of this may have been practical, perhaps to transport and/or lower the coffin into the ground in the churchyard. Similar findings have been documented at a Sámi churchyard in another region of Finnmark (cf. Svestad 2006; 2010). However, most of the holes found at both sides were asymmetrical, and are found in an awkward position, suggesting that the holes were not designed to carry or lower a coffin. These holes may have served a spiritual purpose, however. Given Sámi preoccupations with the soul of the dead, the holes may have been drilled to allow for the exit of the soul(s) (Fig. 4). There is a parallel feature in the burial custom of the Eastern Sámi, Karelians, and other people further east, of making a small window or aperture in one of the pediments of grave houses (Storå 1971: 153–5; Valk 1994; Laakso 2003; 2010). This is generally conceived in the same manner as suggested



*Fig. 4. Apertures for the soul? Drilled holes in the short ends of coffins documented at Gullholmen churchyard, municipality of Tana, Finnmark, northern Norway. Probably the first half of the 19th century. Photograph by A. Svestad 2006.*

above as an exit or passage of the soul (or spirit). The custom was still practiced in the orthodox churchyard of Sevettijärvi in northern Finland in the late 1950s (Fig. 5). It may be argued that



*Fig. 5. Aperture for the soul. Burial house of an Eastern Sámi grave dated to the late 1950s, Sevettijärvi orthodox churchyard, northern Finland. Photograph by A. Svestad 2005.*



this is an (Christian) orthodox custom, but at the same time it is well known that the Orthodox Church was tolerant towards indigenous or ethnic religious customs whether it be of Sámi, Karelian or other origin. Hence, the apertures might well be some kind of transmitted feature (cf. Holmberg 1987 [1915]: 20).

## THE CONSTRUCTING INERTIA OF MATERIALITY

Latour (1993, esp. ch. 3.3–4.9) argues that dualisms such as culture–nature, subject–object do not exist outside of theories. There is no such thing as a pure nature, or a pure culture inside of us, but our way of perceiving nature is always cultural, and culture is always charged with nature in the way that humans are embodied and therefore things themselves. The discrepancy between culture and nature in our contemporary society is an asymmetrical condition introduced by modern metaphysics (cf. e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1968; Bloor 1976; Heidegger 1986). The consequence is that we have been oblivious to the work done by things (or materiality), at best merely judging their quality as representatives of thoughts and ideas, ‘victimized’ by cognitive processes. According to Latour *nature-culture* is a more adequate concept of reality, signifying a symmetrical relationship and including the non-cognitive actions of things. A characteristic feature of humans is that we constantly mix together actions and traditions, things of different times, past and present. Thus, our human enterprise is poly-temporal in the way that we have always sorted and mingled things of different origin, nature with culture, and humans with things. Pure objects do not exist according to Latour, since it presupposes a static reality. Latour therefore applies the term quasi-objects, implying that things are mixed together according to different and contradictory histories and actions. The reality is therefore constantly being produced through a collective process, where things, the quasi-objects or the non-humans (as Latour also designate them), enter as inevitable actors. We are not able to live without these quasi-objects, thus our world consists of networks in which both humans and non-humans work as actors. Latour advocates what he calls a symmetrical anthropology, implying symmetry between body and soul, subject and object, human and thing, culture and nature, and also in a certain way past and present.

Latour’s theory is a useful way of understanding pre-Christian and Christian Sámi burials and their relation to landscape and its sacredness.

Paul Connerton’s study (1989) indicates a more particular theoretical relevance, concerning the collective memory of society expressed through religious practices and rituals. In order to understand these collective actions Connerton (1989: 72–4) applies the concept *incorporating practice*, which is closely related to the philosopher Henri Bergson’s concept of *habit memory* (Bergson 1991). Bergson differentiates between representational memory and habit memory.<sup>9</sup> The former is a cognitive form of memory used to recollect impressions and events. The latter is a non-cognitive form of memory acquired by repetition, as a habit:

... like every habitual bodily exercise, it is stored up in a mechanism which is set in motion as a whole by an initial impulse, in a closed system of automatic movements which succeed each other in the same order and, together, take the same length of time (Bergson 1991: 80).

