

CHAPTER THREE

THE SÁMI AND THEIR INTERACTION WITH THE NORDIC PEOPLES

—◆—
Inger Zachrisson

During the Viking Age a large part of the Scandinavian peninsula was inhabited by Sámi (Figure 3.1). Similar populations within the Uralic-speaking zone reveal many common elements of society and culture, cosmology and religion, dwelling types and settlement patterns. Sámi territory was traditionally divided into *sijte* areas, a territorial, economic and social unit. Society was socially and economically stratified; it was changing, dynamic. Some Sámi were probably settled. Regional differences were still existing, but gave way to a more and more 'pan-Sámi' material culture, and an increasing religious and ethnic consolidation.

Central Scandinavia and the north Norwegian coast were important areas for contacts between Sámi and Nordic peoples. The archaeological material shows that there were relatively clear and stable borders between their dwelling areas. Nordic expansion northwards was primarily the result of an inner development, not of immigration. Contacts between agrarian areas and hunting grounds must have been close and the latter not primarily looked upon as 'outlying land' but as 'a homeland', where Sámi relatives still lived (Hansen and Olsen 2004; Schanche 2000; Zachrisson *et al.* 1997).

Most of the written sources emanate from the early Middle Ages, but probably describe the Viking Age as well. They give information about Sámi in *both* northern and central Scandinavia. But everything that is said about them is said by others. The word for Sámi is based on the Old Norse *finnar* (sing. *finn*) – it was through Nordic people that knowledge of the Sámi reached the world. *Finnmark* meant the 'forest' or 'border land' of the Sámi. Their own name, *Saame*, is recorded once, in an Icelandic saga from the thirteenth century, in the word *sensveinar* (ON *sveinn* 'young man').

Skridefinnas ('skiing Sámi') are depicted by king Alfred of Wessex *c.* AD 890 as neighbours to the *svear*. Adam of Bremen writes in the eleventh century about *Skritefini* living between Swedes and Norwegians, in the area of the Swedes, and that some of them were Christianised. *Historia Norwegie* from *c.* 1150–75, probably written in south-east Norway, describes Sámi shamanism, and divides Norway lengthwise into three zones from west to east: the coastal area, the mountains, and the forests of the *finnar*. Snorri Sturluson, in the thirteenth century, and others talk about Sámi in southern Norway, for example Hadeland, Oppland, and possibly Härjedalen (Mundal 1996, 2003; Zachrisson *et al.* 1997).

