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## **Tax, trade and diversification among the Northern Sami during the 16<sup>th</sup> century**

### *Introduction*

The aim of this paper is to present an example of how of our picture of the traditional way of living of a group of hunter-gatherers – in this case *the Sami of Northern Fennoscandia during the 16<sup>th</sup> century* – can be altered through a renewed and more detailed, individual-based approach to one the main written sources of the time, viz. some preserved tax records. When contrasted to the pictures and models constructed on the basis of ethnographical observations from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a closer and more systematic study of these records reveals greater variability in ways of living, mobility and adaptational strategies than earlier presumed – thus adding diversity, dynamics and time depth to our earlier conceptions.

### *The Sami and their way of living in earlier times*

Due to a cultural diversification process among various heterogeneous groups of hunter-gatherers in northern Fennoscandia, a separate Sami ethnic identity seems to have emerged during the last millennium B.C. This development seems to be part of a mutual identification process involving intensified interaction with other groups who at the same time evolved a separate *North Germanic* identity in the west, and groups identifying themselves as Hämeläiset and Suomalaiset – the predecessors of the later Finnish population – in the east (Hansen & Olsen 2004: 38-41).

From this time – or at least from the first centuries of our era – the Sami stand out as an indigenous people of the north, inhabiting the northern and central parts of Fennoscandia. The approximate extension of their habitation area in historically and traditionally known times, can be seen on the map, figure 1, which depicts the localization of the various Sami dialects or languages, all belonging to the Finno-Ugric language family.

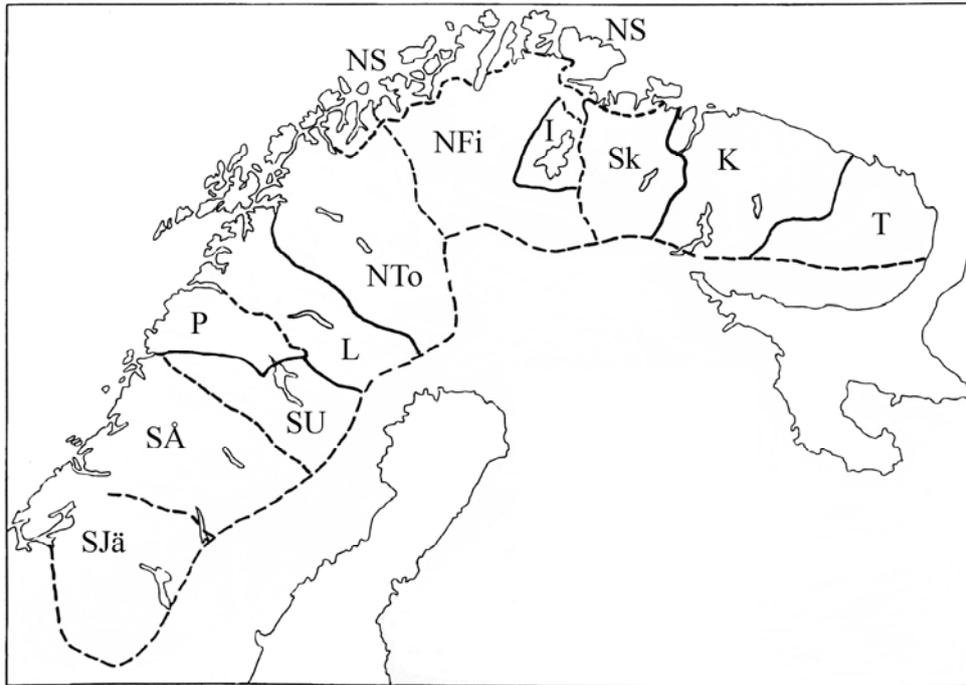


Figure 1.

Despite their general and unifying characteristics, the Sami also display various sub-groups, distinguishing themselves in material culture and not least linguistically – something which may indicate various connections and diversified forms of interaction with other groups, resulting in the exchange of diversified cultural elements.

So far as the sources allow observation, Sami groups along the coast, and Sami populations settled in the interior of northern Fennoscandia, have shown different profiles in ecological adaptation. Fishing and the hunting of sea mammals seem to have played a great role among the Coastal Sami, but these elements were also combined with the hunting of wild reindeer and fur animals (Vorren 1978). In contrast, the inland Sami to a much greater degree had to rely upon reindeer and fur-bearing animals, though they were also engaged in pike fishing in the lakes. Until the last part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century – or the first part of the 17<sup>th</sup> – the great majority Sami were hunter-gatherers, though small-scale sheep and cattle breeding has also been known among some of the coastal Sami from the early Middle Ages and onwards. In the southernmost districts the coastal Sami were even engaged in agriculture (Gjærevoll et al. 1978; Kolsrud 1947, 1961.)

To a certain extent, some of the Sami may also at an early point of time have kept a small number of domesticized reindeer for milking and draught purposes, but the transition to more specialized pastoralism seem to have started first in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Hansen & Olsen 2004) – though some scholars maintain that it goes back to the Middle Ages (Storli 1994; Andersen 2002). On the basis of 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographic evidence from the East or "Skolt" Sami areas, there has been reconstructed a model of Siida life and organization<sup>1</sup>, where one of the basic features is *seasonal mobility*: In spring, summer and autumn the families or households were living at different locations, according to particular resource units that they were allowed to exploit separately, whereas in winter they gathered together in common winter camps, and carried out collective forms of hunting and took part in various social activities (Tanner 1929). Since this model also has found support in earlier (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century) evidence for the communities in the Varanger fiord (Vorren 1978, 1980), it is interesting to see if such a pattern of seasonal mobility is discernible through a broader analysis of the taxation records, encompassing several communities and fiord areas.

#### *Taxation and trade networks*

Throughout the Middle Ages and until end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, large parts of the Sami habitation area was not regularly subjugated to any state power or supremacy. However, from late Medieval times and onwards, Northern Fennoscandia was divided into *partially overlapping taxation districts* between the surrounding states: *Norway* (successively in union with Denmark), *Sweden* and *Russia* (first Novgorod and later the Moscow principality). Striving to control people, resources and territory in the north, these aspiring powers competed in collecting tax from the Sami – and at the same time there were established comprehensive trade networks from all three sides, that were heavily engaged in trade and barter exchange with them, in particular demanding the precious, valuable furs that the Sami could provide (Aarseth 1979; Hansen & Olsen 2004, Hansen 2005). Thus, the Sami maintained relations with both tax collectors and private purchasers of furs, from all three surrounding nation states and the corresponding trade networks (Steckzén 1964; Hansen 1990; cf. figure 2).

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<sup>1</sup> *Siida* is a traditional local Sami community or co-operative organization, consisting of several families or household units, who controlled a common resource territory and used it jointly for seasonal migration, hunting and the exploitation of various resource niches. As such the concept of *siida* connotes both a unit of social organization and the spatial extension of the corresponding usufruct territory (see Vorren and Manker 1962; Hansen 1999 and Helander 1999).

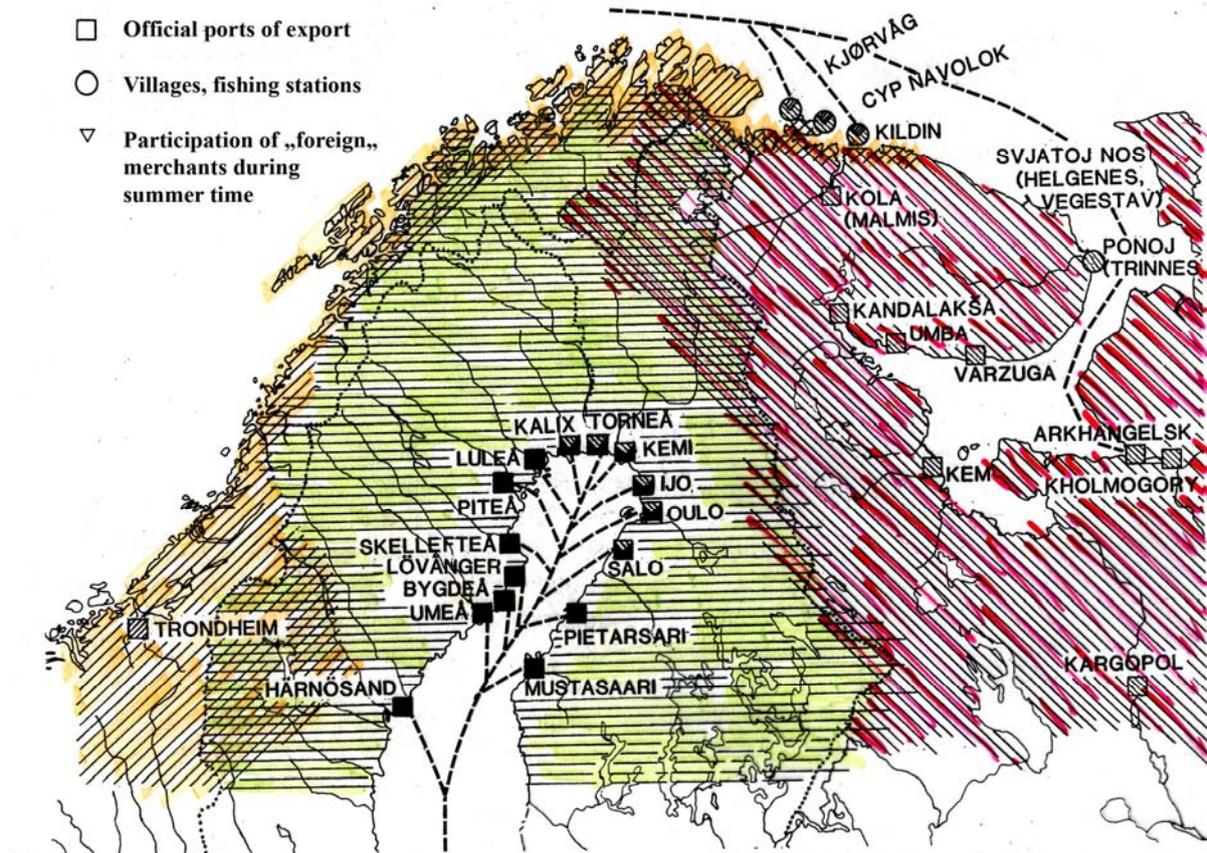


Figure 2.

From the eastern side the Russian trade interests, represented by both Russian and Karelian merchants, from the south Swedish traders and in the north and west: the representatives of the Norwegian trade stations along the coast, attached to the Hanseatic network. As a consequence, there are preserved rather comprehensive records from the second part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century – in particular on the Swedish side – reflecting both royal taxation and trading activities. (Broch & Stang 1961; Hansen 1990; Rauø 2006). (See figure 3.)

### Approach

Such tax records have often been studied in order to explore the consequences of emerging state power or manifestations of greater powers capable of extracting tax or tribute from diverse populations, who for their part are considered as *exploited* by these powers. More recent studies have, however to a greater extent replaced this view with a more complex one – with both parties seeking to exploit the established connections and exchange networks in order to supplement and consolidate their own livelihoods (Hansen 1990; Nielsen 1990). For instance, it has been shown that the coastal Sami chose to sell the dried fish (cod) which the

produced in abundant quantities, to the Norwegian merchants, instead of using it as tax payment to the Swedes, because the fish was twice as highly valued by the Norwegians, as by the Swedes. Then, they used the goods received for paying the Swedish tax (Hansen 1990:193-194, Hansen 2009:354-355).

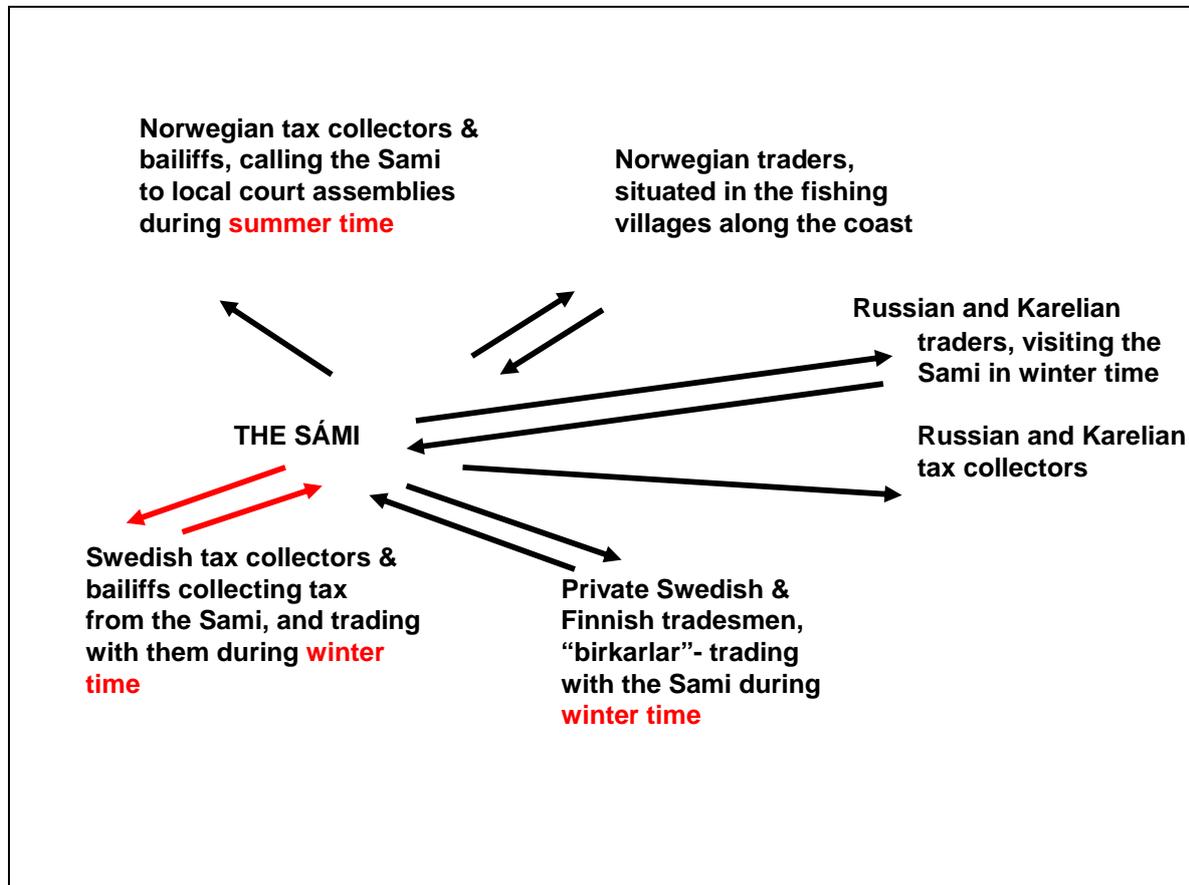


Figure 3.

My aim here is to further develop this latter approach, by utilizing preserved tax records in order to draw a more complex and balanced picture between emerging state powers and indigenous peoples. By focusing to a greater extent on characteristics and information that pertain to the *individual taxpayers*, I hope to be able to show that it is possible to draw more exact conclusions about some of the activities on “grass root level” among the population in question. Depending on how comprehensive and substantial the recorded information for each taxpayer is, it seems possible to shed some light on *local mobility* and *diversity*, as well as on certain *affinities* and *connections* (“networks”), – and possibly even to some degree: *subsistence strategies* and *economic strategies* of the individuals concerned.

The question here is whether the tax was based on an individual assessment of each payer, or if the tax was levied on a kind of collective unit, kin group or tax-paying unit consisting of several persons, so that they could divide a prescribed tax sum among themselves or take turns in paying. Both principles are known from the Sami area in different periods and have led to various conclusions among the scholars (Holmsen 1966; Korpijaakko 1985; Rasmussen 2002). However, a closer scrutiny of ca. 1 800 identified taxpayers that has been undertaken as part of this study, has revealed the taxation principle used by Swedish authorities during the last part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was individually based. The tax was exclusively collected from males, who were inscribed into the “male census” when reaching an age where they were capable of paying tax, regardless of whether they were married or in charge of a household or not. As such, the records are therefore useless for calculating the number of households and population numbers, but all the more reliable for tracing possible patterns manifested by male individuals.

#### *Preliminary findings*

The various forms of *mobility* can be studied both on a more general level, concerning movements *between* siida communities and various fiord areas, but also on a more local level, relating to possible movements *within* a siida or fiord area. In the last case, it is a question of whether the movements are *seasonal*, as proven for the Skolt Sami areas, or whether they are of another kind – e.g. movements between various sites with *intervals of a few years*. Due to the way the tax records are structured, the conditions for studying intra-area mobility are best in the Altafiord, as the records here relate the Sami taxpayers to different, specified localities. In the fiords further to the east – from Porsanger to Varanger – and in the interior siida areas as well, the taxpayers are listed together in one lump, without further specification.

Presumably, this reflects the way the tax was collected in these areas, at one specific site where the bulk of the population was gathered at specific occasions during winter time, in connection with markets, court assemblies or similar events.

Therefore, we have to distinguish between three kinds of mobility, when we approach the tax registers:

- a) *Seasonal mobility*, like depicted in the “siida model” based on the Skolt Sami areas.
- b) *Mobility with subsequent stays or intervals at various sites*, lasting from one and up to 5-6 years – and which thus forms different ‘life histories’ or biographies for the individuals in question.
- c) *More permanent resettling between various siida and fiord areas* – which would equal *migration* in the more traditional sense.

Of course, one cannot draw any absolute demarcation between these kinds of mobility. Seasonal mobility will be possible to detect from the tax registers, if one can compare two lists recorded at different times of the year. Since the Swedish taxation took place in winter, while the Norwegian was carried out in relation to court assemblies during midsummer, a comparison of such two lists should give some indication. The number of actual Norwegian records is small, but a preliminary look at those few, gives at hand that no seasonal migration between various sites *within the Altafiord* can be observed. However, a closer scrutiny of the Norwegian tax record from 1593, compared to the contemporaneous Swedish ones, reveals an interesting migration between the inland siidas and fiord bottom of Alta. Evidently, 9 out of ca. 20 taxpayers usually registered in Guovdageaidnu these years stayed the summer in innermost part of the Altafiord, where they presumably were engaged in the salmon fisheries in the Alta river – though they may also have participated in the salt water fisheries. In the same way, a lesser number of taxpayers resident in the neighbouring siidas of Láhpojávri and Ávjovárri situated further to the east, also took part in seasonal migrations to the Alta river outlet or vicinity.

Much more frequent, however, is mobility of the second, ‘life history’ kind – with subsequent stays or intervals of a few years at different sites in the fiord. In fact, this was a common, predominant feature of the fiord settlement at the beginning of the period under study. An analysis of the taxed persons and their localization from 1551 to 1600 reveals that the taxpayers fall in two distinct categories: In all 127 persons who are steadily on the move, and 181 persons who have a stationary residence at one site during the whole period that they are taxed. The average interval at which the mobile taxpayers resettle, lies between 3 and 4 years, with the majority staying only one year at each place. A closer scrutiny shows that the two groups also change relative proportions. While the mobile taxpayers make up over 60 percent of the population in the 1550s, they constitute less than 40 percent at the end of the period, towards 1600. The stationary group gains dominance during the 1570s, when there are a general increase in numbers of taxpayers.

In addition, the frequency of movements and resettling between the various localities may open for a closer analysis of the connections or relations between localities. The contact “affinity” between the various sites may namely be measured by calculating the number of individual movements between them. It turns out that the frequency of movements between some of the localities is much higher than between others. In figure 4, which gives simplified

picture of the location of sites in the Altafiord, this has been illustrated by the thickness of the arrows connecting the places, corresponding to the observed number of movements. Thus, it is a fair assumption that the varying degree of mobility between certain sites reflects some aspects of social organisation within the fiord, where some localities are considered to be the legitimate resource area of some groups, rather than others. Whether this really reflects some kind of siida organisation on a lower level within the fiord, or some other kind of social units or affinity, remains to be clarified.

## ***Altafiord***

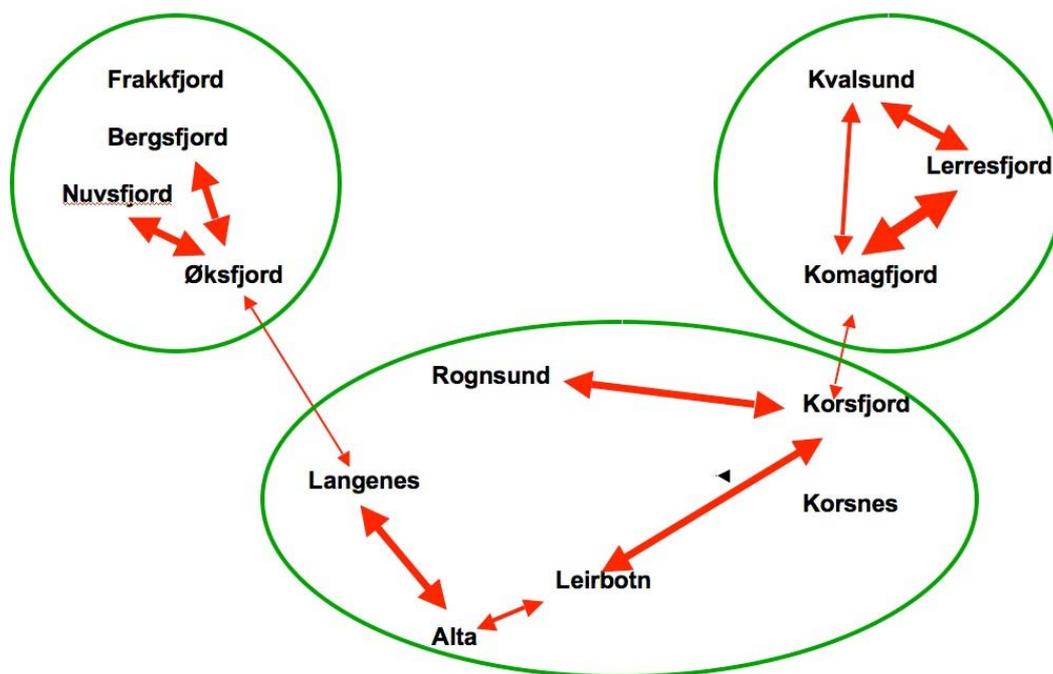


Figure 4.

Some examples of the last kind of mobility – movements with certain intervals, but connecting greater entities, like various fiords and siida communities – can also be borne out of the material. In figure 5 I have tried to illustrate the most frequent passages observed between inland communities and the coastal regions. Those concern the connections between Ohcejohka and the Tana fiord basin, between Ávjovárri and Porsanger, and between Ávjovárri and Guovdageaidnu on the one hand, and the Altafiord on the other. In other words, what seems to be reflected by these observed movements, are the communication lines

formed by the rivers and water courses; viz. the Tana river, the Lakselva and the Alta-Guovdageaidnu river. In the same way, one may chart the most frequent resettlings among the fiord areas. Not surprisingly, the most frequent contacts are found between fiord areas that are bordering to each other, such as: Alta – Porsanger, Porsanger – Laksefjord, Laksefjord – Tana – or as in the case of Varanger and Laksefjord, situated not too distant from each other.