As phrased by John Mullarkey (1999: 51) ‘... representational-memory *imagines*’ the past whilst habit-memory merely *repeats it* ...’. Put briefly, Connerton’s main point is that in a collective ritual the past is remembered through ‘re-enactment’, or physical repetition of actions. This is an incorporating practice implying that conceptions of belief are embedded in materiality in such a way that they continue to exist in a tacit manner. Connerton stresses that this form of practice is particularly significant in mortuary rituals of archaic societies: ‘The rhetoric of re-enactment is encoded too in an even more direct embodiment, in *gestural* repetition. Particularly in archaic rituals this process comes most starkly into play in the represented presence of the dead’ (Connerton 1989: 68).

It is questionable if this is only relevant to so-called archaic societies. According to the nature-culture ontology advocated above there is no reason to differentiate between archaic and modern societies regarding the role of materiality. However, this role may differ through time and between societies. In any case, keeping in mind the re-enactment of rituals and practices concerning the exercise and preservation of Sámi religion, the material features of Christian Sámi cemeteries may



be understood as a result of incorporating practices. Incorporating practice (and habit memory) is first and foremost attached to action and exercise, not mind and reflection, and is therefore particularly appropriate when trying to understand a practical, ritualized, and flexible religion as seems to be the case of Sámi religion. This not to serve as a sole explanation, excluding the impact of conscious or cognitive acts, but to illuminate how the reproduction of materiality is not always intended or consciously caused. Materiality or the surrounding environment may function as a social and bodily agent of its own, as something that gathers and relates qualities in time and space (cf. Olsen 2003: 98; 2010). Hence, materiality is inseparable from mortuary practices, the dead, and life after death. The tacit appearance of various pre-Christian Sámi features attached to Christian graves may at least be partly understood as a result of incorporating practices subsequent to Christianization. In this way materiality was able to preserve the important connection between the living and the dead, which seems to be present long after Christianization. The surrounding environment or mythical sphere (including pre-Christian graves and sacred places) must be conceived as a crucial prerequisite in this regard, as an overall manifestation of the eternal realm of the living and the dead. The materiality as seen through the graves themselves and the surrounding environment may therefore have had a constitutive impact on the Sámi conversion to Christianity, suspending the opposition between confession to Christianity on one hand, and the relation to Sámi religion, traditional burial customs, and sacred landscape on the other.

A subtle, long-lasting and illustrative indication of the 'pre-Christian' link is provided by the continuous existence of metal objects in both pre-Christian and Christian Sámi graves. This must also be seen in the context of the significant and interactive role played by metal objects during the rise of Sámi ethnicity in the 1st millennium BC (Olsen 1984; 1991). These objects may be a momentous example of the constructing inertia of materiality, and may lie behind the numerous conceptions of the sacred character of metal among the Sámi up to recent times (see e.g. Turi 1911; O. Pettersson 1957; Manker 1961; Mebius 1968; 2007). This is not, however, an argument in favour of Sámi ethnicity as an unchangeable essence, but an attempt to conceive the impact of materiality and its different accentuations through time.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Rydving noted that:

*As the departed did not have a similar position in Christian (Lutheran) theology as in indigenous thought, the departed lost significance when the Christian religion became increasingly predominant. The change of religion implied that one half of the family ceased to exist (Rydving 1995a: 143).*

Although it appears that Christianity undermined the importance of the dead among the Sámi, archaeological evidence, as has been shown, does suggest that this 'other half' continued to remain a part of Sámi nature-culture in a subtle way (cf. Svestad 2007; 2010).<sup>10</sup> This makes religion and religious practice something of an event; of doing or acting when mind becomes insufficient.

In reflecting upon our own contemporary 'Western world' Christian inhumations (in the Lutheran Protestant tradition), the following is striking: we place our dead in coffins, which we lower deep into the ground, we put flowers on top, cover them with earth, and finally mark the graves with tombstones. We do this without much reflection or thought. However, we still know for certain that this is the way it should be done. In other words: in burying our departed we seem preoccupied with acting – doing things properly - not so much with thinking. This signifies how burials and mourning practices are embedded in materiality and bodily movements, and how habit memory plays a crucial part.

The heterogeneity of both pre-Christian and Christian Sámi graves stresses that Sámi burial customs were not strongly normatively constrained during any period. On the contrary, these customs seem to have been very inconsistent, varying throughout the Sámi regions. This challenges the idea of an authentic and consistent Sámi religion. Allowing for the 'uncontrollable' impact of a 'working' materiality the very idea of an authentic and consistent religion turns out to be insufficient. Let me illustrate this with one last empirical example of a quite recent study on Sámi nature theology (Johnsen 2005).

