

The Heart of Hearths

Some Reflections on the Significance of Hearths in Nature, Culture and in Human Memory

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Starting from new discoveries of classical Saami hearths in an area where they hitherto have been unknown, the author claims that the organization of the Saami hut can be explained by what can be considered as a shamanistic nomadic tradition common to Eurasia and Greenland. The comparative ethnographic material is supplied by the Evenks at the river Yenisey in Siberia. The expressions of the shamanistic cosmology are to be found in the midpassage or linear structure of the arctic huts with the hearth at the centre. This structure has been used also in the practice of the shamans. The metaphoric and cosmological potential of the fire and the hearth is furthermore explored in sedentary societies, with examples in Classical Antiquity and in Scandinavia. Some implications concern different types of cairns. Iconographical aspects are also treated. The similarities are tentatively explained as consequences of the archetypes of the transforming and regenerating fire, but also as a means of upholding social boundaries in a literary as well as a figurative sense.

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Key words: Saami, Siberian (Evenk), shamanism, hearth, fire symbolism, cosmology, midpassage.

INTRODUCTION

The Saami hearths in the woodlands have long been well known in the Swedish Northern Norrland, that is, the provinces of Lappland, Norrbotten and Västerbotten. They have been treated in particular by Ingela Bergman (Bergman 1988, etc.).

In 1987 Bernt Ove Viklund and I discovered the first Saami hearth outside of this area and outside the Swedish Lappmarken ('The Lapp Lands'), which before AD 1674 was considered as exclusively Saami territory. The site was the sandy heath near Locksta, Björna parish in northeastern Ångermanland. I myself had documented a long-term Saami presence in the area, both of the Forest Saami and on the Mountain Saami (Westerdahl 1986). I based my assumptions on traditions and on the continuous supply of reindeer moss on the late Ice Age glacial deltas and not only at Locksta. However, I had never succeeded in substantiating the claims in oral tradition about Saami habitation sites, except at the turf hut (Sw. *kåta*), built in 1901 at Locksta. In this hut in that same year, my best informant on South Saami culture, Elisabeth Stinnerbom, was born. In 1985

Bernt Ove Viklund and a small team reconstructed the kåta on the original site for the benefit of cultural tourism (Westerdahl & Viklund 1984; Viklund 1987).

The county of Västernorrland was at any rate now enriched with a new type of ancient remains. And with it went a lot of other discoveries, for example Stone Age settlement sites, rock paintings and possibly related early pitfalls, sacred places and possible cultic sites in the immediate area.

The credit for this seemingly never-ending new material goes solely to Bernt Ove Viklund, a trained fields archaeologist with an exceptional, if not uncanny, feeling for the ecological milieu of these extremely discrete remains. Since then he has localized between 300 and 400 hearths in northeastern Ångermanland and started a series of systematic surveys in the northwestern part of the province, with some successful excursions into Västerbotten and Jämtland (Viklund 1992, 1997; Fig. 1).

This paper is intended to broaden the perspectives on hearths. But it is no way meant to chronologically categorize the various hearth types or hearth groups, not even between the units in such groups, even if such thoughts do occur. It is rather diachronic, drawing on the hearth as an archetype in cognitive systems.

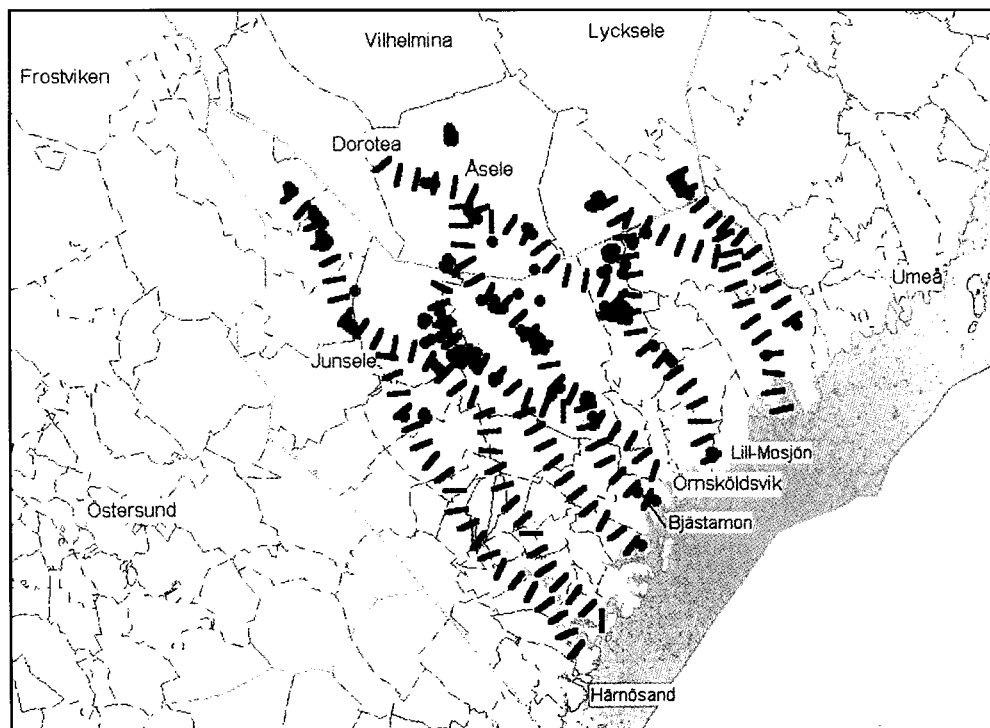


Fig. 1. Map survey produced by Bert Ove Viklund and Kulturmiljövård och arkeologi (KMVA) in Härnösand. The dots either mark single hearths or groups of hearths of Saamish type, or alternatively, systems of hearths. The stroked areas are the principal Saamish transhumance routes to the coast according to Westerdahl (1986).

The aims of this paper are among other things to illustrate how it was and still is, possible to *think by means of the hearth*, and thus not only to present the picture of the warming and illuminating fire in the middle of the dwelling, of whatever kind it may be.

