This is the published version of a paper published in *Acta Borealia*.

**Citation for the original published paper (version of record):**

Bergman, I., Edlund, L.-E. (2016)  
Birkarlar and Sámi - inter-cultural contacts beyond state control: reconsidering the standing of external tradesmen (birkarlar) in medieval Sámi societies.  
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08003831.2016.1154676

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

**Permanent link to this version:**  
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-120669
Birkarlar and Sámi – inter-cultural contacts beyond state control: reconsidering the standing of external tradesmen (birkarlar) in medieval Sámi societies

Ingela Bergman\textsuperscript{a} and Lars-Erik Edlund\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}The Institute for Sub-arctic Landscape Research, INSARC, Arjeplog, Sweden; \textsuperscript{b}Department of Language Studies, Umeå university, Umeå, Sweden

**ABSTRACT**

It is not until the fourteenth century that written records offer a glimpse into the coastal societies of Northern Sweden. Records include references to a social stratum referred to as the *birkarlar*, who were tradesmen engaged in trading with the Sámi. The origin of the *birkarlar*, their prominent status and the meaning of the term, is an enigma that has been much disputed among scholars although there is consensus about the economic and fiscal supremacy of *birkarlar* vis-à-vis the Sámi. However, the paradox of tradesmen employing force against their most important circle of suppliers and customers remains a puzzle. The *birkarl* institution is analyzed by means of alternative reading of historical records from the perspective of the indigenous Sámi and coastal farming communities. The postulated animosity between Sámi and the *birkarlar* is critically examined in light of the social and economic context of interior and coastal communities during the Late Iron Age and Early Medieval period, and in relation to historically known Sámi kinship relationships and marriage traditions. Data are analyzed with regard to demography and social structure, and from a landscape perspective including the logistics and practicalities of inter-cultural contact. Analyses corroborate that *birkarlar* were deeply rooted in the coastal communities and fully involved in the regular subsistence activities. They were representatives given a commission of trust and contacts between the *birkarlar* and the Sámi were characterized by mutuality and inter-dependence.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**

Received 11 May 2015
Accepted 11 January 2016

**KEYWORDS**

Birkarlar; Sámi; coastal communities; northern Sweden; trade; tally sticks

**Introduction**

The Sámi of northern Fennoscandia are mentioned in early historical records dating to the first centuries AD (Collinder 1953; Hætta 1980; Hansen and Olsen 2004, 45–51), revealing that there was a population in the north that was well distinguished from
the Nordic societies of Norway and Sweden. However, very little is known about the cultural affinity of the indigenous coastal population of northernmost Sweden. In contrast to the very extensive archaeological material in the interior, archaeological remains in coastal areas dating to the Late Iron Age and Early Mediaeval times are sparse and inconclusive. It is not until the fourteenth century that written records offer a glimpse into the coastal societies, including mention of a very limited social stratum referred to as the *birkarlar*. Information is meagre, revealing only that *birkarlar* were tradesmen with the exclusive right (granted by the Swedish King) to trade with the Sámi. During the course of the sixteenth century, the standing of the *birkarlar* was progressively reduced, and eventually the *birkarla* organization ceased to exist.

The origin of the *birkarlar*, their prominent status and the meaning of the term, is an enigma that has occupied scholars for centuries (cf. e.g. Nordlander 1906; Jaakkola 1924; Schybergson 1935; Steckzén 1964; Collinder 1965, 1–21; Dahlgren 1965; Fjellström 1965, 42–56; Favorin 1968; Friberg 1983, 186–196; Sundström 1984, 138–144; Söderlind 1986; Vahtola 1987; Wallerström 1995, 239–264; Mäntylä 1998, 334–336), leading to a wide range of theories. Even though the social status and descent of the *birkarlar* is much disputed, there is consensus about their economic and fiscal supremacy *vis-à-vis* the Sámi, as manifested by the *birkarla* power of taxation and their tough tax enforcement (Luukko 1956a, 1956b, 1956c; Olofsson 1962, 137–291; Hederyd 1985, 74–76; Sundström 1993, 80; www.samer.se/4541). From a Sámi perspective, the *birkarlar* are strongly associated with greed and the violent exercise of power (cf. Svonni 2008). The oppression of the Sámi by the *birkarlar* is firmly internalized as part of Sámi historiography and has become an axiom embraced by both scholars and the general public, reproduced in folklore and literature (cf. Rosendahl 1964; Hederyd 1985, 74–76, 2003; Svonni 2008) and including the puzzling paradox of tradesmen employing force against their most important circle of suppliers and customers.

In this paper we analyse the *birkarla* institution by deconstructing the predominant (colonial) central power discourse and, instead, reading historical records from the perspective of the indigenous Sámi and coastal farming communities. The postulated animosity between Sámi and the *birkarlar* is critically examined in light of the social and economic context of interior and coastal communities during the Late Iron Age and Early Medieval period, and in relation to historically known Sámi kinship relationships and marriage traditions. The study draws on archaeological data and on a variety of historical sources including taxation records and other cameral records, judicial records, royal instructions and correspondence, most of which date to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Data are compiled and analysed with regard to demography and social structure, and from a landscape perspective, including subsistence strategies and the logistics and practicalities of inter-cultural contact. These are aspects largely overlooked in previous research and, therefore, may add new and significant knowledge.
The historical and geographical setting

Numerous finds of foreign provenance demonstrate an extensive trading network during the Late Iron Age, connecting northern Fennoscandia with commercial centers such as Novgorod and Visby and later with the powerful Hanseatic League (Serning 1956, 1960; Zachrisson 1976, 1984; Fjellström 1986, 59–67; Malmer and Malmer 2005; Bergman 2007). Some of the Sámi sacrificial sites in the interior of northern Sweden dating to AD 800–1300 include coins from Germany, Denmark, Norway, England and even the Caliphate (Jammer et al. 1956, 185–222; Malmer and Malmer 2005), giving a good picture of the widespread connections of the Sámi societies. The huge number of foreign objects suggests an organized network with well-arranged chains of middle men. The birkarla institution probably evolved during this period, although it is not until the beginning of the fourteenth century that birkarlar are first mentioned in historical records. In AD 1328 the Swedish King, Magnus Eriksson, stipulated the right by tradition of birkarlar to trade with the Sámi (Svenskt diplomatarium 4: 73 nr 2676; Vahtola 1991, 219). Thirty years later, in 1358, these privileges were corroborated by his son Erik Magnusson, who refers to previous confirmations made by his father’s forefathers, thereby dating the birkarla institution back to at least the thirteenth century.

Records from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries offer quite detailed information about the birkarla domain covering most of northern Fennoscandia including the Torne, Kemi and Lule and Pite lappmark (administrative units corresponding to indigenous Sámi territories) and reaching as far as the North Atlantic and the Barents Sea (Figure 1). Birkarlar from the Luleå and Piteå parishes were traveling to the Atlantic coast on a regular basis to trade with the Sámi and collect taxes on behalf of the Swedish King, and similarly birkarlar from the Torneå and Kemi areas travelled to the coastal areas of the Barents Sea. Trading enterprises also included groups other than the Sámi and there were regular markets, for instance at Varanger, attended by merchants from far and near (cf. Nordlander 1906, 220–232; Fellman 1910, 299–308; Hoppe 1945, 62–64; Hansen 1984).