In interviews among reindeer Sámi, most of them true Christian believers, the theologian Tore Johnsen (himself a Sámi) has documented several practices and rituals which clearly relate to 'pre-

Christian' cosmology, whether the informants are aware of these links or not. One of these practices is connected to the *sieidis* (sanctuaries, sacrificial places), which still are known in the landscape where they carry out their reindeer husbandry, as they have been doing for many centuries. It is no longer a custom to sacrifice to a *sieidi*, partly reckoned as idolatry, but it is necessary to treat the *sieidi* with care and not behave disrespectfully or provocatively (cf. Kjellström 1987; Äikäs et al. 2009). One of the informants made the following statement: ' "For a long time now this has been our belief. You shall not worship that [*sieidi*]. But treat all things decently. The animals, knucklebones, those who are dead. One must be cautious towards the lot" ' (quoted in Johnsen 2005: 32, my translation).<sup>11</sup> Among several things this indicates a material link between the 'pre-Christian' and 'Christian' religious practices and beliefs of the Sámi. The Christian Sámi no longer sacrifice, but the *sieidis* and other things are still present and alive within the nature-culture. This example indicates that conversion did not imply a desacralization of space, as argued by Rydving (1995a: 144), but rather how 'extinct' religious conceptions and practices are actually stored in space, making sacralization a dynamic but inconsistent process. Consequently, statements characterizing Sámi religion as dead, abandoned, or non-functional (see e.g. Mebius 1968: 14; Bäckman 1975: 138; Rydving 1995a: 142, 161) are rendered insufficient or even inadequate for understanding religious processes among the Sámi during and after conversion.

It seems difficult to fully understand Sámi religion and conversion only by recourse to written sources and cognitive processes. Materiality plays a crucial part, whether articulated or not. This emphasises how 'nature at hand', things, constructions, and bodily movements is significant for our understanding of religious practices and processes. Few traces of the materiality dealt within this context are to be found in the written records. Neither should it be expected, as it represents 'actors' and actions of a silent kind. Of all rituals in a society, burial customs and mourning practices are perhaps among the most defining. When burials occur people's dependence on and affection for things seems to be of utmost significance.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Bryan Hood for making comments to this manuscript.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This custom was probably established in the 17th century and was still practiced to some extent subsequent to World War II (Manker 1961: 128, 184).

<sup>2</sup> Terms like 'Sámi indigenous religion' or 'Sámi ethnic religion' have been applied in other studies (e.g. Rydving 1995a; 2004; Pentikäinen 1997; Mebius 2007; Äikäs et al. 2009). In this context I will simply use 'Sámi religion' or 'pre-Christian' in quotation marks referring to Sámi 'non-Christian' concepts and beliefs.

<sup>3</sup> Sámi designations/place-names are given in the Northern Sámi dialect according to current Sámi-Norwegian orthography unless otherwise noted (cf. Kåven et al. 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Eastern Sámi designation according to Storå 1971.

<sup>5</sup> Designations are given in a partly antiquated orthography in the Lule Sámi dialect (cf. O. Pettersson 1957).

<sup>6</sup> Illustrative examples are the cemeteries at Mortensnes (i.e. Per Larsenvik locality) and Paddeby in the municipalities of Unjárga/Nesseby and Vadsø (both eastern Finnmark). However, their chronology has not been sufficiently investigated.

<sup>7</sup> This survey was carried out in collaboration with archaeologist Juha Ruohonen, University of Turku, The *sieidis* were reported to the Siida Museum in Inari, northern Finland.

<sup>8</sup> Place-name in Southern Sámi dialect and antiquated orthography (cf. Manker 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Bergson's conclusion, however, is neither of the two, but a third more general concept of memory (Mullarkey 1999: 51–5).

<sup>10</sup> This 'continuation' is also reflected in Sámi naming traditions today (see e.g. Miller 2007: 92, 249–52; cf. Itkonen 1946; Rydving 1995a; Myrvoll 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Particular fish *sieidis* have allegedly been used up to recent times in connection with fishing (e.g. Vorren 1987: 104; Äikäs et al. 2009: 112).

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