THE SAAMI HUT, NORTH SAAMI GOAHTI, SOUTH SAAMI GAETIE

The Saami tent or turf hut and its parallels around the world, like the *tepee* of some Native American tribes, is an expression of an extremely elementary and functional type of dwelling. Its fundamental features have very ancient roots. The hut or tent consists in principle of a roof of varying material, built around a framework of wood. It looks almost like a truncated cone. The slightly oval or round floor is laid directly on the ground. In the centre is the slightly elevated stone hearth (North Saami *árran*, South Saami *aernie*). Where the cone is truncated on the roof, we find the smoke-hole (North Saami *reahpin*, South Saami *riehpene*; Fig. 2).

The elementary form of the hut does not mean that it is primitive. It is an optimal form for moveable huts, created long ago in mobile or nomadic societies. In later times a certain sophistication is discernible, particularly in the framework of poles, especially the “yoke” of (plur.) *bågstänger* or *bågsaxar* (Sw.), *lgrahte/bealjít* (North Saami), *otneresh* (South Saami), in the choice wooden pieces and the execution of details. This means that the degree of preservation of the framework will be notably higher, but the covering turf material still has to be taken down or replaced with regular intervals. The temporary tent hut materials, like hide or felt, were invariably meant to be taken down often.

Indoors, the functional aspect is expressed in the optimal localization of the hearth in the middle, which gives light and warmth uniformly to all parts of the hut. The construction of the hearth clearly shows an understanding of the principles of storing heat in the stone pack and of the advantages of placing the fire in a slightly elevated position. The draught holes, in three calculated locations at even distances near the floor, regulate the air supply to both fire and people. In the case of the fire, an admirably stable effect can be achieved by opening and closing the draught holes so as not to bother people or to consume too much fuel.

When turning to the cognitive sphere, to understand how the hearth in the small space also becomes a centre in the conception

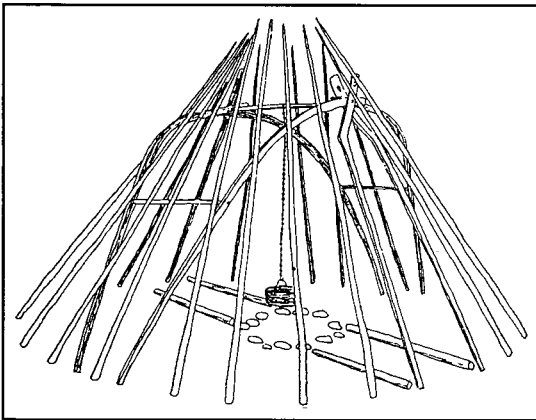


Fig. 2. The principal layout of the gaetie built with a skeleton of arched rafters, South Saami *otneresh* after Faegre 1979.

of the large space, it is important, I believe, to remember a few aspects. Thus it must be understood that the importance of function does not exclude the significance of other, less functional elements. Most of them are facets or angles of the same subject as function. Function and symbolism are often more or less parallel phenomena (e.g., Westerdahl 1995). If we really want to know how the hearth functioned we must account for the material aspect; how it served as a source of light and heat. But we must also understand how it is possible to think and feel with the hearth at the centre.

THREE PERSPECTIVES

The above heading introduces the perspective of *nature*. A systematic field survey can reveal the hearths and thereby “populate” the deserted landscapes with people and huts from the past. Thus even today these discrete remains change what we may view as pure unformed nature, *chaos*, into a past human order, *cosmos*. They are windows to the past and give us the dimensions of a cultural landscape. The hearths of the sandy heaths have become the third most frequent type of man-made remains in inland Norrland, after Stone Age settlement sites along the watercourses and pitfalls which mostly appear in systems.

Another perspective is that of *culture*, the cultural science of today. It is thus necessary to study the hearths from a holistic modern conception of cultural history, where interviews and reflections on social (societal, family) life, economy, language, place names, religion or magic are combined with archaeological observations, finds of objects and experiences of practical tests.

The third perspective is that of memory. This aims at the knowledge that we can still manage to find in oral tradition regarding what has happened at the site, ghosts and subterranean treasures, etc. There is always a story connected with latter-day hearths and hut foundations. Today we ourselves provide the latest contribution by probing in the ground and by test excavations (Fig. 3).

But also the process of retelling stories and the regeneration of tradition has always been connected with the hearth. The myths and tales of Saami origin about inexplicable events and sacrifices of reindeer bulls, but also more mundane information on the latest prices of reindeer meat in Örnköldsvik on the Bothnian coast or in Hattfjelldal in Norway, have been passed on to generations of youngsters while seated around the hearth.

In 1907-1910, at the hearth of her father’s winter *kåta* at Locksta, Elisabeth Stinnerbom, one of the greatest present-day narrators of



Fig. 3. Saami-type hearth area. Photo: Bert Ove Viklund.

lappmarken (*Sápmi*; *Sameätnam*) listened to the poems about the Sons of the Sun, the myths of the exploits of the family group or *sijte* (in North Saami, *siida*) shaman (South Saami, *nåejtie*) Niehkor-Guörnje and the testimonies on the last reindeer-herding Forest Saami of the south. They were told to her by her father Sjul Jonsson (b. 1857) and his youngest uncle Kristoffer Jonsson (b. 1845). Her retelling of this oral material will always stay in my memory and in the memory of others who listened to it (Westerdahl 1986, *passim*).

CONTEXTS

An analysis of the hearths and hut foundations in the mountain area of Sweden clearly shows them to be an important element in a continuous cultural landscape in the upper birch-forest region, where the Saami transhumance pattern of the latest centuries is known to have occurred.

In the woodlands there might be a related tendency. But there is also an older pattern. Sven Donald Hedman has recently used analogies from later times of the Forest Saami exploitation of these areas to explain the occurrences on the sandy heaths of hearths from the Iron Age and the Middle Ages (Hedman 2001; Fig. 4). Earlier temporary settlement sites are grouped directly along the edge of the waters, and their background is obviously connected with subsistence, with fishing and hunting. Hedman's conclusion is that this other woodland pattern, on the strength of the reindeer moss supply on the sandy heaths, reflects an economy based on the small-scale domestication of reindeer. The theoretical and empirical basis was supplied by Kjell-Åke Aronsson in his doctoral dissertation (Aronsson 1991), the results of which have been hotly contested, especially by Inga-Maria Mulk (Mulk 1994).

