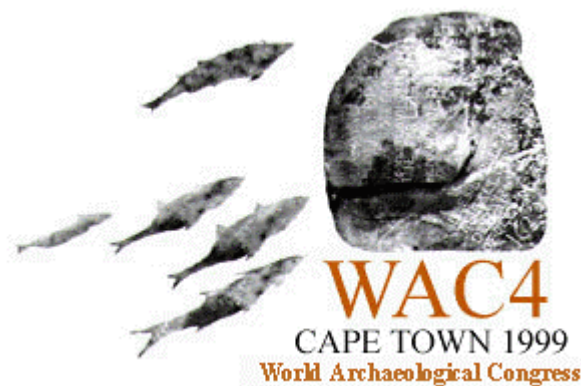


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Symposium: Collecting, Collections and the Development of the 'Reburial Issue'

SKELETAL REMAINS OF THE NORWEGIAN SAAMI

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A burial

In Norway, two population groups, the Norwegians and the Saami, have coexisted for perhaps as long as two thousand years. The ethnic group called Saami are concentrated in the north of the country, mainly in the counties of Finnmark and Troms, with smaller groups distributed to the south, in the middle part of Norway.

In November 1997 a rather special funeral took place near Alta in Finnmark in Norway. Two tiny "pulk"-shaped coffins, each containing a skull, were buried just outside the Kåfjord churchyard fence. The funeral was attended by hundreds of people: relatives of the deceased, local citizens, and representatives of the Norwegian State and the Norwegian State Church. The burial of the skulls took place 145 years after the deaths of the individuals.

The skulls were the remains of two Saami men, Mons Somby and Aslak Hætta, who had been executed by decapitation on October 14, 1854. This was the punishment for an uprising by a group of Saami against the Norwegian authorities in 1852. During the fight between the Saami and the Norwegians, two of the Norwegians, a merchant and a law officer, were killed. Somby and Hætta were tried, convicted, received the death penalty, and were subsequently beheaded (Zorgdrager 1997).

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After the execution, the headless bodies of the two men were buried outside the churchyard fence at Kåfjord church, while the heads were sent to the University of Oslo, where they were placed in the anthropological skull collection of the Institute of Anatomy, and where they remained until 1997.

In a letter to the Institute of Anatomy, dated February 7, 1985, a relative of Mons Somby, Niilas Somby, requested that the skull of his grandfather's brother be returned to the family for burial (Bull 1996). The institute asked the Law Department of the University of Oslo to evaluate the legal aspects of this claim. The Law Department concluded that the skull should be released for burial. In spite of this, the Institute of Anatomy refused to release the skull. The person in charge of the anthropological skeletal collection claimed that the skull was a very valuable scientific specimen, and that Niilas Somby, who had requested the release, was not a direct descendant of the deceased and therefore had no rights to the skull.

The question of repatriation was not resolved until 1997, when the grandchildren of the other executed person, Aslak Hætta, joined Niilas Somby in demanding the surrender of the two skulls. The Institute of Anatomy was finally ordered by the University administration to give over the skulls for burial, after a legal debate between the Saami parliament, the Department of Justice, the Department of Church, Education and Research, and the University of Oslo.

The burial ceremony became a symbolic rectification of past and present wrongs done to the families of the deceased and to the Saami people by the Norwegian authorities. Representatives of the State and of the Church apologized to the Saami people for the injustices perpetrated by the Norwegian authorities against the Saami throughout the years, which had culminated in the bitter controversy over the release of the skulls.

This is a very abbreviated version of a long and difficult story. The burial of the two skulls in 1997 is not the end of the story, however, but constitutes the first step of an ongoing process concerning the future disposition of all Saami skeletal material in Norway.

The skeletal collection at the Institute of Anatomy, University of Oslo

In the 1800's, historical research in the Nordic countries was concerned with the question of the racial histories of population groups. It was a generally held belief that the physical appearance of the individuals defined their racial affinities. This was in tune with the prevailing European research interest in classifying humankind into disparate racial groups. Skeletal parts from graves were systematically collected in order to obtain research material for establishing the racial origins of population groups (Næss and Sellevold 1990). It was especially skulls that were collected, since it was believed that racial characteristics were most strongly expressed in skulls.

Until 1970/1980, archaeologists and physical anthropologists provided definitions of the Saami from a physical anthropological point of view (Schanche 1997). In this context, the skeletal remains from graves were of great importance as source material for research. Sizeable collections of skeletal material came into being.