Managing this vast catchment area presupposed established social networks and efficient communication logistics. Contact between birkarlar and the societies of the interior would have been frequent, resulting in reciprocal practices. Accordingly, the role and significance of the birkarlar in relation to Sámi societies is best understood by studying the socio-economic settings and the practicalities of contact.

The social and economic setting

There are only a few complete records listing all birkarlar for each region and year; these relate to 1553, 1580, 1590 and 1606–1607. In addition, there is a list dating to 1577 covering Pite lappmark. There are also a number of fiscal accounts and registers of members of the district courts from the period 1539 to 1617, including occasional and fragmentary information on birkarlar. The 1553 record was compiled on the initiative of the Swedish King, Gustav Vasa, who was striving for total control over the profitable trade with the Sámi. The listing of birkarlar was an attempt to garner information
about the number of birkarlar, their identity, home village and sphere of power. Thus, the 1553 register records an organization that was still largely self-governed and exhibiting original traits, while subsequent records reflect the successive subordination to the Swedish Crown. There are a number of birkarla registers dating from 1607 to 1620, however, during this period the birkarlar were totally integrated into the Swedish fiscal and administrative system. The record of 1620 marks the end of the birkarla organization and there is no mention of birkarlar in official registers after that.

By putting together all accessible first-hand information on birkarlar for the period 1539–1615, and analysing it from the perspective of their contemporary socio-economic context, a picture appears that significantly adds to that presented in previous studies.

The sixteenth-century birkarlar were farmers living in coastal villages beside the Gulf of Bothnia from Bureå in the south to Torneå in the north (Figure 2). During the final stage of the birkarla period, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, there were
*birkarlar* living in Kemi (20 km east of Torneå) and active within the Kemi lappmark. The Torneå lappmark was the most extensive, bordering the domain of Russian merchants in the east.

It is interesting to note that the *birkarla* trading network cut across many linguistic borders, embracing speakers of Sámi, Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian dialects. In the sixteenth century fiscal records for the Torneå parish, village names and lake names are generally written in their Finnish form (cf. Wahlberg 1963 passim; Pellijeff 1992, 1996 passim; Nylund Torstensson 1973, passim, 1977, 71–84). The Finnish language area along the Torne River shows, in an interesting way, connections with various parts of the Finnish speaking-area and illuminates long-distance influences over time, highlighted by the analysis of place-names (Vahtola 1980) and with the help of geolinguistic evidence (e.g. Winsa 1991, 1994, 1996). In the Kalix River area,
as well as in Luleä and Piteä, Swedish dialects originating in different parts of the North Germanic area are spoken among the coastal population but the place-names also indicate prehistoric presence of Finnish and Sámi speaking peoples. For the dialects compare, for example, Pihl (1924), Rutberg (1924), Dahlstedt (1956, 9–46), Edlund (2001, 34–44) and for the place-names Wahlberg (1969, 84–97 et passim), Pellijeff (1973, 53–55, 1980a passim, 1980b, 87–90, 1982, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1990 passim), Edlund (1988, 35–60, 1989 passim, 1991, 25–48, 1994, 243–258, 2005, 41–52) and Edlund et al. (in press), Korhonen (2009, 202–234), Bergman (2010 passim). Thus, there is good reason to believe that a multilingual competence could be found among the coastal populations in older times (cf. Edlund 1989, 165–168, 1997), as is the case in more recent times (Collinder 1926, 120–126; Källskog 1992, 33–34). Even in the Torne, Lule and Pite lappmarker it is possible that such multilingual competence was a reality. A multilingual situation is, after all, the rule rather than the exception within the language communities of the world. It is likewise possible that pidgin varieties and other simplified varieties of the languages in this northern area have been used over time, as was the so-called Borgarmålet, used in the eighteenth century in the southern parts of the Swedish Lappmark (Högström [1747] 1980, 77; Collinder 1970, 156–157; Dahlstedt 1982, 20–24; Edlund 2009, 155–157; Kuzmenko 2009, 123–132), or Russenorsk, used in the nineteenth century in Northern Norway (Dahlstedt 1982, 20–24; Broch and Jahr 1984, passim; Jahr 2005, 1538–1542). A later phenomenon is, in contrast, the standard variety of Swedish (boksvenska) used to facilitate contacts between different linguistic groups, known from the eighteenth century (Linnaeus [1732] 2003, 53; cf. Dahlstedt 1978, 56–57; Widmark 1991, 170–171 et passim; Edlund 2009, 150–151). Regarding the language(s) used when birkarlar met with the Sámi, there is no explicit information to be gained from written records, as far as we know. However, as demonstrated here, it is obvious that this area was a multilingual melting pot with Sámi, Finnish, Swedish and Norwegian dialects as well as simplified languages like Borgarmålet. The linguistic evidence that can be drawn from the personal names (surnames, by-names) in the written sources are in many ways more questionable, due to the source material; they are, therefore, not further discussed here.

Taxation records show that the birkarlar were among the wealthiest landowners, although not necessarily the absolute richest, in their respective village, owning large areas of arable and pasture land and large stocks of cattle. However, in terms of capital assets they were certainly in a class by themselves (Älvsborgs lösen 1571). By comparing the 1553 list of birkarlar with records of individuals paying taxes for fishing in interior lakes and seal hunters (Landskapshallingar, Västerbotten 1553, 1555, 1557) it is evident that the birkarlar were fully involved in the everyday subsistence activities of sixteen century farmers in the north, including cultivation and cattle herding, hunting and fishing. In addition, the birkarlar owned quite significant numbers of reindeer as beasts of draught (Bergman, Zackrisson, and Östlund 2014, 49).

Just like many other farmers, the birkarlar were engaged in the regular marketing of domestic surplus production (Sw. landsköp) mainly limited to the rural market (Friberg 1983, 186–193; Nordlander [1892] 1990, 317–320). In taking part in this local trade, they were obviously not holding the status of a birkarl. According to taxation records, the same person could be listed both as a birkarl and as a rural tradesman.
(Sw. landsköpman) in the same year, paying separate taxes for his activities. A document describing the court session held in Torneå in 1420, mentions how all of the peasants who were lappefarar (meaning people traveling to the Sámi (lapps)), and all of the birkarlar made complaints about tradesmen from Finnish Tavastia (fi. Häme) encroaching on their trade with the Sámi (Nordlander 1906, 224). This implies that not only birkarlar, but also ordinary peasant farmers, were trading with the Sámi. Thus, although the term birkarl is associated with trading activities, it is by no means simply the equivalent to tradesman.