Most of the hearths found by Bernt Ove Viklund in the county of Västernorrland belong to this category, but a sizeable number most probably can be linked to the transhumance of the Mountain Saami, who perhaps emerged as a particular group during the 17th century.

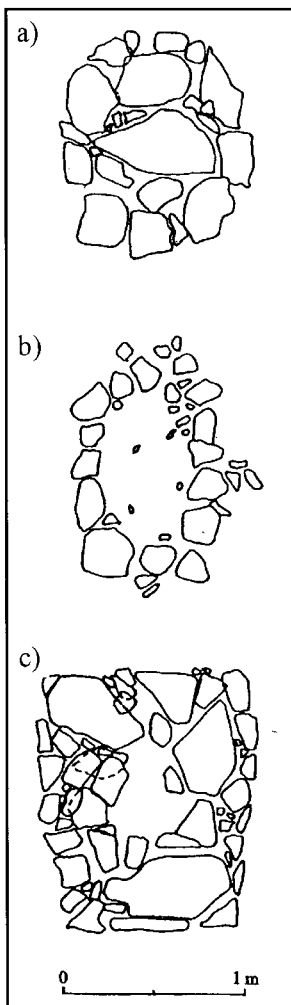


Fig. 4. Types of hearths illustrated by Sven Donald Hedman (2001): a) An oval hearth filled with stones, dated AD 1441-1648, and adjacent to another hearth at Lappmyrtjärn in the commune of Älvsbyn. The place name of the small lake indicates Saamish presence during fairly recent times. b) An oval hearth dated AD 1039-1276 from another site at Rebraurströmmen with six hearth. c) Rectangular flatstone hearth dated AD 724-975 from a site with ten hearths at Rebraurströmmen, Arjeplog, Lappland, Northern Sweden.

They passed with their reindeer herds through the woodlands of the Forest Saami down to the Bothnian coast, and temporarily used the well-known hearth sites and grazing heaths, sometimes also on their way back to the mountains in the spring. More permanent dwelling camps were found in the mountains (for late spring, summer and autumn; spring and autumn camps being identical), and on the coast tent camps were used in winter. Later the Mountain Saami lived in the outhouses of farmer hosts, and nowadays in their own houses.

Another hypothesis was presented by the Norwegian archaeologist Inger Storli, who observed that the banked *stallo* hut foundations in the Mountains (either in Norway or in Sweden) partly coincide in time with sites of early hearths in the woodlands on the northeastern side of the Scandinavian peninsula. She presumed that the same groups seasonally occupied both and that therefore a Mountain Saami-type economy already was established in the Late Iron Age. The debate over this idea, shows, however, that it has not been unanimously accepted (Storli 1993 with comments).

HOW TO THINK BY MEANS OF THE HEARTH

Our starting point is the hearth itself. The functional aspect will not be addressed here, but does indeed include a number of relevant questions: How has the hearth worked? What is shown by the traces of fire and heat and what are the finds in and around the hearth and within the hut? How has the space in the hut been organized? What is the relationship between the different huts in the group?

In the area of immediate concern very little has been done archaeologically. Instead we must at this stage use historical sources to explain if and how the space in the Saami hut has given the impetus to a metaphysical conception of the world outside, not least of the supernatural world.

The famous historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, maintains that space to religious man is not homogeneous. It shows breaks and cracks (Eliade 1969: 13). From these breaks and cracks in natural space the sacred elements pour forth and become visible, in "hierophanies". The nomadic hearth is such a place. At the same time the hearth by way of its centrality is the site where the tree of the universe or the pillar of the world, in ancient South Saami *mailman stytty* or in Latin *axis mundi*, emerges from the ground and carries from there the earth and the sky. Its normally invisible stem goes through the smoke-hole (Eliade op. cit: 21ff, 32). This is the first obvious consequence of the centrality of the hearth. Incorporated in every individual Saami hut is this general principle. And on the great roof, in the globe above, the pillar appears as the Pole Star (Lundmark 1982).

It goes further than that. The constructing of the hearth can itself be considered as a renewal of the microcosm or as a repetition of creation. Under the hearth in the Saami hut lives *Sarakka*, one of the four *Akkas*. She gives the female sex and she assists at childbirths. To her were given libations and probably even a part of the meat. These offerings are instrumental in promoting fertility and the regeneration of the family. But also the two other *akkas* were associated with parts

of the hut and childbirth, *Juksakka* at the entrance area representing similar functions as *Sarakka* and *Possjoakka* at the Sacred Space, the *boassu* (South Saami *båossjoe*), the inner part of the hut opposite the entrance. Their mother, *Maderakka*, is seen as residing in the hut as well (Bäckman 1984).

In recent times only fragments of the old ritual behaviour are documented. Some examples may suffice. O.P. Pettersson describes a Saami wedding, probably at the autumn and spring camp of *Vuokkere* (*Vökarn*) in the Vilhelmina mountains in 1883, where he was present himself (Pettersson 1888):

“The evening is spent in a happy company, and brandy is distributed by the becoming bridegroom. Before the invited guests taste their snaps, a few drops of brandy are poured in the fire; hereby they want to safeguard the happiness of the young couple.”

Margareta Bengtsson told Emilie Demant Hatt in 1914, that offerings of coffee were made also at significant spots on the grazing lands, when the old people left it forever.

The old mother of Margareta passed for the last time with her family to Norway. She took four different kinds of brandy. In every hut she treated all the people to it. And she poured the very last cup at the hearth stones at her own seat and wished luck to her daughter who would henceforth take over that seat (after Fjellheim 1989).

THE SACRED SPACE AND ITS SACRED AXIS

At the back of the hearth is the Sacred Space or *possjo*. In later, Christian, times, it was banalized to contain kitchen utensils. In pagan times the *possjo* flag-stones marked an area taboo to women. It was only through an opening at the draught hole of the *possjo* area that the meat of a dead bear could be brought into the hut. Also the reindeer meat was taken inside this way (e.g. Aronsson 1995: 62f). This procedure was thus also taboo to the female sex.

