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Broadbent, Noel D.

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Debatt

Coastal Saami in Västerbotten: a reply to Liedgren and Ramqvist

I have found Liedgren's and Ramqvist's debate article on my book, *Lapps and Labyrinths. Saami prehistory, colonization and cultural resilience* (2010) to be interesting and I appreciate the opportunity to respond. Their critique focuses on the Grundskatan bear grave and five general hypotheses that I formulated to provide a wider geographic (circumpolar), and ecological (north-south and coast-inland) perspective on prehistory in the Swedish north.

Turning to the first issue, they rightly point out that the Grundskatan bear grave (I prefer the term bear burial) was a tipping point in my thinking; but one that led me to consider *all* the evidence I could find for the unthinkable... that ancestors of the Saami had indeed lived on these coastlands, and to explore what such a culture would look like and where its roots would lie. I did not begin my research with this perspective and spent many years pursuing other ideas, including ignoring the Saami option.

But after poring over the historical sources and maps, the place names, the oral histories and ethnology, and examining in detail the archaeology of these coastal dwellings, their locations, layouts, clustering and associated ritual features, then putting all the evidence into a chronological, technological and economic framework, the bear burial and the Saami connection at Grundskatan made perfect sense. This ritual burial cannot simply be explained away, as Liedgren & Ramqvist attempt to do, by arguing that it was just a random, unrelated find (which Liedgren has apparently also done with the Onbacken bear grave in coastal Hälsingland, although this find has not been dated as far as I know).

As regards their critique of the stratigraphy of the bear bones in Hut 4, I can clarify as follows. The bones, as confirmed by soil chemistry, were found in the southeast corner of the hut and at

the same level (c. 15.71 m a.s.l.) as the charcoal spread from the hearth. Fire-cracked rocks were not found with the bones, as my critics incorrectly state, but were found in and under the wall of the hut (fig. 1). They probably emanate from Hut 3. The bear bones were deliberately covered with stones that were not part of a collapsed wall. The radiocarbon and AMS dates show the hearth and the bear bones to be archaeologically contemporary with each other as well as with the main period of the Grundskatan hut complex, including the nearby circular sacrificial feature.

The selection and sorting of bear bones at Grundskatan are consistent with both Saami and other circumpolar practice. In terms of the overall setting and social context, and the dwelling and hearth as symbolic of the Saami cosmos, the bear burial at Grundskatan can be seen a unique manifestation of Saami identity. There are, in addition, compelling archaeological parallels in the Ainu bear cult of Hokkaido, including the connection to the dwelling, the sorting of the bones, traces of burning and the placement of rocks (a cairn) over the bones. I devote a whole chapter of the book to this subject, including comparisons with some 42 bear burials and bone depositions.

Liedgren & Ramqvist note that my material includes dates obtained using older and newer methods. I was aware of this issue and since my chapter on chronology discusses this material using two standard deviations, the framework should be broad enough to overcome any potential discrepancies. They write that there is no relationship between elevations and the radiocarbon dates, which is misleading. I clearly state that this depends on the topography of each site (nine locales along almost 500 km of coast).

I posed five general hypotheses to help reformulate the discussion of long-term prehistory, although the main subject of the book is the Iron