Birkarlar are never mentioned by their title in the regular sixteenth-century census registers, church records of tithes, or in the registers of fishermen and seal hunters. The sole context in which the concept occurs on a regular basis is in connection with the annual assessment of the so-called birkarletaxa, that is, the fixed fee claimed by the King as a rate of interest for giving birkarlar the privilege of trading with the Sámi (Nordlander 1906, 226–233). From 1554 onwards the birkarlar were assigned the collection of taxes from the Sámi on behalf of the King under the supervision of the King’s bailiffs (Nordlander 1906, 227–232; Olofsson 1962, 242, 266). Considering that craftsmen were recorded by their name and profession, for example Olof smed (Olof the smith), Hans skomakare (Hans the shoemaker) and Måns skräddare (Måns the tailor), it is noteworthy that no one is mentioned by his status as a birkarl. The fifteenth and sixteenth century Tänkeböcker (the city registers of the Stockholm city and court protocols) and Jordeböcker (taxation records), frequently report on tradesmen from the Gulf of Bothnia coming to Stockholm to trade, however, there is no mentioning of birkarlar in that context (Olofsson 1962, 221). A number of records dating to the late sixteenth century mention that birkarlar from Torneå were engaged by the Swedish King for their expertise in connection with boundary disputes between the Swedish Crown and neighbouring states in the Barents region, specifically Russia (cf. Handlingar rörande Skandinaviens historia 29 1858, 149–155; Fellman 1915, 65–70). Otherwise, birkarlar are referred to in written records only on occasion, in their role as lay assessors at district-court sessions held in Sámi villages or in cases where they were fined for adultery with Sámi women. Thus, birkarlar are only referred to by their title in situations involving Sámi one way or another. So, who were ascribed the birkarla status and what did the position actually imply?

**Private operators or representatives?**

Although there are many different theories about the descent of the birkarlar and the origin of their organization (cf. Steckzén 1964, 15–54; Söderlind 1986, 86–112; Vahtola 1987, 324–333; Wallerström 1995, 239–246, for reviews) there is consensus about the incentives for their trading activities. According to the prevailing view, birkarlar were private entrepreneurs acting only for their own gain and profit. They were ascribed social and political power by virtue of their wealth and prestige (cf. Fjellström 1965, 42–56). However, this understanding of birkarlar and their social role is based on written information filtered and weighed through the eyes of their main opponent, that is, the Swedish Crown, rather than on structural analyses of factual data. By matching the birkarla registers of the period 1553–1606 to regular census records accounting
for the number of taxpaying Sámi in each of the *lappmarker* and peasants in the coastal villages, the structure of the *birkarla* organization emerges. First, the number of *birkarlar* within and between each *lappmark* is quite consistent over the years (Table 1) and, correspondingly, there are a consistent number of Sámi taxpayers within and between the *lappmarker* (Table 2). The median number of Sámi taxpayers *per birkarl* varies between 6.5 and 9 (Table 3). These figures correspond to the number of households in a Sámi *sijdda*, that is, groups forming the basic social units within Sámi society (see Manker 1953, 13–17; Odner 1983, 82–83; Mulk 1994, 10–14; Bergman et al. 2008, for a discussion of the *sijdda* concept). The number of peasants liable to pay taxes according to the so-called *bågamantal* (i.e. every man who could handle a bow, Sw. *båge*) *per birkarl* is equally consistent within and between the parishes, and also over time (Table 4). The median number of peasants *per birkarl* varies between 17.9 and 27.1 (Table 5). Finally the ratio of peasants vs. Sámi taxpayers ranges from 2.5 to 3.2 (Table 6).

### Table 1. The number of *birkarlar* in each *lappmark* (Landskapshandlingar, Västerbottens handlingar 1553–1606).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lappmark</th>
<th>1553</th>
<th>1577</th>
<th>1580</th>
<th>1590</th>
<th>1606</th>
<th>m =</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Torne</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lule</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pite</td>
<td>16&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ume</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>54.65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Two of which living in Bureå in the parish of Skellefteå.
<sup>b</sup>Fourteen birkarlar were living in the parish of Skellefteå.

### Table 2. The number of taxpayers in each *lappmark* (Landskapshandlingar, Västerbottens handlingar 1553 and Norrlands lappmarker 1577–1606).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lappmark</th>
<th>1553</th>
<th>1577</th>
<th>1580</th>
<th>1590</th>
<th>1606</th>
<th>m =</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Torne</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>178</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lule</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>136.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pite</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>134.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. Ratio number of Sámi taxpayers *per birkarl*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parish</th>
<th>1553</th>
<th>1577</th>
<th>1580</th>
<th>1590</th>
<th>1606</th>
<th>m =</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Torne</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lule</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pite</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4. The number of taxpayers (*bågamantalet*) in Torneå, Lule and Pite parishes (Landskapshandlingar, Västerbottens handlingar 1553–1606).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parish</th>
<th>1553</th>
<th>1577</th>
<th>1580</th>
<th>1590</th>
<th>1606</th>
<th>m =</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Torne</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>393.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lule</td>
<td>453&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>408&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>415&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>470&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>361&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>421.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pite</td>
<td>387&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>308&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>305&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>332&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>269&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>320.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Excluding the villages of Måttsund and Ersnäs in Nederluleå parish.
<sup>b</sup>Including the villages of Måttsund and Ersnäs in Nederluleå parish, and the Bureå village in Skellefteå parish.
<sup>c</sup>Including the villages of Måttsund and Ersnäs in Nederluleå parish.
Comparing the number of farmsteads according to the 1543 taxation and property records (Jordaboken) with the number of Sámi taxpayers the ratio is equally consistent, ranging from 2.9 to 3.4 (Table 7). Altogether, demographic analyses of the relationship between birkarlar, Sámi and coastal farmers reveal a strikingly consistent pattern, suggesting there was a particular social and economic framework defining the sphere of action of the birkarlar (Figure 3). Was there an actual association administering the trading activities of the birkarlar? If so, what were the structural features characterizing this organization?

Rules of engagement

A document describing the district court session held in Piteå in 1424 gives quite detailed information about the structure and practicalities of the birkara activities. A number of birkarlar complained that there had been great disagreement among them concerning shares and taxes in the lappmarker. They now asked for an agreement to be reached and urged all of the birkarlar to hold to the old rights and rules dictating that any birkarl who provided a Sámi, his wife, children or servants with items such as reindeer, nets, food, an axe, a kettle and a pot and any other items the Sámi would need to sustain themselves and thereby saving the Sámi from hunger and poverty, he (i.e. the birkarl) then had the right to trade with and collect taxes from that Sámi for the next three years without interference from the regular birkarl. However, when three years had passed, the Sámi would return to the proper shareholder (Erik Nordberg, unpublished transcription, see also Nordlander 1906, 222). Apparently, there was an ethical
codex regulating their internal affairs within and between the different lappmarker and also their relationships with the Sámi. The court document of 1424 confirms that birkarlar from different lappmarker joined together on certain occasions to settle the rights and rules and to distribute shares among them. A note in a court record dating to 1546 mentioning the theft of a kettle from the “house of the guild” (see Landskapshandlingar, Västerbotten 1546) suggests there was actually an association of birkarlar (Nordlander [1892] 1990, 353). The very precise territorial division between birkarlar of different lappmarker is illuminated by a document dating to 1562 listing complaints made by the birkarlar of Pite lappmark about birkarlar from the neighbouring Lule lappmark who were intruding and stealing from the Sámi (Nordlander 1906, 247).

Joint actions by the birkarla community as a whole are corroborated by a document dating to 1528, which tells of a delegation of two birkarlar, representing all birkarlar of Torne, Lule and Pite lappmarker, who met with King Gustav Vasa to negotiate about the value of the Kings interest in the trade (Nordlander 1906, 226). Other records refer to birkarlar taking collective actions within the local arena. For instance, in 1498, the birkarlar of Pite and Lule lappmark jointly lodged a complaint to the King about bailiffs interfering with their trade (Fellman 1915, 10–11).