The ritual content of the Saami bear feast is richly developed and seems to express a fundamental opposition between men and women, between male roles and female roles. Many have considered this gender opposition the primary organization of space in the Saami hut (Yates 1989). Most often the men are to the left of the entrance (North Saami *uksa*, South Saami *okse*), the women to the right. There have been efforts to trace continuity from prehistoric times. Hans Christiansson once excavated a hut foundation, presumably from the Bronze Age, at *Forsavan* or *Kväiken* in Tärna parish. He observed the pattern of quartzite chippings at the left side of the entrance and concluded that this would have been the seat even of the modern patriarch when carving in wood with his knife! (Christiansson 1969).

We thus know from later times that there were distinct areas for men and for women. These areas were separated by the short passage from the entrance (*uksa*) to the hearth, often marked by spruce logs in the northern Saami lands, less obviously so in the south.

Kjell-Åke Aronsson states (1995: 63), that the oblong, rectangular shape of the Saami hearth could be seen as determined by the general layout of the hut. Wouldn't that layout rather lead to a round hearth, if it is only the question of following the walls? In this case I think the axis of the midpassage is the determining factor.

In Knud Leem's account from 1755, the *goahti* consists of nine elements, the *uksa* part, the hearth (*árran*), the *boassu* part at the back, and three seats on each of the sides, male or female (*loito*; Fig. 5). Such a division could reflect a primary *dualism* in the space categorization of the cognitive system of the Saami. The problem would then be that it is very easy to observe the *centrality* of the hearth. And it is obvious that there is indeed a linear structure or axis in the midpassage from *uksa* to *boassu*, although that particular axis will result in the duality referred to above. The sanctity of that axis is furthermore marked by the three or four *akkas*. But in my opinion all three ways of division are equally valid. I have furthermore a distinct feeling that they are intertwined and that our own concentration on finding one single guiding principle is futile in a nomadic or semi-nomadic society like that of the pagan Saami.

Equally futile, in my view, is the quest for a single guiding principle in the conceptions of the supernatural world among the Saami. We must know what is up or down, east or west, beside or inside. I feel that our physical or geographical order is not applicable. Everything can at the same time be up or down, inside and under. I can, at least, trace this versatility in the spirit of shamanism, to which I will soon return.

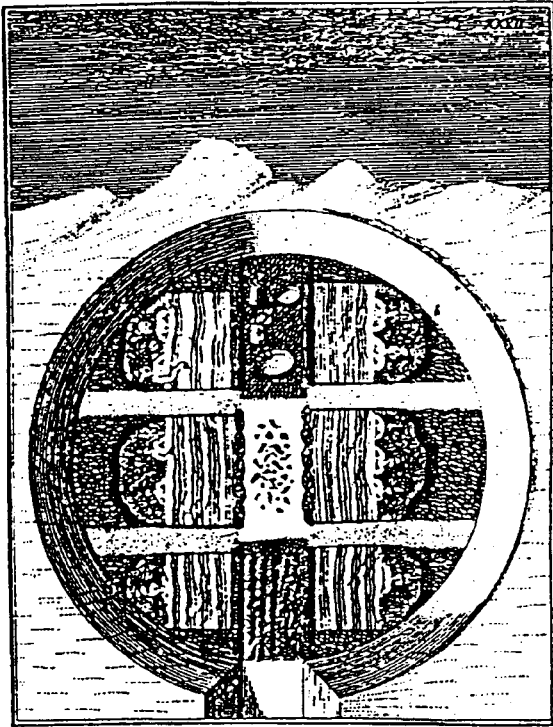


Fig. 5. The nine parts of the ground plan of a Saamish cot in Norwegian Finnmarken. After Leem 1755.

MOVING TO ANOTHER HUT SITE; HAUNTED HUT SITES

I have also tried to find the basis of an important principle that I have learned from Saami oral tradition. A new hearth should never be laid on an old one. Neither should a new hut be erected on an old foundation. Instead a new hut should be built close to the old one, which then is left to rot.

Ernst Manker states that after a death in a hut, the hut walls

were removed and a cross (*aernie-* or *árran-cross*) was put in the old hearth, surrounded by a small cairn (Manker 1959: 196). This statement gives the impression that this would only happen if a death had occurred in the hut itself. But my definite impression is that a regular rule had been established that the younger generation always ought to build a hearth and a hut of their own. This was, on the other hand, always done in the immediate neighbourhood of the old hut. Many hearths of old huts at a large number of traditional camp sites seem to illustrate this assumption, according to my informants. The minimal position taken by some informants is that all the hearths were in any case not used simultaneously.

My explanation for the Saami rule above contains two elements. One is functional. It was indeed rational to move the hut fairly often. You had to take it down to renew the cover anyway. It would even be unusual if it lasted for a whole generation.

But the second element might have been even more important. Under the hearth lived not only *Sarakka*, but also the ancestors. More specifically, the dead were certainly those who had lived in this particular hut, but in a general sense the ancestors seemed to have their abode here, if not in the hut at least in the immediate neighbourhood. Thus the rule above repeats itself, that in every individual hut is incorporated a general principle.

Furthermore I have the impression that the haunted huts, of which there was much talk, were precisely the sites where the old rules had been broken. A new generation continued to live in the old hut of their parents and perhaps forefathers. The ancestors were those who were challenged by the new generation. An important point is that the latter clearly represented a new authority which had now taken over from the old one. The fundamental contents of the articulated ghostly disturbances in the haunted huts appeared to me to be *irritation for lack of authority and power, disturbances and imbalance*. This was definitely my impression in my interviews with elderly Saamis. Today, from what I can judge, the tradition is more or less obliterated.

THE MIDPASSAGE OF GREENLAND.

In the various cultures of Greenland, from ca. 3000 BC to ca. 1000 AD, the hearths are found incorporated in a so-called midpassage (Dan. *midtergang*; Fig 6). One of my students in Copenhagen, Ulla Odgaard, in 1995 produced an interesting M.A. paper on arctic tent constructions and the significance of this midpassage (Odgaard 1995). Odgaard concludes that its metaphysical reflection can be found in a shamanistic universe. Last year she finished her PhD dissertation on a related subject (Odgaard 2001).

