

Reindeer pastoralism in Sweden 1550-1950

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Abstract: In the middle of the 16th century we get the first opportunity to a more detailed knowledge of reindeer pastoralism in Sweden. At that time the Sami lived in a hunter-gatherer economy. A family had in average about 10-20 domesticated reindeer, mainly used for transport. They could also be milked and used as decoys when hunting wild reindeer. During late 16th century the Swedish state and merchants bought large amounts of fur from the Sami. The common payment was butter and flour. This created a new prosperity, which led to a considerable increase in population in Swedish Lapland. The population became too large for a hunter-gatherer economy. A crisis in early 17th century was the starting point for the transition to a large-scale nomadic reindeer pastoralism. Up to the middle of the 18th century intensive reindeer pastoralism was successful. But the pastoralism became gradually too intensive and diseases started to spread when the herds were kept too densely crowded for milking in summertime. During the first decades of the 19th century reindeer pastoralism in Sweden went through a major crisis. The number of reindeer herding mountain-Sami decreased considerably, mainly because they went to live permanently along the Norwegian coastline. Intensive reindeer pastoralism started to give way for extensive herding towards the end of the 19th century. In the north of Sweden influences from the Kautokeino Sami were an important factor, in the south extensive reindeer herding started to expand when the market for meat came closer to the Sami. During the 1920s the milking of reindeer ceased in Sweden, except in a few families. At that time Sami families from the north had been removed southwards. They further demonstrated the superiority of extensive herding to the Sami in mid- and southern Lapland. Reindeer pastoralism is basically a system of interaction between man and animal, but it has been heavily influenced by market forces and state intervention during hundreds of years. To a large extent these long-term external influences have made reindeer pastoralism what it is today. That aspect should not be overlooked when assessing the future prospects of reindeer pastoralism in Scandinavia.

Renskötseln i Sverige 1550-1950

Sammanfattning: Först vid mitten av 1500-talet finns det källmaterial som ger oss en tämligen detaljerad bild av renskötseln i Sverige. Vid den tiden levde samerna i en jakt-, fiske- och samlarekonomi. En familj hade normalt 10-20 renar som främst utnyttjades vid transporter. Tamrenarna kunde också mjölkas och fungera som lockdjur vid vildrensjakt. Under senare delen av 1500-talet köpte svenska staten och handelsmän stora mängder pälsverk av samerna. Den vanligaste betalningen var smör och mjöl. Detta skapade ett välstånd som ledde till en betydande folkökning i svenska lappmarken. Befolkningen blev för stor för att rymmas inom ramarna för en jakt- och fiskeekonomi. En kris i början av 1600-talet blev startpunkten för övergången till en storskalig renomadism. Fram till mitten av 1700-talet var den intensiva renskötseln framgångsrik. Men renskötseln blev efterhand alltmer intensiv. Under senare delen av 1700-talet började det spridas sjukdomar i de tätt sammanhållna hjordarna. De första decennierna av 1800-talet innebar en allvarlig kris i renskötseln. Antalet renskötande fjällsamer minskade kraftigt, främst genom utvandring till norska kusten. Den intensiva renskötseln med mjölkning av renarna började ersättas av en extensiv renskötsel inriktad på köttproduktion de sista decennierna av 1800-talet. I norr var naturförhållandena och influenser från Kautokeino-samerna en viktig faktor, i söder utvecklades renskötseln i extensiv riktning främst därför att marknaden för renkött kom närmare rensköterna. Under 1920-talet upphörde mjölkningen av renar i Sverige, utom i några enstaka familjer. Då hade förflyttningarna av samer från nordligaste Sverige söderut påskyndat utvecklingen och ytterligare markerat den extensiva renskötsel-teknikens överlägsenhet. Tamrenskötsel är ett samspel mellan människa och djur, men det är inte bara en fråga om renskötare och hans hjord. Externa marknadsfaktorer, beskattning och lagstiftning har haft ett betydande inflytande på renskötselns utveckling under hundratals år. De har till stor del format renskötseln till vad den är i dag. Detta bör beaktas när man gör bedömningar av renskötselns framtid.

Forces far away from the practice of reindeer husbandry have had a considerable impact on its development. Conditions of trade, foreign politics and changes in society at large have played a major role in making reindeer pastoralism in Scandinavia what it is today. This aspect should not be overlooked when we assess its future.

