

The knife's history

A knife is a tool with a sharp blade that has the purpose to cut ore slice. In the man's earliest history, already 2.5 million years ago, tools similar the knife were embodied and used. The first ones were probably made by wood, bone, teeth and horn¹. After a while the knife was made by different stone materials², which was the originator to the term Stone Age. Norway was mostly under ice in the Stone Age³. After the ice melted and about 8000 B.C⁴ there emerge settlements in Norway. These ascribe to the Ahrensburg-culture that belongs to the last tool-culture in Stone Age.

After Stone Age came the Bronze Age (in Norway about 1800 B.C until 500 B.C). Then the people began embodying some of the tools in bronze instead of stone. Bronze is a metal alloy consisting primary of copper (90%), usually with tin (10%) as the main additive, and is easy to shape. With the bronze came a technological evolution which gave the earlier tools of stone a slightly more advanced shape, expression and function. The knife in its recognizable shape is one of the results of this. Embodying bronze is very expensive because of the manufacture and import of raw material. Probably tools made of bronze was reserved the most powerful families and became a symbol of personal prestige and elite.

By the entrance of Iron Age (500 years B.C) instead of using bronze, iron was used in production of tools and weapons. In the beginning iron was imported, but about Christ birth Norway had the raw material itself. Self production if iron instead of importing, made the costs much lesser comparing to the production of bronze. Products of iron were available for many people to everyday use. The situation is slightly different in Sami culture. The Sami Iron Age started around year 0, but no signs of local iron extraction have been found. Probably tools of iron have been imported and not produced. Therefore tools of iron among the Sami have been considered rare and expensive.



- 1 There are few traces of these tools because of the materials perishability. The oldest bones, that with certainty have been used as tools are 1.5 – 2 million years old.
- 2 The oldest known tool culture is the Oldowan-culture seen first in East- and South Africa for two million years ago. It dominated in about 1 million years before more advanced tool cultures replaced it. The Oldowan-culture had then already spread out to most of Africa and Eurasia – a continent that consists of Europe and Asia.
- 3 Until 11 000 years B.C. Norway was under ice.
- 4 It means 10 000 years BP – Before Present where present is 1950.

Knives in Sápmi

Among the Sami people exists a long tradition in making knives and “Sami knife” is a term well used. The traditions of the form of the knife have developed over a long period of time with peculiar ornamentation. The knives are supposed to be functional and accommodated to the intended use. Those living the Sámi lifestyle use different knives to different tasks. One knife killing animals, one cleaning fish and one for every day use. A Sami whose livelihood is reindeer has many knives. A little knife with the purpose of marking the reindeer. The largest knives are all-round knives. They are used for example as a tool to fix things, cut wood, woodwork and cutting food.

Materials the “Sami knife” is made of are horn, tree, leather and metal. Scabbards made of wood are used in the larger knives because it's lighter than horn and more gentle for the blade. Earlier they also used birch bark in scabbards. Scabbards made of horn often have a curve in the end and knives of leather a rounded figure in the end. Barck and Kihlberg (1981).

Making a beautiful knife is not easy. The ornamentation is engraved by hand and it demands a lot of practice maintaining these skills. Duodji performers that are good show their skills through ornamentation and form of the knife. No knives are alike and the ornamentations are different from place to place. One who knows the ornamentations can easily see if the knife is from a Sámi area from north or south. Knives made of good woodworkers are desirable among collectors, and the most competent woodworkers get a good price of their knives.

The knife can be used too many things, also to cure. There are many local customs by using the knife curing different diseases. Putting the knife on little wounds, swelling or infected wounds as the curer blows on the knife is supposed to help curing the damage (information given by Inga Hermansen Hætta). If one has disease or damage they are supposed to stroke the knife over the area of disease. Then you stroke – or cut away the disease (information given by Annie Henriksen).

Earlier the knife also was used during birth. They put the knife under the pillow or bed to the one which is giving birth in the purpose to give power and protection. (Information given by Annie Henriksen, 2012.)

The knife has also been used getting a girlfriend. One who is in love with a girl and wants her to be his girlfriend can use the knife winning the girls heart. He then has to make a knife and try to get the girl to pay a symbolic amount for it, in jingling coins. That is important otherwise there can be unfriendliness between them. This counts for everybody that get's a knife (information given by Inga Hermansen Hætta, 2012).

