

Emic and etic perspectives on the history of collecting Sami material culture

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Introduction

This paper is a contribution to our joint project *Time and space in Lule lappmark*. In this project our focus is on how the Sami objects in museums were collected, how they have been conserved, and how they have been used in research especially in relation to questions on Sami ethnicity. In this article we review the historical background to ethnographic and archaeological museum collections in general, to establish how and why Sami material culture was collected. In another paper we will attempt to analyse more closely a selection of Sami collections, to see how accessible this material is to researchers and the public, and further to examine the ideological basis for the selection of objects for display in exhibitions. Some of the underlying attitudes to the Sami, their past and present, are revealed through an analysis of the texts that accompany the various museum displays of Sami material culture. Questions like the following need be asked: what is generally selected from the collections for study and for display, and what cultural landscapes are being constructed, for instance in dioramas? Past and present need to be separated, since the original reasons for assembling the collections need a historiographic approach, whereas the reasons for still using certain Sami objects today and ignoring others require a 21st century assessment.

The aim of this presentation is to discuss how Sami material culture has been dealt with in national museums in particular, and in academic and culture-political settings in general. The ideological pre-conceptions of the relevant actors are a central concern. An important question is whether the underlying attitudes of individuals and the policies of institutions are politically motivated, and indeed whether it is possible to distinguish between the two? The present discussion is based on a series of visits to museums with Sami collections. The argument we pursue is based on our observations about the presentation of cultural heritage. Neither emic nor etic considerations are generally exposed in the presentations in exhibitions. The meaning and significance of these concepts are rarely dealt with.

Our first question involves the ethnographic, anthropological and archaeological collections, including exhibitions. It is rarely made explicit that archaeological artefacts belong to Sami culture. This denial applies to internal museum classification and to exhibition texts. Political attitudes often prevail over academic insights. Material culture derived through archaeological fieldwork is generally not linked to ethnic affiliation when presented in exhibitions. This is thought-provoking since the very same physical remains may be clearly identified as reflecting Sami ethnicity when it is presented in publications.

Secondly, it is important to understand the mechanisms that lie behind the suppression of the other, in this case the Sami people, as shown by the reluctance to discover or identify a Sami presence through material culture. The archaeological and historical heritage of northern Sweden as a whole has been consistently marginalised as a result of its economic and political relationship to the central authorities of Sweden. Museums today underplay Sami culture in their exhibitions and in other media, even though political progress has led to a belated recognition of Sami rights, as confirmed through the establishment of the Sami parliaments in Norden.

There is a third question, perhaps the most challenging yet most intractable issue, which is how the exhibitions are appreciated by museum visitors. What aspects of Sami culture, history or contemporary life receive notice from visitors, and how selective or how inventive is the public gaze? Cultural production is perhaps easier to study than cultural consumption.

Several categories of source material are relevant for the present study. The category that we consider first of all is the ethnographic material. Material remains obtained through archaeological and anthropological studies, including ethnoarchaeology, form the second category. The third and final category is physical anthropological material, especially human skeletal remains. We argue that emic and etic perspectives ought to be embraced in the interpretation of all three categories, and to this end these perspectives need to be examined further.

Emic and etic perspectives

Recognition of different culture traditions and the particular culture histories of different groups are preconditions for understanding and respecting indigenous peoples who have cultural backgrounds that are different from the point-of-view of the majority including those

who control the national state. A conscious use of the hermeneutic approach may be helpful in the dialogues that must take place at various and diverging levels: between the past and the present; between etic and emic attitudes to reality as we see it; and between peoples with different religious views and epistemologies, where fundamentally different cultural values may operate. Resolving these issues will in many cases become a complex matter. The distinction between emic and etic considerations is important, as this distinction underlies many assumptions in discussions within the humanities.

The terms emic and etic were first coined by the linguist Kenneth L. Pike and they are now generally accepted and used by scholars within the social sciences, but not quite in the same way as Pike conceived the concepts in 1954. It is Marvin Harris' distinction between etic and emic approaches and his discussion of the issue first presented in 1968 that have become the general reference (Harris 1990).