Occasionally, records mention details presenting a glimpse of the organizational features. There is a passage in the so-called Sumlen (1600–1601) by the Swedish antiquarian Johannes Bureus (1568–1652), stating that the King’s bailiff was not allowed to collect taxes unless all birkarlar sitting around him had properly counted and approved the tax (Bureus 1886, 223). In addition, there is information suggesting that birkarlar joined and travelled together to meet with the Sámi. In a letter dating to 1595, the clergymen Andreas Nicolai, who was on a mission on behalf of the Swedish King, complained that he had been in Torneå for 14 days waiting for the birkarlar to come back from their winter journey, thereby implying that they were traveling together. In 1575, the court session of the Semisjaur Sámi village community was attended by
12 birkarlar from Pite lappmark and 12 Sámi, all acting as lay assessors. In other words, nearly all birkarlar active in Pite lappmark were in the same place at the same time. This strongly points to common logistics and joint travels.

The Birkarla–Sámi trade: events or process?

The most tangible proof of birkarlar acting within the framework of a distinct and well-organized association is their joint payment of the annual fee to the King. According to a fiscal record dating to 1528, there had been a fixed fee for each of the lappmarker that had remained the same over the years (Nordlander 1906, 226; Steckzén 1964, 281; Söderlind 1986, 93). From 1554 onwards the Sámi were directly subordinate to the King, paying taxes based on the number of taxpayers and their payment capacity, in a similar way to the coastal farmers. This meant that Sámi and peasant taxes were dynamic and could vary from one year to the next. However, the birkarlar were still obliged to pay a settled fee over a period of more than 50 years, thereafter they paid taxes in the form of tithes and duty. During the period 1554–1606, the King kept detailed records of the taxpaying capacity of the Sámi and the farmers with regard to number of reindeer and stock, the number of furs of squirrel, marten, fox etc, crop harvest, seal catch and fishing hauls, specifically of salmon, perch, pike and herring. In addition, the peasant tradesmen paid taxes based on their profits (Landskapshandlingar, Västerbotten 1554–1606). So, how come the birkarlaf fee remained fixed and settled?

The only plausible explanation to this puzzling circumstance is that the birkarla trade with the Sámi included actions beyond the scope and control of the King. In contrast to the trade managed by individual peasant tradesmen, characterized by a straight buyer–seller relationship and immediate transactions between the parties, the birkarla–Sámi trade included communities rather than individuals, and long-term exchange relationships based on shares, stakes and credits. Peasant tradesmen mainly marketed their surplus production of crops, stock and butter, while the birkarla–Sámi trade also included commodities of foreign provenience, such as copper vessels, iron kettles and various other iron objects, hemp and frieze fabric (Landskapshandlingar, Västerbotten 1553; Nordlander 1906, 222; Fellman 1915, 22; Hoppe 1945, 60). The strict division between the birkarla and peasant tradesmen is illustrated by a complaint made by birkarlar that as soon as they bought some fish from the Sámi, they were called landsköpare (i.e. peasant tradesman) and had to pay taxes as such (Nordlander 1906, 240–241).

Written records provide evidence of an intricate and complex exchange system based on shares. In addition to birkarlar having shares of their own (cf. Nordlander 1906, 235; Fellman 1915, 7–8) there were ordinary farmers who received shares from the birkarla–Sámi trade equating to an agreed amount of money; for instance Mrs Karin Jakobsdotter (born around 1485) from Piteå owned five shares in the Sámi trade, and her daughter three (Sikeborg 1996, 267). Their shares were probably acquired through inheritance. Another record tells of the birkarla taxes for Pite lappmark being paid by all farmers together in the year 1554 (Landskapshandlingar, Västerbotten 1554; Nordlander 1906, 227) again suggesting that farmers were involved in the Sámi trade with birkarlar acting as agents. The mode of the procedure is revealed in a
verdict at the court session held in Piteå in 1539. Jon Ersson was fined for not having paid the birkarlar for their trade with the Sámi on his behalf. He had been in debt to the birkarlar for four years (Landskapshandlingar, Västerbotten 1539). This implies a system where farmers were placing orders with the birkarlar based on the size of a settled share, much like buying through a mail-order firm. Holding shares meant having the right to participate in the trade, but also included the obligation to put up investment capital. In this context, the birkarlar played a central role as creditors, with the financial capacity to pay expenses on behalf of the Sámi on the one hand and the peasant shareholders on the other (as in the case of Jon Ersson above). The purchasing power and delivery capacity of the parties set a natural limit to the turnover and to the number of shares in each lappmark. Therefore, shares were much coveted and carefully administered.

Considering that birkarlar performed the function of a banking institution, crucial to the transaction system as a whole, it is not surprising that some regulation to secure stability was imposed at the district court session in Piteå in 1424 (above), stating that no birkarl owning less than one share should have the right to trade with the Sámi (Nordberg, unpublished transcription, see also Nordlander 1906, 222).

The very complicated procedure of exchanging goods, settling debits and credits, administering orders and so on included many aspects, with the birkarlar acting as bank, bookkeeper, haulier and entrepreneur. Supply of goods from the Sámi areas remained unknown to the farmer shareholder, and vice versa, until the actual transactions took place. In case of supply, demand and solvency getting out of balance, transactions would have been settled the following year(s). Indeed, trade and transaction cycles would have covered three years minimum as suggested by the birkarla regulations of 1424 (above) and the legal case of Jon Ersson (above) who had been in debt to the birkarlar for four years. Instead of consisting of a number of instant transactions and single events, the birkarla–Sámi trade formed a continuous process. It would have been impossible for the Swedish authorities to identify the outcome of the trade at any given point in time and this explains why the King settled for a fixed fee.

Archaeological finds of standard weights and balances in Sámi contexts (Serning 1956, 132; Hedman 2003, 161–162), in addition to the huge number of foreign objects, provide evidence for trading networks involving parties in full agreement about the measurement of value at the time and corroborate the active role of the Sámi in trading transactions as early as the Viking Age. There is no information on how the trade was organized. Written records describe trading activities only from the perspective of the Church and the Swedish Crown and in this context the Sámi are totally objectified as a group. However, the complex relationships between the trading parties, including accounts of shares, debts and credits and the logistics involved in arranging meetings, presupposes the integration of trade in the socio-economic organization and the annual subsistence cycle. There is a passage in a text describing conditions in northern Sweden during the early sixteenth century which says that the Sámi had certain people acting as managers (Sw. föreståndare) called birkarlar, whom they jointly elected and obeyed (Olaus Magnus [1555] 1982, 181). The passage indicates that the relationship between Sámi and birkarlar was similar to
that of farmers and *birkarlar* and if the term *manager* is replaced by *agent* it makes complete sense. In addition, the consistent demographic relationship between Sámi and *birkarlar* (above) suggests that trade was organized on the *sjdda* level and thus structured in a similar way as it was among the coastal communities.