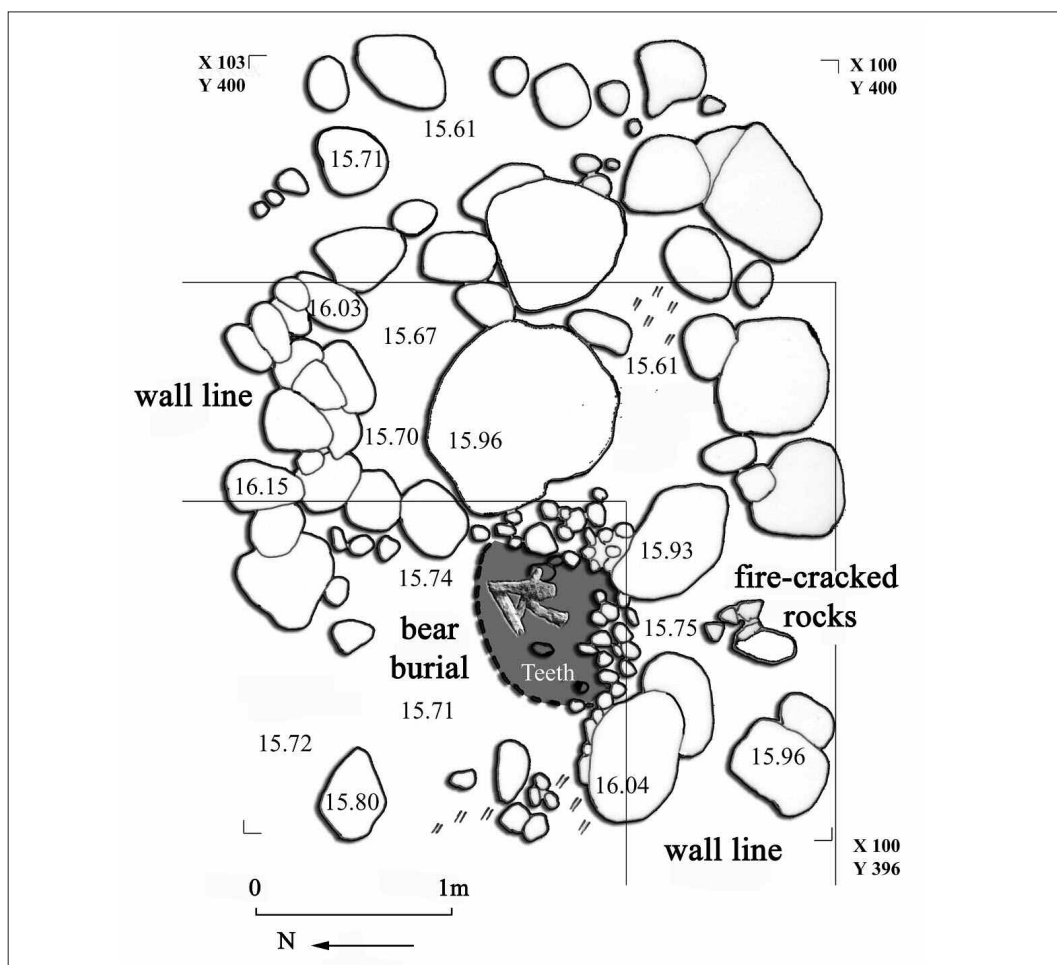


Fig. 1. Plan of the south-east corner of Hut 4 at Grundskatan in Lövånger, showing the location of the bear bone deposition, hut wall lines, elevations and fire-cracked rocks (Broadbent 2010, p. 80, fig. 79).

Age. Liedgren and Ramqvist devote most of their opinions to these hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. *The Saami are an indigenous people with roots going back 7000 years in northern coastal Västerbotten.*

The indigenous Saami ethnohistorical narrative, as expressed in most Saami literature on the subject (cf. Kuolok 1996; Lehtola 2004; Solbakk 2004; Haetta 2005), rests on the perspective that they are indigenous to the Nordic region. They are a circumpolar people who entered this region from the north and east, probably shortly after it

became ice-free. This argument parallels very well the biogeography of northern Sweden as seen, for instance, by the distributions of plants and animals, including DNA. I thus examined Västerbotten's coastal archaeology from this ecological point of view and considered how different aspects of this prehistory could relate to the formation of Saami identities in the coastal zone.

Rather than proceeding from what we recognize today as Saami culture, I have focused instead on the long-term *process of ethnogenesis*. I certainly do not believe that the Saami existed in the forms we know today 7000 years ago. But I do

argue that elements that led to these identities can be recognised in the prehistoric record of this region.

Circumpolar rock art, asbestos-tempered pottery and transverse arrowheads are found in this prehistoric coastal setting, as in other regions where Saami identities took form. In broader terms, there is continuity in the organisation of settlement and hunting systems, from the quartz-using sealers of Västerbotten to the Iron Age sealers that are the subject of my book. One can also see the introduction of animal husbandry and metallurgy starting in around 2000–1500 BC, both of which are recognised as important elements in Saami ethnogenesis (cf. Jørgensen 1986; Jørgensen & Olsen 1988; Hansen & Olsen 2004). The Bronze Age grave forms were closely tied to local territories, although the smaller Iron Age cairns bear a close resemblance to the forest graves of the interior. And during the Iron Age this coastal region was still not Norse-settled territory, as seen from the absence of long-houses, tumulus graves, Germanic place-names etc.

