

THE RETURN OF ANDERS POULSEN'S POWERFUL SÁMI-DRUM

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One of the final major initiatives by former Sámi Parliament President Aili Keskitalo was to write a letter to Queen Margrethe II of Denmark. The contents of the letter, dated 21 September 2021, were regarding the *permanent* return of an antique drum, referred to at the end of the seventeenth century as *rune-bomme* (rune-drum), to Sápmi and the Sámi people. At that time the drum was already in The Sámi Museum in Karasjok, but the deposition agreement with the National Museum of Denmark was due to run out on 1 December 2021. The letter from Aili Keskitalo caused a stir in the Norwegian, Danish, and British news media.

To discover the background to the president's enquiry to the Queen of Denmark in Autumn 2021, we must go back to an event that took place in Varangerbotn, in the very northeastern part of Denmark-Norway, a good 330 years ago, at the beginning of December 1691. An elderly reindeer owner by the name of Anders Poulsen was arrested then in the Nesseby area of Varanger and taken to Vadsø, the administration centre of Finnmark at that time. The bailiff in Vadsø, a Sámi sheriff, and several other Sámi were present at the arrest. The young magistrate in Finnmark, Niels Tygesen Knag (1661–1737) relates that Poulsen was interrogated and examined in his chamber in Vadsø.

The Rune-Drum

During Anders Poulsen's arrest, an instrument was confiscated at the same time, a bowl-shaped drum, which in the sources of law (court register) of that time is named "Rune-Bomme" (Rune-Drum). As well as the drum there were also two hammers made of reindeer horn and a brass pointer. The pointer was shaped like a ring, which danced up and down when the drum-skin was beaten. A series of figures were painted on the drum. The owner's task was to provide interpretations when the brass ring rested on one of the drawings. During the trial, Poulsen had to answer specific questions about the use of the instrument, and it was this strange rune-drum that defined the case as a criminal matter. The case itself against Poulsen

came up at the district court in Vadsø on 6 February 1692 – two months after his arrest and the initial interrogation.

The formal charge against the old Sami was that he was arrested for having been in possession of, and having used, an oval object called a rune-drum. With this instrument he had “practised the wicked and ungodly art of sorcery”, according to the indictment. The public prosecution, represented by Vadsø Deputy Bailiff Olle Andersen, led the case and was in charge of the interrogation. After an extremely detailed description of the rune-drum, which took two days and comprised many handwritten pages in the judicial record (Tingbok), the bailiff believed the sentence should be severe. Faced with such great ungodliness and shameful devil’s work, the judge should determine a fearful example, claimed the deputy bailiff in his final summing-up. From the subsequent court documents, it is apparent that he had witch-burning in mind.

This Sámi was, according to Olle Andersen, a sorcerer and idolater who had forfeited his life and should be “burned up by the fire”. By playing the magic drum, he had set evil demons in motion. Every beat upon the drum was thus a beat to Satan in hell. It was the Devil who was behind the rune-drum and its symbols, as detailed in the local authorities’ commentary on the case. They observed that Satan plays his game among the mountain Sámi, with the help of the rune-drum and the rituals connected to it.

[Drumming in the courtroom](#)

During the legal process itself, the accused actually gave a demonstration of how he usually handled the instrument. The local judiciary and the common people followed eagerly as <https://sway.office.com/xtukfjS7EZwHmFyx?ref=Link> Poulsen went over to the courtroom table, took up the drum lying there, made the sign of the cross over himself and the instrument, and said a silent prayer in Finnish. Weeping, and with the utmost devotion, he then lifted the drum and played upon it so that everyone could see the Sámi rune-drum in use. He hit it with one of the hammers and the brass ring danced up and down in time to the movements of his hand and the blows on the drumskin. After continuing the drumming for a while, he told the legal tribunal that the gods could not agree whether they should answer or not. The gods were sceptical about the invocation coming from a “Norwegian’s House”. Poulsen shouted aloud to his spirits that they should not be afraid of the Norwegians.

Although he was playing in a Norwegian house, the Norwegians would do them no harm, he said, before he continued to play. Finally, he received an answer...

Poulsen used the drum to communicate with assisting spirits from the hereafter. When he communicated with his gods, he was able to act as a healer and prophet. He himself emphasized these qualities:

- Tracking down stolen good and forgotten objects
- Healing
- Mastering the art of divination and being able to see into the future
- Being able to tell things about people located in faraway places

Asked about his motivation for acquiring these abilities, Poulsen answered that he wished to know how people lived in remote places, he wanted to know whether people travelling had luck with them, and he wanted to be able to help people in need. In general, his sense of self consisted of doing good deeds by acquiring the secrets of the rune-drum.

