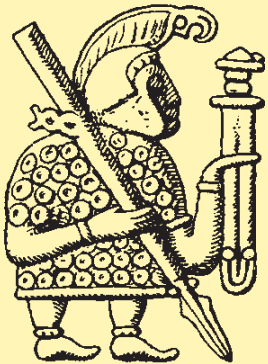


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Debatt

Sumtangen, a medieval communal reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) drive locality on the mountain plateau Hardangervidda in Norway, once more

There is a legend about Lake Finsberg. In the older days, the legend says, at the time when there was much reindeer on the north of Hardangervidda, then there was an extensive hunting of reindeer at the lake. In the middle of the south shore is a level and low spit of land that draws together the lake to a narrow sound. It is said that it was here in the sound that the hunting was carried out. Animals on move on the north side were driven into the water, stabbed and beaten to death while they were swimming and then dragged ashore on the spit of land and slaughtered. *Sumtangen* is the name of the place. The hunters used long rows of cairns and wooden sticks with ropes between says one of the legend variants. The rows stretched several kilometers out in the terrain in the form of a funnel that was wide farthest out, but got narrow towards the sound. When the animals entered the funnel they were lead straight into the water. In it were stretched out lines that prevented the animals from swimming to the sides. At the spit of land on the south side [of the sound] the hunters lay ready in boats waiting (Indrelid 2010, p. 28, my translation, the author's italic).

Introduction

The preamble above is presented by Svein Indrelid as a local legend describing a special communal mass trapping technique used in the sound at Sumtangen in medieval time. The communal drive described differs substantially from the reindeer drives that we know have been in use on Hardangervidda at that time (Blehr 1973; 2012). What more, we do not have any legend describing the communal reindeer drive at this locality. At the best we have a fragment. It was published by T. S. Haukenæs (1884, pp. 188–191) together with a fragment of a legend from another locality. The latter tells about a communal reindeer drive at Gravskar, a mountain gap situated roughly 2,5 kilometers further to the northwest, and wrongly located to the sound north of Sumtangen at Lake Finsberg (Bakke 1985, p. 100). The fragments tell about how the reindeer were driven into pitfalls in Gravskar, and how the ones who did not get caught there rushed into the lake to swim across the narrow sound to Sumtangen.

Both fragments are by Indrelid treated as if they were from the same legend, and he freely uses or ignores elements from both of them in the creation of his personal Sumtangen legend. Furthermore, he adds a saying about how lines had been stretched out in the water, so as to catch reindeer as they swam across the Lake Finsberg to Sumtangen (Nicolaysen 1865, p. 23).

Based on the mean radiocarbon datings of fifteen bones from the middens outside the remnants of the two medieval huts at Sumtangen, and an estimation of the number of reindeer that the bones in the same middens represented, Indrelid and the osteologist Anne Karin Hufthammer conclude that in the second half of the 13th century a large scale communal mass hunt (i.e. communal reindeer drive) with a special technique was carried out in the sound at Sumtangen (2011, p. 44). We are not told what this special technique entailed, but Indrelid has earlier described its effects as a massacre (Indrelid 2010, p. 32). Indrelid and Hufthammer claim that entire

herds were driven into the water where they were killed by hunters in boats. They estimate the annual average of this hunt to be 110–156 animals over a 50 years' period. An activity of such a size, they argue, was far above what could have been organized in the local communities. Moreover, they considered the mass killing of entire herds to have been an altogether foreign method for hunters from these communities (Indrelid & Hufthammer 2011, p. 51).

As to the term “herd” however, it is a term used for a larger unit within a population, sometimes for post-calving aggregations of 1 000–5 000 animals (Parker 1972, p. 30). Thus, it goes without saying that no “mass killing of entire herds” can ever have taken place at Sumtangen. The animals that were killed when the drives in the fall took place were, besides single animals, predominantly bucks from small flocks on their way from their mountainous summer area in the north to the fostering flocks further south on the central part of Hardangervidda (Bakke 1985, pp. 105–106).

The osteologist Liselotte Takken Beijersbergen has contested the annual average of the hunt presented by Indrelid and Hufthammer. Contrary to them she evaluates the number of reindeer that the bones in the middens represented out from the whole assemblage excavated at Sumtangen. Assuming that the communal drives occurred annually, and over a somewhat longer timespan than Indrelid and Hufthammer had operated with, her conclusion is that a minimum of 15–23 reindeer were killed each year (Takken Beijersbergen 2017, p. 343, 353). This is noticeably less than the 110–156 animals Indrelid and Hufthammer had arrived at, making it evident that Indrelid's speculations about a mass hunt at Sumtangen cannot be substantiated from an osteological point of view.