In other words, there is ample evidence for a historical trajectory from the deep past and into later times. Interaction with other groups was nevertheless intense (I argue that the Saami were directly involved in coastal trade), all of which contributed to their ethnic identities, using Fredrik Barth's 1969 model.

These northern coastal non-Christians underwent a major transformation, however, as the hegemony of the Swedish state and church was felt through the appropriation of land, resources and taxation. By c. AD 1300, the Saami/Lapps had officially become "the heathen other", leading to assimilation on the coast, with the obligatory name changes and Christianisation, or to their displacement inland.

Hypothesis 2: There are two main historical-ecological regions in Sweden, the Circumpolar and the European. During the Iron Age the Germanic agrarian settlement boundary coincided with the 63rd parallel on the Bothnian coast.

I have simply stepped back and taken a broader historical-ecological look at Nordic prehistory. This gives a very different view of Swedish prehistory than one based on the nationalistic

and/or a local paradigm, and quite simply is an effort to see the forest for the trees. As regards the second part of the hypothesis, I provide ample evidence, ecological, linguistic and archaeological, for this fact.

Hypothesis 3. Proto-Saami, Proto-Finnish and Proto-Germanic societies (for lack of better terms) had been in close contact for thousands of years and were heterogeneous and overlapping.

Liedgren & Ramqvist seem to like this one, although it is the basis for including the Saami in the equation regarding coastal settlement in Västerbotten. My theoretical orientation throughout the book is one of inclusiveness.

Hypothesis 4. Coastal and interior settlement during the Stone Age in northern Sweden occurred in semi-sedentary settlement cycles relating to the peaks and declines in terrestrial and marine resources. Animal husbandry changed this pattern and contributed to sedentism as well as to nomadism.

I have long questioned how the north Swedish interior (Lapland) could have sustained hunter-gatherer populations for thousands of years, particularly the communities evidenced by villages of fire-cracked stone mounds. Elk and beaver, the principal terrestrial prey for most of north Swedish prehistory, would have been rapidly depleted by hunting; and furthermore both elk and wild reindeer undergo natural dramatic population swings, requiring 30–40 years to recover. The Bay of Bothnia, unlike the coast of Norway, was also subject to great variability, especially regarding salinity and ice conditions. For these reasons, an economic strategy built on a combination of coastal and interior resources would have been a key for longer-term sustainability. By concentrating on the peaks of productivity, one could maintain human populations and allow time for the recovery of hunting resources. This is why I formulated the idea of punctuated sedentism as an alternative to separate inland and coastal hunting cultures.

The clustering of Stone Age sites and finds on the coast, as well as agrarian indications (see fig. 16 in the book), may reflect periodic abandonment and resettlement over time. These relate to shoreline displacement but probably also to peaks

and declines in resource productivity and climate conditions. The Iron Age sealing huts likewise display distinct chronological horizons. Generational shifts between the coast and inland are well-known in arctic and sub-arctic settlement systems, and pulses of expansion and regression are recognised in world-systems and resilience theory (Modelski & Thompson 1999; Holling & Gunderson 2002; Redman & Kinzig 2003). This argument is intended to illustrate how for much of prehistory the interior population could in fact be the same as the coastal population.

Hypothesis 5. *Northern Sweden was part of a World System of trade and information exchange that been in existence since the Early Stone Age (Mesolithic).*

By the time northern Sweden was first occupied following deglaciation, Neolithic societies were well-established in the Middle East and Asia. Populations were rapidly expanding northward and across Eurasia. There were already large-scale kinship-based trading networks as well as more extensive information exchanges. The whole concept of the Circumpolar Region is based on this vast interconnectedness, and winter travel technologies made this especially effective. These were intensified toward the east, the basis of the so-called Arctic Bronze Age, and continued in the Iron Age, especially the Roman and Viking Periods. World-systems theory offers useful social models for viewing prehistory over much larger areas than the Swedish hinterlands (cf. Kardulias 1999).

This material, which has almost exclusively been known and discussed by Swedish archaeologists, deserves to be seen in much broader geographic, cultural and theoretical terms. Saami prehistory has long been held hostage by geographically myopic, theoretically unaware and culturally antagonistic points of view. My book is intended as a small step towards changing these attitudes.

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Noel D. Broadbent

Arctic Studies Center

Department of Anthropology (MRC 112)

National Museum of Natural History

Washington, D.C. 20013-7012

USA

broadben@si.edu