

The Bear

Among many populations in the northern hemisphere the bear has gotten an unique place in myth, lore, rituals, and way of thinking. So special was the bear for the sami people that it had to be hunted in a special way. In connection with the successful hunt, a feast was celebrated in the bear's honor. Before going out hunting, the drum was consulted if the occasion was suitable. The hunter who would put the spear into the bear's heart had already been chosen at the first bear feast. No one dared to say out loud that they were going bear hunting - the bear could hear and understand even if it was far away. Therefore, other words were used for both the bear, the knife and other things that had to do with bear hunting.

The bear's divine overseer and counselor was called *Leibålmái*, alder tree-man.

The women chewed alder bark and the red sap that formed with the saliva was spat over hunters and dogs during parts of the bear feast. The Sami word for alder is curiously the same as that for a woman's menstrual blood.

No bear bone was allowed to be cut or damaged. If a dog managed to steal a bear bone, he had to pay with one of his own. If the bear's leg was injured, it had to be dragged with the injury into the other world, and that was not allowed to happen. After all the meat was eaten, all the bones of the bear were buried and the grave was carefully thought out so that it was left alone. According to Sami belief, the bear returned to the world it once came from and there it told the other bears about the feast it had been part of. The other bears then also wanted to visit the hospitable Sami.

The bear's penis bone was particularly powerful. They took advantage of that and hung it on the sacred drum. They also used to make a mark in the drum for every bear they managed to kill. A hunter with many marks on his drum walked with his

head held high in pride. You could also make use of the fat, which made an excellent liniment. And the bile - it was drunk to become strong and brave.

Even though bear graves are difficult to find, they are known from several different places in Sapmi. One of them can be traced to my home districts in Jämtland. There they tell about Anders Andersson in Östra Värjaren: that he discovered a stone cairn near his farm sometime around 1914. Lifting the stones, he found the skeleton of a bear. Around one of the bones in the skull hung an old brass chain. So, this was an old bear grave. He sold the bones to an antiques dealer and the bear disappeared from history. Much later it could be traced to a museum in Germany. The skeleton was loaned to Sweden, where it was dated to younger than 250 years.

What is it about the bear that makes it so peculiar? Is it that it sleeps all winter? Or that it is hard to catch? It almost seems like it can read the hunter's mind and reveal his next move. Is it that it can walk on two legs, just like us humans? I don't know - but I know that whoever has seen a free bear in the eyes never forgets it.

Åsa Viridi Kroik

Institute of religious history, Stockholms university