Sacred and Profane Livelihood: Animal Bones from Sieidi Sites in Northern Finland

TIINA ÄIKÄS, ANNA-KAISA PUPUTTI, MILTON NÚÑEZ, JOUNI ASPI and JARI OKKONEN

In this paper, animal offerings at Sámi sacrificial sites, sieidi (Saan), will be discussed from an archaeological and a zooarchaeological point of view. Offerings are seen as a part of daily subsistence activities where the border between sacred and profane was fuzzy and transient. We take the position that animal offerings cannot be interpreted as ritual actions clearly separated from everyday life, but, rather, we have to take into account that the relationship between offerings and livelihood was seen as a dynamic one in a holistic worldview. We discuss archaeological finds from three sieidi sites as examples and claim that the offerings taken to sieidi sites tell us about daily subsistence strategies but at the same time also about the relationship between people and animals in the worldview of the Sámi.

INTRODUCTION

The sieidi is a type of sacrificial place among Sámis. It usually consists of natural objects, either of stone or wood, unshaped by human. Offerings of meat, antler, metal (Itkonen 1948:318) and in later times alcohol (Sköld 1999) were made to sieidi in order to obtain good hunting success, among other things. According to the ethnographic material, they served as a medium to contact supernatural forces (Mebius 2003:147). The dating of sieidi sites is often complicated. There are finds from the Iron Age and Middle Ages but there is also oral tradition indicating their use even in the 20th century (Fossum 2006:108; Paulaharju 1932).

The study of the sieidi sites has traditionally been based on mainly 19th- and 20th-century ethnographic evidence on the use of the sieidi, and only a minority of the sites have been archaeologically investigated (Vorren & Eriksen 1993:198; Schanche 2000:271; in Finland see Okkonen 2007; Harlin & Ojanlatva 2008). Sieidis have regularly been interpreted in a religious frame of reference. Most studies have concentrated on identifying and grouping sieidi sites, and fitting together ethnographic observations and archaeological finds. However, there have been also some attempts to connect the sieidi sites to the broader context of subsistence activities and past ritual landscapes. For instance, Vorren (1985, 1998) has studied the spatial distribution of offering sites in connection to hunting pits. Also, Åikäs (in press) paid attention to the spatial relations of sieidi and other ancient sites. According to her there are differences in the location of the sieidi sites: some of them are far away from other signs of physical human influence to...
landscape and others are part of a network of sites relating to daily activities.

This paper is an attempt to see sieidi sites and animal offerings as parts of the livelihood, religion and worldview of the Sámi. We draw upon the ideas that animal offerings on ritual sites cannot be considered as merely ritual actions separate from other spheres of life (e.g. Brück 1999, Insoll 2004) and that archaeological data can be used in re-interpreting the relationship between animal offerings, ritual and subsistence among the Sámi. The idea of the connection between ritual and everyday life is hardly new in archaeological discourse (e.g. Brück 1999, Bradley 2000, 2005, Insoll 2004). It has, however, rarely been applied to the study of archaeological finds of animal offerings in northern Fennoscandia. We will consider the zooarchaeological finds from three archaeological sieidi sites in present-day Finnish Lapland. The excavations on these sites are a part of an ongoing project, *Human-Animal Relationships among the Finnish Sámi 1000–1800 AD*,1 funded by the Academy of Finland, and more sieidi sites will be excavated during the upcoming field seasons. In this paper, we will concentrate on animal bone finds from three sacrificial sites and argue that the animal offerings on these sites can be interpreted as part of a holistic worldview, where ritual, religion and subsistence cannot be separated from each other.

RITUAL, SUBSISTENCE AND ANIMALS

In archaeological interpretation, sacred and profane have often been separated from each other (see Brück 1999). Nevertheless, contrasting voices have also risen in recent years (e.g. Brück 1999, Insoll 2004, Bradley 2005). Brück (1999) argues that the separation of ritual and rational behaviour in archaeological and anthropological interpretation is an artificial product of Western post-enlightenment rationalism and it should therefore be avoided in archaeological research. She suggests that, instead of labelling certain practices that are visible in the archaeological record as irrational ritual behaviour with no actual consequences, we should consider these practices as rational actions within the particular worldviews people had in the past (Brück 1999).

In a similar vein, Timothy Insoll (2004:23) sees religion not just as one aspect of life but rather like a lens through which the whole of human life can be seen. This does not mean, however, that the whole of life is ritualized or that people were more spiritual in the past (cf. Brück 1999), but that beliefs and worldview gave meanings to the surrounding world and to the way how people acted in it. Moreover, the functional and symbolical aspects of certain practices, places or objects are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but these aspects can coexist and interact. Bradley (2005:16) gives an example from Spain where farm buildings could have both symbolic and practical roles at the same time, and where functional and symbolic interpretations of the buildings reinforced one another. Ritual is thus not set apart from daily life but is an integral part of it, and people often attach ritual meanings to the practical actions of their daily life.

Zooarchaeological studies still tend to employ the dichotomy of ritual actions and rational, subsistence-related behaviour, and ritual treatment of animal remains is routinely considered separately from economic interpretations of zooarchaeological assemblages. To name one example, the volume *Behaviour behind Bones. The Zooarchaeology of Ritual, Religion, Status, and Identity* (Jones O’Day et al. 2004) is organized in two parts, of which the first explores ritual and religion and the second social differentiation and status in diet and subsistence. However, the economic treatment of animals and their remains has hardly been something purely secular in the past (Insoll 2004:72). Actions and ideas we would label ritual have been deeply embedded in, for example, cattle husbandry practices in past societies (e.g. Apo 1998, Stark-Arola 1998). While such conceptions
hardly make sense within a modern Western scientific worldview, they were perfectly rational to people in the past (cf. Brück 1999:322), who were likely to consider them as just as essential as other subsistence practices. Furthermore, ritual actions are not necessarily confined to shrines or other special contexts (Bradley 2000:123, Insoll 2004:73) or to specific ritual occasions. Rather, subsistence-related activities, such as hunting, can be seen as a ritualized dialogue between the hunter and the guardian spirit of animals (e.g. Brightman 1993:187, Tarkka 1998:102), and the whole course of the hunt can sometimes be interpreted at a ritualized or religious level (e.g. Brightman 1993:187, Tarkka 1998:102, Ingold 2000:48).

Thus, the religious aspects of human-animal relationships, such as animal offerings or feasting, do not belong solely to the realm of religion, nor can subsistence strategies, such as hunting or animal husbandry techniques, be considered as merely economic activities. According to Jones O’Day (2004:155), the secular and religious aspects of food procurement can be related in a holistic social system in non-Western societies. She stresses that the ritual in food procurement must be seen as religious, secular and social at the same time (Jones O’Day 2004:155). For instance, the Fijians reaffirm and re-create their connection with the cosmological creation and hierarchical relationship with ancestors through ritualized patterns of production, and at the same time these ritualized food procurement practices are tightly interwoven with expressing and maintaining social hierarchies, identities and gendered division of labour (Jones O’Day 2004:155–156). A Fijian example may seem far-fetched in regard to Sámi society, but the connection between subsistence strategies, religion and social relationships can be found in a range of non-Western societies (e.g. Brightman 1993; Stark-Arola 1998; Tarkka 1998), and such connections may also be seen in Sámi practices. For instance, according to Schanche (2000:324–325), the exclusion of women from sieidis connected to hunting was both religious and social. After the commercialization of hunting the role of women in hunting changed and, at the same time, women were excluded from some rituals connected to hunting.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MATERIAL AND METHODS

As a case study we will now turn to three sieidi sites in the area that is nowadays Finnish Lapland: Kittilä Taatsi, Enontekiö Näkkälä and Utsjoki Seitala (Fig. 1). All the sites are known from written sources. They were all used by fishermen, reindeer herders and/or hunters (Fellman 1906; Paulaharju 1932). Hence they seem to have been used by a bigger group or community (Rydving...
Nevertheless there are differences between the sites based on the different geographical areas in which they are situated: Kittilä in the forest by a small lake, Näkkälä by the lake Näkkäläjärvi and Seitala in the mountain area close to the river Teno. Closeness to water is a common factor in their location. The sieidi at these places consisted of a stone or rock formation of various size and shape. All three sites were described as offering sites used by reindeer hunters and herders. For the first two fish offerings were also described in the written sources. The distance to water is somewhat longer from Seitala and a deep hill makes the walking distance even further; however, a local informant told us that fish was offered here too.