This paper will limit itself to Sweden during the last 400 years. Reindeer husbandry is ancient but I leave the question of its origin to archaeologists, ethnographers and, may be, historically inclined biologists. We have some written sources from the Viking Age and Medieval times, but they do not inform us about the proportions and practice. In the 16th century we reach safer ground. From that time the Swedish crown kept extensive tax-records and trade-registers regarding the Sami (Fig. 1). They give us the first comparatively detailed information about the practice of reindeer husbandry.¹

The Sami society was based on a hunter-gatherer economy in the middle of the 16th century. One of the proofs is the old village-pattern, which can be reconstructed from the tax-registers. The villages shown in Fig. 2 cannot have been based on large-scale nomadic reindeer pastoralism. Then they would have formed a pattern more similar to the long and narrow villages of present-day reindeer herders.

In mid-16th century domesticated reindeer was used for transport, milking and as decoys during hunts for wild reindeer. A family had in average about 20 reindeer. Counts of reindeer were made by the authorities in 1605 and 1609. Such counts of course cannot be expected to provide exact numbers, but other sources confirm that they give a fairly good indication of the general pattern of ownership of domesticated reindeer.²

We know that hunter-gatherer societies must be sparsely populated and that they are sensitive to disturbances. During the 16th century there was a large demand for exclusive furs in all parts Europe. Prices were high and the Swedish state was active in the European fur-trade. The Sami were important providers of furs from wild animals. The state had a constant fear of the Sami fleeing to Norway or

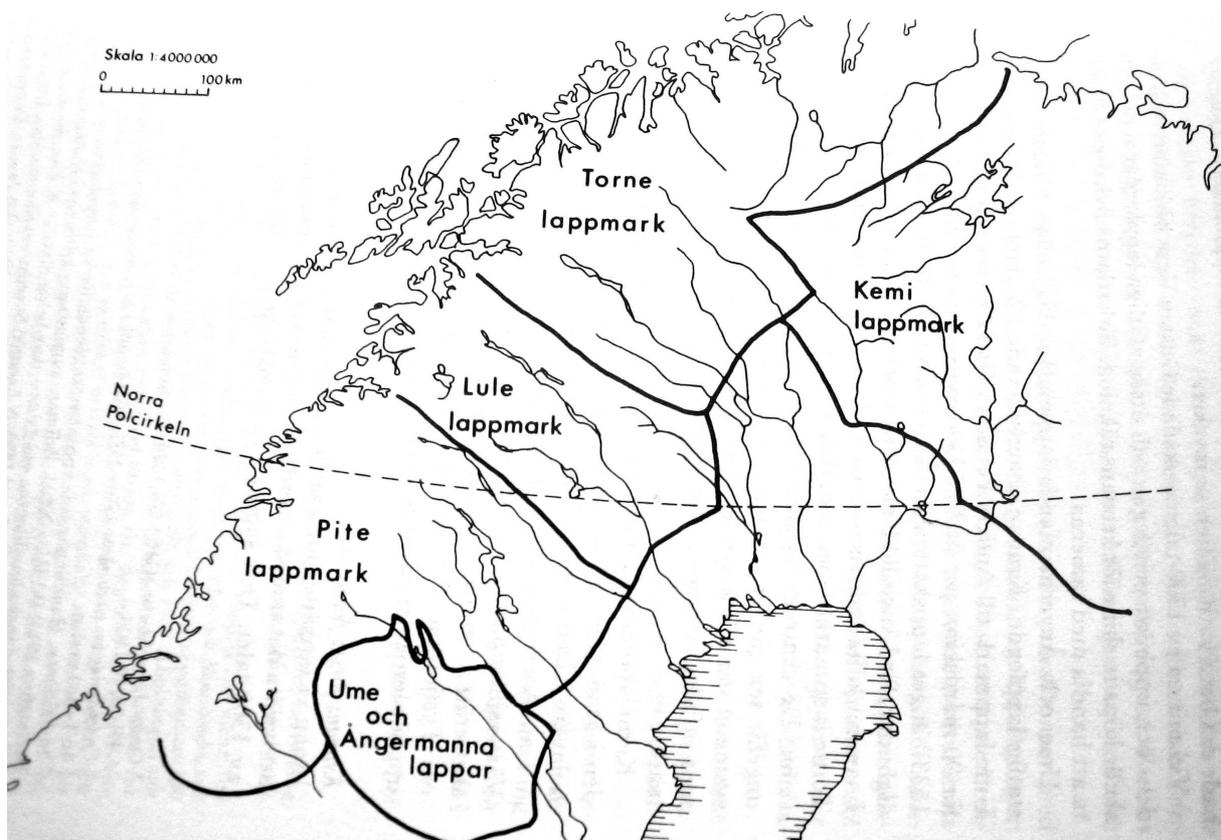


Fig. 1. The areas covered by the Swedish king's registers for tax and fur-trade 1550-1620.