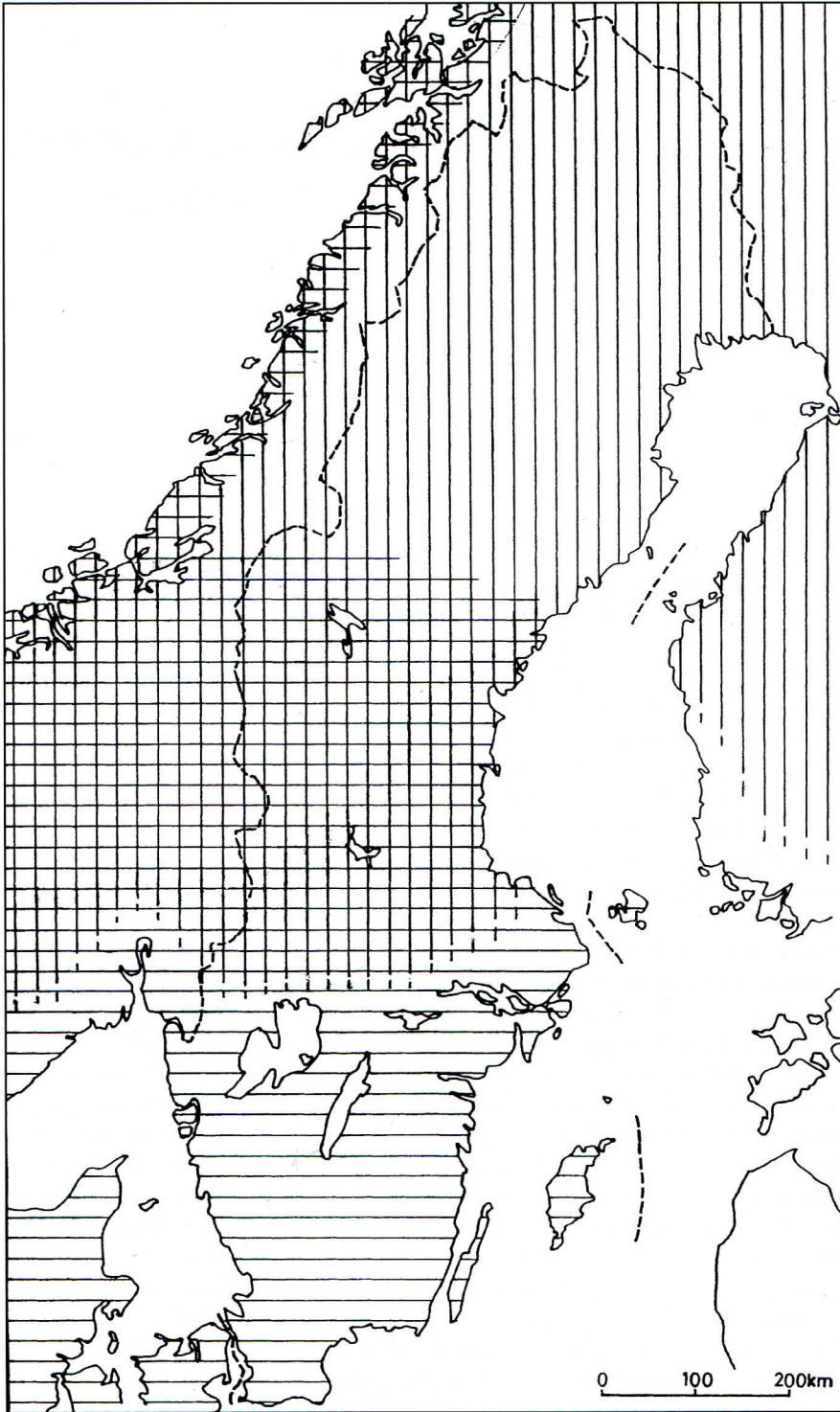


Figure 3.1 A schematic picture of Sámi culture (vertical lines) and Nordic culture (horizontal lines), c. AD 1000 (after Zachrisson *et al.* 1997).

The Old Norse sources show that the Sámi were a natural part of Norwegian society; the two peoples lived in a kind of symbiosis. Some Sámi moved to Iceland, according to written sources and grave finds (Einarsson 1994). The borders between the peoples were not sharp. The Norwegians knew that they shared the country with another people – much more than later on. But the Sámi were not looked upon as equals. Local petty kings could have Sámi in their service. Snorri Sturluson tells of a man named Finn, or rather he was a *finn*. He was small and quick, a master on skis and with his bow, the stereotypes of a Sámi. He had long and faithfully been serving king Rörik of Hedmark (Mundal 2003).

Finn was taken up as a Christian name in the Norse culture, and used in some of the most aristocratic families. On the other hand, nearly all the Sámi in the written sources have Norse names. The concept *finnkonge* ‘Sámi king’ shows Sámi with a special status. Conflicts between Sámi and Norwegians are rarely described – it was considered wrong to mistreat the Sámi. The main criteria of Sámi culture seem to be based on ecological, economical and religious elements. Several people were probably bilingual (Mundal 2003; Zachrisson *et al.* 1997). It was because of contacts, not in spite of such, that the Sámi for so long could maintain their own culture (Odner 1983).

One can distinguish between ten Sámi languages today. During the Viking Age their language area was larger to the south – Sámi was probably the language in central Scandinavia when the Indo-European language arrived (Sammallahti 1996; Strade 1997; Wiik 2002). Influence from Sámi to Nordic may be indicated as far south as Uppland before AD 800 (Kusmenko and Riebler 2000). Many place names from the Iron Age and the Middle Ages in *Finn-* or *Lapp-*, hence identifying ethnic origin, are to be found in southern Norway, especially in the south-east (Olsen 1995).

According to genetic (mitochondric DNA) research, the Sámi have a different genetic disposition compared with other peoples in Europe. It could mean that they emanate from a very old (west) European population (Sajantila *et al.* 1995; cf. Hansen and Olsen 2004).

Differentiated societies are usually rooted in some form of surplus production, and the possibility of using it in a trading position. The many prestige objects from the outside world in Sámi ancient monuments indicate exchange of a surplus. The Norse chiefdoms functioned as redistributive systems (Odner 1983; Hansen 1990). When they became established in the north, they depended on alliances with corresponding societies to the south; one exchanges goods and marriage partners. In the north there were to be found walrus tusks, exquisite furs and gerfalcons, prestige objects sought after by the European elite – things that the Sámi hunters had access to (Hansen and Olsen 2004). Even if tax and plundering expeditions are mentioned, it was probably a more varied reality with co-operation, useful for both parties (Odner 1983). But it does not hinder an asymmetrical relation of power. The saga of *Egill Skallagrímsson* tells about how Þórólfr Kveldulfsson in the tenth century in winter time went from Hålogaland to trade with and tax the Sámi in the mountains. From them he received fur products, afterwards sold in England – ‘most went calmly but part of it with fear’ (Zachrisson *et al.* 1997).