Biography

During Anders Poulsen's interrogations, several biographical pieces of information came to light, such that we can form a specific impression of the course of his life. When Poulsen was arrested at the end of 1691, he was a very old man. He was born in Torne Lappmark, probably in the Sámi town of Utsjoki, just over the border from present-day Northern Finland. As an adult he relocated to Norway. In the sovereign state of Denmark-Norway he lived on the coast in both the Nordlandene and Finnmark regions in the northern part of Norway. Like other nomadic Sámi, he paid sea tax and made other payments to Denmark-Norway.

The old man was married, but his wife was the whole time unaware of his fate. He had a large flock of children based in both West and East Finnmark. It is particularly his son, Christopher Andersen in West Finnmark, of whom we hear more in his father's interrogations. The delinquent described his son Christopher as a good doctor, even though he had not mastered the rune-drum to a 'doctoral' extent. Four of Poulsen's children, three daughters and one son, followed the legal proceedings in Vadsø. Their testimony was based on the fact that their father's talents had not caused any harm. They swore that he had never stolen, or deprived others of happiness.

Witchcraft investigation

Poulsen's trial was to develop into one of the most sensational witchcraft investigations known in Norway. The seized rune-drum is one of the very few drums for which we have the owner's own explanation regarding the drum's symbols and figures. The many-hundred-year-old rune-drum is therefore deposited and carefully conserved in the basement archive at Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat, The Sámi Collections in Karasjok.

The complexity of the case against Anders Poulsen was perceived by the local Danish-Norwegian authorities as very special and unusual. The magistrate Niels T. Knag was at a complete loss as far as sentencing was concerned. Should he judge according to the Norwegian law of 1687, which decreed that sorcerers should be burned alive? Together with the district governor in Finnmark of that time, Hans Hansen Lilienskiold (c.1650–1703) from Bergen, the magistrate decided that the misdeeds and the idol worship, which Poulsen had actually owned up to, were not clearly enough defined in the applicable penal code. Until there was an answer from the learned scribes in Copenhagen, Poulsen was to remain in custody, and the bailiff was to take charge of Poulsen's possessions and assets.

Instead of an answer from the learned men at the University of Copenhagen, the case from Vadsø in 1692 took a surprising turn. A significant factor in the history of the old reindeer-herding Sámi was that the very next day after the trial, he was killed while he lay sleeping in a *gamme* (turf hut). Since Poulsen was a sorcerer, he had to die, explained the murderer, after he had killed the old man with three axe blows to the head. The legal proceedings against Poulsen thus had no final outcome. Magistrate Knag took the rune-drum with him to Copenhagen when he left Finnmark in 1693.

The case against Poulsen in 1692 is one of 37 source-documented witchcraft trials against Sámi individuals in Northern Norway dating from the end of the sixteenth century to the close of the seventeenth century. Of these, 18 ended in the death sentence. The majority of the Sámi who were accused of practising sorcery in the north were men, in contrast to the gender distribution in the Norwegian witchcraft cases, where the majority of those sentenced were Norwegian coastal women.

Shamanism

Poulsen's detailed description of the rune-drum's areas of operation was subsequently viewed as one of the most significant sources we have regarding Sámi shamanism. Using the drum,

Poulsen conveyed messages between people and the spirits. Through his instrument he obtained knowledge about a great many situations which were of use to the local community within which he operated. These might involve healing, helping to perform other good deeds, being able to see into the future and uncovering hidden treasures. The shaman acted as a teacher, prophet, healer, and minister of souls in his environment. It should be noted that the kind of shamanism connected with the Poulsen's case is still a highly disputed issue among scholars.

The case of the drum – the final solution

Although Her Majesty the Queen of Denmark might not have been able to do much in this special case, the Sámi people and former Sámi Parliament President Aili Keskitalo certainly had a good case when the president asked for the permanent return of the shaman drum to where it actually belonged. The final outcome of the case occurred in January 2022, when the Danish Minister for Culture, Ane Halsboe-Jørgensen, gave permission for the National Museum to “release a Sámi drum, a so-called rune-drum”, with reference to the Danish Museum Law, paragraph 11, subsection 2. So, The National Museum formally transferred the Sámi drum to the RiddoDuottarMuseat Museum Association in Karasjok, Norway.

The Cultural Minister's reasoning was that it was natural that the drum should find its permanent home at a museum “to which it has a historical affiliation”. Permission was furthermore granted based on the drum's extended loan to The Sámi Collections, together with the drum's particular connection with and relevance to the region.