¹ Lundmark, 1982.

² Hultblad, 1968, p. 206; Lundmark, 1982, p. 144 sqq. According to the count in 1605 the two richest families in Lapland had 85 reindeer, four families had 70.

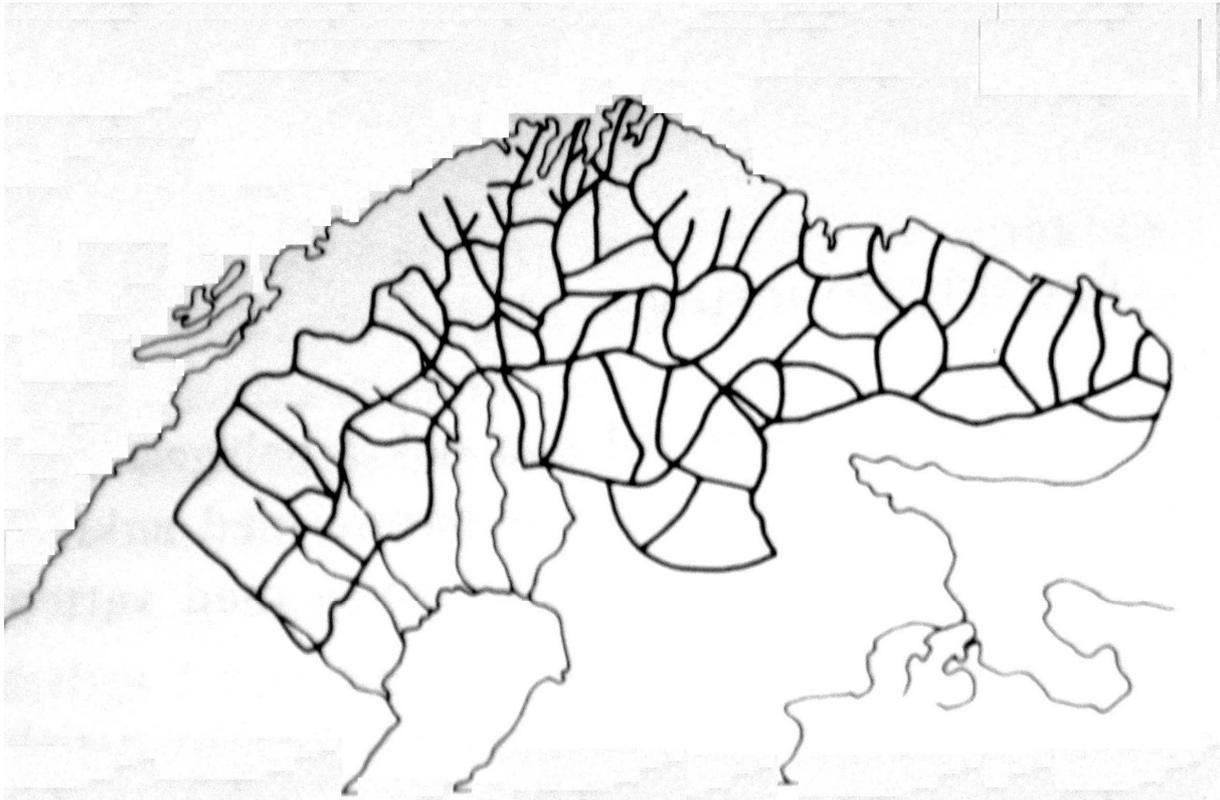


Fig. 2. Sami ("Lapp") villages during the second half of the 16th century (Vorren, 1980).

Russia. Therefore the tax burden on the Sami was not heavy. The normal tax was 40 squirrel furs or one pelt of marten per family and year. If the state wanted more furs it had to buy them.

The furs were bought by the bailiffs, the transactions were registered and the records were carefully checked by superior authorities. Furs were generally paid with butter and flour. We have reliable registers of how much foodstuff the bailiffs handed over to the Sami as payment for furs.³ The amounts were considerable. Furthermore the Sami sold furs to Swedish, Karelian and Russian traders. We know very little about the extent of these transactions, but they could have brought even more foodstuff to the Sami.