**Birk and the structure of trading networks**

**Credit and debit**

We suggest that the term *birkarl* is best understood in the linguistic context of the extensive trading networks connecting northern Scandinavia with the European market during the Iron Age and Early mediaeval periods. For deducing the trading and transaction practices, the information given by the sixteenth century priest of the Torne and Kemi *lappmarker*, Johannes Jonæ Tornæus, provides a sound point of departure. He tells how the burghers had to credit the Sámi in one year to be repaid by them in the subsequent year. This procedure continued until one party was unable to pay or when one or more of the parties passed away (Tornæus [1653] 1900, 62–64). Tornæus continues: If they are unable to write, they have a tally stick […] on which they carve as many notches […] as they owe and carve their mark in it. They then split it in two parts and give one half to the creditor, keeping the other half themselves (translation according to Grandell 1989, 13). It is obvious that the tally stick was essential for keeping records. This was emphasized by a legal case at the beginning of the eighteenth century explicitly demonstrating their significance: A court record describing a session in Torneå in 1718, tells how the district court judge, Samuel Krook, claimed that Nils Niva had not paid him for 60 *alar* of frieze cloth, whereupon Nils Niva showed his “Kill Kulla elr Karfståck,” that is, his tally stick, to the court with notes and notches proving that he had, in fact, paid. The court instructed Samuel Krook to produce evidence against Nils Niva, however, he could not do so (Bucht 2014, 77). This specific case verifies the legal significance attached to tally sticks (cf. Leem 1870; 238 according to Solem [1933] 1970, 244).

**Tally sticks and trade**

A number of studies have addressed the role of tally sticks (Grandell 1944, 182–184, 1986, 121–127, 1989 passim; Alinei 1960, 191, 197; Hémardinquer 1963, 143–148; Arnould 1966, 98–101; Baxter 1989; Kuchenbuch 1999, 303–325, 2006, 114 with ref. in note 1, et passim; Wedell 2011, 185, 212, 241–242, 259, 272–277 with ref. passim). There were various types of tally stick: simple, split, triple and fork shaped. Grandell (1989, 1) argues that the split tally was the most commonly used:

It was cut in two pieces, each of the same shape, and was used in business transactions between two parties to a contract, e.g. seller and buyer, creditor and debtor, employer and employee. It was used for the most part in credit transactions in the days when paper was still unknown and even much later when people were still illiterate.

The simplicity and exactness of tally sticks serving as mnemonic accounting devices made them highly useful in societies without systems of writing, or, as put by
Kuchenbuch (1999, 319), “Kerbhölzer fungieren als mnemopraktische, zeitüberbrückende Alltagswerkzeuge im Umgang mit Maß und Zahl, und was sie bewahren, versprechen und garantieren, steht nicht im Zeichen des Gewinns, sondern des Ausgleichs.”

There are finds, written accounts and also terminologies from various periods and places providing evidence of the widespread use of tally sticks. For example, in Odensvi in the Swedish province of Småland, they were used in connection with deliveries of charcoal to ironworks (Grandell 1986, 122–123) and in Viney in Switzerland tally sticks were used to settle affairs between wine-growers and the estate owners in connection with grape harvesting (Grandell 1986, 122). In 1186, the English royal treasurer, Bishop Richard, writes about how notches were cut into the split tally sticks used by the Crown in loan transactions (Grandell 1986, 123, 1989, 10–11; Baxter 1989; Kuchenbuch 1999, 314). In addition, tally sticks have been used far outside the European cultural sphere, for example in China (Grandell 1989, 2–4; cf. Baxter 1989, 47) and among Samoyedic peoples and Mansi people (Solem [1933] 1970, 244). Indeed, tally sticks were used by reindeer herders until the 1980s in accounting the number of sold reindeer (Figure 4).

**The Finnish pirkka, Russian bírka and Swedish birkarl**

European languages include different words for tally stick: Italian taglia, French taille, Swedish karvstock, German Kerbstock or Kerbholz, Greek symbolon and so on. The Finnish word is pirkka (Lönnrot 1866–1880, 2, 212, 1886, 128), a word very likely corresponding to the Russian bírka. The etymology of the Russian word is disputed (cf. Preobrazjenskij 1958, 26; Šanskij 1965, 122–123; Vasmer 1976, 87, the latter resume the etymological discussion as “Schwierig,” cf. Wallerström 1995, 261–262).

Considering the fact that the use of pirkka in Finnish dialects exhibits a south-eastern distribution, it is tempting to interpret the word as a loanword from the Russian bírka (SKES 3: 574; SSA 2, 373; Plöger 1973, 132; and, for ethnological similarities between bírka and pirkka, see Aspelin 1888, 128–132). From the perspective of linguistic geography, it may seem problematic that the word pirkka is not represented in dialects and areas bordering the geographical sphere of the birkarl. However, it has been pointed out that the oldest linguistic stratum of the Finnish dialects in the Gällivare and Torne areas of northern Sweden could be Karelian in origin (Winsa 1991, 209–213, et passim, cf. map 17, 22, 37 and 38, et passim; cf. Winsa 1994, 257–271, 1996, 613–623). The connection between Karelia and northern Sweden is corroborated by the archaeological record, including a huge number of artefacts of Karelian provenance (Serning 1960; Zachrisson 1984; Bergman, Zackrisson, and Östlund 2014).
Thus, the assumption that there may be a connection between pirkka and birkarl is quite plausible and we propose that birkarl should be interpreted in the context of a northern economic sphere including extensive trading networks, well-developed credit systems and efficient accountancy techniques. The interpretation is, however, not entirely new; it is touched on by, for example, Granfelt (1929, 61–62) and Grandell (1986, 126–127), and in some way also implied by Wiklund (1947, 35) when he discusses the place-name Pirkkala (cf. Wallerström 1995, 261–262). In our contribution, however, the linguistic interpretation is put within a broader historical context. The role of birkarlar as representatives given a mission of trust and also performing the function of a banking institution, makes the interpretation of birk meaning “tally stick” all the more probable. The tally sticks of farmers and Sámi involved in a trading network were entrusted to their birkarl.

The Birkarlar and the Sámi

Confrontation

The reputation of birkarlar as brutal enforcers of power against the Sámi is manifest. However, upon examining written records covering the period 1539–1606, another picture emerges. During this period the Sámi had quite a strong standing vis-à-vis the Swedish Crown, providers as they were of sought-after commodities (Fjellström 1986, 63–67, 501). They were familiar with, and made use of, the Swedish judicial system to call attention to unsatisfactory states of things, either at court sessions or in letters to the King (Fellman 1915; Solem [1933] 1970, 82). For instance, in 1559 there were complaints about bailiffs and birkarlar selling commodities to the Sámi at a higher price than they had to pay in Norway (Fellman 1915, 23). There are no complaints from the Sámi about birkarlar being unjust and brutal in general, but there are three men who stand out in this respect: Jöns Jonsson, Oluff Amundsson and Nils Orawain (Fi. Oravainen; cf. Hederyd 1991, 239), all of them birkarlar and bailiffs in the Torne lappmark. In 1559, the Sámi complained that Jöns Jonsson took furs without paying and used reindeer for transportation without compensating the owner. The Sámi also accused him of accountancy crimes including, among other things, giving false information to the King about the number of Sámi taxpayers. Oluff Amundsson was appointed bailiff in 1555 and in 1562 the district court judge informed the King that Oluff Amundsson’s toughness in exercising his commission was driving both farmers and Sámi away to Russia (Fellman 1915, 23–28). Nils Orawain/Oravainen was the most infamous of them all and in 1594 the birkarlar and the Sámi of the Torne lappmark jointly urged the King to remove him from office (Fellman 1912, 337–339, 1915, 35–62).