The north Norwegian chieftain Othere (ON *Óttarr*) reports to king Alfred of Wessex in c. AD 890 that the *finnas* live along with and east of the Norwegians, hunting, fishing and catching birds. Othere had 600 unsold tame reindeer, six of which were decoys. The wealth of the Norwegian chieftains was said to be mostly in the tribute of the *finnas*,

which was differentiated: 'Each pays according to his rank. The highest in rank has to pay fifteen marten skins, five reindeer skins, one bear skin, ten measures of feathers, a jacket of bearskin or otter skin and two skip-ropes', 60 ells long, one made from walrus-hide and the other from sealskin. The size of the reindeer herd may indicate that it was owned by several Sámi. The chieftains seem to have divided the tribute from the Sámi in exchange for political patronage, goods such as agricultural products, imported textiles or precious metals (Hansen and Olsen 2004). *Historia Norwegie* says about the Sámi: 'There are also by the *finnar* numerous squirrels and hermins, and of the skins of all these animals they every year pay large tributes to the kings of Norway, whose subjects they are.'

When the kings' power in Norway became stronger in the tenth century, the relations between the Sámi and the Norsemen got more strained. During the eleventh century the king got the fur trade as a monopoly. A surplus of fur probably lies behind the many imported metal objects found among the finds of the *c.* ten large Sámi sacrificial sites in the interior of northern Scandinavia. The many Norwegian silver coins in them are from *c.* 1050–1200. The coins were pierced, used as ornaments. But weights here and at a dwelling site, plus non-pierced coins from another site and a grave, indicate that the Sámi by now were part of the 'weight economy' of Scandinavia – perhaps as merchants themselves. Their society was well integrated in the trade and economic system of the surrounding societies (Hedman 2003; Zachrisson 1984; Zachrisson *et al.* 1997).

Some twenty silver hoards from the tenth to the thirteenth century, characterised by necklaces and bracelets, were found in the Sámi areas in the north. The finds have a complementary spread in comparison with the Sámi sacrificial-site finds. The agglomeration in the 'border zone' in Nord-Troms may indicate ritual depositions, perhaps between representatives for both Sámi and Norsemen, a symbolic confirmation of the border between them. Some of the silver ornaments have a very low silver content. Were they especially produced for the Sámi (Zachrisson 1984; Hansen and Olsen 2004)?

Sámi erected 'hunting-ground graves' *c.* 200 BC–AD 1300 in the inland of central Scandinavia, which were as a rule cremation graves under modest stone settings (Zachrisson *et al.* 1997; Zachrisson 2004; Bergstøl 2008; Skjølvold 1980; Hansen and Olsen 2004). Adopting burial customs from others does not, however, necessarily mean that the underlying ideas were also taken over, but it indicates near contacts. Nordic grave customs spread further and further north among the Sámi in the inland of Sweden. At the same time the agrarian areas at the coast experienced a boom.

Near contacts between Sámi and Norsemen on a high social level are indicated at Vivalen in Härjedalen with twenty rich flat graves with inhumation burials from *c.* 1000 to 1200. They are typical of Sámi graves as regards burial custom (orientation, birch-bark shrouds), combinations of grave goods similar to those of the sacrificial sites (locally made hunting arrowheads and pendants, eastern-type penannular brooches and pendants, western coins and ornaments) and characteristic functional alterations of objects, compared with their areas of production. There were objects of goat skin in three graves. The dwelling site area nearby, from *c.* 800 to 1200, has up to now revealed remains of two Sámi huts with typical stone-filled fire-steads and bones of reindeer and goats/sheep (Zachrisson *et al.* 1997).

In the north so-called *urgraver*, graves of stone, and bear-graves, with ritually buried bears, became characteristic Sámi traits (Schanche 2000; Hansen and Olsen 2004).