Archaeological material derives from three excavations conducted during the summer of 2008. Henceforth, all the descriptions of the excavations and animal bone finds are from Äikäs & Núñez (2009a, 2009b, 2009c) and Puputti (2008a, 2008b, 2008c). The sieidi sites in this study seem to have been used for a long period of time. The radiocarbon dates of bone finds range from 290 ± 25 BP to 830 ± 25 BP (Hela-1889–1898) in Seitala, from modern to 900 ± 25 BP in Taatsi (Hela-1878–1880) and from modern to 830 ± 25 BP (Hela-1881–1887) in Näkkälä. Written evidence on the use of these sites dates back to the early 20th century (Paulaharju 1932), and two 19th-century coins from Näkkälä and Seitala and the 19th-century bottle glass from Seitala indicate 19th-century use of sieidi. Previous finds from Finland indicate that sieidi were used during the medieval and early modern periods. In Finland the best-known example of an offering find comes from Ukonsaari island. Sir Arthur Evans found a silver ornament from the 13th century while visiting the site. In addition, excavations have revealed bones that are dated to the 14th century and the beginning of the 17th century and a Russian coin from the 17th century (Okkonen 2007).

Archaeological finds, apart from bones, were very scarce in these excavations. In addition to modern finds (e.g. 21st-century coins, a spectacle lens and jewellery), we found only a bone ring, from Taatsi, a 1883 coin and pieces of a mid-19th-century glass porter bottle from Seitala, and a bone button and a 1866 coin from Näkkälä. Mulk (in press) argues that the role of bones in the sacrifices to the sieidi grew and the role of metal objects diminished after 1350 AD. a shift that was related to economic as well as social changes among the Sámi in that period. It is also possible that the extremely small number of artefacts from Taatsi, Näkkälä and Seitala is due to differences in offering traditions between Finland and northern Sweden Mulk refers to.

The importance of a sacred place as a context of offerings has lately been acknowledged (e.g. Ladd 2001). The repatriation of the finds is an important aspect when studying sacred sites. In some sites we were able to leave most of the bones in situ whereas in some cases all the excavated material was needed for analyses. After the final analyses the bones will be returned to the place where they belong. Hence, osteological identifications were conducted in the field aided by osteology atlases (Hillson 1986, Barone 1999) and a photograph reference collection. All the fish and some bird bones (the unidentified merganser and unidentified bird from Taatsi) were taken for identification with the aid of the reference skeletons in the collection of the Zoological Museum of the University of Oulu. The age of the reindeer was assessed by using epiphysial fusion (Hufthammer 1995), and tooth eruption and wear (Miller 1974). It has to be noted that the schedules of skeletal development suggested by Hufthammer and Miller are based on Norwegian wild reindeer and North American caribou respectively and, thus, the age assessments of Finnish reindeer based on these studies have to be understood as estimations, not absolute biological ages.

**KITTILÄ TAATSI**

The sieidi at Taatsi is an approximately 10-metre high rock formation that is situated...
on a deep and stony river bank (Fig. 2). Small test pits were made under the stones on the hillside and the hollows in the rock formation were also inspected. The stony surface made it impossible to open wider excavation areas. The finds were concentrated on the western side of the sieidi, but a few bones were found on the other sides too. Samuli Paulaharju (1932:50) describes how reindeer antler and head bones as well as fish bones could be seen on the upper parts of the sieidi.

Bones of reindeer, gallinaceous birds, waterfowl, pike, trout and perch were found during fieldwork in the summer of 2008. The animal bones (Table 1) were found in the hollows in the sieidi or in the stony hillside. Nine fragments of reindeer bone were found. One back of a skull was found on a small terrace south of the sieidi and another among the rock west of it. One mandibular premolar of an individual of c. 21–25 months (Miller 1974) was found and two fragments of temporal bone (pars petrosa) were found right next to the sieidi. In addition, a sacral bone, a distal tibia, a calcaneum and a proximal metatarsal were discovered in the stony hillside.

Bird bone finds from the Taatsi excavations included capercaillie, unidentified gallinaceous
bird, unidentified merganser and unidentified bird. Fish made up the most abundant group of bones found. Altogether 243 fish bones were found, although 225 of these are likely to derive from one perch deposited in a rock hollow. In addition to the perch bones, also 12 trout bones and two pike bones were discovered. The perch bones included bones of the head, vertebral column and ribs, whereas the bones of trout and pike were solely cranial bones.

ENONTEKIÖ NÄKKÄLÄ

The sieidi stone at Näkkälä stands on a small hillock c. 20 metres from the shore of Lake Näkkäläjärvi. It is 3.2 metres high and, when the trees have dropped their leaves, it can be seen from the hill close by. Compared to Taatsi the finds were more closely concentrated around the sieidi. They were found on the eastern and southern sides of the stone, that is, from the lakeside (Fig. 3). Paulaharju (1932:41) tells how deer antlers and metapodials have been brought to the sieidi and the fishermen have oiled the stone with fish oil. Paulaharju indicates that the sieidi was first used in connection with other subsistence activities and only later became important for reindeer hunters too.

The animal bones from Näkkälä were mostly found in the humus layer and they were rather badly preserved, as mostly teeth and antler fragments were found. The animal bone material consisted of merely 47 bone fragments, of which 21 were identified as reindeer, four as bear, 15 as mammal and six as fish (Table 1). The reindeer bones were teeth, a fragment of a mandible, antler fragments, one fragment of pelvis and one unfused distal radius (Table 2). According to tooth wear (Miller 1974), the teeth and the mandible belonged to a minimum of four individuals of different ages. The age estimations ranged from c. two years to ten years. Antler finds were too fragmentary for reliable estimation of the sex and age distribution of the offered individuals, but most antler fragments are relatively robust which implies adult male reindeer.

The bear bones identified in the Näkkälä excavations were upper molars which probably derive from one bear skull. They were unearthed right next to the sieidi, at a c. 20 cm distance. The occlusal surface of the molars was facing up and, thus, the skull was probably deposited upside down, the anterior part pointing towards the lake. Two complete molars from the right maxilla and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common name</th>
<th>Scientific name</th>
<th>Näkkälä</th>
<th>Seitala</th>
<th>Taatsi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reindeer</td>
<td>Rangifer tarandus</td>
<td>21 (4)</td>
<td>62 (2)</td>
<td>9 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artiodactyl</td>
<td>Artiodactyla</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown bear</td>
<td>Ursus arctos</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mammal</td>
<td>Mammalia</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capercaillie</td>
<td>Tetrao urogallus</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merganser</td>
<td>Mergus sp.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallinaceous bird</td>
<td>Galliformes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bird</td>
<td>Aves</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pike</td>
<td>Esox lucius</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trout</td>
<td>Salmo trutta</td>
<td>12 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perch</td>
<td>Perca fluviatilis</td>
<td>225 (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>Pisces</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>258</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
two lingual fragments of molars from the left maxilla were found from the eastern side of the sieidi. Poorly preserved, unidentifiable fragments of mammal bone, perhaps parts of a skull, were found in connection with the molars.

Because most of the bone finds were teeth and antlers, it seems that mostly skulls, heads or/and antlers were offered in Näkkälä. One antler fragment from the Näkkälä excavation was a proximal fragment of a shed antler. Unfortunately, other animal bone finds did not suggest whether complete heads or

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Näkkälä</th>
<th>Seitala</th>
<th>Taatsi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cranium</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tooth</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antler</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vertebral</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper forelimb</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper hind limb</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremities</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
bare skulls were brought as offerings. The fragments of radius and pelvis indicate that, in addition, the skulls and antlers, also meatier parts, of reindeer carcass, or merely bones of these parts, were brought to sieidi.

UTSJOKI SEITALA

The offerings at Seitala sieidi have taken yet another form. The sieidi stone is relatively low and cannot be easily seen. It has been known for its peculiar shape (Fig. 4). On its south-western side there is a big hole – so deep that a man can crawl in it. In the cave-like hole there are smaller niches carved by the water. There were only a few finds close to the sieidi. The majority of the bones were concentrated on the lower hill north west of the stone. The number of antlers and bones found was substantial compared to the other sites. This goes hand in hand with Paulaharju’s (1932:31) description where he mentions that there used to be a large amount of deer antlers around the sieidi.