By emic is generally meant the insider view. An emic approach seeks to describe another culture – Sami culture in this case – in terms of the categories, concepts and perceptions of the people being studied. An etic approach considers the outsider view that heritage managers all too often adopt. They tend to use only the categories and concepts of modern, western ways of thinking within the humanities and the social sciences in order to describe a culture under study. Both approaches ought always to be present. Any lack of culture historical focus in heritage management is liable to result in the neglect of emic and etic dimensions in interpretations, in particular when a study is based on archaeological evidence. Integrated emic and etic insights into Sami world-view and ideology in relation to Sami material culture need further research in order to improve the general understanding of these matters. We need to investigate in more detail meanings in traditional Sami society, and not least their practices during prehistoric times. Ethnicity is generally a central theme in the context of northern Fennoscandia, but ethnicity has hardly been considered problematic in connection with Nordic culture and what evidence has been taken for granted to be representative of it. This lack of concern requires further attention.

Nordic culture in the Nordic area – a matter of course

The national culture heritage is generally represented through the culture of the majority population. This is also the culture exposed and underlined in the assessment of national

culture identity. This is definitely the case in the Sami areas in the northern part of the Nordic countries and in northern Russia (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Sapmi – the land of the Sami. Grey shading indicated the area inhabited by Sami people today (Drawing: I.-M. Mulk & Ellinor M. Hoff).

Characteristic for Nordic culture is a value-set resting on Germanic – Indo-European – hegemony, and the equivalent Finnish hegemony in Finland. Society is based on a world-view resting on dichotomies about normal versus not normal. The publication of the proceedings from the 13th Nordic meeting for archaeologists which took place in Tromsø 1970 entitled *Bonde – veideman – bofast - ikke bofast i nordisk forhistorie* (in our translation: Farmer –

hunter/gatherer – sedentary – non-sedentary in Nordic prehistory (Simonsen & Munch 1973) presents a shared value system in the general attitude expressed within Nordic archaeology. The norm is Nordic, Germanic, farmer, sedentary as opposed to Northern, Lappish (the term in use by outsiders at the time of the publication), Sami, nomadic, etc. (see also Schanche & Olsen 1983).

The important questions therefore relate to the implications of ethnic difference. How was Sami culture represented in the national museums in the past, and how is it represented today? And who has the responsibility for including and displaying the cultures of indigenous ethnic groups, among which the Sami constitutes by far the largest number of people in the Nordic countries?

Steps towards discrimination of Sami people and culture

We have chosen museums in Sweden as the case study discussed here, as the history of museum collecting in the Sami area of Sweden underlines very well the points we want to make. Nowadays there is a general assumption that the Sami always have been subordinated to the Swedish national state, an attitude which seems rooted in the concept of cultural stages that dominated thinking in Sweden the 1800s. In fact prior to the 1600s the Sami in northern Sweden generally lived independently and undisturbed by surrounding societies. Meetings with traders, for example the *birkarlar* in the northern part of the Gulf of Bothnia, usually took place in connection with markets.

After the Sami areas were incorporated in the nation states at the beginning of the 1600s church sites were established. These also became meeting places for tax collecting and for current legal affairs. It was at this time that the Sami drums were forbidden and were confiscated and mostly destroyed. Despite these changes the Sami people were still the majority population in the northern areas of Sweden and the judicial system still reflected local interests. By the middle of the 1700s the Sami formed the majority in the so-called *lappmarken* areas in Sweden. The shared interests of the church and the state affected the Sami society from within and consequently changed its foundation. Håkan Rydving has shown how quick and dramatic the change was from Sami pre-Christian to Sami Christian religion in his dissertation *Drumtime* (1993). This change took place between the 1670s and 1740s.