This arctic or subarctic type of hearth with a midpassage is known from many other places and milieux besides Greenland, as observed by Ulla Odgaard. It is found not only in the Scandinavian Saami huts and in prehistoric buildings on the Kola peninsula and the White Sea, but also in Siberia. The general layout of the buildings there is similar to the Saami hut. The hearth with its front and back

sections forms a kind of axis, although with considerable variation. For example, what corresponds to the Saami *uksa* and *possjo* could be a cist- or box-like construction. But mostly it can be established that the entrance is where we expect it to be, at the front of this linear structure.

THE SHAMANISTIC UNIVERSE

The ceremonies and equipment of shamanistic practice, extending down to the details of the shaman drums, are strikingly similar in hunter societies from Scandinavia to eastern Siberia (Michael 1963; Diószegi & Hoppál 1978). Other similar features include the ritual behaviour at the successful conclusion of a bear hunt. There are many other parallels. It is clear that also the general characteristics of the metaphysics of these societies must have been shared.

The concept of shamanism has been treated by Åke Hultkrantz (1978). It is not an actual religion, but rather a “religious configuration” or “complex”. It has a close relationship to hunter societies based on individualism, clannish and kinship systems, in principle a classless society without any division of labour except according to sex and age (Voigt 1978). The shaman is a mediator between the living and the dead and the supernatural world in general. He can achieve this aim only with the help of auxiliary spirits. Thus he travels in a trance between the worlds and their guardians. He is also a diviner and a healer.

How did the shamanistic universe take expression in a hut? “The world-pole or world-tree symbol alternates in shamanistic ideology with the world river symbol, which in some cultures is identical with the river of death.” (Hultkrantz

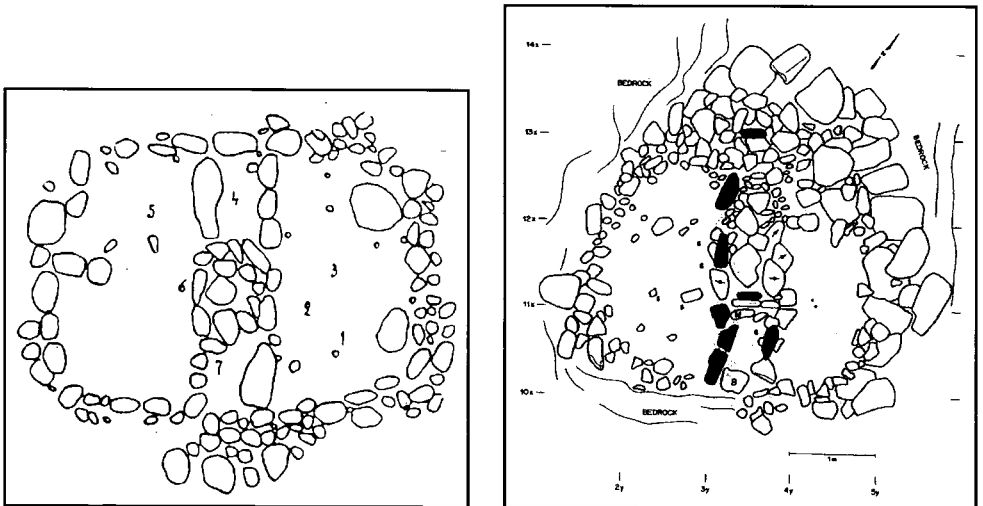


Fig. 6. (Left) Midpassage with a box-like hearth at Lakeview Island, Ellersmere Island, Canada (Schledermann 1990). It belongs to Independence I (c. 2500 BC).

(Right) Midpassage cot at Jokanga on the northern part of the Kola Peninsula, dated around the Birth of Christ, in the transition between Early Metal Age and Saamish Iron Age, according to Toivo Itkonen (1918).

1978: 110). The best ethnographic description concerns the Clan River, *numengi* or *mumongi khokto bira*, ‘the watery river-road’ of the Evenks, and its associated symbols. The Evenks are a small Tungus people at the Yenisey river of Siberia (Anisimov 1968a, b; Vasilevitch 1978).

The Evenks conceive of the universe as divided into three worlds: the upper, the middle and the lower. The middle world is the earth (the *taiga*) and the two others are copies of it, but on different levels along a vertical axis. Another conception places them outside of each other but horizontally. The principal river of the shamans, The Clan River, runs from the upper world in the east and goes west and down to the lower world in the north. Tributaries run from it from shamans of the various clans. These tributaries also unite the three worlds of the universe.

Every clan thus had its own river route, but also access to the common mythical Clan River. Along it, the whole life of the clan was enacted. Life was successive stages of reincarnation in a closed circle. At the upper reaches were the immortal souls (gods), living in a large tent; in the middle were the present times, and at the mouth of the river was the land of the dead clan members, watched over by an old woman. Other old women watched over the clan and the river route. One of the guardians had an elk antler (the earth) and another a fish-tail (the water) as her attribute. The bird is another *pars-pro-toto*. Parts of this Siberian cosmology have already entered archaeological interpretations. Compare for example Jussi-Pekka Taavitsainen’s idea about the detached elementary “boat” of some rock carvings as the antlers of the Cosmic Elk (Taavitsainen 1978).

My own suspicion is that the three *akkas* of the Saami world of space conceptions represent a similar function as the auxiliary or guardian spirits, visualized as old women, of the Evenks and other shamanistic peoples. The definition of them as actual goddesses has possibly clouded their origin (cf. Bäckman 1984).

The tent was the microcosm: “The symbolic expression of this mythical shamanistic clan was the shaman’s tent” (Anisimov 1968a:110). The three areas of the tent, that is the midpassage, are connected in Evenk tradition with the Clan River. They are illustrated by Anisimov (op.cit. Fig. 7) in the floor plan of the tent of the shaman himself. Before the séance of the spirits took place, the tent and its immediate environment had been provided with wooden idols symbolizing the auxiliary spirits watching the transition between the worlds. The shaman sat or lay during the séance on an elevated platform opposite the entrance, corresponding to the *possjo* and the seat of the *Possjoakka*. In the tent of the séance, this is the Sacred Space. What corresponds to the Saami *uksa* and the space of the *Juksakka* is accordingly the lower “soul tent” of the river. The corresponding spirits of the Evenks are also associated with the presence of the world tree in the tent.