The only documented case of physical violence being exercised by a birkarl dates to 1547, when Hindrik Nilsson from Torne lappmark was fined 8 mark for beating a Sámi (… “hade slagit een lap i lapmarkenn,” Landskaps handlingar, Västerbotten 1547). The fact that the case was brought to justice and that the fine was quite high in relation to the general level of fines shows that this was considered serious. In view of the long history of the birkarla trade, and the huge number of birkarlar involved over
time, the aforementioned cases stand out as exceptions. Correspondingly, there are only a few cases of *birkarlar* having brought Sámi to court (Nordlander 1906, 247). However, it should be underlined that there were most certainly a number of unrecorded cases not taken to court.

**Co-operation and common interests**

Information on the extent and character of contact between the *birkarlar* and the Sámi is very sparse, but there are notes here and there outlining a pattern characterized by co-operation rather than confrontation between the parties. In a document dating to c.1520–1530 and providing information about the fishing in major rivers and streams, it is noted that *birkarlar* were fishing in the river Åbyälven on behalf of the Sámi (Berggren 1995, 51–52), implying an agreement between the parties where the *birkarlar* protected the rights of the Sámi vis-à-vis the Swedish Crown. Another example of *birkarlar* acting in favor of Sámi interests appears in a letter to King Gustav Vasa in 1544, which contains complaints about *birkarlar* preventing poor farmers from settling in the *lappmarker* (Fellman 1915, 14–15; Nordlander 1906, 236). In all probability the opposition to settlement was primarily motivated by self-interest, however the Sámi nevertheless benefited from this engagement. In addition to the common action requesting that Nils Orawain/Oravainen be removed from office (above), the *birkarlar* and Sámi of Lule lappmark jointly took action in 1606, requesting that Herr Lars from Torneå be removed as their priest since he was too weak to travel to the *lappmarker* and too old to conduct his duties (Nordberg 1973, 27). On the part of the Crown, *birkarlar* and Sámi were treated alike with respect to taxation of reindeer and their commitment to transport timber in connection with the building of churches at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Nordlander 1906, 243; Fellman 1915, 118; Nordberg 1973, 23–41).

In the past, Swedish court sessions included a panel of 12 lay assessors representing the general public. Accordingly, when sessions were held in Sámi territory the panel included Sámi representatives (Fellman 1912, LVI–LIX; Solem [1933] 1970, 82; Korpijaakko-Labba 1994, 110–114). In 1589 it was proposed (by the Crown) that *birkarlar* should attend court sessions among the Sámi on a regular basis (Nordlander 1906, 249), but it is not confirmed that this actually became common practice. However, the panels for the court sessions of 1575 and 1586 in the Pite lappmark, both included *birkarlar* along with Sámi assessors. In 1575 the panel included as many as 24 lay assessors; 12 Sámi and 12 *birkarlar*. This extraordinary arrangement was probably the result of the gravity of the cases brought to justice, as a way of bringing about as fair a trial as possible for the two men who were facing charges of theft and subsequently sentenced to death (*Landskapshandlingar, Norrlands lappmarker* 1583). In 1586, a *birkarl* was charged with adultery with a Sámi woman. The panel of six Sámi and six *birkarlar* imposed a minor fine on the *birkarl* “since he was a poor man” (*Landskapshandlingar, Norrlands lappmarker* 1587).

During the course of the sixteenth century, the Swedish Crown progressively increased its judicial and cameral control of the northern areas; however, the Sámi–*birkarla* trade remained a constant thorn in the Crown’s side. In a final attempt at
breaking the *birkarla* influence, King Karl IX imposed a number of regulations at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries dictating the conditions of their activities on Sámi ground. There was a fixed number of *birkarlar* allowed for each *lappmark* and bargaining was only allowed in certain places at certain times of the year (*Handlingar rörande Skandinaviens historia* 29 1858, 167, 197, 252–255; Fellman 1915, 92–93, 118). It was stipulated that the bailiff should have priority for 14 days to purchase and collect taxes and until then the *birkarlar* and Sámi were strictly forbidden to trade (*Handlingar rörande Skandinaviens historia* 29 1858, 266; Fellman 1915, 128). In fact, there was a death penalty for those traveling around among the Sámi at other times of the year (Fellman 1915, 128). Instead of having their camp sites “here and there,” the *birkarlar* were instructed to build their booths and cabins at assigned marketplaces. Each cabin should house two *birkarlar* (three in Kemi lappmark) and there had to be windows in the cabins (*Handlingar rörande Skandinaviens historia* 29 1858, 184–187, 255; Fellman 1915, 153–154).

The *birkarlar* were forbidden to trade with the Sámi at night behind closed doors, or even worse, “running at night from one Lap to another” (our translation) (Fellman 1910, 461). Reading between the lines suggests that Sámi and *birkarlar* were meeting at times and in places of their own choice throughout the sixteenth century, under the radar of the bailiffs. Eventually, when the Crown enforced all its powers to impose total control over the trade, the Sámi and the *birkarlar* nevertheless sneaked away during the night to bargain on their own terms.

