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Reindeer-herding cultures in northern Nordland, Norway: Methods for documenting traces of reindeer herders in the landscape and for dating reindeer-herding activities

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on reindeer-herding culture in northern Scandinavia. Reindeer herding concerns the day to day work with the herd on seasonal pastures and on the spring and autumn migrations. The main purpose is to discuss the age of reindeer pastoralism in northern Scandinavia. The transition to a reindeer-herding culture in northern Scandinavia occurred as reindeer came into private ownership, by which means reindeer acquired a new status in society. At the same time a new settlement pattern was established, involving a shift away from watercourses and new landscape elements coming into use. These new areas were the high hills between the rivers. In following the reindeer, people established new settlements in the reindeer pastures. At the same time, new types of physical features were established in the same areas, such as milking places “(gieddi)” and bone deposits. In Hamarøy municipality there is a large number of documented physical cultural remains related to reindeer pastoralism. These are hearths, places where reindeer were milked, and bone deposits that have been dated from the end of the late Iron Age, through the medieval period and to recent times. It is argued that they can be linked to a transition from a hunter-gatherer society to pastoralism, a change that can be dated back to the transition between the Iron Age and the Middle Ages, with the initial phase apparently dating from the end of the late Iron Age. This is a pattern that coincides with similar surveys in other areas, such as on the Swedish side of the Norwegian border. It is argued therefore that the transition to reindeer pastoralism occurred at this time.

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1. Introduction

The main objective of this article is to analyse archaeological material from northern Nordland, where the survey area consisted of the mountains of Hamarøy municipality (Figs. 1 and 2). This is an area that contains documented hearths, milking places, stone fences and bone deposits. The sites have been dated from the late Iron Age to recent times. This area was used by the reindeer Sámi located in Sirkas sijdda, who had their main winter settlement on what is now the Swedish side of the border and who moved up into the high mountains in the summer. The sijdda consisted of family groups that worked together to keep the reindeer collected within a restricted reindeer grazing area (Withaker, 1955: 54–55). The main question is whether this material located in the study area can be linked to reindeer herders or to hunter-gatherers. Moreover, the objective is to investigate whether this cultural material can provide evidence of when the transition from a hunter-gatherer society to a reindeer-herding culture occurred.

To answer this question, the criteria which can be used to differentiate between the reindeer-herding culture and the hunter-gatherer culture are discussed. The analysis focuses on the settlement patterns and material cultures associated with the different landscape types. The question is: what distinguishes a reindeer-herding society from a hunter-gatherer society? The reindeer-herding landscape and the different traces associated with a reindeer-herding society are therefore compared to what we find in a landscape associated with a hunter-gatherer society. There is also a focus on what kind of changes occurred at an ideological level as society changed from a hunter-gatherer society to a reindeer-herding society. Herding concerns the day to day work with herd on seasonal pastures and on the spring and autumn migrations (Paine, 1964: 83, 1994: 19–20).

2. Research history

As late as the beginning of the twentieth century, many researchers believed that reindeer pastoralism dated far back in time (Sirelius, 1916; Hatt, 1918; Itkonen, 1919; Wiklund, 1919, 1948: 62–68). Although there was some disagreement concerning the

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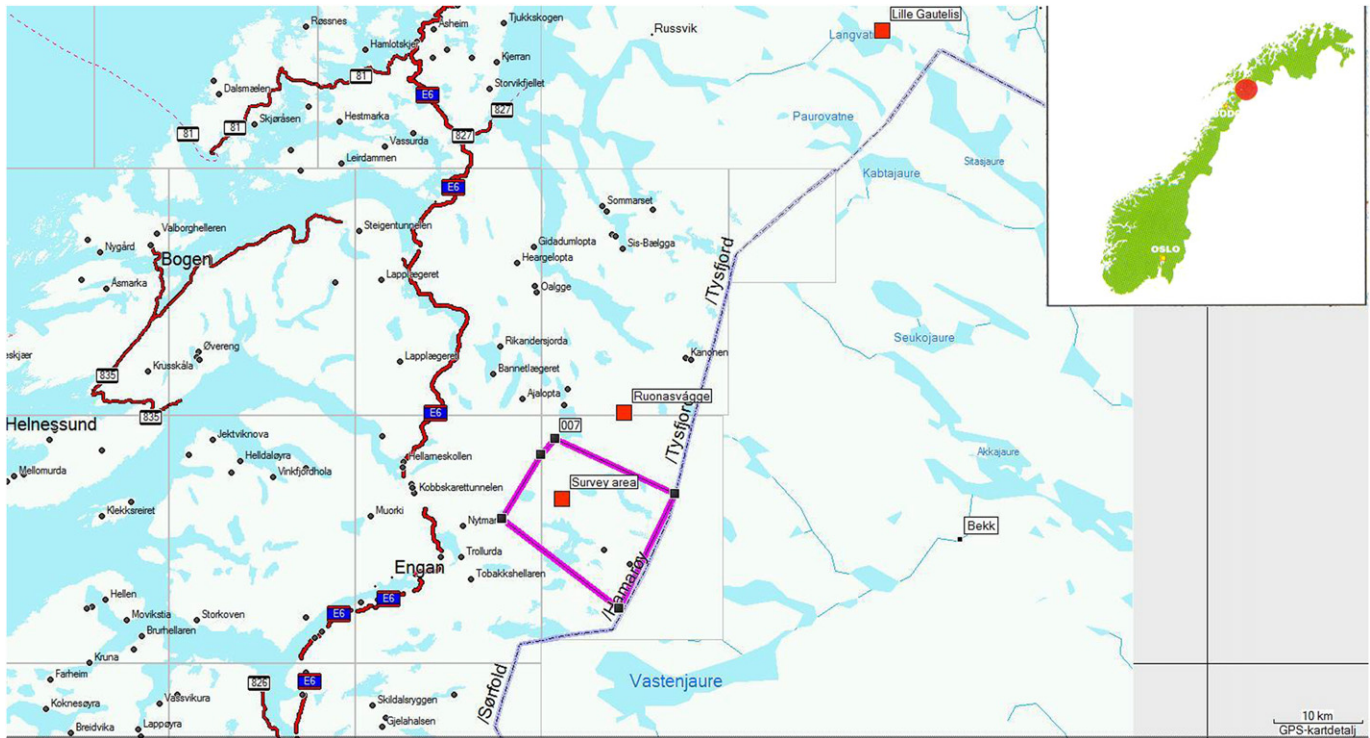