The consequence was a sharp increase in population, which upset the balance between population density, economic system and resources. We have reliable reports that a crisis occurred in the first decades of the early 17th century when the Sami no longer had furs to sell for foodstuff. Bailiffs reported to the king that the fur-bearing animals had "disappeared". That may be an exaggeration, but we know that a breakdown in fur-trade occurred. Not even the fur-tax could be paid and many Sami fled to the Norwegian coast, which functioned as something of a safety net when there was a crisis in Swedish Lapland.

The disruption of the balance between population and resources was the main factor behind the crisis. But additional factors worsened it. When the crown no longer could get furs as tax it demanded large amounts of dried fish, which hit the food-sector in a way that fur-tax had not.⁴ The crown also demanded reindeer from the Sami and started to keep its own herds in Lapland. The purpose was meat production. Salaried Sami were employed as herders. One herder could have 30-40 reindeer. When the project was at its peak the state had over 1000 reindeer in its herds in Lule lappmark alone.⁵ The project was in force between 1601 and 1620. Then it collapsed but it could have inspired new directions of thought.

³ See tables in Lundmark, 1982, pp. 125 sqq.

⁴ Lundmark, 1982, pp. 87 sqq.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 96 sqq.

The rise in population caused by fur-trade was most apparent in central Lapland. It could have caused an overexploitation of wild reindeer as well. We know very little about the number of wild reindeer in Lapland until about 100 years later, but at least at that time it seems to have been most scarce in central Lapland.⁶

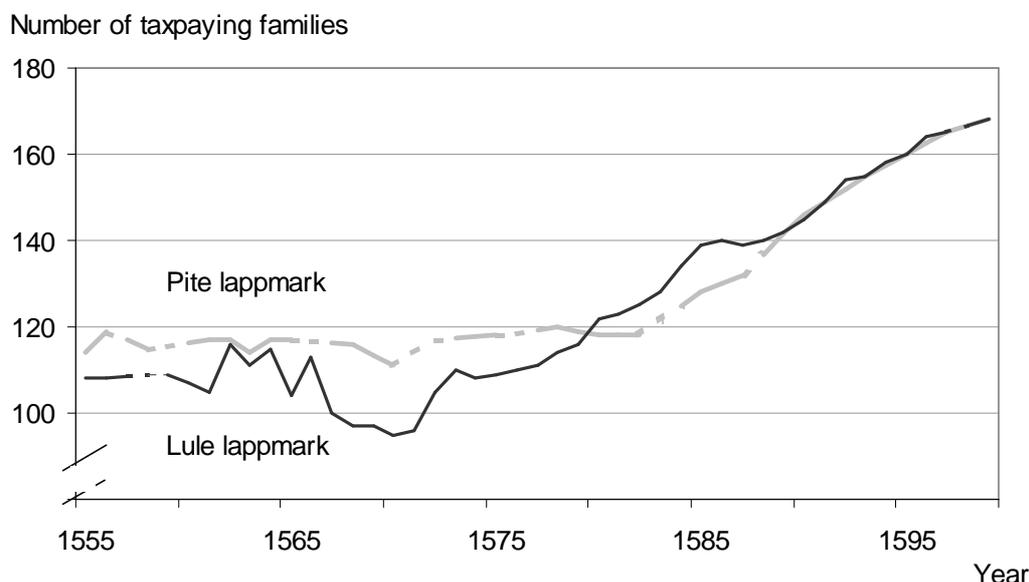


Fig. 3. The population growth in Pite and Lule lappmark 1555-1599. The general tendency was the same in Torne lappmark, but the figures are less precise. (Lundmark, 1982, p. 191 sqq.; Bergström, 2000).

From the middle and late 17th century we have extensive and reliable sources regarding Sami economy and culture in Swedish Lapland. They confirm that large-scale reindeer pastoralism was widespread at that time. The disruption of the hunter-gatherer society had forced the Sami to find new means of existence. The expansion of their small herds of domesticated reindeer became the solution. The first step towards large-scale intensive reindeer husbandry had been taken.

We now enter a period of expansion for intensive reindeer husbandry in Sweden. It lasted for 100-150 years, roughly between the middle of the 17th century and the last decades of the 18th century. At that time products from reindeer husbandry comprised about 20 per cent of the export from the towns along the northern coast of the Baltic. Hides from reindeer and dried fish (mostly pike) were the major posts. Shoes, boots, gloves and fur coats made from hides of reindeer were popular in Stockholm during the 18th century. Tanned hides were in great demand. The Sami were considered expert tanners. These were products from the winter markets in Sweden. A considerable trade also took place in markets along the Norwegian coast during summer. A valuable commodity brought there was reindeer-cheese.