Without their traditional religion Sami people became more exposed to repression. The historian Karin Granqvist has demonstrated this process in her interpretation of the methods applied by the state and the state church as a means of tackling Sami resistance. Traditions, customs and moral values embedded in Sami culture were either ignored or rejected, and the Sami appeared as the different *other* (our emphasis) and their culture and lives were perceived as uncivilised (Granqvist 2004:209ff). It was not until the latter part of the 1800s that the Sami were exposed to a more structured discrimination and a harsh political *Swedification* took place. Lennart Lundmark in his book *Samenes skatteland* (2006) has provided a series of examples of how the county administrative boards, which represented the Swedish government in northern Norr- and Västerbotten, misappropriated Sami land rights using overtly colonial methods. Sami land was taken over in connection with tax collecting. Of course these changes also affected the traditional Sami *sijdda*-organisation prior to the 1600s (Lundmark 2006:34, see also Mulk & Bayliss-Smith 1999).

Around the turn of the century 1700/1800 the county administration started a decisive attack against the Lappmarken legal administration. This was a time of upheaval in Sweden both from an ideological, political and social point-of-view. There is no straightforward explanation for this unrest. Lundmark has pointed out three factors which ought to be considered: the most basic explanation he presented was to see Swedish attitudes as reflecting the general changes taking place in Europe in ways of thinking, rooted in new paradigms about culture stages. His second explanation related to Swedish internal – domestic – politics, while his third concern was at the level of the individual political actors (Lundmark 2006:94ff).

Lundmark's analysis is relevant to our discussion of how the discipline of archaeology was founded and how the major museums were established in the Nordic countries. A conclusion, which we are tempted to draw on the basis of this brief summary of the history of the Sami in northern Sweden, is that historical facts are exposed to selective memory. This is definitely the case when it comes to Sami history. It is the history of the colonisers rather than the history of the colonised that has prevailed.

Movements against church and local authorities from the 19th century onwards

The new discipline archaeology became established primarily as a museum subject early in the 19th century, with the Three Age System that had been developed in Denmark as the

underlying framework for systematization and final classification. It is the history of archaeology and of museum studies from this time onwards which is our primary concern here. The actual time in focus was also a time when local authorities acted in full agreement with the Lutheran orthodox church. In areas with Sami settlements suppression of Sami people by the church had led to unrest. The Læstadian religious revival movement in the middle of the 1800s was to some extent a protest against the superior power of the church. The most outstanding event was the Kautokeino uproar in 1852. This led to the execution of the two persons Mons Somby and Aslak Hætta in 1854. It took more than 140 years before the reburial of their remains took place in 1996, an event that was seen by the Sami people in Norway as a victory (see also Mulk 2002, Schanche 2002).

One of the most important Sami leaders in the early 1900s was Elsa Laula (name after marriage: Laula Renberg) from Dikanäs in Åsele lappmark. Her experiences from growing up in Åsele lappmark, including the herding of reindeer and the tilling of new arable land in harsh surroundings, were important experiences for her struggle for justice for the Sami people and recognition of Sami culture. Elsa Laula was trained as a midwife. On behalf of the Sami in the southern *lappmarks* she travelled to Stockholm to complain about social conditions. She published a booklet (1904) entitled *Inför lif eller död? Sanningsord i de lappska förhållandena* (in our translation: *About life and death. True words about Sami conditions*). In it she wrote that one does not find out about Sami conditions by looking at them as if studying a colourful painting and comparing it to the higher Swedish cultural stage.

In 1903 *Lapparnas Centralförbund* - the Lappish Central Organisation - was founded at a meeting in the Sami hut at Skansen, and Elsa Laula was elected its first leader. The following year the first Sami association was founded in Fatmomakke and the Sami national day was established as the 6th of February. The first Sami national meeting was held in Trondheim on that day in 1904, and the opening speech was held by Elsa Laula. She realized that Sami cooperation over the national borders was absolutely necessary, and her work also prepared the ground for the coming cultural political movements. She saw the gradually increasing poverty among the Sami in Sweden as resulting from the discriminatory policies of the State (Laula 1904).

