

# Matching Wits: An Historical Sketch of Lapp Women

by Seija Paddon



Ruija, Pyssyjok: Anton Sammun Anna-Leena ja Sarkapakka.

Photo: National Museum of Finland.

*I have elected to use the popularly acknowledged term 'Lapp' throughout, rather than the anthropologically correct 'Same,' to facilitate identification.*

*And the world stood on one leg like  
the crane  
when mother gave birth to me*  
—Sirikka Turkka

The mental image of our world standing on one, the male-hierarchical leg, embraces a multitude of meanings. By association, the patriarchal histories are equally precariously balanced on the male writing/encoding and its tautology. There-

fore any historical commentary on the subject of women tends to spectacularize the female behaviour even when the behaviour is manifestly unspectacular in its context. My attempt to view the Lapp woman in an historical perspective, then, unavoidably meets particular difficulties. It is based on a deadly hush and a male opinion twice-removed from its subject. The historians have not been either Lapps or women. Moreover, because the pre-Christian Lapp culture was, to a great extent, matriarchal, any historical commentary is ideologically in opposition to itself. One-leggedness aside, the Lapp woman emerges as a true match for the male wit

within the confines of her socio-cultural structure.

The land that Lapps inhabit has had many names both in the historico/geographical records and mythological fables. Names such as *Thule*, *Ultima Thule*, *Fennia*, and *Scridfinnia* are suggestive of a land of mystery when compared with the prosaically modern and familiar *Lapland*. Its boundaries have had an equally varied history, although a significant portion of it has always lain north of the Arctic Circle, a landscape of coniferous forests, fells, hills, pine-covered wastelands, marshes, tundra, lakes, and numerous rivers. Long before 98 A.D., when Roman historian

Tacitus wrote about the Lapp life and customs,<sup>1</sup> the Lapps had occupied as large a territory as northern Scandinavia, Finland, the Kola peninsula, and regions between the White Sea and the large lakes of Ladoga and Onega. Tacitus may have gathered the information for his ethnographic treatise *Germania* among Germanic tribes who were in contact with Lapps, rather than through personal observations. Nevertheless, Tacitus viewed the Lapps as barbarians who lived at the world's fringe and lacked everything a Roman male considered necessary for the maintenance of his sense of a civilized self. He judged the Lapps to be extraordinarily poor and wild. His notion of poverty was based on the fact that they had no weapons, horses, fine furnishings, or permanent homes. The fact that they did not cultivate land but lived by fishing, hunting, and gathering wild herbs, by association made them wild. The most astonishing aspect of their life, however, a phenomenon never before mentioned in classical writings, was the fact that women hunted along with men and took their share of the kill. In winter they travelled, dressed in animal skins, at amazing speeds on curved pieces of wood. (The origin of Lapp skis can be dated with certainty between 1500 and 1000 B.C.)<sup>2</sup> Lapp men, in Tacitus' version of history, had sunk so low into servitude that particularly skilled women were often chosen to lead the hunt. Tacitus' description carries a tone of incredulity:

*But they consider this a happier existence than to groan in the fields, to work at the building of houses, to stake their possessions and those of other people on risky ventures. Safe from men, safe from gods, they have attained the most difficult thing: there is not even anything left for them to desire.*<sup>3</sup>

Subsequent scholars have pointed out that Tacitus' discourse is riddled with clichés borrowed from other historical descriptions of so-called 'savage' tribes. The clichéd writing did not make it fictional, however, but merely reinforced a particular paternalistic worldview. To the mind's eye of a Roman male, familiar with female slaves, treasures, looting raids, contested inheritances, and colonization of cities and lands, the concept of 'barbarians' denoted the opposite of that which

he was familiar with. Further, the behaviour of the Lapp woman was unacceptable not only in the Roman view, but it also conflicted with the credo of the Athenian world.