The animal bone material recovered from the Utsjoki Seitala excavations consisted of 116 animal bone fragments. All the bones identified to species, a total of 62, belonged to reindeer (Table 1). Most of the reindeer bones were parts of the cranium, such as antlers and teeth. In addition to antlers and teeth, also one mesial fragment of a mandible and three fragments of temporal bone (pars petrosa) were found (Table 2). Two antler finds were proximal fragments of shed antlers. Also, three fragments of upper vertebrae, twoatlases and one cervical vertebra body were found. As these vertebrae derive from the uppermost parts of the spine and all the other identified finds were cranial fragments, it can be assumed that these vertebrae were probably deposited attached to complete reindeer heads. Most of the tooth finds were too fragmentary for age estimation, but at least individuals of c. four to five years, c. two to four years and less than two years were present. Antler fragments included robust antlers of adult male reindeer as well as more slender ones belonging to female or immature individuals.

SIEIDI IN SUBSISTENCE LANDSCAPE AND WORLDVIEW OF THE SÁMI

The species diversities and skeletal frequencies were somewhat different at the three
siedi sites in our study. Mainly antlers and heads of reindeer were sacrificed in Seitala, whereas in Näkkälä a few fragments of long bones and bones of bear were also found. The species diversity was highest in the animal bone assemblage from Taatsi, as bones of reindeer, capercaillie and three species of fish were identified. In general, reindeer bones seem to be the commonest find in archaeologically studied siedi sites, while bones of birds and fish have also been identified in smaller numbers (e.g. Okkonen 2007; Mulk in press; cf. Manker 1957:52).

The bones found from these sites seem to derive mainly from animals that have had central roles in local subsistence strategies. Reindeer herding, hunting and fishing have played varying roles in the subsistence of the Sámi, their relative importance varying according to the period and geographic area (e.g. Itkonen 1948, Pieski 2000). Few Sámi dwelling sites have been archaeologically excavated, but it seems that the species diversity and the representation of different species in the archaeological material from the three siedi sites correspond to those from roughly contemporaneous dwelling sites and market places (e.g. Hambleton & Rowley-Conwy 1997; Lahti 2006). In general, the archaeological animal bone finds also correspond well with the written sources describing the offering practices in these particular sites. Only at Näkkälä, despite written evidence on fish offerings, we found little (merely six fish scales) trace of the fish offerings. This might be due to the bad preservation of some fish bones. In addition, if fish oil was sometimes spread on the stone this activity leaves no material traces.

The archaeological finds from Taatsi, Näkkälä and Seitala draw our attention to a number of important aspects of human-animal relationship and religious ideas among the Sámi. For instance, the role of crania and antlers in the offerings is closely related to religion and beliefs, and the proportion of crania and antlers on offering sites clearly differs from that in dwelling and market places (c.f. Hambleton & Rowley-Conwy 1997; Lahti 2006). Written sources mention different ways of offering a reindeer. It could be slaughtered at the site, buried alive or left alive by the stone (e.g. Paulaharju 1932, Itkonen 1948, Schefferus 1963 [1674]:177–178). Friis tells how especially the antlers of the slaughtered reindeer were brought to the siedi (Friis 1977 [1871]:141). Although offering these less meaty body parts of reindeer might be interpreted as rational or frugal behaviour, it is more likely that these parts of reindeer were offered because they were considered somehow better, suitable or special, and heads could also be considered to have special value and therefore be sacrificed. For instance, among the Khanty, the moose head was regarded as the tastiest part of the animal and was thus often spared for ritual meals (Jordan 2008:238). Also among the Sámi, the head of the reindeer has had special value attached to it. Reindeer skulls and antlers have been, for instance, deposited on graves (Zachrisson in press), and skulls and antlers are also common among the archaeological finds from other siedi sites (Okkonen 2007; Mulk in press). Reindeer tongue is considered to be great delicacy even today, and antlers have provided valuable material for handicrafts.