It ought to be pointed out that Sami issues have been put on the political agenda more frequently in Norway than in Sweden since the 1950s. An emerging academic debate about

ethnicity was a part of this process – for example, the anthropologist Harald Eidheim pointed out as early as in 1958 that the Sami were subject to discrimination (Eidheim 1958). So far as we know, Eidheim's book was the earliest focus within an academic context on the role of discrimination in Sami social issues.

Sami ethnicity was brought up as a research topic in a *Magister Artium* dissertation in 1974 (see Kleppe 1977), and some years later the political issues embedded in archaeological discussions about who exactly were the people represented in archaeological remains, was raised in Norway at The Nordic Contact Seminar, a forum for students of archaeology in the Nordic countries. The striking title of a paper published in the proceedings from that seminar is, in our translation *Were they all Norwegians? An ethno-political critique of Norwegian archaeology* (cf. Schanche & Olsen 1983). Today the new legal status of the Sami ought to be reflected in presentations of national history in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia (cf. Fig. 1). However, the indigenous status of the Sami is often not remembered or, for other reasons, is left out.

Early interests in Sami ethnographic material culture through collecting

Even in the 21st century the Sami role in Scandinavian heritage is often forgotten, yet some 19th century pioneers had a more inclusive vision (Fig. 2). Sami culture was prominently displayed when Arthur Hazelius (1833 – 1901) opened his museum in Stockholm to the public in the 1870s. Hazelius put into practice the idea that all of Sweden should be represented in the museum collections that he organised. Therefore Sami culture was part of his project to collect everything that was about to disappear in buildings and in everyday items and traditional clothing from all over Sweden, focusing on material of later date than 1520. The museum that he opened in Stockholm was originally entitled *Skandinavisk-Etnografiska samlingen* on the 24th of October 1873. This was located in Drottninggatan 71.

The name was changed to *Nordiska Museet* in 1880. One of the earliest exhibitions – if not the earliest - of Sami culture was at this museum in Stockholm. This was an autumn migration of Sami reindeer herders from the Lule lappmark, and it was the subject of a museum display as early as 1874 (Nyström 2002:95, see also Medelius *et al.* 1998). The display was done in cooperation with Gustaf von Düben and his wife Lotten who had donated their Sami collection to Hazelius (Medelius *et al.* 1998:258). Lotten von Düben was an excellent

photographer, and she had accompanied her husband on the research journeys that formed the basis for a book that he published in 1873 (von Düben 1873)



Fig. 2 The courtyard at Etnografiska museet, Wallingatan, Stockholm 1929. A *seite* is seen near the window towards right. (© Etnografiska museet, Stockholm, photographer unknown.)

In fact an interest in collecting Sami objects had begun much earlier, in the 1600s, when church, state and some private people began to take an interest in exotic objects. Amongst these early collectors was the church which often collected for the purpose of destroying objects that were considered harmful, the most well-known example being the Sami drums. The drum was considered a central instrument in what the church saw as idolatry. Some few of these objects were, however, enrolled in collections – mostly private ones. This is a rather well-known part of the history of early collecting. For further details about the Sami drums we refer to the detailed studies by Ernst Manker (1938, 1950).

In the Era of the Enlightenment, especially the later 1700s, a more systematic interest in collecting and classifying all aspects of nature and culture became evident throughout Western Europe. This interest is well exemplified by the Cook expeditions of the 1760s and 1770s, where scholars included ethnographic objects and human remains in their vast project to collect and describe the natural and cultural history of the new worlds that they encountered in North America and the Pacific islands. The aim with these collections was to understand and to classify non-Western peoples, in part to facilitate commerce and colonialism as well as to promote the Enlightenment project. Ethnographic collections have been seen as an integral part of colonialism (see Edmond [1977] 1997, Thomas 1991, Rio 1999).

The Swedish interest in the north was also part of this European movement in which knowledge was seen as the key to expansion in commerce and political control. Carl von Linné's journey to Lappland was motivated at one level by his passion for the collection of plants, but his official support and his growing renown can also be seen as part of a much wider movement in which a more systematic knowledge of people and environment was linked to the Swedish state's own project for greater political control of people and resources.

