

GRÅTRÄSKFYNDET

English summary

Welcome to the Gråträsk-exhibition.

The items on display are part of the Gråträsk-finding. In total, there are more than 1 300 objects in the archives at the National Historical Museums of Sweden (Statens Historiska Museer, SHM). They have generously agreed to lend us a selection of items for the purpose of this exhibition, important to the region, presenting a glimpse of an elusive people and its ancient traditions.

Gråträsk

The village of Gråträsk is situated in the westernmost part of the county of Piteå, bordering to the county of Arvidsjaur. The village itself was founded in the late Middle Ages, but people have been present in the region since the stone age. Good fishing and hunting grounds as well as forests suitable for reindeer herding made it an important location for the indigenous Sami people.

During the 14th century farmers from the coastal region paid fees to the Swedish government to get the exclusive rights to the fishing grounds in Gråträsk. Shortly afterwards, they realized the farming potential of the region.

During the 15th century the Swedish government regulated the so-called Lapland trade area, the north-western part of Sweden, from the forest region to the mountains on the border of Norway. Seasonal markets were set up mainly in Jokkmokk, Arvidsjaur and Lycksele and people living in the Lapland-area were allowed to do their trading only in these authorized markets. The proximity to Arvidsjaur made Gråträsk important for transit.

During the mining period in Nasafjäll in the mountains, the main route for transporting silver ore to the coast went through Gråträsk. The village flourished and a church was built there in 1645.

Fyndplatsen – The site

In 1897 an archaeological finding was made in the Tjautjer lake, just to the south of Gråträsk. It is popularly known as the Gråträsk finding. It consists of more than 1 300 objects made from mainly silver, copper, bronze, and brass and spans a period of more than 600 years. It is one of Sweden's largest findings of metal objects.

The finding was made by two farmers, Olof R. Granström and Alfred Vestin, on their way to haymaking. Four poles sticking out of the ground caught their attention and they started digging by hand. Soon they encountered the metal objects in parcels of birch-bark, on top of a box-like construction made from wood.

In 1909 the archaeologist Gustav Hallström visited Gråträsk to analyse the site of the finding, make sketches and search for more objects. His conclusion was that the site was an ancient Sami sacrificial site.

Fyndet – The finding

Gråträskfyndet consists of more than 1 300 objects, which have been dated to the period of 700 – 1300 A. D. They are mainly made from silver, copper, bronze, tin, and brass, but there are also objects made from led, glass, pearls, gold, and ceramics. There are buckles, rings, pendants, necklaces, coins, and more.

Some of the objects were crafted locally, but the main part traces its origins to Russia, the Baltics and France, a proof that the trade network of the time was vast and well-developed. Some of the items were quite newly crafted when deposited on the site, while others show signs of old age and wearing, and there are even some traces of textile and wool.

Many of the items are connected to older Sami traditions, and the objects depicting animals are from the pre-Christian era. However, some of the objects show clear signs of Christianity affecting the Sami pagan religion. The tin crosses are known as hammer-crosses and might be a unification of the Christian cross and the Norse god Thor's [Höragalles'] mallet.

The items were brought to the National Historical Museums of Sweden in Stockholm, to be preserved and analyzed. They are mainly stored in the archives, but some are on display in the Gold Room at SHM.

Tolkning av fyndet – Interpreting the finding

The findings at Gråträsk have been interpreted as Sami sacrificial gifts from the pre-Christian period. There are, however, slight differences between the findings from Gråträsk and other similar findings in the Lapland-region. Due to this fact, a debate concerning whether this is an actual Sami sacrificial site has ensued.

There are many different theories concerning the origins of the findings. Some scholars have suggested it is a buried stash from robbed sacrificial sites, others say it might be a merchant's stock, hidden away from thieves. Statements concerning the site of the finding are varied and of different age and credibility. Even the box-like structure found at the bottom of the site has been described in many ways, varying from a box to an altar, and from a raft to a small house.