When the Sami had a strong position in the market they were also respected by the authorities. The most apparent sign is the border convention between Sweden and Norway 1751. It gave the Sami rights of reindeer herding as if no borders existed. Between Lapland and the Baltic coast a border was drawn in the 1750s.⁷ Its major purpose was to defend Sami hunting and fishing rights and certain matters of taxation. But gradually the border became more important regarding grazing rights. Within the Swedish Sami villages certain families also had a strong exclusive right to smaller areas called tax-lands (lappskatteländ).⁸ But there were also common lands where poorer Sami tried to create a herd for themselves in the hope of eventually getting a tax-land.

Towards the end of the 18th century there occurred a crisis in intensive reindeer husbandry in Sweden. Diseases started to decimate herds. The most probable cause was that the herds were kept too closely gathered during milking season. At that time the competition for tax-lands had intensified and they had become much smaller than before, especially in the summer area.

⁶ See map in Ekman, 1910, p. 9.

⁷ Lundmark, 2006b.

⁸ Lundmark, 2006a.

Furthermore, there are many reports that wolves caused exceptional damages during the first decades of the 19th century. The diseases and the wolves hit reindeer pastoralism hard. Between 1780 and 1840 the number of taxpaying Sami in Lule lappmark decreased from almost 400 to about 150. Some of them became settlers and were no longer registered as Sami, but the vast majority of them left to stay along the Norwegian coast.⁹

Sami products became less important when farm produce and products from small saw-mills gained a bigger role in the regional economy. From the late 18th century the number of settled farmers increased considerably in Lapland and in the forest area further down towards the Baltic coastline. A consequence was increased problems of winter grazing. Some settlers demanded money from the Sami to allow them to graze their reindeer. There were no regulations governing this. It all depended on the personal relations between the individual settler and the reindeer pastoralist.¹⁰

Around 1800 general ideas about inferior cultures reached Sweden. Both the nomadic culture and the Sami people were considered doomed to extinction. This view led to a contemptuous attitude from the authorities. The Sami rights to their tax-lands were weakened. In Jämtland in the south the Sami were deprived of large areas of grazing-land.

There were also signs of moral decline in Sami society at that time. The drinking of alcohol had been restricted mainly to the short visits to the markets. Now settlers brought the Sami spirits all year round and made use of it to exploit them in business-dealings.

From the middle of the 19th century the Sami got better conditions in Sweden. During the same period religious revivals improved the moral climate. Especially laestadianism in the north is well known. A new policy gained support among the authorities. It stated that even if the Sami were doomed to extinction, it was a civil and Christian duty not to speed up the process. The improvements for the Sami first came about in Jämtland, where they got better rights to their remaining lands in 1841. Later the state bought back some of the lands that had been taken from the Sami in early 19th century. The whole of this area is today called the reindeer-grazing mountains (Renbetesfjällen) in Jämtland (Fig. 4). After a decision in parliament 1867 a borderline (Odlingsgränsen) was drawn in Lapland in 1871 and 1890. To the west of that line the Sami could keep their reindeer basically wherever and whenever they wanted. In 1886 they got the right to graze their reindeer in winter down to the coast, but only in places where they had done so before. A similar right came about outside the reindeer-grazing mountains in Jämtland in 1889. In laws at the end of the 19th century the Sami got a monopoly in practising reindeer husbandry and their traditional rights to hunting and fishing were confirmed. The possibilities for non-Sami to own reindeer were restricted.

But the special rights for the Sami came with a price. To deserve the “Lapp-privileges”, as the authorities called them, the Sami must remain nomads. According to the racist thinking of the time, the Sami were only fit for reindeer husbandry. If they tried to do something else it would unavoidably lead to poverty and misery. Therefore the state gradually imposed a strict separation between reindeer husbandry and hunting-fishing on the one hand, and other means of support on the other. Especially the combination of farming and reindeer husbandry was to be prevented at all costs.