The Great Exhibition in London of 1851 was a landmark in ethnographic display. Nations from all over the world took part, displaying examples of their natural marvels, cultural curiosities and manufactured products. The Sami were singled out alongside other ethnic groups regarded as especially 'exotic', and they were displayed in an exhibit that included live Sami people. This interest in 'exotic' peoples was imitated in the world fairs and exhibitions that later took place in other European cities, such as Paris, Berlin and Copenhagen.

The open-air museum at Skansen in Stockholm included Lappvistet: the Sami camp site from Frostviken which was inaugurated around 1891. It was actually inhabited by a Sami family. The idea of displaying live human beings is a topic of its own, not the least since emic and etic values seem to have been totally beyond consideration. This issue was first discussed in museum circles about ten years ago by Gjestrum (1995).

In the second half of the 1800s and well into the 1900s trade with exotic objects, including Sami objects was big business. Sami objects in museums have been documented in two recent

surveys. The first inventory of Sami collections in Sweden was made in 1980, commissioned by *Kulturrådet* of the Swedish government and the Sami organisation *Riksförbundet Sameäitnam* (Mulk & Nilsson 1980). Twenty years later *Ájtte*, *Svensk Fjäll- och Samemuseum* together with the Sami Parliament financed a new initiative to get Sami objects in collections returned to their place of origin. *Ájtte* and the Sami Parliament together decided to initiate a project on the return of Sami museum material in 2000. Not all the institutions that were contacted replied, but the majority did (Edbom 2005, appendices). The aim was to produce a report on the location of Sami objects with special attention to religious objects and skeletal remains. This project has resulted in a useful report which gives an interesting picture of what had been collected. It is, however, a problem that contextual information about the objects, including information about exact place of origin, often is lacking. In order to gain insight into this matter there is a need for research by specialists with a combined expertise in Sami studies and museum studies. This is a matter we have been dealing with in our joined project, but it is premature to launch results yet.

Archaeology and anthropology – invisible Sami material culture

The growing interest in race biology in the second half of the 1800s led in Sweden to the foundation of *Antropologiska sällskapet* (Anthropological Society) established in 1873 on the initiative of Gustaf Retzius, Hans Hildebrand, Oscar Montelius and Hjalmar Stolpe (Ljungström 2004). In 1877 the name was changed to *Svenska sällskapet för antropologi och geografi* (Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography). Research on the Aryans was a central theme from the very start of the society. The term Aryans was used by linguists in a way that is synonymous with the term Indo-Europeans in our time (cf. Kyllingstad 2003:24). An important difference, however, is that the linguists of the 1800s saw language and biological heritage as inseparable and aspects of the same phenomenon. Sven Nilsson and Rudolph Keyser considered the Sami population to be a north-European indigenous people. This interpretation was questioned in the 1860s when it was argued that two Stone Age cultures had existed and the so-called ‘arctic’ included the Sami. The idea of co-existence was, however, soon rejected, particularly after the denial by A. W. Brøgger (1909) of any connection between the Sami and the Arctic Stone Age. As a result the non-Sami model became the prevailing orthodoxy, at least until the publications of Gutorm Gjessing in the 1930s and 1940s. Gjessing’s work was based on archaeological material from northern-Norway (Gjessing 1935). His views on the matter were, unfortunately, not always consistent (see also Kleppe 1974:19-47, Hansen & Olsen 2004:19, 27-30).

In Sweden the main boost to museum collections stemmed from large-scale archaeological surveys in the 1940s-1970s, connected to the hydro-electricity schemes of the state-owned Vattenfall company. Starting in the early 1900s in the Lule river valley a large number of Sami sites had already been destroyed by dam building and inundation. After new laws were passed in 1942 systematic archaeological investigations began, and some sites were excavated. These finds were incorporated into museum collections in Stockholm and today they form a large part of the Sami material that is held in museums (Zachrisson 1976). Few of these finds have been exhibited, and as yet these objects have not been fully accepted as part of the Sami heritage.