The treatment and condition of the offered bones also carry important religious meanings. According to Zachrisson (in press), it was important that the antlers came from living animals or were at least still attached to the spine. However, the finds from Seitala indicate that fallen antlers might also have been given to the siedi. Itkonen (1948:318) also states that fallen antlers were offered as well as whole heads with antlers still attached. Moreover, in Sámi society it was believed that all bones should be consecrated (Zachrisson 1985:84; cf. Graan 1899:66, Leem 1956 [1767]:428–429). The written sources from the 17th century onwards emphasize that the bones of the sacrificial animal were not to be broken (e.g. Högström 1980 [1746/1747]:191). But already at the
beginning of the 18th century there are sources telling how among the southern Sámis the meat of the sacrificial animal was eaten together with the marrow from the bones. Split bones could also be found in the excavated material from Sweden dating to the 17th and 18th centuries (Iregren 1985:105, Zachrisson 1985:87–88). Also in the material from Seitala there were cut marks in the bones (Fig. 5). Zachrisson (1985:94) has suggested that sources might have described what people should do, not what they did. The careful handling of the bones was related to the thought of a new animal that was to be created of the bones by adding new meat on the skeleton (Mebius 2003:143).

It is likely that the importance of the bear and the reason for bear offerings in Näkkälä lies in the special relationship between the bear and people in the Sámi worldview, and it is indeed known that the bear was given a special meaning in Sámi tradition. According to Mebius (2003:96–116), the bear was considered to be a holy animal. There was a relationship between man and bear that differed from the rest of the animals; for instance, in folklore a bear married a human woman (e.g. Fjellström 1981 [1755]:13). Because of these beliefs there were special rules and customs that needed to be followed when hunting a bear. Bear bones were also treated with respect and some bear graves have even been found. In Sweden some bear graves have been found close to sieidi sites (Fossum 2006:101), although in Finland no bear graves have been found and bear bones from sacrificial sites are also scarce. The dating of the bear bones in Näkkälä is similar to the main period of bear graves in Norway, which is 1000–1300 AD (Schanche 2000:271). Based on the single bear bone finds from sacrificial sites and graves, Schanche (2000:290–291) suggests that single bear bones also had a special meaning and powers. The reason why bear bones were offered probably lies in the idea that parts of an animal such as bear carried special value, force or meaning, and were therefore preferable offerings.

The religious aspect of the animal offerings is thus rather evident when ethnographic data and characteristics of the archaeological assemblages are considered. However, the religious interpretation of the animal offerings fails to take into account the complex relationship of religion, worldview and everyday practices. Ethnographic sources repeatedly emphasize that the offerings to the sieidi were made to ensure future hunting or reindeer success (e.g. Äimä 1903, Paulaharju 1932, Itkonen 1948), which clearly indicates that the animal offerings in sieidi sites are strongly connected not only to religion, but also to subsistence strategies. Reindeer were offered for reindeer success, fish for fishing success and bones of other game animals for hunting success (Itkonen 1948:311–318). Sometimes, according to Itkonen (1948:313–314; see also Mebius 2003:143), the bones of fish or reindeer were believed to assemble as a new animal. He recounts that sometimes reindeer bones were arranged in an anatomically correct order, and it was believed that subsequently a new reindeer individual was born of the skeletal remains. Frans Äimä (1903:115) describes how the best fish and meat was brought to the sacrificial place, then cooked there and afterwards eaten. It was believed that the food was shared with the god when people eat at the sacrificial place.

Fig. 5. A cut mark on an antler from Seitala. Photo: Tiina Äikäs.
Giving away food in order to maintain good hunting success in future can be interpreted as rational behaviour within a given view of the world, and the above-mentioned evidence indeed suggests that the Sámi offering tradition was deeply rooted in livelihood and subsistence, as well as in religion. Following Brück (1999), we argue that giving away meat, sacrificing reindeer crania and antlers or bear crania were not merely metaphorical or symbolical acts, but they were actually believed and perceived to work. In this sense, animal offerings on sieidi sites cannot be regarded as any different from, for instance, setting traps or manufacturing hunting equipment. However, the idea that sacrifice actually works is firmly rooted in religion and worldview. This kind of view on how the world works is based on the assumption of a reciprocal relationship between people and animal or the guardian spirit of the animals, the assumption that animals are attending to what people do and can react to human action (cf. Brightman 1993:186–187, Ingold 2000:51). Within such a conception of the relationships between humans and animals, the animal offerings on sieidi sites can be considered a completely possible and valid way to manipulate, for instance, the outcome of the hunt or success in reindeer herding.