Asocial power was interpreted in moral terms, the women of classical Greece, on the whole, were seen as virtuous when absent and immoral when present in the society of men. Since the historical male view insisted on a woman's oppositeness and was disturbed by any blurring of clearly defined differences, the 'civilized' male eye perceived the Lapp woman as a spectacularly masculine type rather than a well-developed human being, able to come to terms with the demands of her environment.

The vast land, where for two months at a time the sun cannot set but obscures the light of the stars at night, or where in winter the moon appears at an infinite distance in clear, thin air, was blanketed by silence for hundreds of years at a time. The first centuries of the Christian era represented such a gap in Lapp history. About 550 A.D. Procopius, a famous Goth historian and a man nurtured among the pomp and circumstance of the Byzantine court, wrote about the Lapp people, referring to them as 'savages.' Procopius offered the fact that the Lapps "do not even know the sweetening influence of wine, but men and women alike indulge in one relentless welter of hunting" (Bosi, p. 47) as proof of their savagery. His discursive anxiety viewed the Lapp mothers as abnormal. Rather than breast-feeding their young, they wrapped them in animal skins, gave them a piece of marrow-bone to suck and hung them up in a tree after which the mothers went off to hunt with their husbands. Procopius' spectacularized treatment of Lapp women obscured facts. Subsequent studies have shown that "the skins" in which women wrapped their infants were in fact a wooden cradle lined with soft animal fur. The cradle itself was a narrow piece of wood, carved hollow and covered with animal skins. The marrow-bone contained nourishment in highly concentrated form and was given to an infant only when breast-feeding was not possible. This alternate source of nourishment enabled the mother to participate in activities which took her away from her infant for extended periods of time. Significantly, the sixth century Lapp mother circumvented the dictates of feeding

schedules which restrict the movements of nursing mothers elsewhere even today.

Procopius' observations were followed by another long silence broken only by an errant monk, Saxo Grammaticus of Denmark. About 1200 A.D. Grammaticus wrote about the *Scridfinni* hunters who believed in magic and while on migratory journeys, moved their tents by loading their reindeer with animal skins, poles, and stakes. In 1555, the exiled Roman Catholic Archbishop of Uppsala, Olaus Magnus, published a book in Rome titled *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (Bosi, pp. 55-57). His description of sixteenth century Lapp life was greatly distorted and carried an elaborate blend of the fantastic. He included stories about one-eyed people (a link with the Polyphemus legend) burrowing underground and hibernating in winter like bears, or alternatively living in tree-tops at immense heights, on the edge of the world. From such vantage points the Lapps supposedly contemplated the ice tides of the ultimate sea. In reality, during winters the Lapps constructed cabins which were partly underground, enabling them to conserve heat. The 'houses' in the tree-tops were store-houses in which meat was kept safe from hungry wolves and wolverines. While the historical and the fantastic were complementary in reinforcing the ideologically dominant view, ultimately these historians, these men of the Church, had a single, obsessive thought in common: the Lapp heathens were seen as savages in need of conversion and their pagan beliefs had to be eradicated.

Even a cursory look at the Lapps' religious beliefs uncovers reasons, if indeed reasons were necessary, why Christianity could not tolerate their existence. Aside from the Christian faith in the patriarchal God as the ultimate guarantee of the truth of His institutionalized word, it is the institutionalized word which also defines a woman's role in life as well as the correct version of what a woman is. The possibility of female divinity not only involved ideological heresy, but was a threat to the known symbolic order. Among the Lapp tribes certain divinities were common to all, although legends and beliefs varied among the different tribes. The Supreme Divinity Ibmel — a Uranic god — was an abstract idea never given form in art. Upon creating the earth, Ibmel sent 'woman and mother' down to bring it

life. She was the life-giver, the first mother, while the Supreme God was largely unmentioned and only vaguely connected with the beginning of things. *Máddár-akko* (woman-mother), on the other hand, continued to be a living symbol in their race-memory.