The archaeologist Gustav Hallström, who investigated the site in 1909, made connections to the traditions surrounding the lake itself. It was known as a Saivo – a lake sacred to the Sami. Such lakes were popular for fishing, and sacrifices could have been made there throughout many generations.

The Gråträsk findings are special, since there was no Seite, a holy relic made from stone or wood, much like a totem, or items made from iron or animal tusks found at the site. This might be explained due to the relocation of the Seite and the iron objects rusting and disintegrating with time. It might be even simpler: the sacrifices at the lake were made for good fishing, not good hunting, and no iron arrowheads would thus be found there.

Offer-luopte – Sacrificial luopte

Written sources from the 17th and 18th century describe holy trees, wooden figures, and sacrificial altars, signalling that these were of great importance in everyday Sami life and frequent throughout the landscape. Decomposition and deliberate demolition of these structures might be the reason to why there are so few of them remaining to this day.

The wooden structure described at the Gråträsk finding site was not preserved, but there are written descriptions and simple drawings of it. A more recent theory suggests that the objects were deposited in a sacrificial Luopte, a storehouse made from small logs.

The size and shape support the theory and the birch-bark and twigs found at the site might have been used for covering the roof of the Luopte, a common way of building in Sami tradition.

On Sami drums, used for religious purposes, these Luopte are frequently depicted, among gods, spirits, shamans, and seite, stating their importance.

Heliga samiska platser – Sacred Sami sites

The Sami people have always lived close to nature, which clearly shows in their religion. Nature itself was divine and every stream, mountain and tree was ruled by a spirit. Every part of nature had a soul and should thus be respected.

The sun and the moon, thunder and wind were connected to myths and living creatures. Alongside these spirits were gods and goddesses, each ruling a specific aspect of life or nature, each crucial to all living things.

The world was divided into three levels: heaven, earth, and the underworld. The latter, known as Saivo, was the home of the forefathers. Some lakes and mountains were known to be gateways to the Saivo people.

To get blessings from the gods and to establish connections with their forefathers the Sami people would make sacrifices, either to a single god, to a local spirit or to the Saivo. Sacrifices would be made for good hunting and fishing, to bless the reindeer, for good weather, for health and many other reasons.

The Seite, few in numbers but important in folklore, found at these sacrificial sites have been interpreted as either the totem of the local spirit or as the homestead of a greater god or goddess. Most often the Seite was a strangely shaped log or rock, varying in size. The more sacrifices made, the stronger the Seite would become.

Sami culture is rich and varied, as the Sami region – Lapland – covers almost one third of present-day Sweden's area. There are differences and variations in rituals, choices of locations for camp sites and sacrificial sites, gods, and myths. Furthermore, there are notable changes over time. Thus, the sacrificial sites predating Christianity are very difficult to interpret fully and incontestably.

De samiska metalldepositionerna – offerplats eller depå?

Sami metal findings – religious sacrifices or hidden treasures?

There are twelve known Sami metal findings within the Swedish part of the Sami lands (they cover Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia). Most of them have been dated to 700 – 1300 A.D. They have been very diversely interpreted, but today most scholars agree to them being ritual sacrifices at holy sites.

The objects at the sites are made from metal, but the composition of objects differs greatly. The sites, however, are all located at, or close to, a lake, with four of them being directly connected to well-known Saivo. The Saivo tradition was strong, and the Sami people believed them to be gateways to the underworld and the forefathers.

As new influences from around Europe reached the Sami people, and their trading in skin, hides and fur gave many of them a significant amount of wealth, this excess lead to the tradition of ritual sacrifices at sacred sites.

This tradition ceases during the 14th century. Perhaps due to changes in trading, high taxes to the Swedish government, or maybe due to new cultural influences. The plague, the arrival of Christianity, or looting of the sites might be other explanations.

If you have any questions concerning this exhibition – please feel free to ask our staff at the reception/front desk.

Thank you.