Rendering the Sami prehistory invisible is predominant in the way the museums have chosen to classify objects and other physical cultural remains which can be associated with Sami culture. This ambivalence in the interpretation is particularly evident in the way Sami prehistory is made invisible in exhibitions. What has been verified by the research community in question and is standard reading in scientific publications has generally not penetrated into public presentations like exhibitions. This is the case even at institutions like national museums and university museums which claim that their displays are research-based presentations.

Studies based on physical anthropology and race biology

Sami history and prehistory have for long been regarded by the general public as extremely interesting, and today this is still the case. It is a view shared by academics who see the Sami as providing fascinating and exotic themes for research. This positive evaluation is in contrast to the political and ideological devaluation of Sami issues during the same time period.

Research carried out on human skeletal remains – physical anthropology – meant that people were classified in groups according to height, and other significant features. Issues like race, ethnicity and indigenous people were often intermingled. A theme often dealt with was Sami origin, including questions on whether the Sami were an indigenous people or not.

Perceptions around these questions have changed over the years. During the late 19th century the Sami were considered an indigenous people; in the early 1900s, the opposite was the dominating opinion. Gustaf Hallström was an influential archaeologist who led the argument for a late immigration of the Sami. His article (1929) *Kan lapparnas invandringstid fixeras?* (in our translation: *Can the immigration of Sami people be determined?*) asserted that the

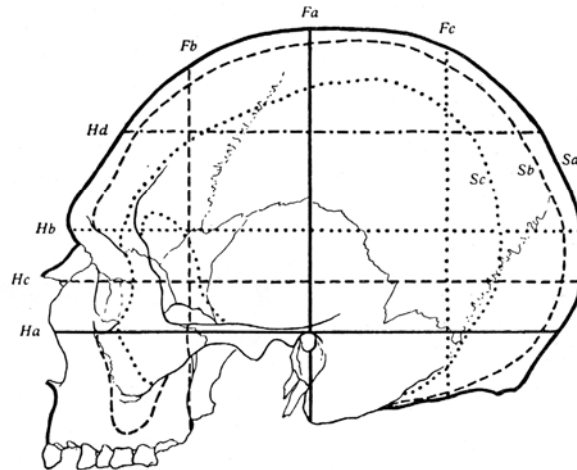
Sami were newcomers, arriving from the east during the early Iron Age. He has had a great influence on Swedish debate and general opinion in these matters, including the legal system, archaeologists, historians as well as genetic research.

Race biological studies were never pursued in Norway as the leading research trend to the same degree. Physical anthropology in Norway had its origin in K. E. Schreiner's work as head of the anthropological institute in Oslo. During his time the collection of skeletal material was extended, with most of the material dating from the Viking Age and the Medieval Period and coming from what were considered to be Sami burials, of which Schreiner himself had excavated several (Kyllingstad 2003:115). His research into what he classified as Sami physical features was published in two large volumes (Schreiner 1931, 1935). These studies were based on 582 craniums each of which had been examined with reference to 63 standard measures and angles. These results were presented as 37 relational measures associated with seven different local groups (Fig. 3).

KRANIOGRAMME UND GEOMETRISCHE ZEICHNUNGEN

TAFEL I—LXXXIX

Die Kranioogramme nach der Methode von P. und F. SARASIN mittels des Kubuskraniophors und des Diagraphen MARTINS, die geometrischen Zeichnungen mittels des Kubuskraniophors und des Dioptrographen MARTINS von der Zeichnerin des Anatomischen Instituts, Frl. S. MÖRCH, ausgeführt. Sämtliche Figuren in 1/2 nat. Gr.