The Lapps also believed in numerous lesser gods who were involved specifically in human affairs. For example, the Nature-gods were either males, such as The Man of the Wind who released storms at a whim, or females, such as Sar-Akka, the woman who spun and hid under the hearths of tents and huts. There she transferred a child about to be born to the female occupant of the hut; she also joined the child's body to his/her soul thus ensuring the birth of a complete being. This procedure happened under the watchful eyes of two other female divinities, the 'Door-woman' who watched over the entrance and the 'Woman of the Bow' who would give the infant her protection thereafter (Bosi, pp. 130-134).

Although the practice of shamanism and magic was the preserve of male magicians and shamans, the most popular histories of the fourteenth and fifteenth

centuries mention Lapp women as witches who not only sold winds to sailors, but also the power of second sight to those in need of it. The winds were tied in three magical knots, the untying of which resulted in winds varying from a safe breeze for sailing to perilous gales. Belief in the awesome power of these practices persisted well into the second half of the seventeenth century and the literary use of references to them permeates, besides English literature, the literatures of the Germans, French, and Americans. Works which allude and/or directly refer to the practices range from Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* (1592) to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).<sup>4</sup> The ingenuity inherent in successfully selling air at any velocity (or second sight, for that matter) and the ability to sustain the 'civilized' world's fear and awe for centuries, renders any attempts at further commentary woefully inadequate.

The Scandinavians' efforts to convert the Lapps to Christianity began in the thirteenth century but did not achieve notable success until the middle of the seventeenth century. The Christians' obsessive need to locate and destroy the

Lapps' ceremonial instruments, such as their magic drums, resulted in a large-scale destruction of their cultural and artistic heritage. In retrospect, the Lapps' practice of magic was suggestive of a drama of innocence under siege in a century during which the true Christian believers burned 20,000 women alive as witches.

It was the lucrative European fur trade, however, rather than spiritual or intellectual pursuits, which made it necessary for other peoples to have a more realistic interpretation of Lapp life. An ancient world suddenly appeared before the European eye as if from a long sleep, a world which exhibited every sign of health and vitality. Socio-economically the Lapps belonged in three groups, the mountain, forest, and coastal Lapps, designations which were then already a thousand years old. The fully nomadic mountain Lapps undertook long migratory journeys in an annual rhythm, and lived throughout the year in tents which the men and women together put up and dismantled. The forest and coastal Lapps were half-nomads with separate seasonal dwellings. Archaeological evidence shows that co-



Petsamo, Suonikylä. Preparing the oven for baking, 1932.

Photo: National Museum of Finland.

operative labour, not only between the sexes, but also between inhabitants of various settlements, had been the norm for nearly fifteen centuries.<sup>5</sup>

To the seventeenth century Scandinavian observer the woman's role in the Lapp economy surpassed the role of her neighbours to the South, both in terms of the variety of tasks she performed and the skill and industriousness with which she performed them. The variety alone as a concept challenged any rigid, marginalized notions of a separate and subservient women's culture. Moreover, the benefits of her industriousness did not automatically accrue to the male members of her immediate and/or extended societies. In areas which the patriarchal sexual division of labour would designate as the traditionally feminine, the Lapp woman's skills certainly at least equalled the skills of women in other cultures. She was the tailor and the shoemaker. She made thread from reindeer sinews, sometimes covering it with tin for decorative purposes. She spun wool from the fur of hares, knitted, sewed, wove, and decorated clothes, belts, and bands with wondrous embroidery depicting images of birds, stars, flowers and beasts. In addition, she was an expert at hunting, fishing, feeding and caring for reindeer and domestic animals as the Lapp male. In summer the men and women lay sunning themselves close to the surface of waters teeming with fish which they caught with spears. At night they burned wooden torches at the prow of their boats and the light lured the fish close to the water's surface. In winter they thrust nets under the ice and by making a great deal of noise above the ice, they drove the fish into the nets on the shore side. Often women did all this alone. The unmarginalized female participation extended into sports. For example, the Lapps played a ball game with a leather ball the size of a human fist and filled with hay. To the astonishment of a seventeenth century historian, the men did not show themselves "more expert at it than the women."<sup>6</sup>

The Lapp women's joint economic contribution with males and the freedom embedded in the notion of partnership had far-reaching effects. Family property, such as reindeer herds which are/were the Lapps' wealth, was not owned solely by the father but rather he owned it in partnership with his wife and children. Inheritance was commonly divided equally

among all the children, male or female. Any property a bride brought into a marriage or later inherited was hers unconditionally. An ancient custom which is still observed dictated the tent to be the woman's domain, not in the Western European reductive sense, but as a symbol of the family's continuity. Hence, young couples settled close to the wife's family because it was the mother who ensured the survival of the family.