The Sámi had a symbolic power in their magic, for which the Norsemen had great respect. Sámi figure as healers, advisers and masters of magic. Sámi and Norse share certain fundamental religious concepts, such as the *seiðr* and the belief in magical weapons and clothes. They fight together against the introduction of Christianity. In the earliest Christian law codes for south-east Norway, written down before c. 1120, the Christians are forbidden to go to the land of the *finnar* in order to have their fortune told or to be healed. As far south as in Hedmark a Sámi shaman hammer from about the twelfth century was found at a dwelling site (Bergsland 1970; Zachrisson *et al.* 1997; Zachrisson 2004).

The Nordic peoples interpreted their relationship to the Sámi in the light of myths. The Norse live in *Miðgarðr*, the Sámi in *Útgarðr*. The goddess *Skadi* skis and hunts with bow and arrows, like a Sámi woman, and the Sámi woman *Snæfríðr* became ancestress to the Norwegian royal dynasty (Mundal 1996, 2003).

The Nordic and Sámi elites exchanged marriage partners. There are women's graves with Nordic types of ornaments in Sámi areas, and women's graves with Sámi types of ornaments – often eastern, of bronze – in Nordic areas (Storli 1991; cf. Schanche 2000; Zachrisson *et al.* 1997). Written sources tell of Sámi women marrying Nordic men of the highest level of society. King Haraldr Hárfagri marries *Snæfríðr*, daughter of *Svási* the *finn*-king, who lives in a Sámi hut at the royal mansion at Dovre in southern Norway. They have four sons. In a high-status sphere Sámi were evidently accepted (Mundal 1996).

The 'mats' of birch-bark covering Nordic boat graves in Uppland were originally parts of conical huts, Sámi *gåetie*. Were they trade products or did Sámi live close by? Another question is why typical Sámi items were used at such prestige occasions, whether it was solely for practical reasons, or maybe also symbolical (Zachrisson *et al.* 1997). The Sámi have played a far greater role in both religion and economy than formerly assumed (Price 2002).

The attire of Nordic Viking Age man – and woman – was evidently an ideal for high-ranking Sámi men. Male graves at Vivallen and Långön Island in Ångermanland contained textiles of wool and linen: imported status objects. The richest man's grave at Vivallen shows 'double-gender affiliation' (he was probably a shaman): it consists of an 'oriental' belt belonging to the East Nordic/international male dress, and adornments to high-ranking Nordic women's attire, such as the necklace, knife and linen tunic (Zachrisson *et al.* 1997; Price 2000). Such belts – perhaps signifying a shaman – have been found in other rich Sámi graves in east Scandinavia as well. Swords, on the other hand, in Jämtland and Härjedalen are as a rule found in hunting-ground graves, not in those of the settled areas. Could this be a sign of Norwegian influence on Sámi (Zachrisson *et al.* 1997)?

The Sámi functioned as specialists inside the Nordic economic system. They were hunters and gatherers. *Historia Norwegie* says: "They are very skilled hunters, . . . nomads who live in tents . . . these they take on their shoulders, fasten smoothed boards under their feet . . . and move with their wives and children faster than the bird . . . whereby the reindeer pull them."

Sámi women were of old specialists in preparing the pelts of animals, with methods, tools and terminology of their own. The fur trade in the South Sámi area was directed towards Nordic people: the Sámi words for 'marten' and 'to prepare skin' are here borrowed from the Nordic language, while the same words in the North Sámi area are

from the Finnish language. The South Sámi word for 'snare' is *giele*, but also *snaarroe*, a word taken over from Nordic. It shows close collaboration (Zachrisson *et al.* 1997).

Historia Norwegie also says about the Sámi: 'There is an enormous amount of wild animals such as bears, wolves, lynxes, foxes, martens, otters, badgers and beavers . . . squirrels and hermins.' The Nordic word for 'fox', ON *refr*, Norw *rev*, Sw *räv*, is probably a loan from Sámi/Fenno-Ugric to all the Nordic languages, which shows it to be an early loan (Bergsland 1970; see Hansen and Olsen 2004). The black (or white) fur of the mountain fox was one of the most valued of all skins from the north.

Trapping pits, usually in systems, for catching big game, elk or reindeer, seem once to have characterised Sámi culture, but later spread also to Nordic culture. In Dovre there were such large systems that the meat, hides and antlers from reindeer caught here must have been for sale at a large market, maybe a result of Sámi–Norse cooperation (Mikkelsen 1994).

Sámi probably made skis for Nordic people. Most of the several hundred prehistoric skis found in Fennoscandia are of Sámi type, several with typical ornamentation. That the Sámi were specialised in skiing is stressed from the ninth to the nineteenth century (Zachrisson *et al.* 1997).