Fig. 1. Overview of the mentioned localities. The survey area is marked on the map.

earliest dating of this transition, most researchers agreed that reindeer herding could be dated at least as far back as the late Iron Age, i.e. 560–1030 AD.

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, researchers began to question this conclusion. In particular, the analysis of pitfalls and

other trapping devices for wild reindeer, which had been documented in Varanger in Northern Norway, were important for dating the transition to reindeer pastoralism (Vorren, 1944, 1980). It was documented that wild reindeer were trapped as late as the seventeenth, eighteenth and even up to the nineteenth century in

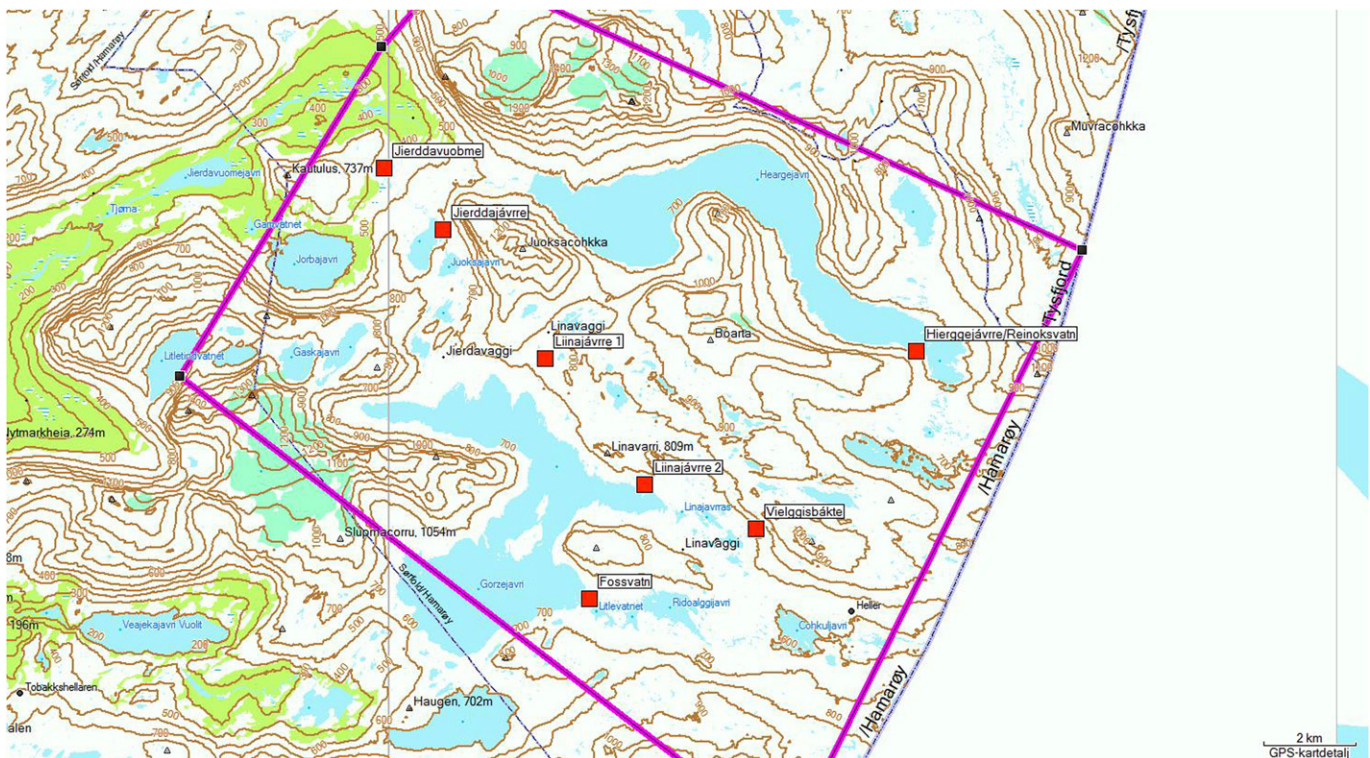


Fig. 2. Survey area with the different localities mentioned in the texts.

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