

# Sacred mountains and arctic rock art in northern Norway

*Montañas sagradas y arte rupestre ártico en el Norte de Noruega*

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## **Abstract:**

In the Sami worldview, mountains are living entities closely linked to the atmospheric deities, ancestral spirits and shamanic rituals. Peaks may be named after animals, due to a morphological resemblance or a mythical connection. Ancestral places of offering, with deposits of bone and antler of reindeers, known as *seides* are oftentimes located near distinctive sacred rocks, or below the summit. Isolated mountains with distinctive prominences are considered as protectors of the area and given the name *Haldi*. This paper is based in the author's field

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experience as an anthropologist and archaeologist who has climbed sacred peaks north of the Arctic Polar Circle. The symbolic dimension of arctic mountains is interpreted in connection with ancient representations of shamans and auxiliary spirits, in rock art panels photographed in the fjords of Tromso and Alta, in northern Scandinavia.

**Key Words:** sacred mountains – arctic rock art – northern Scandinavia - archaeology

**Resumen:** En la cosmovisión de los pobladores Sami, las montañas son entidades vivientes vinculadas a las deidades atmosféricas, los ancestros y los rituales chamánicos. Los picos pueden ser nombrados como animales en virtud de semejanzas morfológicas o conexiones mitológicas. Las montañas aisladas con prominencias distintivas se consideran protectoras de un área y se denominan “haldi”. Los lugares tradicionales de ofrenda, llamados “seides”, se sitúan debajo de las cumbres o junto a rocas sagradas distintivas. Esta investigación se basa en la experiencia de campo de la autora como arqueóloga y antropóloga que ha escalado picos al norte del Círculo Polar Ártico. La dimensión simbólica de la montaña es analizada en relación con motivos de chamanes y espíritus auxiliares, representados en sitios con arte rupestre fotografiados en los fiordos de Tromso y Alta, en el norte de Escandinavia.

**Palabras clave:** montañas sagradas – arte rupestre ártico – norte de Escandinavia – arqueología

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## Introduction

The Sami people of northern Scandinavia have cultivated a particularly intimate connection with the arctic nature, perceived

as a living entity. Ritual interactions with mountain peaks, considered to be sacred, are still a common occurrence in traditional activities, such as hunting and herding. Ancient rock art sites in northern Norway demonstrate that this unique connection with mountain and coastal landscapes goes back in time more than five thousand years.

For centuries, the Sami have followed their herds of reindeer using skies and *pulks*. Their nomadic subsistence has been based mainly on herding, and it is complemented with the hunt of terrestrial mammals (elk, fox and wild reindeer), as well as fishing. Sami settlements are usually located near the fjords, in order to facilitate access to maritime and inland resources. Traditional housing includes turf huts and conic tents called *lavvu*.



Figure 1: Artic mountains of Northern Norway

In the past, coastal Sami communities also engaged actively in hunting for sea mammals (seals) and whaling. Rituals and taboos

still regulate the fishing of the halibut, an enormous type of maritime fish which sometimes can weigh around 400 kg and whose capture is considered as complex as “game hunting”. In the old days, the hunt of the bear also used to be considered a sacred activity.

In the Sami worldview, mountains are living entities closely linked to the atmospheric deities and the ancestral spirits (Haetta, 1994, p. 6; Bradley, 2002, p. 9) (Figure 1). Isolated mountains with a distinctive prominence, in or near the summit, tend to be considered as protectors of the area where they are located, and they are given the name *Haldi*.

Mountains may be named after animals, due to a morphological resemblance or a mythical connection. Elevations of a rounded shape tend to be viewed as breasts, and certain peaks are capable of displaying a clearly anthropomorphic behavior, coming alive and moving from one place to the other (Reidar Bertelsen, personal communication, 2008). Male mountains are known to compete for the favors of a female mountain, as it is the case with the so called “Maiden Island”, in the Lofoten archipelago.