According to Indrelid and Hufthammer, the idea that the hunt could not have been organized by locals was supported also by data from an earlier excavation. In the 1970s four reindeer bones with runic inscriptions had been found in the middens. In spite of the fact that medieval runes were in common use at least to ca. 1400 for simple messages inscribed on wood and bone (Samnordisk runtextdatabas 2004) Indrelid and Huftham-

mer did not believe that knowledge of runes existed among the local hunters. From their point of view the bones must therefore have been carved by people from towns. It is these townspeople, they state, that were present at Sumtangen as organizers of the communal mass killing, possibly under the control of the clergy or the crown (2011, p. 53; cf. Indrelid et al. 2007, p. 149; 2010, p. 33; 2011, p. 70; 2015, p. 35). However, since it is documented that runes were in common use in medieval time there is no reason to take the four reindeer bones as evidence of an organization led by townspeople.

Communal caribou drives

Indrelid carried out a search after possible cairns as well as stone settings left after wooden sticks on the northern side of Lake Finsberg, and he declared with emphasis: “we found them” (Indrelid 2010, p. 32, my translation). However, the communal reindeer drive he claimed to have found, and that he decided most likely to be the drive with the special trapping technique that his legend told about, was a drive already known to him (Indrelid et al. 2007, p. 132). It consists of only six cairns that I documented as early as 1972. There were no cairns and wooden sticks, as Indrelid claims, stretching “north from the lakeside towards the glacier area” (Indrelid 2011, p. 57). What more, the cairns were not situated at the sound across from Sumtangen where Indrelid's communal mass drive supposedly was to have ended, but further west where the lake is at its widest (Blehr 1973, p. 104; 1982, pp. 19–20; 1987). The remnants of this communal reindeer drive – as of all the other drives that I found in the 1970s – were less eye-catching than the communal drive Indrelid presented in his legend. It consisted only of the six cairns mentioned above, placed strategically on a mountain ledge. Settings after wooden sticks might be difficult to find, and none have been discovered on the slope from the cairns and down to the lake, but they must have been used on this stretch, or alternatively, a driver must have been stationed there. The wooden sticks, or the driver acting as a scarecrow, would have led the startled animals to abandon their migration towards the noise from the rapids at the outlet of the lake (cf. Clarke

1940, p. 104). Instead they would have trotted on uneasily until they reached the shore where they would have entered the water without much ado. This is due to the reindeer's evolutionary adoption to the wolf (*Canis lupus*) who would have interrupted its pursuit when the reindeer entered the water (cf. Crisler 1956). It was not accidental that the drive ended where Lake Finsberg is at its widest. The width would have made it problematic for the reindeer to escape the hunters, who most probably would have waited for them in their boats on the opposite side of the lake until the animals had swum so far that they would have had difficulty saving themselves by turning back when intercepted (Blehr 1987, p. 90).

Obviously, the remnants of the communal drive I had found on the northwest side of Lake Finsberg could not be identical with the drive that Indrelid presented in his 2010 legend (cited in the preamble above), that allegedly ended at the sound opposite Sumtangen. Indrelid does not seem to notice this complication in his own reasoning. In a paper published together with Hufthammer in 2011, the picture he has constructed is furthermore wrongly associated with me: "The authors agree with Blehr that the presence of rows of cairns and also wooden poles on the north side of Lake Finsbergvatn to some extent verify the ancient legend concerning mass-hunt by use of drift lines" (2011, p. 49, cf. p. 47). I have never stated what they here ascribe to me. As for the "ancient legend" mentioned, it is a modified version of the one Indrelid presented in his 2010 article. We are now told that it was written down by W. F. K. Christie already in 1840, and that it is referred to in an article by Øivind Bakke (Bakke 1985). This is however not the case, no legend is documented by Christie. Nor is it therefore, as they claim, also referred to by Haukenæs (1884), Bøe (1942), and Blehr (1973; 1982). The most spectacular difference from Indrelid's 2010 legend is that the funnel-shaped system where we are told the herds of migrating reindeer were diverted, now is said to have consisted of long rows of human-like closely spaced stone cairns, or wooden sticks (Indrelid & Hufthammer 2011, p. 46).