**Family relations**

In court protocols from the sixteenth century, adultery is a frequent theme and the coastal parishes of northern Norrland were no exception (Sandström 2003). In fact, adultery dominates the cases brought to justice. Penalties were strictly regulated depending on whether the parties were married (to other spouses), whether or not they were related and, if so, the degree of kinship. There are a number of cases including peasant farmers, most of them *birkarlar*, having had illegitimate relations with Sámi women (Table 8). Obviously this phenomenon presented a very particular problem and at the beginning of the seventeenth century the Crown enforced strict regulations in an attempt to put an end to this kind of relationship. In 1599, the King criticized the fact that *birkarlar*, married and unmarried, had mistresses in the *lappmarker* as well as at home, thus committing adultery. In addition, he criticized the Sámi for giving away their daughters as mistresses to *birkarlar* and then, after eight or nine years, taking their “damaged” (Sw. *skämde*) daughters back and marrying them to a Sámi. Therefore, the King decreed that unmarried *birkarlar* were forbidden to travel and trade in the *lappmarker* (*Handlingar rörande Skandinaviens historia* 29 1858, 168–169; Fellman 1915, 85–88). Four years later another decree refers to the abominable conduct of married *birkarlar* having Sámi mistresses and, even worse, buying the daughters of the Sámi, sleeping first with one and then another in apparent adultery. Therefore, every *birkarl* being convicted of adultery was to be decapitated. In addition, Sámi selling their daughters should be sentenced to death, without mercy (*Handlingar rörande Skandinaviens historia* 29 1858, 175–176). There is no mistaking the King’s
Table 8. Persons fined for adultery with Sámi women and years of court sessions. Figures refer to the amount of fines in *daler* (dr) or *mark* (mk). Persons not being registered as *birkarlar* in any records are marked by *.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and parish</th>
<th>Village</th>
<th>1539</th>
<th>1546</th>
<th>1547</th>
<th>1549</th>
<th>1553</th>
<th>1563</th>
<th>1572</th>
<th>1574</th>
<th>1583</th>
<th>1586</th>
<th>1587</th>
<th>1589</th>
<th>1590</th>
<th>1592</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marcus Suensaara</td>
<td>Torne sn</td>
<td>4 mk</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindrik Laffesson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Juoksengi</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>8 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Måns Juoksengi</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Jönsson</td>
<td>Kuivakangas</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>8 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jöns Peckula</td>
<td></td>
<td>4 mk</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik Packan* Vojakkala</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nils Olofsson</td>
<td>Niemisel</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>7 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olaff Anundsson</td>
<td>Armasaar</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>15 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olaff Hindersson</td>
<td>Niemisel</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lars Nilsson</td>
<td>Matterengi</td>
<td></td>
<td>6 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jöns Nilsson</td>
<td>Niemisel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindrik Larsson</td>
<td>Vojakkala</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jöns Persson* Björkön</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>96 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erik Klockare*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olaff Jönsson</td>
<td>Kuivakylä</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>54 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jöns (*)</td>
<td>Armasaar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30 mk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Ersson*</td>
<td>Alkula</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15 dr</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hendrik</td>
<td>Juoksengi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5 dr</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nils*</td>
<td>Kuivakangas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>40 dr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name and parish</th>
<th>Village</th>
<th>1539</th>
<th>1546</th>
<th>1547</th>
<th>1549</th>
<th>1553</th>
<th>1564</th>
<th>1563</th>
<th>1572</th>
<th>1574</th>
<th>1583</th>
<th>1586</th>
<th>1587</th>
<th>1589</th>
<th>1590</th>
<th>1592</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lule sn</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jöns Olsson</td>
<td>Björsbyn</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larens Davidsson</td>
<td>Måtsund</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon Persson</td>
<td>Måtsund</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ture (Ersson)</td>
<td>Rutvik</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nils Andersson</td>
<td>Antnäs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olle Jönsson</td>
<td>Alvik</td>
<td>4½</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mågns Olsson</td>
<td>Rutvik</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larens Jönsson</td>
<td>Antnäs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anders Mågsson</td>
<td>Ersnäs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larens Sierdsson</td>
<td>Antnäs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nils Larsson</td>
<td>Björsbyn</td>
<td>4½</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pål Larsson</td>
<td>Björsbyn</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nils Ingevualsson</td>
<td>Sunderbyn</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olof Nilsson*</td>
<td>Sunderbyn</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pite sn</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Larsson*</td>
<td>Öjebyn</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jöns i Hellan*</td>
<td>Öjebyn</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lasse Olsson*</td>
<td>Porsnäs</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nils Larsson</td>
<td>Sifors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mårten Pedersson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8 dr, 10 öre, 16 örtug</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Continued.
indignation over the *birkarla* conduct. Adultery was common among the population in general, but the King acted thus only in the case of *birkarla*–Sámi relations. Why? Considering the strong interests in northern trade, there is reason to believe that there were economic reasons for his actions, rather than moral concerns. Also, in his ambition to strengthen the political position of the Swedish Crown, the King challenged the powerful *birkarlar* with all the means at his disposal.

At first glance, the information on the buying and selling of Sámi women (above) implies utmost ruthlessness towards Sámi in general and Sámi women in particular. However, the description is from the perspective of outsiders unfamiliar with indigenous traditions. If, instead, the information is interpreted from a Sámi perspective, it suggests that both parties indeed were acting in accordance with the Sámi *rudá* tradition, that is, the very strict rules of courting and proposing (Nordberg 1948). Kinship relationships were (are) fundamental to Sámi societies (see Bergman et al. 2008 for a discussion on Sámi kinship relations) and marriages were preceded by intricate procedures of exchanging gifts between the suitor and his future parents-in-law and, in fact, the whole family of the bride. It was customary that gifts of proposal amounted to a significant number of silver objects in addition to woollen cloth, kettles, reindeer and so on, and the suitor and his family expected equally valuable gifts in return. The gifts, referred to as *rudá*, were carefully negotiated between the parties and negotiations could last for 2–6 years. Eventually, if the *rudá* was agreed upon, the couple married. In case of disagreement, the marriage was called off followed by painstaking deliberations on how the *rudá* should be returned and also how the costs involved in the courting enterprise should be repaid to the suitor. If negotiations failed they often ended up in court. The *rudá* tradition was practiced across the entire Sámi settlement area, Sápmi, indicating its ancient origin and vital social significance.

Considering the fact that marriages not only involved the spouses, but their entire families, as well as having an effect on the *sijdda* composition, working teams and the management of reindeer herds, the social implications of marriages were indeed significant. In the eyes of the Swedish officials and clergymen, the *rudá* tradition appeared to be a transaction whereby brides were bought and sold, hence the indignation. During the seventeenth century, the clergy made huge efforts to stop the *rudá* practice; however, it continued well into the nineteenth century (Nordberg 1948, 24–25). Put in this context, the accusations of *birkarlar* buying Sámi women actually confirm the profound understanding among the *birkarlar*, and acceptance, of the conditions of *rudá*.

The issue of married *birkarlar* having mistresses in the *lappmarker* reflects the judicial and religious values of the Crown and the Church, which did not necessarily coincide with indigenous concepts. In other words, the *birkarlar* may have been married to Sámi women according to Sámi traditions, although not formally registered by Swedish authorities. In addition, the notion of mistresses should be interpreted from the perspective of contemporary standards where *frillon*, that is, second wives, formed part of the official social institution, having statuary rights and quite a high ranking (Carlsson 1971, 195–197). Written records reveal that *birkarlar* and other peasant farmers had *frillon* both from their own ranks as well as among Sámi women.
Family relationships between birkarlar and Sámi are confirmed by occasional reports. In his report on the winter markets of 1615, the bailiff of Torne lappmark tells of a Sámi who, when asked about the reason for not having delivered any fish, explained that he had hidden the fish to give it to his relatives among the birkarlar (Wiklund 1909, 15). The bailiff also writes that the Sámi of the Tingevara and Ruonala village communities were very obstinate and unwilling to submit to the bailiff and had been since some birkarlar had children and wives among the Sámi (Wiklund 1909, 23). This was the case with Nils Orawain/Oravainen (above) who had a Sámi wife, named Inga Orawain/Oravainen. She lived among her kin in the Tingevara village community in Torne lappmark. Nils Orawain/Oravainen was obviously on excellent terms with Inga’s family and relatives, acting jointly with them in matters concerning neighbouring Sámi communities (Fellman 1915, 56). Inga Orawain/ Oravainen was certainly a woman of high status and great power. A tax collection register from 1600 lists an enormous number of silver objects among her belongings, making up more than 450 lod, that is, almost 6 kg (Fellman 1915, 79–82; Fjellström 1962, 56–57, 183, 223, 1986, 492–493). Nils Orawain/ Oravainen seems to have had at least one wife besides Inga. A record dating to 1597, the year of his death, mentions his wife Lucia S. (… “hustru Lucia S. Nils Orauains efetter leffuersa”) (Fellman 1915, 76). She was living in a village in Tornedalen (www.matarengi-ff.se) and probably was not Sámi.

An interesting insight into the lifestyle of birkarlar is offered by a misprint in a censor register from Pite lappmark. In the winter of 1597 the bailiff summoned the members of the Laisbyn village community to pay their annual taxes. The taxpayers were listed by name and their respective tax rate. One name, Zackrias, is ticked off with a note saying “doesn’t count, is birkarl” (Sw. reknes intet är birkekarl) (Landskapshandlingar, Norrlands lappmarker 1599). Apparently, the bailiff did not recognize Zackrias Olsson, who was a birkarl from the Kopparnäs village in the parish of Piteå. This is quite remarkable as one would expect the bailiff to be familiar with all the birkarlar in his district. Zackrias was probably staying with the Sámi of Laisbyn and blending in well as one among equals. That birkarlar were staying in the interior, taking part in everyday life, may be suggested by a map dating to 1671 and enumerating interior Sámi taxation lands (Norstedt 2011). One of the lands is called Börkel lyeden, implying that the land was managed by a birkarl.