Different mountains can be associated with diverse deities. One group of peaks might be linked with the spirits of the ancestors, whilst another might be related to the mother goddess, or the god of hunt (Bradley, 2002, pp. 9-13). Mountains are also considered sacred, due to their role as *axis mundi*, in the connection of the celestial world, the terrestrial world and the underworld.

It is interesting to note that folk stories about trolls, which are widely spread in mountain areas of central and southern Norway (Ceruti, 2009a), are not so common among Sami groups in northern Norway (plus, they are virtually unknown in other parts of the Sami territory, such as northern Finland). Evil, ugly

mountain giants among the Sami are known as *stallo* and they have been identified with the Vikings, or the Norse tax collectors, traditionally dressed in black (Haetta, 1994). *Stallo* is said to come from the netherworld (not from the mountains) and he is described as carrying an axe. His extractive nature is also reflected in the fact that he is perceived as a cannibal, capable of eating human flesh or sucking the blood from the brain of children, and he is occasionally described as followed by lemmings.

### **Mount Tromsdalstind: climbing a sacred mountain north of the Arctic Polar Circle**

Tromsdalstind is a mountain 1238 meters high, located in the Arctic region of Finmark, overlooking the fjord of Tromso. The name of the mountain stands for “the peak in the valley of Troms”. Virtually everyone living in the coastal city of Tromso has climbed Tromsdalstind at least once in a lifetime, and some people will take the trouble to go up to its summit every year, at the end of the summer. The sacredness of the peak became publicly known a few years ago during an attempt to build a ski ramp on its slopes, a project that met strong opposition among some of the local Sami residents (Reidar Bertelsen, personal communication, 2008).

Accounts about the technicalities of the climb to the summit of Tromsdalstind were strikingly different. Some people told me that it was an easy ascent, while others described it as a rather difficult endeavor.

I undertook the climb of Tromsdalstind under unfavorable climate conditions. I walked out of the hotel carrying my

mountain backpack and I was immediately slapped by the bitter cold of the Arctic. I found my way across the long bridge that separates the island of Tromsø from the mainland; walked past the Arctic Cathedral, a church whose shape is meant to represent the traditional *lavvu* tents that the Sami use in wintertime. I kept walking towards the outskirts of the city, until I found myself in a little forest trail, entirely alone and wrapped in an endless white curtain of thick fog. I had already been warned about the fog, and instructed to come back as soon as I first caught a glimpse of it, since many people have lost their way on attempting to climb without visibility and eventually died of exposure to the cold. Fortunately, not long after I started hiking, the weather cleared.



Figure 2: on the summit of Tromsdalstind

The climb of the so called “summer route” of Tromsdalstind was somewhat demanding, in that the abrupt ridge of the peak fell almost vertically on the opposite side, and the glacial eroded

stones stood in precarious equilibrium, among patches of slippery frozen snow. With no crampons in my backpack, I had to undertake the pitches quite carefully, as it became quite clear that this was the slope of the mountain used by those who described the ascent as “very difficult”. When I eventually reached the snowcapped summit of Tromsdalstind, I was treated to a view of utmost beauty, as the horizon opened towards the dramatic alpine peaks and hanging glaciers overlooking the Lyngen fjord (Figure 2).

There are conspicuous piles of stones on the summit of Tromsdalstind, which are of modern origin, but I also had a chance to notice lower windbreakers of uncertain antiquity that were scattered nearby, which were partly covered in snow at the time of my ascent. It is interesting to keep in mind that traditional Sami places of offerings on mountains are usually located just below the summit (Bradley, 2002, p. 6). In my opinion, this particular aspect connected to the Sami selection of ritual places should not be overlooked, whenever archaeological surveys are undertaken in mountains located within ancestral Sami land. In Norwegian glacial archaeology, the snow patches below the summits of high mountains are surveyed for findings that may include iron arrowheads, wooden bows, shafts, or other cultural items related to ancestral hunting activities (Fabregd, 2009; Callanan, 2014; Ceruti, 2019). I believe that alternative interpretations -including those that might consider ancestral Sami offering sites- should not be disregarded by archaeologists.