Identical formulations referring to the hunt, and its organizers, make it clear that Indrelid as

the archaeologist is responsible for them (Indrelid 2011, pp. 68–69; Indrelid & Hufthammer 2011, respectively pp. 50–51). I have therefore felt free to ascribe the interpretation of the hunt to him also in the articles he has written together with others. The differences between the articles are mostly on the form level: In one article the rows of cairns and wooden sticks are connected to each other with ropes (Indrelid 2010, p. 28), whereas in another one the cairns were human like (Indrelid & Hufthammer 2011, p. 46), and in yet another, stone fences are added to the funnel shaped rows of cairns and wooden sticks, that now again are connected with ropes (Indrelid 2011, p. 60, pp. 70–71).

The Sumtangen locality, as all the other localities with remnants of large medieval stone huts on Hardangervidda, is located near bottlenecks that the reindeer bucks will pass on their own volition during their migrations between the mountainous area in the north where they spent the summer and the central part of Hardangervidda to which they returned in the rutting season in the fall. It would therefore have been quite pointless to construct long lines of closely spaced stone cairns and/or wooden sticks making a funnel shaped system so as to get the bucks to the bottlenecks. All that was necessary was a rather modest row of cairns and/or wooden sticks placed strategically in the bottleneck itself so as to block the reindeer's further migration. As I showed at the drive at Lake Finsberg the bucks would then have chosen to get into the lake so as to escape from the drivers. In this way, caribou drives ending in water were different from the ones known from other parts of Norway. I have in mind regions where the animals were chased into enclosures or over the edge of precipices. In these latter forms of drives the animals had to be driven so hard that they would stampede towards their destiny without possibility to stop before it was too late. To prevent the panicking animals from breaking through them, these drift fences were commonly made as rock walls. Since the drives on Hardangervidda, with only two known exceptions (Blehr 2014), ended in water, that the reindeer would enter at their own volition, here it was not necessary to control the animals physically with fences that they could not penetrate. However, the driv-

ers had to take one important precaution. Contrary to the drives ending in enclosures or over precipices, drives leading to water had to be so gentle that the animals would follow the line of cairns and wooden sticks in the drift fence at a distance without panicking. Had the reindeer been followed too closely, they would have saved themselves by rushing off through the drive line.

As to what made the reindeer keep at a distance from the cairns and the wooden sticks it was the fluttering from whatever the hunters had attached to them. It might have been pieces of birch bark, wooden slats or bundles of twigs, anything would have done as long as it would have moved in the wind (cf. Finstad & Pilø 2010, p. 32). The reason is that reindeer, as all *cervidae*, do not react towards objects that are downwind of them as long as these are motionless. But any movement was bound to have made them apprehensive of danger and would have caused them to keep at a distance from whatever was fluttering.

Conclusion

This is not the first time I have been critical to the picture presented by Indrelid of the communal reindeer drive at Sumtangen in medieval time (Blehr 2012). One might therefore ask, why do I find it necessary to refute it once more? The reason is simply that Indrelid instead of contesting my critique continues to ignore it (Indrelid 2013; 2015; Indrelid et al. 2015).

Admittedly, the fragmentary character of the archaeologist's data will always make their assertions more or less tentative. But this does not exempt them from the use of empirical data and testing of hypotheses. However, when it comes to Indrelid's articles I find them far too rich in unsubstantiated statements. There has for example never been any drift fences going from Lake Finsberg to the glacier area further north. There is no evidence that townspeople and not the hunters themselves organized the communal drives in medieval times. Neither Haukenæs nor Christie wrote down any legend from Sumtangen. And as for the special trapping technique that we are told was in use in the second half of the 13th century, it is only presented as a statement.

I also find it telling that by letting his presentation of how the reindeer were secured at Sum-

tangen revolve around the legend that he himself has created, Indrelid makes it appear as if no research regarding medieval reindeer hunting worth mentioning had been carried out on Hardangervidda before his own. In this way the articles give off the appearance of being pioneer works. This is also the picture Indrelid presents when he is interviewed (cf. *Forskning.no* 2006-12-12; *Lågendalsposten* 2006-12-13; *Aftenposten* 2007-09-25, 2011-19-20; *ScienceNordic* 2011-12-14).

The examples I have presented here should suffice as an explanation for why I do not want Indrelid's interpretation of the medieval activities at Sumtangen to be the commonly accepted one, or one serving as a model for future interpretations of similar settings on Hardangervidda. As researchers we have a responsibility to present a picture as solidly underpinned as possible, based on our limited data. This is a paramount and everlasting responsibility we have towards the people of the past that are presented in our research, and as well towards present and future generations.

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