The co-operative aspect of life, first between the sexes and through subsequent extension, between communities, inevitably generated a political view of existence which was both tolerant and peaceable. The notion of a single chief to whom everyone owed their life and unquestioned loyalty was both foreign and unattractive to the Lapps. It is a matter of socialization, of course, to what extent the undifferentiated mental and other training between the sexes and its resultant companionship retarded aggressive rivalry and combat. However, since the Lapps had demonstrated unwillingness to participate in raids into other areas, and generally preferred to outwit their greedy Southern neighbours rather than involve themselves in skirmishes, they were thought to be probably useless in war.

An integral part of the Lapps' adaptability in viewing growth and change as a process rather than a goal-ended aggressiveness, was their mastery of the distinctly separate languages of the Scandinavians, Finns, and Russians with whom they came in contact during migrations and trading. Modern studies show that rather than 'savages' who lived in isolation for centuries, the Lapp women and men had known wholly or in part, one or several of their neighbours' languages over a period of a thousand years. The historically familiar tone persisted, however.

Thomas Robert Malthus, in his *Scandinavian Journals* (1799), tells of an encounter with the matriarch of a migratory mountain-Lapp family. Malthus in his pursuit of knowledge about the Lapps self-evidently depended on the aid of a Norwegian interpreter who conducted the interview in Norse, "a language" — Malthus reports — "she spoke tolerably well." After observing a young Lapp mother in the tent washing her children's faces, Malthus concluded, surprised, that perhaps it was done to compliment him

and his entourage.<sup>7</sup>

The mighty train of Christianity, the nineteenth and twentieth century pursuits of economic goals, and advances in technology, have unavoidably made triumphant inroads into the life and culture of the Lapps. The three-pronged attack has been as indifferent about its target as the ticking of a clock. Moreover, the historically dominant discourse has been an integral part of the process of conquest despite, or rather because of, its manifest flaws. The textual element common to all the writing has been the use of words such as 'witch' and 'heretic' as hatchet-words which have carried the psychological power to paralyze all opposing thought. Any analysis of such renderings, however ruthless, merely comments on the immediately obvious, while the larger truth is irretrievably lost. Further, although historically the Lapp woman's ability to match the male will and intelligence in matters of living is unchallengeable, her life and appropriation into the dominant Christian order remain, to a larger extent, an enigma. One of the many mysteries surrounding her history concerns the influence her example might have had in the shaping of the lives of women in neighbouring cultures. However, because in her regions the Arctic sun clings to the horizon for long periods of time, it enables even a pebble to cast a long shadow. Surely, then, the extraordinary Lapp female experience and the shadow cast in the lives of other Nordic women still await a 'woman-centered' redefinition of the significance of both.

<sup>1</sup>Roberto Bosi, *The Lapps* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1960), pp. 42-43.

<sup>2</sup>See Roberto Bosi, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup>Björn Collinder, *The Lapps* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1949), p. 206.

<sup>4</sup>Ernest J. Moyné, *Raising the Wind: The Legend of Lapland and Finland Wizards in Literature* (East Brunswick: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1981), pp. 48-49, 133.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Paine, *Coast Lapp Society* (Tromsø: A/S Peder Norbye, 1957), pp. 54-66.

<sup>6</sup>Johannes Schefferus, *The History of Lapland* (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Rediviva, 1971), p. 109.

<sup>7</sup>Patricia James, ed., *The Travel Diaries of Thomas Robert Malthus* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1966), pp. 189-192.