

Bear graves in Sapmi

Man's reverence for the bear leaves traces not only in myths and stories, but also in the landscape. So far, 45 bear graves have been found in Sápmi. The bear's bones have been placed there after a bear ceremony. In Swedish Sápmi, 13 graves have been found in the mountain and forest regions. Most are located within the Southern Sami area. It can be mounded graves, sometimes with remains of wood, rocks, or in crevices, where bears have been buried. Most are from the 18th century or later.

The bear's bones have been placed in a specific order with the skull and shoulder blades at one end of the grave. Sometimes they lie on a base of birch-bark. In about half of the graves, the bones are split, the fatty marrow had been eaten. Written sources state that it was tradition for the bones to be buried whole, but what is said and what is done are not always the same thing.

Just like when a person was buried, the place was left behind the funeral ritual.

The place was never made sacred and no rituals were ever performed sacrifice at the grave.

The bear grave on Vägvisarholmen

The northernmost and oldest bear grave in Swedish Sápmi has been found outside Jokkmokk, within the Sami village of Tuorpon. On *Vägvisarholmen in Karatssjön*, a thousand-year-old bear grave was excavated in 1986, which was then moved to Ájtte. It was a young bear that had been buried, only 1 1/2 years old, but it was big compared to bears today.

The people have not placed their legs directly on the ground, but lie on a bed of birch-bark. Underneath the birch-bark is a layer of burnt coal. Perhaps a fire was set to thaw the ground? The bones on the birch-bark bed are laid down in the same way as they were in the body. Even very small bones from the bear's frames are there.

Extreme care has been taken to ensure that nothing is lost. It's hard to tell if it's a male or female. No penis bone has been found, but the penis bone was charged with

the power of the bear and was often used as an amulet - did the hunter keep the penis bone?