### **Arctic rock art, shamanism and sacred places**

Sami religion has been described as embedded in the landscape (Kleppe & Mulk, 2006). Landforms that can be perceived as sacred

include mountains, lakes, peninsulas, islands, waterfalls, river rapids, and coastal areas. The coast is a very sacred place, where the world of the living merges with the celestial sphere and the underworld of the dead (Bradley, 2002, pp. 6-12). The sacredness attributed to these places is sometimes enhanced by ancient rock-art manifestations that are engraved on smooth surfaces eroded by the glaciers.

The coastal village of Alta, in the heart of the Sami territory, is home to one of the most magnificent collections of prehistoric rock art from the Arctic style. Literally thousands of carvings of reindeer, elk, bears and small boats are represented on the horizontal boulders that the glaciers smothered on the shores of the fjord. The petroglyphs of Alta have representations of hunting scenes, ceremonial processions and ritual activities (Figures 3 and 4). Rock art experts therefore assume that the area of Alta must have been an important ceremonial place in ancient times (Helskog, 2008). I noticed that many of the panels have been carved in view of a distant mountain called “*Haldi*”, nearly on thousand meters high, which is considered to be a sacred peak. In my exploration of the summit of nearby mountain Komsafjell, I documented what appeared to be ancient *seides* or places of offering, also in view of the summit of mount *Haldi* (Ceruti, 2009b).

*Seides* are natural rock formations of unusual or distinctive shape, which Sami people recognize as places of power. Some of them are used as places of offerings, to be presented with fish oil or reindeer meat. Disrespecting a *seide* is a serious offense that can cause the trespasser to suffer misfortune, or even an accident (Haetta, 1994).





Figure 3: The petroglyphs of Alta

At the foot of Komsafjell, I hiked towards a distinctive rock formation named *Seide Kjerringa*, located at the tip of a peninsula, overlooking the fjord of Alta (Figure 5). About six meters high, with the shape of a mushroom and a slight resemblance of the face of an old woman, it has been a traditional place of offerings for many generations. The Sami fishermen often approach it from the sea, and still make offerings of fish oil for the success in fishing (Bradley, 2002; Haetta, 1994).



Figure 4: Zoomorphic petroglyphs in Alta

Places of offering containing deposits of bone and antler are usually located in rock crevasses near conspicuous features of the landscape. The sites are frequently marked with carved wooden poles; smeared with fish fat and sparkled with the blood of sacrificed reindeer. As in other parts of the world, animal sacrifices among the Sami are meant to guarantee the abundance of food, to preventively appease the soul of the dead, for protection against lightning strikes and for the propitiation of the rain. In the old days, offerings of bone and antler of a white reindeer were presented to the sun, and the whole body of a sacrificed reindeer was buried (with only the antlers visible) when offered to the god of lightning. Some places of offerings are located right below the summit of a sacred peak.



Figure 5: A sacred rock near Alta

Sami people still share the notion that disrespecting a *seide* may bring bad luck or misfortune; it might even cause an accident to the trespasser. Dressing up on ceremonial clothes was an acceptable way to pay homage to the sacred places (Haetta, 1994, pp. 25-29). Another way of honoring sacred mountains and *seides* is by means of a singing: a traditional “*joik*” usually involves distinctive rhythm, nasal tones and imitation of animal sounds. *Joiking* involves the donation of energy and life force to the recipient of the tune (the expression is usually “*to joik someone*”). Norwegian culture has adopted the underlying principle of the *joik* in the tradition of composing specific melodies or songs for rituals of passage such as weddings or birthdays.