APPENDIX

ANDERS POULSEN'S POWERFUL RUNE-DRUM – ITS ORIGIN AND REPATRIATION

The Sámi Collections/RiddoDuottarMuseat, Karasjok, 20.05.2022

HIFO–Tromsøs Reiseseminar til Indre Finnmark, 19–22.05.2022

Extract from my lecture given at this venue, as part of a travel seminar to Inner Finnmark organized by the Tromsø branch of The Norwegian Historical Association (HiFo)

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Introduction:

About 330 years ago, in 1691–1692, the last serious witchcraft case in Finnmark unfolded in Vadsø. The confiscation of an object described as a rune-drum (*Rune-Bomme*). A bowl-

shaped object of pine, approx. 44 cm long, 33 cm wide and 10 cm high. Divided into five fields, with figures, signs, and symbols. A hammer and a ring or pointer made of brass also belonged to the drum.

The issue was revived in Autumn 2021 and the beginning of 2022, involving The Sámi Collections/ RiddoDuottarMuseat, the Sámi Parliament, The Danish National Museum, the Danish and Norwegian royal families, the Ministry of Culture and Equality in Norway, the Ministry of Culture in Denmark, The Nordic Council and a number of politicians from various parties.

The drum's history from December 1691 to January 2022

- 07.12.1691: Anders Poulsen's drum is confiscated by Deputy-Bailiff Olle Andersen and the Sámi sheriff Poul Iversen in Varanger (probably in the Nesseby area, "3 store mil fra Vadsø", according to the sources). Poulsen and his drum were carried to Vadsø by reindeer transport.
- 08.12.1691: the bailiff and Finnmark Magistrate Niels Knag take possession of the drum, in connection with the interrogation of Anders Poulsen in Vadsø.
- 09–10.02.1692: Anders Poulsen plays his rune-drum during the district court case against him in Vadsø.
- December 1693: Niels Knag brings the drum with him when he travels to Copenhagen.
- 1693: the drum enters The Royal Art Gallery (inventory number 802/65).
- From 1845: the drum enters the National Museum in Copenhagen (registered as Ela5, see also Ernst Manker under drum no. 71]).
- 1978: The Sámi Collections in Karasjok asks for the loan of the drum, referring to arrangements and Sami cultural heritage.
- September 1979: the rune-drum is transferred to The Sámi Collections/Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat. Courier transport is provided for the vacuum-packed drum.
- 1979–1999: loan agreement, thereafter, extended to 2009, and then until 2011 and 2016.
- 2006: The Sámi Collections raise a formal claim for the transfer of ownership of the drum. Letter sent to the National Museum from Sámiid Vuorká-Dávvirat.
- December 2007: the National Museum in Copenhagen rejects the claim for the transfer of ownership and asks for the return of the drum. The justification is to preserve the unity of The Royal Art Gallery collection (1580–1820) – one of the foremost collections in the world, it is claimed.
- 2016: National Museum requirement for the storage of the drum in a climate control unit (formerly stored in a light-proof storage case).
- From 2016 to 01.12.2021: duration of final loan agreement.
- 21.09.2021: "Repatriation of Sámi drum to RiddoDuottarMuseat" letter sent from Sámi Parliament President Aili Keskitalo to H.M. Queen Margrethe II of Denmark.
- 21.10.2021: King Harald of Norway does not wish to involve himself in the case but says "I know this is up in the Danish Museum and there will probably be a decision soon" (NTB news agency).
- 02–04.11.2021: the drum case is revived in connection with a Nordic Council of Ministers meeting held in Copenhagen. The Norwegian Culture and Equalities Minister, Anette

Trettebergstuen, observes ahead of the meeting that the formal ownership of the drum should be transferred to the Sámi Parliament in Norway. Norwegian politicians take up the case at the Nordic Council meeting on Wednesday 3 November 2021. Helge André Njåstad (FrP - Fremskrittspartiet) asks a question to the Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen about the drum.

- November 2021: the National Museum in Denmark concludes that it is willing to transfer ownership of the drum to The Sámi Collections in Karasjok. It submits its professional recommendation to the Danish Ministry of Culture. In an article entitled *Den store trommejakten* (The big drum hunt) by Jens-Eirik Larsen, Head of Research for modern times and world cultures Christian Sune Pedersen explains that the professional resolution to return the drum was taken, and the issue resolved, before the then Sámi Parliament President Aili Keskitalo wrote her letter to the Queen (*KulturPilot* 2022: 48).
- 24.01.2022: Danish Culture Minister Ane Halsboe-Jørgensen gives permission for the National Museum to “release a Sámi drum, a so-called rune-drum”, with reference to the Danish Museum Law, paragraph 11, subsection 2. The National Museum transfers the ownership of the Sámi drum to RiddoDuottarMuseat in Karasjok, Norway.
- 12.04.2022: the anniversary exhibition “RUOKTOT – Return of the Sámi Drums” opens at the museum in Karasjok.

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