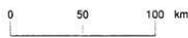
Cultural and educational measures were also taken to prevent Sami from leaving reindeer husbandry. Children of nomadic Sami were forced to attend schools of inferior quality. Their parents were forbidden to live in wooden houses, which would weaken them and tempt them to abandon nomadism. They were also discriminated when the state distributed rather generous support to those who wanted to set up a small settlement with farming in Lapland. This policy had its greatest influence in the 1910s and 1920s. It lost influence during the 1930s.

The Sami in Sweden stuck to the milking of reindeer even after the crisis in early 19th century. But they now had larger tax-lands and probably did not keep the reindeer as closely crowded in summer as before. The crisis had also meant that there was room for larger herds among the rich Sami.¹¹ Milking became more cumbersome as the herds grew. In the middle of the 19th century reindeer-cheese lost its importance as a source of income during summer. The increase of settlers in Norway made it difficult to bring reindeer and goods to the markets along the coast and the trade with Sami from Sweden virtually disappeared.

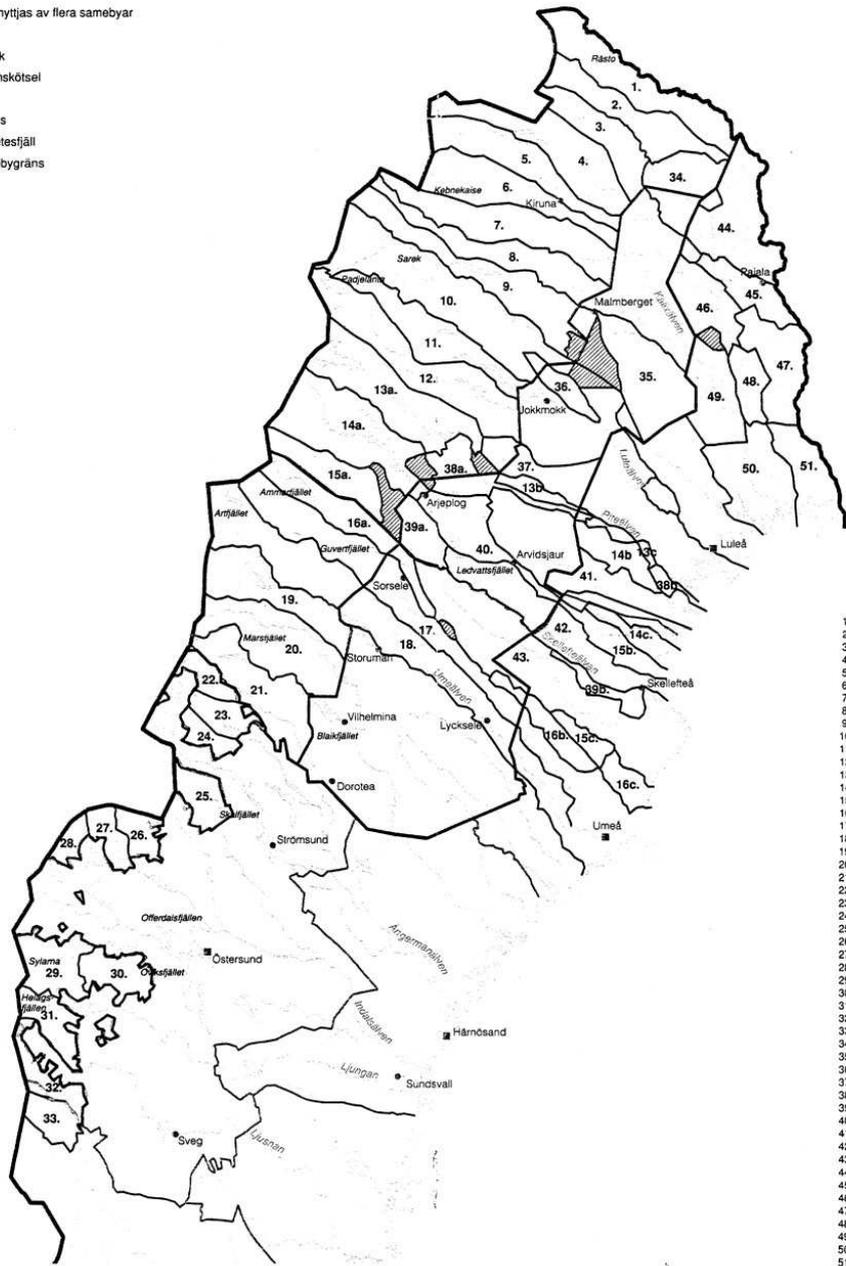
⁹ Hultblad, 1968, p. 206.