The shaman tree, the *Shamanenbaum* of the learned world, or in Evenk *туру*, the world tree, is accordingly the second element of the microcosm expressed in the layout of the tent. The shaman drum was supposed to be made from the wood of this tree. “The ancestor spirits are imagined as living at the base of the clan tree and are associated with its base -the root, the beginning. —These spirits were

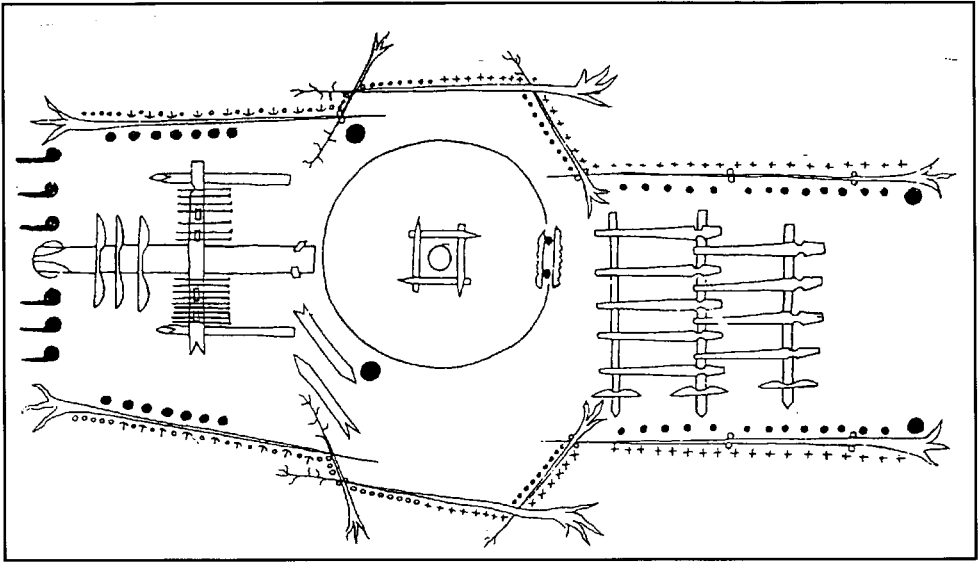


Fig. 7. Anisimov's sketch of the tent of the Evenk shaman and its immediate environment, furnished with symbols of auxiliary and guardian spirits and the linear structure of the Clan River (Anisimov 1968a).

conceived as feminine spirits and are reflected in a generalized way in the form of the mother-mistress of the clan tree" (Anisimov op.cit.: 97). Here we find an even closer parallel to function of the *akkas* than the auxiliary spirits visualized as old women above. And the tree stands above the hearth.

Thus, the third element is the hearth. The shaman tree "stands with its butt at the hearth which is considered to be the fire belonging to the whole clan" and this clan fire "is regarded as the dwelling place of the mistress of the clan hearth," who is "also the mistress of the hearth, the tent and the camp" and "provider for the clan and the guardian of the souls." The tent level and in particular the hearth level represent the world of the living. The fire on the hearth makes it possible for the shaman to find his way back from his travels. The goddess of the Clan Fire watches the souls of the clan and is connected with reincarnation or birth. She resides in the fire or under the hearth (Anisimov loc.cit., quotation, summary). Again we can refer to *Sarakka* and *Maderakka*.

To mark the site of the Tree of the World, a larch tree could be hung under the smoke-hole of the Siberian tent. It is a fragment of the vertical cosmos. In ancient South Saami this is, as mentioned, the *mailman stytty*. Such rituals are known also in Saami tradition.

A tree was hung in the smoke-hole with its root end towards the sky (pers. comm. Åsa Virdi Kroik). The linear structure of the Saami hut or the midpassage may have represented this tree as an *axis mundi*, but placed horizontally in the sense of a "shadow." At least, this in correspondence with the contemporaneous multi-level idea of shamanism.

The Clan River was the midpassage of the Siberian shaman tent. A journey along the midpassage or the river was a trip from death to reincarnation, even for other participants than the shaman himself. From man the route went to the animal. The shaman was eaten symbolically by an animal. The reincarnation was a transition to the world of the ancestor spirits and the rebirth a return to the living. Reincarnation could also be interpreted as a burning in fire, perhaps sometimes like a “totemistic” rite of initiation. Even here the loaded significance of the hearth is marked out.

It should be noted that the shamanistic universe is relevant in the landscape outside the hut as well, but in this connection I will only refer to the contributions found in Michael (Ed, 1968).

It is very reasonable, indeed, that the picture of the shamanistic world is seen in the interior of the individual hut, the *nåejtie* (South Saami) being the head of the family or rather the head of the family group (South Saami *sijte*). The picture of the universe has realized this interior with its midpassage on another level. The Siberian river, however, may correspond to something else in the cosmology of the pagan Saami, perhaps to the Tree of the World. As we have seen above, these two symbols alternate in shamanistic ideology. The attributes of the auxiliary spirits are perhaps a little different among the Saami, reindeer gradually replacing elk, but also basically the same, as the fish and the bird, each representing the entrance to another world.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HEARTH IN SEDENTARY SOCIETIES

The hearth does not only have metaphysical significance in shamanistic tradition. It also has a role as a transcultural archetype or rallying point even in sedentary and agrarian societies. Some of its features can reasonably be called universal. Those which are the easiest to account for are taken from cultures whose languages are Indo-European.

THE HEARTH IN ANCIENT SEDENTARY SOCIETIES

The main societies of interest here are the agrarian polis states of Greece and Rome, which have been admirably treated by Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges in his classic *La cité antique* (1864). His truly original approach started with the smallest social units, the unions (clans etc.) of higher order, of which the institutions of the state were mere reflections (Fustel de Coulanges 1979: 25ff).

The religion of the family was that of the family hearth, according to Fustel de Coulanges. In every house was an altar, previously the same as the domestic hearth. On this altar, Greek *bomos*, *eskara* or *hestia*, the latter word identified with *Vesta*, the Roman goddess of the state hearth, depended the past and the future of the family. The Romans called this altar *ara* or *focus*.