The idea of reciprocal relationship between humans and animals has also deeper, religious meaning that we should take into account in our interpretation of the animal offerings on sieidi sites. More specifically, we mean that the practical and magical aspects of subsistence activities such as hunting can be considered inseparable and the whole course of events of the hunt may be interpreted on a religious level (Ingold 2000:48). For instance, Brightman (1993:186–187) states that the Rock Cree see hunting as a reciprocal relationship between people and the guardian spirit of the animals. Animals may appear in dreams prior to the hunt, which is considered a sign of future hunting success. During the hunt, respectful behaviour must be maintained and appropriate utterances spoken. And, after the kill, the remains of the animal must be treated with respect and appropriate offerings have to be made to ensure the recreation of the animals (Brightman 1993:103–135). Thus, the whole course of events leading to a successful kill and the subsequent treatment of the animal carcass can be seen as a dialogue between people and the guardian spirit of the animals, and shot through by the idea of a reciprocal relationship between people and nature where people have to take certain actions to ensure future hunting success and recreation of animals. Tarkka (1998:101–104) argues that in traditional Karelian culture the hunting ground was a liminal, ritually created sacred space, and the act of hunting could be described as ‘a ritual journey in a subsistence landscape imbued with mythical meaning’.

Ethnographic accounts of the hunting and reindeer-herding practices among the Sámi contain abundant evidence of similar or related ideas on the relationship between people and animals and the religious aspects of subsistence activities. For instance, Itkonen (1948:14–16) describes the typical course of a bear hunt as follows. The hunter was not to tell anyone, especially not women, when he went tracking a bear. When the bear’s winter nest was tracked, a party of three or four men set forth to kill the bear. They did not sharpen their weapons or eat on the day of the hunt. When the bear was killed, it was placed on the ground on its left flank so that its feet pointed towards the nest and the head to the left from the nest. The carcass of the bear was divided among the hunters, and the men did not return home along the same route that they had taken earlier. Thus, the course of the bear hunt was filled with religious meaning, and the hunt was an essential part of constructing the special relationship between bear and people in the Sámi worldview (cf. Mbius 2003).

The connection between animal offerings, livelihood and religion is further emphasized by the findings of hunting pits close Näkkälä. The dating of hunting pits is problematic (see
However, hunting pits and rectangular fireplaces can be considered as belonging to the same cultural context and being related to hunting (Hamari & Halinen 2000:166–167). For instance, the presence of hunting pits, rectangular fireplaces and a sieidi in the area of Näkkälätärvi might indicate simultaneous use of these places. This implies a possibility that the sieidi sites may, for instance, have been visited during hunting activities. Also, Itkonen (1948:311–318) describes how sieidi places were visited at the beginning of the hunt in order to ask for success. After the hunt men returned to eat a sacrificial meal where part of the catch was skinned, cooked and eaten (Itkonen 1948:311, 318). Along the same lines, many sieidi sites in Northern Finland seem to be an integral part of a network of sites relating to everyday activities. There is, for instance, a fishing site in proximity to the sieidi in Keimönä. The co-occurrence of sieidi and other, subsistence-related sites further confirms the connection of the ritual practices on sieidi sites with livelihood. Thus, it is clear that the ritual treatment of animals in sieidi sites worked in favour of the subsistence strategy in the worldview of the Sámi, but, at the same time, it was tightly interwoven with religious ideas and worldview.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the animal bone finds from three sieidi sites in Northern Finland were studied and the relationship between ritual treatment of animal remains, religion, worldview and subsistence practices was considered. We emphasized that animal husbandry practices, hunting and fishing were at the same time practical and spiritual activities among the Sámi, and we interpreted the animal offerings on sieidi sites as a nexus of daily subsistence strategies and religious meanings and practices in the Sámi worldview. It is clear, though, that, in addition to fresh theoretical approaches such as the one suggested in this paper, more archaeological excavations are also needed on Sámi sacrificial sites as well as on Sámi dwelling sites if we want to understand further the relationship between religion, society and livelihood among the Sámi in different areas and periods.

NOTES

1Project code: 1122623.
2Reference number for the Dating Laboratory, University of Helsinki.

REFERENCES


Fellman, J. 1906. Anteckningar under min vistelse i Lappmarken. II. Finska Litteratursällskapets tryckeri, Helsingfors.