I visited a Sami campsite on the side of the river Alta and watched the children making shell necklaces inside a traditional *lavvu* tent. I also tasted reindeer stake for dinner. One evening, under the

gleam of the northern lights for which the town of Alta is famous, I joined the archaeologists who work at the local museum in a night visit to some untouched petroglyphs. The rock carvings barely visible in daylight become clearly distinguishable and virtually “alive” when illuminated by the light of a torch. It makes perfect sense that they were carved to be seen in the dark, as part of activities such as story-telling, with which the ancestral inhabitants of Alta would have entertained the many weeks of complete darkness during the arctic winter.

Reidar Bertelsen, the Dean of the Archaeology Department at the University of Tromsø (at the time of my visit), guided me on a field trip to see archaeological sites in the fjord of Tromsø, including some rock art panels. Located at the narrowest strait of the fjord, the rock art panel of Skavberg offers petroglyphs that represent the Arctic wildlife (bear, reindeer) (Figure 6), and couple of anthropomorphic figures holding a rounded object in their hands. Colloquially referred to as the “tennis players”, these images actually represent shamans beating the sacred drum to induce a trance (Figure 7). In this context, the animal motifs are thought to represent the auxiliary spirits invoked during the *seances*. Entranced, assisted by the spirits of bears and reindeer, the Sami shaman or *noaide* could start his journey with a spiritual climb to the sacred peak.

As far as Lapp shamanism is concerned, we shall confine ourselves to a mere reference, for it disappeared in the eighteenth century [...]. According to the seventeenth century authors, confirmed by folklore, the Lapp shamans held their seances entirely naked, like many other Arctic peoples, and attained genuine cataleptic trances during which their souls were believed to descend to the underworld to escort the dead or to seek the souls of the sick. This descent to the land of shades began



by an ecstatic journey to a mountain [...] which symbolizes the Cosmic Axis and hence is at the “center of the world” [...]. The seance included songs and invocations of the spirits; the drum [...] played a great part in producing the trance (Eliade, 1974, pp. 223-224).



Figure 6: Reindeer and bear motifs carved at Skavberg

Sami shamans would often travel to the underworld to accompany the soul of the dead or to retrieve the soul of the sick. The soul of the dead migrates to an underwater realm known as the *saivu*, where existence is believed to continue to evolve in a reality that is symmetrical and inverse to that of the living (Bradley, 2002, p. 12). In my opinion, the nearly perfect reflection of the forest and the houses on the still surface of the waters of the fjords (on windless days), could have contributed to the ancestral Sami belief that placed the spirits of the dead in a watery underworld, inversely symmetrical to the world of the living

(Figure 8). For mainland Sami groups, the *saivu* was located in lakes near sacred mountains, also visited by the shamans in their trances (Haetta, 1994, p. 11).



Figure 7: Anthropomorphic petroglyphs

The Sami shamans often mediated between people and the forces of nature, such as lightning and thunder, which were intimately connected with mountains. Deified natural forces in the Sami system of beliefs were often represented in the surface of the magic drums of the *noaide*. *Ukon*, also known as *Horragalles* o *Dierpmis*, was the god of lightening, thunder, rain and the wind (Bradley, 2002, p. 4). He was represented carrying a hammer or ax with which to pursue the evil mountain giants, showing remarkable similarities with the Nordic god Thor (Haetta, 1994, p. 15). The Sami god of wind was called *Biggalmai* and he carried

two shovels to brush away the bad weather (Haetta, 1994, pp. 15-18). *Baei´ve*, the sun, was represented as a rhomboidal figure with four perpendicular rays on which sacred entities were standing. The moon, *Aske* or *Mannu*, was acknowledged for its vital role as a source of light during the dark months of the Arctic winter. The Sami god of hunting was known as “the man of blood” or *Leaibolmmai*. As the “owner” of wild game, who ruled over the reproduction of the reindeer, he was represented carrying the branch of a tree (Haetta, 1994, pp.18-19) and he was ritually honored with offerings of reindeer, fish and birds (Bradley, 2002, p. 9). “The man from the water”, known as *Cahcolmmai*, was considered as the owner of the lakes. Spring goddess *Ruonanieida* was embodied in the lichen and moss. The god of illness and death was represented on horseback, presumably as a reminder of the raids suffered by the Sami people in medieval times.