Sámi were of old making exquisitely decorated objects of elk and reindeer antler, often with resin inlay. Reindeer hunters buried in the south Norwegian mountains were also specialised 'comb-makers', working in antler (Christensen 1986).

The much discussed *stalotomter*, a kind of hut foundations, may also indicate specialisation. These Sámi hut foundations, in rows, above the tree-line in Scandinavia, indicate a new use of the mountains. It is debatable whether the dwellings were erected in connection with hunting (Mulk 1994; Hansen 1990), or for reindeer herding. New types of location, with good grazing for reindeer, were now chosen for dwelling sites; this was a new type of Sámi society, based on a semi-nomadic living, which was yet another economic differentiation (Hedman 2003; Storli 1994). Changes in the vegetation indicate reindeer herding at Sösjön in northern Jämtland from at least the thirteenth century and at Vivalen in Härjedalen perhaps earlier (Aronsson 2004; König Königsson in Zachrisson *et al.* 1997). The South Sámi language has words from before AD 800 for driving with and milking reindeer. In all the Sámi languages there are, of old, special words for 'tame reindeer' as well as 'wild reindeer' (Knut Bergsland, see Zachrisson *et al.* 1997: 149).

Iron smithing is also stated during the Viking Age at Sjösjön, and iron arrowheads like those from Vivalen and the sacrificial sites found there (Aronsson 2004). The Sámi seem to have been looked upon as specialists in this field according to written sources, and it is indicated from hunting-ground graves of the Viking Age and before (Zachrisson *et al.* 1997).

Sámi were well-known boat builders. A woman was buried in a sewn boat of Sámi type (Larsson 2007) in a Nordic boat grave in Västmanland, Sweden (Nylén and Schönback 1994). The Norwegian king Sigurðr Slembidjárn ordered two sewn Atlantic ships to be built for him by Sámi in Lofoten. The Sámi then made a feast for him – a symbolic act.

On the shores of the border area in northern Norway, in then Sámi areas, there are *bellegroper*, oval/rectangular pits, used to extract train-oil from whale blubber or seal fat. Some pits are so big that the production cannot have been only for local demand (Henriksen 1995; Hansen and Olsen 2004).

Thus, during the Viking Age the interaction between Sámi and Nordic peoples was intensified, especially in central Scandinavia. There was a high degree of reciprocity and social acceptance between them. They had near economic, social and religious contacts. Steadfast forms of collaboration developed, based upon the specialisation of the respective group.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aronsson, K.-Å. (2004) 'Tusenårig boplatz upptäckt vid Sösjön', *Jämten*, 97: 15–19.
- Bergsland, K. (1970) 'Om middelalderens finnmarker', (*Norsk Historisk Tidsskrift* 1970(4): 365–409).
- Bergstøl, J. (2008) *Samer i Østerdalen? En studie av etnicitet i jernalderen og middelalderen i det nordøstre Hedmark* (Acta humaniora 325), Oslo: Unipub.
- Christensen, A.E. (1986) 'Reinjeger og kammaker, en forhistorisk yrkeskombinasjon?', *Viking*, 49 (1985–6): 113–33.
- Einarsson, B.F. (1994) *The Settlement of Iceland; A Critical Approach. Granastaðir and the Ecological Heritage* (GOTARC. Gothenburg Archaeological Theses B:4), Göteborg: Dept. of Archaeology, University of Gothenburg.
- Hansen, L.I. (1990) *Samisk fangstsamfunn og norsk høvdingøkonomi*, Oslo: Novus forlag.
- Hansen, L.I. and Olsen, B. (2004) *Samenes historie fram til 1750*, Oslo: Cappelen Akademisk Forlag.
- Hedman, S.-D. (2003) *Boplatser och offerplatser. Ekonomisk strategi och boplatzmönster bland skogssamer 700–1600 AD* (Studia archaeologica universitatis Umensis 17), Umeå: Institutionen för arkeologi och samiska studier, University of Umeå.
- Henriksen, J.E. (1995) *Hellepropene. Fornminner fra en funntom periode*. (Unpubl. thesis at the University of Tromsø, Stensilserie B: 42, Tromsø.)
- Historia Norvegie*, trans. P. Fisher, ed. I. Ekrem and L. Boje Mortensen, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum (2003).
- Kusmenko, J. and Rießler, M. (2000) 'Traces of Sámi-Scandinavian contact in Scandinavian dialects', in D. Gilbers, J. Nerbonne and J. Schaecken (eds) *Languages in Contact* (Studies in Slavic and general linguistics 28), Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Larsson, G. (2007) *The Ship and the Maritime Society of Central Sweden in Late Iron Age* (Aun 37), Uppsala: Dept. of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Uppsala.
- Mikkelsen, E. (1994) *Fangstprodukter i vikingtidens og middelalderens økonomi. Organiseringen av massefangst av villrein i Dovre* (Universitetets Oldsaksamlings skrifter. Ny rekke 18), Oslo: Universitetets Oldsaksamling.
- Mulk, I.-M. (1994) *Sirkas – samisk fangstsambälle i förändring. Kr. f.-1600 e. Kr.* (Studia archaeologica universitatis Umensis 6), Umeå: Arkeologiska inst., University of Umeå.
- Mundal, E. (1996) 'The perception of the Saamis and their religion in Old Norse sources', in J. Pentikäinen (ed.) *Shamanism and Northern Ecology* (Religion and Society 36), Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- (2003) 'Vikingane kjende godt til samane', *Daerpiens Dierie* (*Sydsamisk kyrkblad*), 2002(4): 2–3, 2003(1): 8–9, (2): 8–9.
- Nylén, E. and Schönback, B. (1994) *Tuna i Badelunda. Guld Kvinnor Båtar*, 2 vols (Västerås kulturnämnds skriftserie 27 & 30), Västerås: Kulturnämnden.
- Odner, K. (1983) *Finner og terfinner. Etniske prosesser i det nordlige Fenno-Skandinavia* (Oslo occasional papers in social anthropology 9), Oslo: University of Oslo.
- Olsen, L. (1995) 'Stadnamn på Finn-. Spor etter samisk aktivitet i Sør-Noreg?', in M. Harsson and B. Helleland (eds) *Stadnamn og kulturlandskapet* (Nasjonale konferensen i namnegransking 7), Oslo: Avdeling for namnegransking, Universitetet i Oslo.
- Price, N.S. (2000) 'Drum-time and Viking Age: Sámi-Norse identities in early medieval

