

## To whom do you give your soul? The story of Lars Nillsson in life and death

At the court in Arjeplog in February 1692, Lars Nillsson was sentenced to death for "idolatrous superstition". Lars was 60 years old and had both children and grandchildren, and it was when his six-year-old grandson had drowned that he had used "idolatrous superstition" to bring the grandson back to life. The Chaplain Peder Noraeus had already accused Lars of practicing "old diabolical idolatrous superstitions" and had sent some men to Lars to see how things were. When the men arrived at Lars' residence, they had found him on his knees in front of his grandson "singing and howling badly" and on his "divination drum violently playing" as he tried to bring the boy to life. The men had also found wooden gods, horns and bones of a reindeer and bones of a foal and an ox, objects which they brought back to the vicar Erich Noraeus and his son Peder Noraeus. At the court in Arjeplog, the wooden gods were displayed and their identity made clear, and his "divining drum" was also displayed; old and broken with associated rings and hammer. When asked if Lars had not been admonished by his soul savers to fear the almighty God in heaven, Lars replied that he had been informed on Christianity, but since his reindeer seemed to be doing better when he used the drum and worshiped and sacrificed to his gods, he had intended to continue with the; "... and will follow and use the customs and habits of their ancestors". Lars was sentenced to death.

The case was sent to a higher legal instance, Svea Court of Appeal. The Court of Appeal concluded that Lars could not be spared and would be kept in prison until market time, where he would be publicly executed as a deterrent for "that nation which is yet inclined to such idolatry and divination". In the Judicial Review's account of the case - which was similar to the account at the court in Arjeplog - it is stated that Lars "by his own admission" had told that he had made the wooden gods that he worshiped and sacrificed to and that he had played the divination drum. In the account it is said that this showed that Lars was so hardened in his idolatrous sorcery that he would not stop the custom of his ancestors.

Lars's explanation and account of why he used drumming and paid tribute to his gods - in order to save his grandson's life - had, through various letters to a higher legal authority, been transformed into his own confession. As the trial goes through different instances, his story takes on both a different content and a different intention; the thing becomes a tool for king and church to persuade the Sami to stop what was perceived as idolatry, while Lars tried to explain why he acted as he did that day when his grandson had drowned.

In prison, Lars was taught Christianity by Peder Noraeus to promote Lars' "bliss of soul" according to one of the Court of Appeal's minutes, and in December 1692 it was decided that he would serve his sentence at the market after the Christmas holiday, as he appeared to be godly and penitent. Lars had been taken to the court and when his 'idols' were put on the pyre, he was asked what he was thinking. "What shall I think", he said "I am now clean from my sins". He received communion, stepped on the pyre and shouted in Sami that Jesus would take his soul. It seems that Lars had climbed the stake alive even though those sentenced to be burned at the stake were often beheaded first.

Despite both dramatic and poetic descriptions of the hope in which Lars parted from this world, as stated in the letter to the king, Lars was executed by burning at the stake after Christmas 1692. Today, we can be appalled by the treatment of Lars and recoil only at the thought that a man was burned as punishment, but during the time period when Lars lost his life, Lutheran orthodoxy stood strong. Deviant beliefs were perceived as threats to the prevailing divine order on earth. In retrospect, Lars' story becomes representative of how the royal power and the church related to the Sami religion and Sami beliefs.

The reason for Lars' action was not even considered; the wooden gods, the drum and the bloody offerings to the gods were perceived as physical expressions of idolatry.

Lars's story was about how he tried to save the life of his grandson, but for the church and the king it became a matter of converting the Sami to Christianity. The meeting was about two spheres - king and church on one side and the Sami on the other - which gave the same phenomenon different content. Church representatives, such as Erich Noraeus and Peder Noraeus, perceived Sami belief and practice as witchcraft and idolatry. Between 1649 and 1741, 49 witchcraft and superstition trials were dealt with in the Lapland of Sweden. The trial against Lars was one of the 49.

*Source: Erik Nordberg's manuscript collection 25:43 b, pp 259-278. Umeå University Research Archive.*

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