¹⁰ Lundmark, 2002; 2006b.

¹¹ Kvist, 1989.



- Områden som nyttjas av flera samebyar
- Åretrunmark
- Vinterbetesmark
- Koncessionsrenskötsel
- Odlingsgräns
- Lappmarksgräns
- Gräns för renbetesfjäll
- Fastställd samebygräns
- Länsgräns



1. KÖNKÄMÄ
2. LAINOVIUOMA
3. SAARVIUOMA
4. TALMA
5. GABNA
6. LAEVAS
7. GIRJAS
8. BASTE
9. SÖRKAITUM
10. SIRGES
11. JÄHKÄSSKA
12. TUORPON
- 13a-c. LUOKTA-MÁVAS
- 14a-c. SEMISJAU-NJARG
- 15a-c. SVAIPA
- 16a-c. GRAN
17. RAN
18. UBMEJE
19. VAPSTEN
20. VILHELMINA NORRA
21. VILHELMINA SÖDRA
22. FROSTVIKENS NORRA
23. ÖHREDAHKE
24. RAEDTIEVAERIE
25. JIINGEVAERIE
26. JOVNEVAERIE
27. NJARKE
28. KALL
29. HANDÖLSDALEN
30. TÄSSÄSEN
31. MITTÄDALEN
32. RUVHTEN
33. IDRE NYA
34. VITTANGI
35. GÄLLIVARE
36. SERRI
37. UOTJA
- 38a-b. STÄKKE
- 39a-b. MASKAURE
40. VÄSTRA KIKKEJAURE
41. ÖSTRA KIKKEJAURE
42. MAUSJAURE
43. MALÄ
44. MUONIO
45. SATTAJÄRVI
46. TÄRENDO
47. KORJU
48. PIRTTJÄRVI
49. ANGESÄ
50. KALIX
51. LIEHITTÄJÄ

Fig. 4. The present distribution of Sami villages in Sweden. Reindeer is allowed at any time of the year west of the Odlingräsänen, which is the western of the borderlines stretching horizontally through Lapland. The same goes for the patchwork of reindeer-grazing mountains (Renbetesfjällen) in Jämtland. Between the Odlingräsänen and the Lapland border (the eastern of the borderlines through northern Lapland) the grazing rights of reindeer is fairly strong between October 1st and April 30th (and for the forest-Sami all year round). East of the Lapland border reindeer have a right to graze where they have done so before. That right is vaguely expressed in the law and has been contested in courts lately. In Jämtland reindeer grazing is allowed outside the Renbetesfjällen from October 1st to April 30th. In certain areas the Sami have not been able to defend that right in some recent court-cases. In areas 44-51 non-Sami farmers have the right to own a limited number of reindeer (but herded by Sami).

Already in the early 19th century the milking of reindeer had ceased among the Finnmark Sami, who had their winter grazing areas in Finland. The reindeer pastoralists in the extreme north of Sweden milked their reindeer to a lesser extent than other Swedish Sami. They kept their reindeer in Troms county in Norway during summer and even used islands close to the coast for summer grazing. There they could allow the reindeer to roam freely.¹²

When the border between Norway and Finland was closed for Norwegian reindeer in 1852, many Kautokeino-Sami registered themselves as Swedes to be able to keep on using their winter grazing areas in Finland. From 1889 the border to Finland was closed for Swedish reindeer as well. The winter grazing areas in northernmost Sweden soon became overexploited. Sami from the north were forced to move southwards in a drawn-out process up to the 1930s. By that time the grazing convention with Norway 1923 had considerably diminished the old summer-grazing areas in Norway.¹³

There was a successive transition to extensive reindeer pastoralism in Sweden. Towards the end of the 19th century there were complaints that the rich Sami let their herds roam free in summer without respect for the boundaries of tax-lands. That indicates that the milking of reindeer was decreasing. At that time we also got a movement away from tax-lands in central Lapland. On the one hand the crown did not want to give the Sami rights to tax-lands, on the other hand the Sami themselves considered the tax-lands incompatible with extensive herding.

Successful extensive reindeer husbandry needs access to a market for meat. Towards the end of the 19th century the improvement of transports made it possible to establish a meat-market of a new kind. In Jämtland in the southernmost area the railroad up to the mountains was finished in 1882 and further to Trondheim in 1886. It changed patterns of migration and stimulated the tendency towards extensive husbandry. In the north the railroad from Gällivare to Luleå was finished in 1888, the whole distance from Luleå to Narvik in 1902. The relocation of Kautokeino-Sami from the north gave a further push towards extensive husbandry in the early 20th century. During the 1920s the milking of reindeer virtually ceased in Sweden.