Die Figur orientiert über die Lage der verschiedenen Schädelumrisse:

1. Sagittalkurven (*S*):
 - a. Die Mediansagittale —.
 - b. Die Augenmittensagittale ----, durch die Mitte der Augenhöhle.
 - c. Die Augenrandsagittale ·····, durch den am meisten lateral gelegenen Punkt des äußeren Orbitalrandes.
2. Horizontalkurven (*H*):
 - a. Die Basalkurve —, entspricht der Ohraugen-Ebene.
 - b. Die Glabellarhorizontale ·····, im Niveau des oberen Orbitalrandes.
 - c. Die Augenmittenh horizontale ----, durch die Mitte der Augenhöhle.
 - d. Die Scheitelhorizontale ----, in der Mitte des senkrechten Abstandes der Glabellarhorizontalen von dem höchsten Punkt des Scheitels.
3. Frontalkurven (*F*):
 - a. Die Ohrfrontale —, senkrecht zur Ohraugen-Ebene und zur Mediansagittalen durch das Porion.
 - b. Die Vordere Frontale ----, in der Mitte zwischen der Ohrfrontalen und dem vordersten Punkt der Glabella.
 - c. Die Hintere Frontale ·····, in der Mitte zwischen der Ohrfrontalen und dem Ophisthokranion.

Fig. 3 Schreiner's principles for measuring skulls (Schreiner 1935).

Schreiner's research was never integrated into the prevailing line of human osteological research of his time: racial hygiene. His Norwegian colleague Halfdan Bryn, who was a medical doctor for the military, exclusively studied the physical features of living humans. Bryn became involved in the work carried out by the race biological institute in Uppsala which had been founded in 1922 (Kyllingstad 2003:83). A few years later, early in 1928, Schreiner and Bryn had an open row about the general conclusions to be drawn on the basis of Bryn's measurements and their reliability. Some incorrect calculations were also discovered by Schreiner (Kyllingstad 2003:141). The technical mistakes were sorted out, but Bryn and Schreiner still did not agree on the conclusion to be drawn. Bryn had included

ideological thinking in his anthropological research. Schreiner also expressed openly a different attitude towards what the Nordic race biological concept implied (Kyllingstad 2003:13), and he managed not to cross the border over to racism.

It is thought-provoking that Schreiner's methods for studying skeletal material were the only ones available until the 1980s, and as late as in the 1990s the term "Nordic" was being used as a characterization of human skulls from Varanger in eastern Finnmark, dated to the Stone Age (Kyllingstad 2003:177).

Concluding remarks

Sami history and prehistory are topics of great interest to the public and within the research community. The oldest collections of Sami material culture in European museums reflect times when interest for the exotic and the strange was prominent. The items collected were taken to private estates, to museums and to universities, and parts of these collections are now dispersed to museums all over Europe. What took place in Sami areas was not unique, as similar collections were being gathered from all over the world. The acquisition and collection of objects and human remains was important for the new nations of the modern age, and for the establishment of their identities. When these new states were consolidated in the mid 1800s, the museum collections of that time became manifestations of their identity at a national level.

Elsa Laula's political actions in the early 1900s stemmed from her dissatisfaction with the way the Sami people were regarded and how they were treated by other Swedes, and were important steps towards the Sami recognition of own values, and their own self-image as a people in no way inferior to the Nordic majority population. For a long time other Swedes had looked upon themselves as belonging to a 'higher stage of culture' than the Sami, a belief that found implicit support in the existence of Sami still practicing a nomadic or hunting and fishing way of life. This social-darwinist attitude also found support in race biological studies, which had a particularly strong standing in Sweden at that time. Laula's initiatives resulted in the Sami people forming their own political organization, and she also initiated cooperation between Sami people across the national borders. The intense debate in the media and within academia that took place in the following years shows the importance of these new and more modern forms of Sami ethnic self-assertion.

From an academic point of view it is important to stress the difficulties that were experienced by museums in the interpretation of their collections and in their presentation of simplified explanations about human variability, geographical mobility, cultural interaction, and historical change, to mention the central issues that had to be confronted. It seems to have been particularly difficult, and it remains difficult today, for Scandinavian museums to break away from inherited narratives, in particular old paradigms about ethnic identity, and especially when it comes to Nordic/Indo-European identity. Until the early 1970s ethnic labels were rarely used in publications and museum displays, particularly when archaeological material was the source material. In relation to the Sami, there still seems to be a substantial gap between ideas current in academia concerning the attribution of ethnic affiliation and the implicit denial of any such link in museum exhibitions.

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