- Scandinavia', in M. Appelt, J. Berglund and H.Ch. Gulløv (eds) *Identities and Cultural Contacts in the Arctic* (Danish Polar Center. Publications 8), Copenhagen: Danish Polar Center, Danish National Museum.
- (2002) *The Viking Way. Religion and War in Late Iron Age Scandinavia* (Aun 31), Uppsala: Dept. of Archaeology and Ancient History, Uppsala University.
- Sajantila, A. *et al.* (1995) 'Genes and languages in Europe: an analysis of mitochondrial lineages', *Genome Research*, 5: 42–52.
- Sammallahti, P. (1996) 'Language and roots', in H. Leskinen (ed.) *Congressus octavus internationalis Fenno-Ugristarum, Jyväskylä 10.–15.8.1995*, vol. 1, Jyväskylä: Moderatores.
- Schanche, A. (2000) *Graver i ur og berg: samisk gravskikk og religion fra forhistorisk til nyere tid*, Karasjok: Davvi Girji OS.
- Skjølsvold, A. (1980) 'Refleksjoner omkring jernaldersgravene i sydnorske fjellstrøk', *Viking*, 43 (1979): 140–60.
- Storli, I. (1991) 'De østlige smykkene fra vikingtid og tidlig middelalder', *Viking*, 54: 89–104.
- (1994) *'Stallo'-boplassene. Spor etter de første fjellsamer?* (Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning B:19), Oslo: Novus.
- Strade, N. (1997) 'Det sydsamiske sprog', in Zachrisson *et al.* (1997).
- Wiik, K. (2002) 'On the emergence of the main Indo-European language groups of Europe through adstratal influence', in K. Julku (ed.) *The Roots of Peoples and Languages of Northern Eurasia*, vol. 4, Oulu: Societas Historiae Fenno-Ugricæ.
- Zachrisson, I. (1984) *De samiska metalldepåerna år 1000–1350 i ljuset av fyndet från Mörtrträsket, Lappland* (Archaeology and Environment 3), Umeå, Inst. för arkeologi, University of Umeå.
- (2004) 'Idre sameby – sydligast i Sverige', *Idre sameby – med historiska spår i framtiden*, Östersund: Gaaltije.
- Zachrisson, I. *et al.* (1997) *Möten i gränsland. Samer och germaner i Mellanskandinavien* (Statens historiska museum. Monographs 4), Stockholm: Statens historiska museum.