In Norway, the first Saami skulls were collected in the second half of the 19th century. The first publication dealing with Saami skulls appeared in 1878. Professor of anatomy Jacob Heiberg

published a description based on measurements of 14 skulls, 11 of which were from the collection at the Institute of Anatomy while three were from the private collection of the Norwegian merchant Nordvi at Mortensnes in Varangerfjord in Finnmark. Nordvi collected skeletal material from pagan Saami graves on a large scale. Some he kept for his private collection, some he sold to universities and museums throughout Europe.

Towards the end of the 19th century, many people were investigating pagan Saami graves throughout Finnmark. Spending their summers collection skulls and selling them to interested parties seems to have been almost a hobby for the Norwegian gentry living in the region: tradesmen, church officials, local law officers and others.

The collecting of Saami skeletal material continued on a large scale in the 1920's and 1930's. The most important Norwegian researcher of Saami skeletal biology was professor of anatomy Kristian Emil Schreiner, who was head of the Institute of Anatomy from 1912 to 1945. He died in 1954. Schreiner's "favorite research objects" were the "ethnic minorities" in Norway, that is, the Saami (Holck 1990). By the time his work on the Saami started, almost all pagan Saami graves in Finnmark had been plundered. In order to get material for his research, he therefore sent his medical students to Finnmark to collect skulls from Saami churchyards from the 18th and 19th centuries. This collecting was done in spite of the very strongly voiced protests of the local Saami. But Schreiner had received approval for his project from the Norwegian parliament, and did not heed the protests (Bull 1990).

The largest collection of Saami skeletal remains in existence is The Schreiner Collection at the Institute of Anatomy at the University of Oslo. There are 922 registered units, mostly skulls, but also some complete skeletons. The number of individuals represented in the collection is larger than 922, however, since a given find unit may consist of the remains of several individuals. The major part of the material derives from Schreiner's investigations of Saami churchyards (Sellevold 1991).

All Saami skeletal remains are unburnt. Most of the material is rather well preserved, and in some cases there are even remains of hair and nails. The proveniences of the finds, however, are often poorly and incompletely documented, since so much of the material stems from non-archaeological investigations.

An experiment

The plundering of Saami graves and churchyards is a thing of the past. Recently, an experiment was carried out concerning the archaeological and anthropological investigation of graves and skeletal remains of the Saami. For her doctoral dissertation, the archaeologist Audhild Schanche, co-convenor of the present session of this conference, tested a new approach in the investigation of pagan Saami graves. The first step in her project was to obtain acceptance for her proposed research by the Saami section of the Tromsø Museum (this was before the Saami parliament had been established). The next step was to get the approval of the Saami living in the vicinity of the graves she wanted to investigate. She informed them about her project, explaining the aims of her research and her proposed plan for investigating the graves in order to obtain their consent.

The research plan for the field work consisted in doing all data collecting on site, and reconstructing the graves after the investigation was completed. This necessitated a close cooperation between the archaeologist and the physical anthropologist in the field. Upon opening

the grave, the anthropological and archaeological investigations were carried out. Then the skeletal material and the associated objects were reinterred, and the grave was restored to its former appearance. Nothing was removed from the grave, and the landscape remained unchanged. The subsequent publication of the results was cleared with Saami authorities in advance of publishing. This approach proved to be satisfactory both to the archaeologist, the anthropologist and to the Saami community.

Prospects for the future

The future disposition of the Saami skeletal material is not yet decided. In 1997, a committee was formed to look into the ethical and legal questions concerning the collection of Saami skeletal remains at the Institute of Anatomy of the University of Oslo. The committee consisted of representatives of the Saami community, the Central Office of Historic Monuments, which is the directorate responsible for both Saami and Norwegian archaeological finds and objects of cultural heritage, the University of Oslo, and an independent osteologist. One of the aims of the committee was to provide a basis for deciding whether or not to repatriate the Saami skeletal remains.

The committee has submitted a document which describes the situation surrounding the skeletal collection, and puts forward proposals for the future administration of skeletal collection. With specific reference to the treatment of the Saami skeletal material in the collection the following is recommended:

- The Saami skeletal material should be kept separate from the other skeletal remains, and should be kept behind closed doors with limited access;
- the Saami parliament or a representative of this parliament should have the rights of administration over the Saami skeletal material, and may decide to repatriate the material.

The question of reburial is not discussed in the document, but is left up to the Saami community to decide. It is emphasized that, before any decisions about repatriation can be made, the units of Saami origin must be identified. In order to do this, a revision of the entire collection is necessary since the find documentation is very inadequate.

The document is at present being evaluated by various state and Saami institutions. A revised document regulating the course of action will probably not be completed until late 1999. The process of deciding the future disposition of the Saami skeletal material is expected to be complex and difficult to resolve.

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