Figure 8: Reflections in an arctic fjord



Figure 9: A sacred drum

The frame of the magic drum was made of the wood of a sacred tree, and covered with the skin of a sacred animal, the reindeer, whose antlers were also used for the percussion device -in shape of a T or Y- called *ballem* o *vietjere*. During divination rituals, the *noaide* shaman could “listen to the speech of the drum” and foresee the success in hunting or fishing (Haetta, 1994, p. 11). The motifs depicted on the magic drums were representations of deified forces of nature (Figure 9). Taking into consideration their



resemblance with the figures in the northern Scandinavian rock art, it is possible to suggest a remarkable continuity (of several millennia) in the shamanic rituals of the *noaide* (Sveen, 1996, pp. 16-17).

Missionaries who entered ancestral Sami communities during the XVII and XVIII centuries contributed to the suppression of the shamanic rituals in northern Scandinavia. The few magic drums that were not destroyed eventually became part of ethnographic museum exhibits (Kleppe & Mulk, 2008, pp. 5-10).

## Conclusions

One of the few indigenous groups in northern Europe, the Sami consider several conspicuous peaks in Finmark and Lapland as sacred mountains in their territory, such as the peak named Haldi, in the fjord of Alta, or the mountain named Tromsdalstind, overlooking the city of Tromso. Sacred mountain peaks are thought to be alive, which is also the case of distinctive rock formations known as *seides*, traditionally chosen as places of offerings. In the Sami worldview, the coast of the fjords is also a sacred place in which the human world, the celestial spheres and the aquatic underworld of the dead all come together.

The traditional Sami shaman, known as *noaide*, was believed to be able to visit the summit of sacred mountains and the depths of the sea during his trances, assisted by the auxiliary spirits of reindeer, bears, whales. Located on the coast of the fjords, the rock art panels of Skavberg and Alta offer zoomorphic petroglyphs that represent arctic wildlife (bear, reindeer) and anthropomorphic figures of shamans beating the sacred drum (Figure 10). In these contexts, animal motifs presumably represent the auxiliary spirits

invoked by the shamans during their spiritual journeys to the sacred peaks.



Figure 10: An image of a shaman playing the drum

Sami traditional beliefs reveal a particularly intimate connection with nature, in which mountains and coastal landscapes are still perceived as sacred living entities worthy of utmost respect. Rock art sites in northern Scandinavia demonstrate that this unique connection with Arctic nature goes back in time for thousands of years.



Figure 11: Norway political map.

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As an Argentinean scholar with some native ancestry, I have spent many years studying sacred mountains in diverse parts of the world, from an anthropological perspective. In 2008 I visited northern Norway, invited by the Department of Archaeology of

the University of Tromsø (Figure 11). It was a unique opportunity to go in the field and learn about traditional views on mountain peaks shared by the Sami. In 2010 I joined my colleagues from the National Technological University of Trondheim in archaeological surveys in the snow-patches of the mountains in Oppland. In 2013, I was invited by the University of Oslo to present a paper in a conference about Transformations and Climate Change. This academic visit gave me the opportunity to climb the highest peak in Norway and hike in the glaciers of Jotunheimen. In more recent years I was back in northern Scandinavia to climb mount Kebnekaise (the highest peak in Sweden) and to ascend peaks in the Lofoten Islands. I have written this paper to honor the arctic mountains and celebrate the wisdom of the Sami people. I owe special thanks to Reidar Bertelsen, Hans Christian Svoborg, Kalle Sognes, Brit Solli, Else Johansen Kleppe, Grete Lillehammer, Kari Berge, Knut Helskog, Richard Bradley, Oddmunn Farbregd, Martin Callanan, Ann Lundberg, Dennis and Klasina Nilsen.

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