So far it has not been possible to detect any great differences between the mobile and the stationary group, when it comes to amount or composition of the tax yields. The central question for further research is therefore: What motivations, needs and moving forces lie behind the observed patterns and changes?

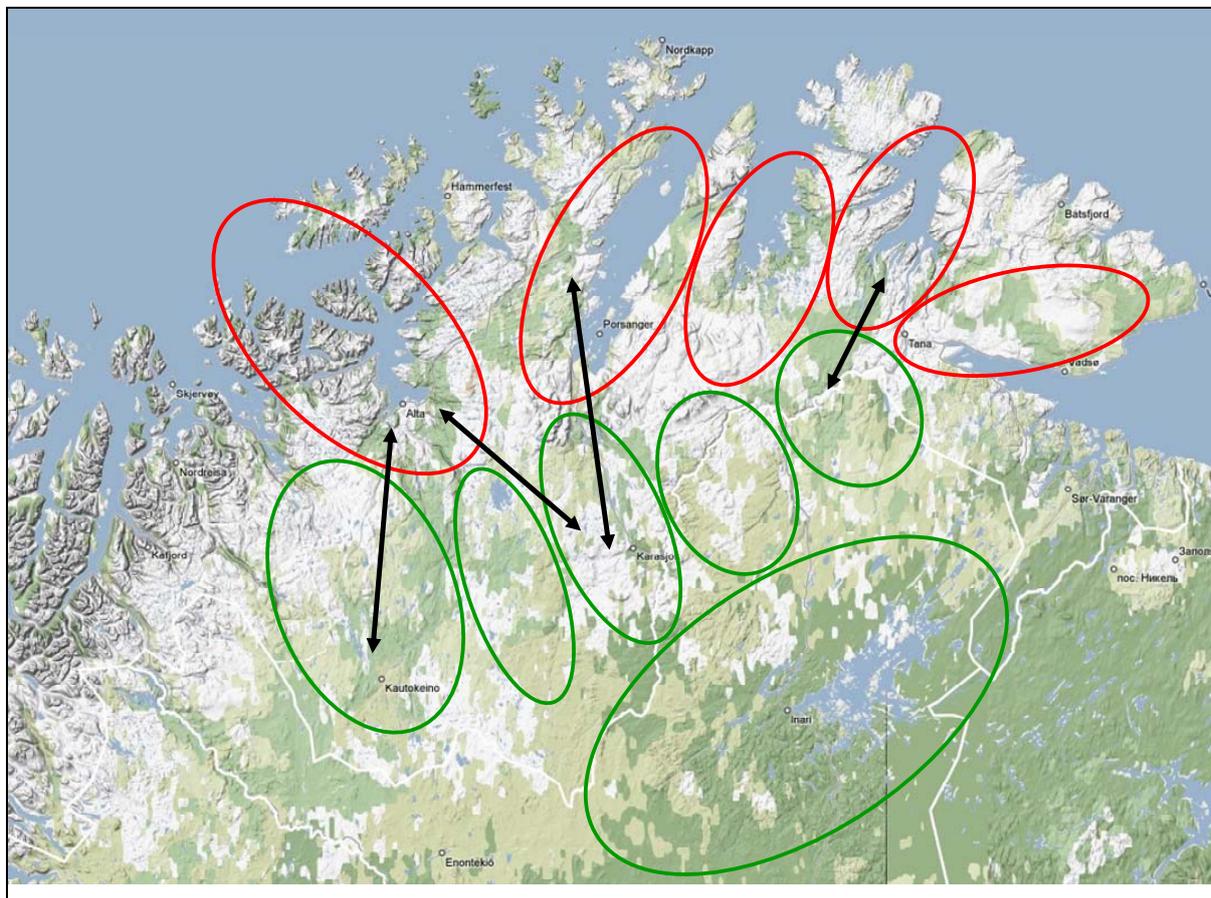


Figure 5.

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