A dying fire thus signified the extinction of the family. It was a holy duty for the master of the house to ensure that the fire burned every day and night. Only once a year, on Idus Martii (1st March) was the fire dutifully quenched and a new

fire kindled, but only with the help of the sun in a glass or with wooden implements. We can compare with some examples from other European societies. In the Celtic world this must occur at the religious festival of *Imbolc* (1st April). In the 19th century in Västergötland, Sweden, this type of fire, called *gnideld* or *vrideld*, was carried by farmers across their field boundaries to inaugurate the new year of cultivation.

Fustel de Coulanges suggests that the ancestor cult is the background to the sanctity of the fire and the hearth. Indeed, according to the beliefs of the ancients, the *lares et penates*, the gods of the house, were considered to be ancestors. Ideally they were living in the ground, under the floor of the house and not least under the hearth or altar.

The very centre of the house and of the family was the fire in the hearth. Grouped around the house was the inner space, which was the farmland of the family. The Roman word for this was *herctum*, its Greek counterpart *herchos*. The boundary area between the different family lands was sacred, and crossings over could mean that one had to make a sacrifice. The boundary stones or poles were called *terminus*, plur. *termini*, in Greek *hermoi*. There was in Rome even a particular god protecting them, also called *Terminus*. But even if it was ritually possible for a stranger to cross the boundaries of different kinds, it was impossible for him to approach the domestic fire in its hearth. The only means was an elaborate ritual. It could as serious as a rite of passage during an adoption, or a transfer of a slave to a new family.

The family lands outside were a kind of larger version of the house. There was an altar. The same type of restrictions existed. It was here that all burials of family members took place. In the earth resided the ancestors, *diis manibus*, which is dat. plur. from the text of the votive inscriptions. If the ancients neglected the rituals, these gods might become *larvae*, malevolent ghosts, in Greek *daimones*, demons. And finally, outside this microworld, existed the tribal and polis lands and boundaries. There was a common altar, the *alta ara*, the High Altar of the State.

THE MEDIEVAL HEARTH IN A SEDENTARY SOCIETY

Another illustration of the central position of the hearth in an agrarian society can be taken from Troels Lund's excellent cultural history of the Nordic countries during the 16th century, the Danish title of which is *Dagligt Liv i Norden i det sekstende Aarhundrede*.

Hans Hildebrand confirmed in his 19th century work *Sveriges medeltid* (1983: 146) the general impression of the hearth as the centre of the dwelling. According to the *Guta saga* the first man who made Gotland habitable, Tjelvar, lighted a fire on its shore. The expression in medieval laws and other texts for claiming land in the wilderness is *fara eller komma å jord med eld och arne*, 'to go or come on the earth with fire and hearth'.

FIRE, CHARCOAL AND THE STONES OF THE HEARTH AS A METAPHOR. At an early stage, man discovered the ability of fire to transform. The most striking transformation is perhaps the transition from a liquid state to a gaseous state; how water becomes vapour. But at a hearth or fire-place it was also discovered that moist clay could be burned to more solid. If it was not dried enough it cracked, and such a process could be accompanied by an explosion. In Late Palaeolithic habitation sites such as that of Dolni Vestonice in Bohemia, fragments of burnt and cracked figurines show parts of this process. This type of ritual behaviour could have been the first impetus to actual pottery-making.

Other materials have been treated ritually in a fire to achieve explosions, like flint in Scania, south Sweden and possibly fossils like Ordovician *ortoceratites*, which could indeed give the same effect. Limestone in general is transformed by fire, but the product, quicklime, will only reveal its new status as slaked lime if water is poured on it.

If certain stones are heated, metals like copper can be melted and liberated from the surrounding minerals. This transformation marks nothing but a miracle in the primeval human mind. Those who first managed to do this intentionally must have been regarded with awe by their contemporaries, enough to make them appear partly supernatural.

By means of cremation the human corpse is consumed by fire but also transformed. The soul, perhaps a particular soul, the free soul, is liberated and is observed soaring into the air.

How metaphors based on fire and hearth once worked is sometimes guesswork. But there are some interesting lines of thought. There might have been a subconscious connection between hearths and stone cairns. One type of cairn is the *burial cairn*; another is the *fieldstone cairn*, consisting of stones removed from the field to facilitate cultivation by hoe or plow. A third type would in fact be the *border cairn* or boundary marker in general.

Björn Varenius treats the first three categories, hearths, burial cairns and fieldstone cairns, in his fascinating paper on materials from the Swedish province of Småland (Varenius 1994): "The analysis of the construction of the hearths etc. provokes the assumption that the similarities with the form of the graves are not coincidental." The construction and the forms are variable; among the hearths 21 % are round/-ed, 54 % square or rectangular and 25 % can at best be described as irregular. This variation is also found among the graves, although not in the same proportions and sizes. And how should one explain the empty graves? In any case, "it is something that hardly can be ascribed to negligence," as Varenius remarks with some irony.

The metaphors of the hearth has, as we have seen, been connected directly with the conception of the dead living under the hearth. In addition there is the intrinsic archetype of the female sex and childbirth. I have mentioned examples from the Saami culture and from Greece and Rome. Anders Andrén has interpreted the low, hearth-like cists with pictures dating from the Gotlandic Viking Age as

female graves, whereas the standing picture stones are those of males (Andrén 1993). The fire of creation must have been a prerequisite for the metaphors of the hearth-grave.

What should particularly be accounted for in this connection is the possible metaphoric significance of fieldstone cairn and the border cairn. They are so similar to burial cairns that they are often mistaken for such. To a field archaeologist, this can be rather embarrassing. But isn't there in fact a point to this likeness? Perhaps it was achieved intentionally, as Varenius suggests?

In the bottom of the fieldstone cairn we can normally find charcoal. This marks the swidden woodland which preceded the regular cultivation of the field. Or it could be traces of the very first intentional fires to make a field. Many of the fieldstone cairns from the provinces of Småland and Västergötland can be dated on the strength of this charcoal to the Bronze Age.

What are the metaphoric connections? Björn Varenius states (op.cit.): "An assumption that does not appear particularly daring is that sowing and harvesting of cereals have been considered extremely symbolic acts". Both processes could be thought to simulate the sexual act, human reproduction with birth and/or rebirth as a result. There are many ethnographic sources which can illustrate this assumption.