In general the Swedish authorities were opposed to extensive reindeer husbandry. They considered it being on a “low cultural level”. The milking of reindeer was closer to the “high cultural level” of the farming society. The 1920s was a good period for reindeer husbandry, herds grow and there were complaints from settlers about damages on crops and hay, there were also conflicts between intensive and extensive reindeer pastoralists. The state initiated a commission, which had directives based on the old ideas about cultural levels. Some of the problems with damages from large herds solved itself during the catastrophic winters 1934-35 and 1935-36 when about 50 per cent of the reindeer in central and northern Lapland starved to death. When the commission published its recommendations in 1936 the idea about cultural levels had lost its appeal among Swedish politicians. The report was also rejected by the Sami on the grounds that the commission’s compromise between intensive and extensive husbandry simply was not convenient. At a meeting in 1937 Sami pastoralists from the whole Swedish reindeer husbandry area declared that extensive herding was superior to intensive.

In the 1920s the illusion that all Sami in Sweden were reindeer pastoralists could not be upheld any more. When the authorities could not change reality, they changed the definitions. The category of “Lapp” (Sami) based on ethnic origin was exchanged for an administrative definition of “Lapp” in the new reindeer husbandry law of 1928. The old position had been that you had to be a “Lapp” to be a reindeer pastoralist, now you had to be a reindeer pastoralist to be a “Lapp”. Only those whose grandparents were reindeer herders could be “Lapps” with a formal right to practise reindeer pastoralism. But to exercise that right you had to become a member of a “Lapp-village”, which was not allowed to practise any other economic activities than reindeer husbandry. By changing the definitions the state had succeeded in upholding the illusion that all “Lapps” were reindeer pastoralists. These administrative manoeuvres changed the structure of the Sami society and caused internal conflicts that are still in the forefront of internal Sami politics in Sweden.

Such is the order that is still governing reindeer husbandry in Sweden. From 1928 up to the 1950s there were no basic changes in either the laws or the practise of reindeer husbandry. After the catastrophic winters 1934-35 and 1936-37 there was a certain pessimism about the future of reindeer

¹² Manker, 1947; Arell, 1977.

¹³ Lundmark, 2002; 2005.

pastoralism among the Sami. But during the Second World War there was of course a high demand for meat and the state encouraged reindeer husbandry. Immediately after the war the authorities started to look at reindeer husbandry as an industry among others. Commissions gave recommendations based on opinions about small-scale industry in general. But the ethnic factor could not be eradicated and got more attention from the 1970s and onwards. International pressure regarding the rights of minority cultures has also started to influence politics and will probably do so to a larger extent in the future.

It is time to make an attempt at some conclusions. Reindeer pastoralism is a system of interaction between man and animal, but it is to a large extent governed by high level political and legal decisions. The majority of these decisions have had very little to do with biological conditions or the needs of the reindeer and the pastoralist.

Reindeer pastoralism could have been very different if political history had taken another course. If the unions between Sweden and Finland and Sweden and Norway had developed in another direction we could have had a federation or even a common state. What would reindeer pastoralism have been like under such circumstances? Had we seen a reindeer husbandry carried out regardless of state-boundaries, exploiting the grazing resources according to the needs of the reindeer?

What had happened in Sweden if the state had not enforced a total separation of Sami reindeer husbandry from other economic activities? We could have had a completely different structure of small-scale diversified industry in northern Sweden. On the other hand we could have had a gigantic Scandinavian Reindeer Husbandry Incorporated, with hundreds of herds. A large scale company like that could have had the economic power and political influence to direct reindeer husbandry according to its interests.

The unforeseen twists of history teach us that the future will take turns that we probably cannot imagine today. My prediction is that many decisions regarding reindeer husbandry will be moved even further away from the immediate practice. Today the rights of indigenous minorities are a growing concern in international politics. I guess that, whether we like it or not, the legal and administrative framework of reindeer husbandry might be determined in places like the United Nation's headquarters in New York or at some international conference in Geneva. This puts new demands on us who are doing research related to reindeer husbandry. If we want to influence its future, our insights must attract attention in the corridors of power where global decisions are made. That means taking on challenges reaching even further beyond those in laboratories and academic seminars.

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Manuscript received 30 March 2006