Kinship, competence and succession of Birkarlar

In line with the predominant view of birkarlar representing an exclusive elite, the succession of the birkarl status has generally been interpreted in terms of rights by birth (cf. Nordlander 1906, 234; Steckzén 1964, 375–376; Hederyd 1985, 75; Wallerström 1995, 251). Indeed, there are a number of actual cases corroborating the suggestion that birkarlar were succeeded by their sons, or sometimes by their sons-in-law (Hederyd 1988, 26, 1991, 228–247; Lundström 2004, 49; Sandström 2011). Written records include formulations suggesting that the birkarl office was kept within families. Old customs and rights of inheritance are called upon with reference to the sayings of a group’s forefathers (cf. Fellman 1915, 67–68). Obviously birkarlar held their office for long periods, up to 30 and even 40 years, and when a birkarl got old and had no son or
son-in-law to succeed him, he would sell his rights to some other rich farmer (cf. Nordlander 1906, 96–97; Fellman 1910, 460–461). Comments on birkarlar traveling to the lappmark accompanied by their sons and sons-in-law, sometimes as many as four and even five of them (Fellman 1910, 460–461), corroborate the character of a family business. There were certainly economic incentives to keep the birkarla trade within the family, with regard to profits and credit rating, but performing the work of a birkarl would have demanded training and skills as well. Birkarlar from Torne lappmark tell of how they had been in the lappmark every year since they were children (Fellman 1915, 67). This note is instructive in many ways. First, the sons of birkarlar accompanied their fathers, learning about the routes and logistics involved in traveling to the interior. Second, they were learning about the terms of bargaining and how to keep records of debts and credits. Third, and perhaps most importantly, they became acquainted with the Sámi trading parties and were acting in a multilingual environment (cf. above) and possibly learned the Sámi language, at least to some extent. Meeting with the same Sámi families and sijdda members year after year must have resulted in personal relationships based on mutual understanding and trust and, in fact, even kinship. In other words, each birkarl was affiliated to a group of Sámi (a sijdda) towards whom he had certain obligations. It is in this context that the various notes on Sámi belonging to birkarlar and birkarlar ruling over “their” Sámi, should be understood (cf. Nordlander 1906, 219–221, 226; Fellman 1915, XVII). In addition, this perspective sheds new light on the agreement of 1424 (above) about the responsibilities of birkarlar in relation to the Sámi, and on the information given by Olaus Magnus (above) that the Sámi elected birkarlar as their managers.

Conclusion

Thorough analyses of the social and economic context of the birkarlar corroborate their deep roots in the coastal communities, fully integrated into the everyday life and subsistence activities of farmers, fishermen and hunters. Based on an oral tradition, finally written down at the beginning of the seventeenth century, scholars have argued that birkarlar were of Finnish descent (from the Pirkkala area), establishing themselves as a foreign elite among the coastal farmers of northern Sweden (cf. Jaakkola 1924; Fjellström 1965; Favorin 1968). In light of the results presented in this study, however, this theory should be dismissed. Data strongly point to the birkarla organization having evolved on local ground as has been suggested by Hederyd (1991, 215–219). However, not in connection with the establishment of Swedish settlements (generally referred to as the colonization initiative) but as an indigenous trading network. By reading the information given in the fourteenth-century records from the perspective of the close Sámi–birkarla relations revealed in the present study, it becomes clear that the inter-cultural relationships go further back in time, pre-dating Swedish colonization. Extensive trading networks were established during the Viking Age, possibly even earlier, as verified by the archaeological record (cf. Bergman, Zackrisson, and Östlund 2014).

Demographic statistics in combination with written information add a new aspect to the birkarla tradesmen as representatives given a commission of trust. The birkarla
status applied only to enterprises involving the Sámi and was obviously not referred to within the local arena. Holding the title of a birkarl was certainly prestigious, but the title was not hereditary per se. Not all sons of a birkarl became birkarlar themselves. First and foremost, great demands were made on experience and skills, and the sons of birkarlar were trained from an early age. When a birkarl retired, his successor was recruited from those well acquainted with the logistics and practicalities of traveling to the lappmarker. In addition, the close relationships between a birkarl and his Sámi trading partners would have been decisive and the Sámi obviously had a say in the appointment of new birkarlar. Reading historical records in a different context and interpreting information from the perspective of Sámi kinship relations and marriage traditions, a new picture emerges. Instead of the one-sided enforcement of power by the birkarlar and the subordination of the Sámi, the inter-cultural relationships were characterized by mutuality and inter-dependence.

The energetic efforts made by the Swedish Crown throughout the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to obtain full control of the birkarlar seem hugely exaggerated considering the small number of birkarlar, amounting to between 40 and 70. However, as representatives of an ancient, geographically extensive, well-developed and lucrative trading organization, they presented strong opponents to the economic and political ambitions of the Crown. Eventually, the birkarlar submitted and during the course of the seventeenth century the Sámi trade shifted to the hands of the Swedish King. Some of the former birkarlar were engaged as bailiffs, exercising the royal power in connection with taxation and implementing the political and territorial ambitions of the King. Thus the role of the birkarlar transformed from being entrepreneurs and representatives to the enforcers of the royal power. As such, the birkarlar disappeared from the historical scene, leaving behind only a vile reputation.

Note

1. The trading territory of the birkarlar from the parishes of Torneå included a vast area incorporating the coastal areas of the Barents Sea and the North Atlantic. The Torne lappmark proper included nine Sámi communities: Lulaby (from 1570 named Siggevare), Tingevare, Rounala, Ingretsby (from 1570 named Suonttavaara), Kautokeino, Lapinjärvi, Aviovaara, Tana and Utsjoki (Hederyd 1991, 255–256). Census registers are highly inconsistent in the way the coastal areas are accounted for. For example, in 1553 the Varanger area is separated from the Torne lappmark, but in the register of 1580 it is included. In 1577 all coastal communities are listed under the heading Westersiö lappemarker and in 1590 they are referred to as Westersiö finner. The figures in Tables 2, 3, 6 and 7 include only taxpayers within the Torne lappmark proper.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the linguists who have contributed to the etymological discussion of pirkka. We thank the reviewers for inspiring comments and Sees-editing Ltd for improving the language.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences [grant no M11–0361:1].

References

Archival Sources

The National Archives (Riksarkivet) Stockholm:
Landskapshandlingar (Västerbottens handlingar och Norrlands lappmarker)
Älvsborgs lösen 1571. Norrland, Finland och hela landet. Volym 21
Gedda, Jonas Persson. 1671. Karta över Lycksele (Umeå) lappmark, Västerbottens län.
The Research Archives (Forskningsarkivet) Umeå University Library, Umeå:

Published


Leem, Knud. 1870. Uppsala årsskrift 1873: 47


Tornæus, Johannes. 1653. ”Berättelse om lapmarckerna och deras tillstånd.” In Bidrag till kännedom om de svenska landsmålen och svenskt folkliv XVII, 3. Stockholm.


