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Between Nomadism and Indentured Servitude. An Historical-Archaeological Study of Early Modern Sámi Economic and Social Strategies in Central Sweden, Jonas Monié Nordin

The early modern period saw a growing tension between Sámi populations, the authorities, and the church in the whole of Fennoscandinavia. Starting in the mid-17th century, the Swedish crown legislated against Sámi nomadism south of the so called lappmarker (regions in northern Sweden dominated by Sámi population, with borders defined by the Crown). During the 18th century, persecution spread and the Sámi population in central Sweden was forced into indentured servitude, as so-called Parish Lapps, in order to avoid eviction to the north; a system that lasted until liberal reforms initiated in the 1860s. Relocation of Sámi groups also featured Finland and Norway during this period. Indenture, however, did not.

I will discuss the relations between archaeological, historical, and linguistic sources of the Sámi population from the medieval period, but with a special focus on that of the historically known Sámi of the early modern and modern periods. Previous research has acknowledged the existence of different sedentary groups of Sámi, including the so-called Parish-Lapps of central Sweden, and peripatetic groups of Sámi across southern and central Fennoscandinavia (Zachrisson 1997; Svanberg 1999; Nordin 2018, 2022). Yet a void still remains in the field and much is still to be researched.

The understanding of Sámi history in earlier research has oscillated between two contrasting positions: The Sámi as the indigenous, first settlers in Scandinavia (e.g. Geijer 1825; Nilsson 1866), and the Sámi as late comers (von Düben 1873; Montelius 1875–77; Nielsen 1891; Baudou 1974). In Finland, the situation is rather different, with an academic tradition featured by a wide acceptance of a chronologically and geographically shared history based in close relations within the Finno-Ugrian language groups, but with a ‘disappearance’ of the Sámi from southern and central Finland during the early middle ages (e.g. Wiklund 1912; Itkonen 1947).

My presentation will empirically focus on fieldwork conducted during the years 2018–2023, including archaeological excavations of three cabins, and one gâetie, a traditional Sámi timber cabin, and two låavthgâetie, Sámi tent sites, dated from the 18th to the 20th centuries in Dalarna, Gästrikland, Hälsingland, och Uppland. These seven sites, inhabited by indentured so called Parish-Lapps, in the case of the cabins, and probably nomadic reindeer herding families, has revealed a unique material.

In the interest of increasing knowledge around these under-researched areas, my work rests on three vantage points:

- 1) The need for critical assessment of earlier research. There is a profound need for extensive historiographic examination of the view on Sámi in the Fennoscandinavian societies.
- 2) The study of material and immaterial traces through recent fieldwork: The historic Sámi population has left limited written record of their own from the medieval and early modern periods. Studies of material culture, landscape, linguistic sources, and oral tradition are therefore paramount for acknowledging the traces of Sámi history.
- 3) Acknowledgement of Sámi agency: Current research in historical archaeology, has revealed a multitude of strategies and practices among indigenous and colonized peoples to preserve and develop culture, identity, and self-determination during the medieval and early modern period (cf. Silliman 2015). There are plentiful of evidence for a strong resilience and diversity among the Sámi during the examined period (Mebius 1968; Larsson 2018; Nordin & Olofsson 2023).

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