The most common metaphor is probably *the transformation*. The virginal earth, *chaos*, has been tamed and changed into human order, *cosmos*. Hans Hildebrand reminds us once more of the passage of the medieval colonizer across the virgin land *med eld och arne*, 'with fire and hearth.' The order is important. First comes the fire on the swidden land and then the hearth of a house. Perhaps the charcoal from that fire was placed in the boundary to the neighbour (see below).

Every *chaos* has to be consecrated to become a *cosmos*. The Indian *landnam* only becomes valid legally with the erection of a fire altar, dedicated to Agni, the fire god. Furthermore, the process of building the altar (the fireplace, the hearth) is in fact metaphorically a repetition of the Creation, although on a microcosmic level (Eliade 1969: 19).

Charcoal has been found in stone boundary lines or stone rows. They have charcoal for the same reason as the fieldstone cairns. Some of them are also dated to the same time. This is only natural. But there are other, less self-evident aspects. In the case of boundary or border cairns, there are stipulations in the laws until late historical times. According to these regulations, charcoal should be put in the bottom of the boundary cairns. The charcoal should more specifically be of lime-wood in southern Scandinavia. It has also been mentioned that a deposit of almost indestructible birch-bark could have been used. This is to show that they had been laid out by man and made to last for all time. This is also how they acquired their legal validity. This rule concerns explicitly what in Sweden was called *femstenarör*, 'five stone cairn', and *trestenarör*, 'three stone cairn', marking boundaries of a somewhat higher level, such as parishes, provinces and later the counties.

Whether this rule has ever been applied to what is often called in Swedish archaeological jargon *liggande hönor*, ‘lying hens’, i.e. a larger flagstone put on top of a number of smaller boulders, in the sense of Saami boundary markers (Westerdahl 1986: 83ff) is not known, but quite plausible.

Probably this charcoal, or this presumably burnt birch bark, was taken from a hearth in a dwelling. The holes dug for the Roman *termini* were always supposed to be provided with charcoal from precisely the hearth that was closest to the boundary, according to Fustel de Coulanges (loc. cit.). And as noted above, the *gnid-* or *vrideld* had to be applied as late as the 19th century in Västergötland to renew and to consecrate field boundaries.

Of interest in this connection are hearths or fireplaces found during archaeological excavations, placed in long rows, sometimes for miles. Raimond Thörn, an archaeologist in Malmö, Sweden, has recently treated those discovered in connection with the road system at the Öresund (the Sound) bridge in south-west Scania (Thörn 1993, 1996, in prep.). These *great rows of fire*, as he calls them, are dated to the Middle Bronze Age. The individual fireplaces appear to be contemporaneous.

Earlier in time, the remarkable Neolithic enclosures, also found in southern Scandinavia, called the *Sarup* type, and often interpreted as ritual or sacred space, were provided with charcoal and traces of fire, together with human bones, in the ditch along the enclosure.

PICTURES AND FORMS

In the classical rock carving of *Vitlycke*, Bohuslän, from approximately the same time period as *the great rows of fire* above, there is an unusually long row of cup marks dividing the whole rock carving scene into two halves, although not of equal size. Here I have found impetus for possible new interpretations of the cup marks. Perhaps this is not just a boundary? Perhaps actual fires could be intended?

Some other implications could be mentioned briefly. There could for example be direct connections between the hearth and the sun, the great fire or hearth, around which we are all sitting and on which we are totally dependent.

Perhaps this idea could have some iconographic significance. Pictures of what we believe are the sun could possibly depict (at the same time?) the fire and the hearth. What about the forms? Round forms for a hearth may mean something different from a square form. The former are seldom encountered. One possibility is that round forms in or pictures of hearths represent a sacred hearth, like a circular temple *ara* or a sacrificial hearth as in the *megaron* temples of pre-Geometric and Early Geometric Greece. The square or “sided” hearths may represent the daily and domestic fireplace.

It seems also possible to discern a gender language in this respect. Björn Varenius (op.cit.) finds the archaic element in the circle, simultaneously the symbol of the eternal, the regeneration of life, a female principle. The non-circular, non-round, four-sidedness may on the other hand be the identity of the present, a

male principle. It is certainly of some significance that houses for sedentary people are often “sided”, in some sense in correspondence with the square or almost square hearth.

On the other hand, round or circular houses are much more ordinary in other types of societies. But they are almost never provided with round hearths.

The fire serves as a *purifier* and the *origin of everything human* in archetypal metaphoric. We find it in the Tjelvar myth mentioned above on the origin of the Gotlanders and accordingly also in the expression on a *landnam*. The fire of Tjelvar may be found on Gotlandic picture stones of the older type (cf Artzy/Westerdahl 2001 in prep. on the meaning and iconography of that fire). And when the fire is lit on the ground it always carries the potential for a repetition of the Creation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can thus be said, that there are transcultural, almost archetypal facets, although perhaps not always in the sense of C.G. Jung, of man’s relationship to and conceptions of the hearth and the fire. These can apply to sedentary as well as nomadic or mobile societies. I have only been able to mention a few, among them the aspects of human origin, transformation or the creation, the altar, gender and boundaries of various kinds in agrarian contexts.

It is quite plausible that if the elementary space of the Saami hut has been inhabited for such a long time, people have been influenced mentally by this indoor scenery. Then the hearth becomes a *pars pro toto* firstly for the hut or dwelling itself and secondly for the universe.

There is clearly something culturally specific about the midpassage huts. We seem to be able to identify them with a shamanistic universe. The Clan River and the “shadow” of the *axis mundi* appear to be facets of the same conceptions. The three *akkas* of the Saami dwelling appear to represent a similar function as that of the auxiliary spirits of the Siberian shaman’s world.

It remains to be explained why the midpassage hearth disappears from Greenland from the European Middle Ages and onwards, in spite of the fact that shamanism in the sense of the *angaqoq*, the conjurer of spirits, still lives on among the Inuit of recent times. There is thus nothing decreed by Fate in the spatial expressions of shamanism in a midpassage arctic or subarctic hut.

English revised by Laura Wrang.

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