From cultural dualism to a multicultural past: perspectives on interaction and identity in Fennoscandian archaeology

Introduction

When discussing past cultural contact and interaction, archaeology has had a tendency to focus on cultural dualism, breaking the issue down to contacts between for example foragers and farmers (e.g. the earliest Central European farming communities and the last hunter-gatherers in Scandinavia), between north and south (the Nordic versus the Arctic bronze age) and between main ethnic groups (e.g. Norwegian and Sámi). As a result one often presented interaction as taking place between two major, homogeneous and apparently contrasting entities.

One such example is the picture of Fennoscandia in the Bronze Age (ca 1800-500 BC) as it may be perceived from Bakkas important survey (Bakka 1976) of the bronzes in northern Scandinavia (fig.1). The map suggests the existence of two distinct cultures, with little geographical overlap: one is the arctic hunter-gatherer culture found in the north and east, the other is the agricultural Nordic bronze age chiefdoms found in southern Scandinavia and spreading north along the coasts.

Recent research do, to a much greater extent, take into consideration that no groups are internally homogenous, that interaction often takes place between various factions within each group, and that many different types of interaction may have taken place within and between groups and sub-groups. In the following I will attempt to present an image of interaction in northern Fennoscandia during the last the two millennia BC according to such perspectives (see also Damm in press a).
Figure 1: Bakkas map of bronze artefacts in northern Fennoscandia (1976)
The heterogeneous society

Our knowledge of the social and economic organisation of the Sámi in recent historical times provides a relevant example for understanding heterogeneity in a society. The Sámi is by outsiders often perceived as one major ethnic group. Their Fenno-Ugrian language (Sámi) may, however, be divided into several language areas, consisting of at least 10 different dialects (fig. 2), several of which are not mutually intelligible. Within the main language group, North-Sámi (fig. 3), there are several regional sub-groups with somewhat different traditional costumes (e.g. Kàràšjohka and Guovdageaidnu). And within each of these regions there are several large families herding reindeer, each with their allocated grazing areas. The
real complexity of the situation is, however, that we are not simply looking at a set of Chinese boxes, where more boxes are found inside the others. Other collective identities can found crossing those of language and dress. In both Kárášjohka and Guovdageaidnu there are (and have been for centuries) both nomadic reindeer herders and settled Sámi (Dálon). In some contexts a family may associate themselves with the main settlement location, at other times their allegiances are with other families or factions with the same economic basis.

![Diagram of Sámi society]

Figure 3: Selected segmented and overlapping identities within Sámi society

Other constellations may be added that are of relevance to cultural interaction: the herders often entered into ‘verdde’-relations with families amongst the coastal Sámi (who subsisted by fishing and a few domesticates). Such ‘guest-friend’ relations were important for both parts (Eidheim 1966, Evjen 2007). It eased access to goods and services in the coastal areas during summer for the herders, and in return they provided reindeer meat, foot wear etc. and often herded a few reindeer for their hosts.

With this as a background we become aware that interaction within and between societies may take many different forms. True, major ethnic groupings may be of importance when we
categorize each other from a more distant perspective, but in many direct interactions the context tunes identities to a much finer level.

**Collective identities in the north 2000-0 BC**

There are many reasons why northern Fennoscandia has been perceived as a coherent entity also in the last millennia BC. The inhabitants in the northern area were all hunter-fishers, they made a particular kind of pottery, often tempered with asbestos and decorated with textile impressions, the metal objects and moulds found in the area were all associated with eastern metallurgy provinces, projectiles were either made of slate or, more commonly, of quartzite.

If, however, one zooms in on each of these characteristics one discovers a wide spectre of local and regional variations. In the interior of the Scandinavian peninsula an increased emphasis on reindeer hunting lead to seasonal movements from the forest area in the winter to the mountains during summer, creating long east-west resource areas following water systems (Forsberg 1989a). Along the coast where subsistence focussed on fishing and sealing, the resource areas on land were smaller, moving more from outer coast to inner fjords and bays (fig. 4). Some families and groups along the coasts introduced domesticates such as sheep and goat and gradually began small scale farming. This indicates at least three main different

![Schematic illustration of different settlement patterns and resource areas in central northern Sweden (from Forsberg 1993)](image)

Figure 4: Schematic illustration of different settlement patterns and resource areas in central northern Sweden (from Forsberg 1993)
subsistence systems, within each of which local groups with separate resource areas would exist. This would have been basis for collective identities at different levels (e.g. local resource area, distinct subsistence economies), but also for interaction within and between subsistence groups. Most marriages would probably have been across local resource groups, but within subsistence group, thus providing a basis for widespread kin groups, while exchange of goods and services would be an important part of interaction across subsistence groups.

The distribution of different types of bifacial quartzite points (Forsberg 1989b) and of different types of pottery (Lavento 2001), demonstrate the closer interaction between some local groups than others (figs. 5 and 6). Both technologies are dependent on knowledge and skill that has to be transmitted within communities of practice (Apel 2001, Hallgren 2008). Much such learning takes place from the older to the younger generation within a community, generating distinct technological features with a learning network, again providing the basis for tacit or more explicit expression of identities (Gosselain 2008). Knowledge and learning may also be transferred through demographic movement, due to marriage and other motivations for re-settlement in a new area (Damm in press c).

Figure 5: Typical quartzite bifacial point.

Figure 6: Regional variation in Säräśniemi 2 pottery in Finland (from Lavento 2001)
A multitude of networks and identities
These diverse data present us with a complex pattern of interaction and networking. As a result, the outdated image of cultural dualism in the period ca 2000-0 BC in northern Fennoscandia may be replaced with a multitude of networks and identities, either active or latent (Damm in press b).

Some networks were based on different subsistence modes, partly distinguishing groups from each other at a regional or an interregional level, but at the same time providing opportunities for exchange. Depending on your geographical location the choice or availability of exchange partners varied. Some reindeer hunters in the interior may have had seasonal interaction with incipient pastoralists and farmers at the coast. Some of the fishing communities would have been settled in the immediate vicinity of the farmers and would have had to interact on a round-the-year basis. Other fishing and reindeer hunting communities would have been located very distant from the farmers and would predominantly have interacted with each other. Thus there was so single or simple pattern of contact and interaction between groups with different subsistence patterns.

Other networks, that may be visible in the archaeological data, would have been based on transmission of technological knowledge, while others again were linked to kinship. Yet other networks and identities may be associated with religion, language and socio-political structures. Some networks and identities may be segmented into different levels (ibid., Jenkins 1997), but often they break that format and instead form a criss-crossing pattern of partly overlapping identities. Because of this multitude of identities we should expect no simple correspondence between the distribution of an assemblage of artefacts and any overall ethnic or linguistic entity. This fact should, however, not discourage us from considering identities in the past (Damm in press b).

Conclusion
By breaking larger entities into a variety of networks based on resource area, subsistence, learning networks and religious practices a more diverse and nuanced image of the past emerges. The simple dualism of earlier interpretations is replaced by a multiplicity of partly segmented, partly overlapping identities.
References:


