Of Goavddis and Runic calendars
Sámi artefacts in Cardinal Borgia’s late eighteenth-century collections

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Abstract: Sámi artefacts are today exhibited in numerous European museums. Since the Renaissance, members of the educated elites were fascinated by the North and acquired Sámi items for their private cabinets of curiosities. Over the centuries most of these collections were dispersed. In a few cases though, some of the items once in these modern collections re-emerged from the past, to be displayed in contemporary museums. This is the case for a few Sámi artefacts currently part of Italian and Vatican collections: a goavddis and a Sámi runic calendar. The paper retraces the stories and histories of these objects, addressing colonial practices and ideologies connected with the acquisition of Indigenous artefacts in Modern Europe. In doing so, this contribution highlights how the presence of these coveted commodities in early museums bore witness to entangled colonial histories.

Keywords Sámi material culture, entangled histories, runic calendars, goavddis, Museum Borgianum.

Over the centuries, a number of Sámi artefacts – purchased, bartered, or looted – reached Italy through tortuous, and often fortuitous, routes. Although most were lost to time, some are currently on display or kept in museum storage. Long before the sociocultural and political entities today known as Sápmi and Italy came into being, Sámi calendars, knives, birch cups, fur shoes and drums became tangible tokens of alterity, fostering specific stereotypical and exotic representations of Sámi people. Through them, educated Italians (and more generally, Europeans) acquired empirical experience of cultures perceived as geographically and culturally remote.

After being confiscated, exchanged, or bought, artefacts underwent processes of meaning-making in their new contexts. However, the acquisition process was seldom considered (Sjoholm 2023). Sámi artefacts – like all ethnographic objects – have interesting and often unknown, or concealed, biographies. These can be difficult to reconstruct since, as Sjoholm highlights, early collectors rarely recorded the provenance or the makers/owners of the artefacts they collected (2023). The stories of how
they left Sápmi are characterized by curtailed agency, power asymmetries, exploitation, defiance, empowerment, and negotiation. Their meanings changed with the changing of contexts and uses.

The examination of historical narratives referencing Sámi artefacts can provide insight into the broader context of their production, export, and exploitation, as well as the larger networks into which they were inserted.
This paper, informed by critical museological and postcolonial theories (Lindmark 2013, Hood 2015, Ojala 2023, Nylander 2023, Kuper 2023), builds on the analysis of written sources and on data collected during visits to the Museo di Antropologia e Etnologia and Museo delle Civiltà, as well as by the author’s experiences during her eighteen-month ethnographic fieldwork in Norwegian Sápmi. As an Italian researcher, the opportunity to live in Sápmi, visiting Sami museums and interviewing Sami cultural workers allowed me to grasp a more nuanced understanding of the symbolic value of musealized Sami material culture.

This contribution retraces the stories of some Sámi artefacts (a goavddis and seven runic calendars), compiling their biographies and highlighting the colonial dynamics that determined their (dis)placement in an eighteenth century Italian collection. This contribution addresses a little-studied topic in Sámi cultural studies and critical museology: lost collections, their origins and their symbolic values in hegemonic societies, with a focus on Italy. In doing so, it sheds light upon seventeenth- and eighteenth-century connections between Sápmi and Italy and contributes to the debate on colonial entanglements of artefacts in Western museums (see Hicks 2020, Kuper 2023).

Dysplaying a goavddis

In 2001, a goavddis (Northern Sámi: ritual drum) and its bállin (Northern Sámi: drum’s hammer) were on display in the small Italian town of Velletri. Known in the academic literature as Pigorini’s drum (Pentikäinen 1987), this unique piece is one of the few Northern Sámi ritual drums still in existence.

The drum was among the hundreds of ethnographic objects once owned by Cardinal Stefano Borgia (1731–1804) (Pentikäinen 1987), whose collections were divided after his death. In the spring of 2001, some of these artefacts from museums all over the world were brought together for the first time in centuries for an exhibition in the Town Hall of Velletri: La Collezione Borgia: Curiosità e Tesori da Ogni Parte del Mondo (the Borgia’s collection: curiosities and treasures from all over the world).

Following the Cardinal’s own classification and display system, the goavddis was exhibited along with artefacts from Oceania. Borgia considered the North and the South complementary and even archived the documents pertaining to these two cultural areas together. His Nordic collection used to be exhibited alongside items Cook donated to the Cardinal after his journeys in the Pacific Ocean. The curator of the exhibition wanted to put the drum “in dialogue with” and “in relation to/contrast with the artefacts from Oceania. […] an assemblage suggested by the conceptual order of the cardinal’s inventories” (Nocca 2001:24).

The goavddis is usually on display at the Museo delle Civiltà – Preistorico etnografico “Luigi Pigorini” (Rome). In 2021, though, it became part of yet another special exhibition celebrating the 700th anniversary of Dante Alighieri’s death. For the occasion, the Museo delle Civiltà – Preistorico etnografico Luigi Pigorini (Rome), set up the exhibition In the Sorrowful City, Journey to the World of the Dead (Ne la città dolente. Viaggio nel mondo dei morti), which anchored Dante’s itinerary through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise to ethnological artefacts belonging to various cultures, addressing how different societies of the past conceived the afterlife or related to the world of the dead.

The section Crossing the Worlds, the Here and Elsewhere in Sámi Cultures featured a
single item: the goavddis with its bállin. If in the 2001 Velletri exhibition, the goavddis was displayed to show the artefacts once in Borgia’s collection and to show the Cardinal’s ideological underpinning of the collections’ organization, in the 2021 Dante exhibition, this item functioned as a starting point for addressing Indigenous pre-/non-Christian Sámi worldviews. The explanatory text reads “[…] The shaman, or noaide, was a central figure among the Sámi.” The Indigenous name for the Sámi ritual practitioner (noaide) is immediately associated with the Western term shaman, borrowed from German, in turn from Russian and originally from Evenki. Besides erroneously explicating that noaide were male (female noaide are attested, Sjoholm 2023), the text explains that his duties also encompassed healing and divination for which he

[…] used a special drum decorated with figures and a metal ring, which was placed in its centre in correspondence with the symbol of the Sun. The drum was repeatedly beaten with a T-shaped stick, until it moved the ring onto one of the figures through which the will of the Gods was read. The drawings traced on the membrane of the drums contain the cosmological conceptions of the Sámi culture. (Translation from Italian by the author).

The text offered general insights into Sámi pre-/non-Christian understandings of the afterlife, introducing the drum but not offering any clue about the history it embodies. The (documented) biography of this drum is neglected and silenced here. Similarly, most of the Sámi items currently on display in Italy are exhibited with little to no information pertaining to their origin, their history, and their value not only in past but also in contemporary Sámi societies.

Both exhibitions are clear examples of how the goavddis has been exhibited with little attention to more nuanced understandings of Indigenous worldviews. This attitude can be traced back to the Western knowledge traditions Western museums are anchored in (see Clifford 1988).

SÁMI RITUAL DRUMS, AN OVERVIEW

The goavddis (also known as gobdis, meavrresgårri; goabdes in Lule Sámi) is the northern–central Sámi ritual drum. Unlike southern Sámi oval-shaped frame drums made with a thin ring of bentwood (gievrie), the goavddis is a bowl drum carved out of a burl. In both cases, the drumhead made of reindeer hide stretches over the wooden structure. The drumhead was decorated with symbolic figures drawn with alder bark. Only a few Sámi accounts of the meanings of these symbols exist but they were obtained under coercion (for instance during trials), so their emic meaning as reported in these account is probably heavily influenced by external pressure (Sjoholm 2023). They were not musical instruments but, rather, ritual tools often used for divination (Rydving 2009). During divination sessions, pointers (North Sámi vuorbi, bajá or ärpa, South Sámi viejhkie) made of brass or bone, and rarely wood, were used. To make the pointers move on the hide, practitioners used drum hammers. These tools were T- or Y-shaped with two symmetrical hammerheads and were usually made of reindeer horn (though wooden ones exist), often carrying decorative carvings. Leather straps with pieces of metal or bone were tied to the drum’s bottom or to its frame. Although the local hegemonic languages do not draw any linguistic distinction between ritual drums from different parts of Sápmi, there are different names to refer to them. In Norwegian, they were known as rune bomme. Literally meaning
rune drum, this name can be translated as "a drum with magic signs" and was based on the misinterpretation of the drum's symbols as runes, in turn erroneously connected with witchcraft. As documented in the Icelandic sagas (twelfth to thirteenth century), Sámi drums had long been known as trolltrumma or sorcerer's drum, a name grounded in the interpretation of Sámi religion as witchcraft (trolldom means sorcery or wizardry) and of the noaide as a sorcerer (trollkar) (Bäckman 2005). Lappetromme or Lappish drum refers to the Sámi people, long known by the derogatory term Lapp. Lars Levi Læstadius (1800–1861), referring to their use as divination tools, calls them spåtrumma (fortune telling drums). Sámi drums were owned not only by ritual specialists but also by each household (Sjöholm 2023), so these artefacts must have been relatively numerous. Today less than 80 ritual drums have survived. During the enforced conversion of the Sámi in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Lutheran missionaries confiscated and often destroyed ritual artefacts. Those who refused to surrender the drums faced dire consequences. Despite the risks, may people kept the drums or deposited them in lakes or woods rather than surrender them. In the early twenty-first century, partially conserved drums are still being found where their last owner hid them (see Storm and Fonneland 2022). Of the sequestrated drums shipped to Copenhagen, 70 burned in the Waisenhuset fire of 1728. Only a few dozen complete drums, scattered across European collections, are known to have survived intact into the twenty-first century, all epitomizing histories of violence and resilience. Of these 70 or so drums, only a fifth are goavddis (Rydving 2009), Pigorini’s being one of them. As coveted commodities, their presence in continental Europe bears witness to entangled colonial histories. Nordin and Ojala highlight that Sámi ritual drums – epitomizing religious and cultural alterity – were among the most emblematic and desired Sámi artefacts in early modern Europe. Exotic artefacts invested with layered meanings, Sámi drums instilled both fear and awe and were prominent in shaping early modern and contemporary imaginaries of Sámi identity (2018, see also Pentikäinen 1987; Ojala 2023).

SÁMI ITEMS IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN COLLECTIONS?

A Sámi ritual drum was once owned by one of the most powerful Italian families: the De Medici. Historical sources show that Cosimo III De Medici, Grand Duke of Florence (1642–1723) had a keen interest in Nordic cultures and even set up a Sámi collection as part of his cabinet of curiosities. There are no contemporary catalogues, inventories, or visual representations of Cosimo’s cabinet, and what happened to Cosimo’s Sámi curiosa is not known since after the Grand Duke’s death, his precious Nordic collection was dispersed. Documents such as his courtiers’ letters offer some insights into the Sámi artefacts Cosimo owned (Pentikäinen 1987). Other letters, written by Catholic priest Father Francesco Negri of Ravenna (1623–1698)6, shed light on how the first Sámi artefacts may have reached Italy. Perhaps following in the footsteps of the Swedish Jesuit Father Johan Ferdinand Körningh (Raunio 2019), Francesco Negri visited Sápmi between 1663 and 1666. Once back in Italy, he compiled Viaggio Settentrionale (septentrional journey). Dedicated to Cosimo III, the travelogue was published posthumously in 1701. Writing about a whalebone found in Finnmark, Negri explained:
This fragment remains with me with other similar curiosities in a Scattoletta [tiny box] which his Majesty of King Frederick III of Denmark wanted to see one by one, and he heard from me my opinion on them. […] the Most Serenissima Highness of the Grand Duke Cosimo III was pleased to see the Scattoletta itself, with the related curiosities, one of the times that I had the honour of his most gracious audience. (translation from Italian by the author) (1700:277).

What happened to the Sámi objects Negri and Körningh may have collected in Sápmi is open to speculation and there is a chance they were shipped to Propaganda Fide in Rome. Given the personal connections between Negri and the Grand Duke, Negri’s items may actually have been acquired by Cosimo.

An enthusiastic collector of exotica and archaeological artefacts, Cosimo had a keen interest in Nordic societies and cultures. In 1674, Cosimo sent diplomat Lorenzo Magalotti (1636–1712) on a mission where he met Schefferus (Klein 2023). In the hope of establishing a “complete [Sámi] curiosum” in Florence, Magalotti asked the German scholar to “[…] assemble a collection of curiosa which as far as possible would resemble your own”. (1674, in Pentikäinen 1987:134). Magalotti was especially interested in obtaining “one of the rings which they make jump on the drum when they hit it, a bow, some arrows of their own manufacture and above all a pair of skis […] a storjunkare”. Magalotti explains that he is already in possession of “[Sámi] dresses, boots, shoes, gloves, feather cap – all embroidered with lead, […] a drum and a hammer” (in Pentikäinen 1987:134). Magalotti provides insights into those Sámi artefacts in the duke’s possession and those he coveted. Unsurprisingly, a ritual drum was among Cosimo’s Sámi curiosa.

THE MUSEUM BORGIANUM

The now lost Sámi Medicean collection was not the only one in modern Italy, as Sámi artefacts are recorded as part of the Museum Borgianum. This famous private collection was first established by Clemente Borgia (1640–1711). At the end of the seventeenth century, it passed down to prominent theologian and antiquarian Cardinal Stefano Borgia (1731–1804), who transformed it into one of the most renowned collections of his time. According to Millin, Cardinal Borgia had set up one of the most important museums in the world for the value of the items it housed (Baraldi 1830:54). His collection, which became an important stop on the Grand Tour, was impressive, sparking the curiosity of renowned writers and scholars such as Georg Zoëga (1755–1809) and Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832).

Fascinated by history and antiquarian studies since childhood, Stefano Borgia was a keen collector of peculiar items and antiquities from all over the world. Since 1770, when he was made secretary of Propaganda Fide, he started acquiring ethnographic objects for his museum with the help of Propaganda Fide’s missionaries. The fame of the Museum Borgianum was immense and even 80 years after the Cardinal’s death his then-dispersed Nordic collection was still famous, as ethnologist Angelo Colini (1857–1918) recounts:

The collections of the Arctic Regions of the ancient Museum Borgianum must have been very rich, as in the letters of Federico Münter, a Dane, are often recalled boxes and parcels of objects from Greenland and Lapland, sent to Cardinal Borgia in exchange for classical antiquities and rare coins […]. Of that [boreal] class only a complete sealskin suit remains today [in the New Museum Borgianum of Propaganda Fide] (1885:2).
The letters Colini refers to are those exchanged between Cardinal Borgia and his friend Friedrich Münter (1761–1830). A German–Danish theologian, bishop, and scholar specialized in archaeology, numismatics and philology, Münter had studied in Rome where, in 1786, he became friends with Stefano Borgia through their mutual friend Georg Zoëga (1755–1809) (Stuiber 2014). Epistolary communications between Borgia and Münter document the cardinal’s interest in acquiring Nordic artefacts. His own descendant, Costantino Borgia, wrote: “[Cardinal Borgia] had befriended some Danish merchants and relied on their work to enrich the Museum Borgianum” (1845:13). This Nordic collection was known as Classe Ottava (Eighth Class), or Classe Runica seu Boreale (the runic or boreal class), storing mainly stone or bronze weapons and coins (Colini 1886:318), the name reflecting the prominence of runes in the imagination of Borgia and his fellow antiquarians. Münter provided Borgia with numerous Nordic artefacts (among them at least 58 Scandinavian lithic artefacts, e.g. hatchets of various materials, hammers, chisels, knives, daggers) honouring his promise to send Borgia materials for the museum so that his runic or boreal collection could become the most important outside of Scandinavia (Cardelli-Antinori 2001). Even though some of the parcels Münter mentioned in his letters to Borgia never reached Velletri – lost or stolen along the way – Borgia’s Nordic collection still held some priceless artefacts (in Andreansen 1944).

**Cardinal Borgia’s Eight Class**

References to Borgia’s Museum in various contemporary and later publications allow us to partially reconstruct what was held in Borgia’s collections, including its Nordic section.

In 1796, the Abbot Étienne Borson (1758–1832) sent a letter to a professor at the University of Turin, mentioning the “cabinet of antiquities and natural history of his eminence the lord Cardinal Borgia of Velletri”, detailing each of the museum’s numerous classes in what reads like an inventory. About the Classe Ottava, one of the three out of ten classes of Borgia’s Museum containing ethnographic objects (Console 2001), Borson wrote:

**Eighth Class, Monuments of the Northern Peoples.**

N. 1. Seven Runic Calendars; one is made with the bone of the Sea Dog fish, the others are made of wood. Mr. Doctor Chrétien Ramus has written a work on these calendars, which he has not yet published.

N. 2. Two magical drums from Lapland and Greenland.

N. 3. Quantity of weapons of the ancient northern peoples; these weapons are made of different stones.

N. 4. Many other weapons of copper, iron and bronze.

N. 5. Some sepulchral urns made of terracotta.

(Translated from French by the author) (1796:38)

Shedding light on Borgia’s interests concerning northern regions of Europe and beyond, this list offers a glimpse into Borgia’s classification system. The Classe Ottava encompasses a wide range of artefacts differing greatly in materials, origins, and functions but united by their area of origin. Borson offers some clues about the place of origin of only two items (respectively from Greenland and Sápmi) while all other artefacts are simply characterized as Nordic in light of the class they are placed in, their origin being in his eyes selfapparent. The artefacts in Borgia’s possession also reflect current fashions and tastes regarding exotica: although Indigenous religious systems were
of his collection (mostly manuscripts) was sent to Propaganda Fide and housed in its Collegio Urbano (Colini 1886). There is no precise information regarding all the assets inherited by Propaganda Fide, as there is no detailed inventory (Di Paolo e Verderame 2022).

The Classe Ruica seu Boreale remained in the family until 1877, when Count Ettore Borgia (1802-1892) sold part of it to Italian politician, scholar, and archaeologist Luigi Pigorini (1842–1925) who agreed those artefacts were to formally remain Museum Bor- gianum’s property. Pigorini purchased, among others, Scandinavian stone weapons for the Museo Preistorico-Etnografico he established in Rome in 1876. Concomitantly, Pigorini received a gift from Countess Alcmena Borgia: the goavddis which once belonged to Cardinal Stefano Borgia (Pentikäinen 1987). Since then, the goavddis, along with the rest of the Classe Boreale, has been part of the museum Pigorini founded. This is the very same goavddis on display in 2021 as part of the exhibition In the Sorrowful City.

The “Borgia” Goavddis

The goavddis – along with the Greenlandic drum – is always mentioned in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century descriptions of Borgia’s collections (Borson 1796; Bartholomaeo 1805; Baraldi 1830; Colini 1886), perhaps because drums as ritual items were collectively acknowledged as valuable tokens of religious alterity.

The origins of this goavddis has sparked scholars’ curiosity since Pigorini acquired it in 1878. Over time, the memory of its origins was lost and its former owner Count Ettore Borgia believed it to be “Eskimo” (probably confusing its origin with that of the Greenlandic
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drum Cardinal Borgia owned) and as such he
gifted it to Pigorini. Pigorini, though, consult-
ed a Danish expert who proved the drum was
Sámi (Pentikäinen 1987). In 1880, Mantegazza
(1831–1910)\(^3\), the first Professor of Anthro-
pology in Italy and an early expert in lappolo-
gy, presented the Italian Society of Anthropol-
yogy and Ethnology with:

[…] a drawing of a magic lappish drum (runebom)
discovered by Prof. Pigorini in the Borgia’s house
in Viterbo and currently part of the Prehistoric
and Ethnographic Museum of Rome. It is perhaps
the only one in Italy and it is also extremely rare
in Europe since almost all Lapland runebom were
burnt in a huge fire years ago in Copenhagen
(1880:445, translation by the author).

No visual representation accompanies this
statement, but in an 1881 educational pub-
lication Mantegazza included a table with a
reproduction of the goavddis (Fig.1). The text
reads: “My very good friend Professor Pigorini
has recently discovered a magic Lappish drum,
and bought it for the ethnological Museum in
Rome and thanks to his exquisite kindness,
I can produce here a drawing [of the drum]”
(Mantegazza 1881:284-285). Later in the text,
Mantegazza briefly describes the hammer and
mentions the pointer used during divination
sessions.

Although the Sámi origin of the goavddis
had been established, where in Sápmi this arte-
fact came from was a mystery that would con-
front later scholars. In 1910, the Swedish religi-
ous historian and bishop Edgard Reuterskiöld
(1872–1932) studied Mantegazza’s drawing
and concluded that this goavddis was the one
Magalotti gave to Cosimo III in the late seven-
teenth century. Upon inspecting the goavddis
in 1938, the Swedish ethnographer Ernst Man-
ergy\(^4\) rejected Reuterskiöld’s identification. In
light of the drum’s structure and the symbols on
the drumhead (the four winds hat seemingly
worn by the hunter chasing the bear), Manker
determined it to be an early eighteenth-cen-
tury goavddis from the Guovdageaidnu area
(Norwegian Sápmi) (Pentikäinen 1987). In
1987, Professor Pentikäinen refuted Manker’s
identification, establishing that the goavddis in
the Pigorini museum originated from Pite or
Lule Lappmark, adding that it was not the one
Magalotti procured for Cosimo III. In Pentikäi-
Runic Calendars as Desirable Commodities

Besides the goavdis, at least one set of artefacts in Borgia’s Classe Boreale can be traced back to Sápmi: the seven runic calendars.

So-called runic calendars – both Sámi and Scandinavian – were coveted artefacts among European cultural elites, as demonstrated by historical sources (among others Fryksell 1758). Used in Fennoscandia until the late nineteenth century as perpetual calendars (almanacs), they owe their name to the letters, runes or notches carved or scratched on their surface for each day throughout the year. They can be divided between primstaff (flat, stick shaped wooden calendars used by Scandinavians) and runic pocket calendars (used by Sámi peoples). According to Dybdahl (2010), the vast majority of Sámi runic calendars were made from birch or antler, but bone also occurs. Several – usually six – thin slices resembling thick book pages were tied together with threads through two holes in the edge on the long sides, allowing users to flip through the calendar like a book and consult two pages at a time. Outer sides often served as covers and did not present cutouts. The seven runic signs for the letters a–g were used as symbols for the days of the week. Repeated 52 times, they cover 364 days instead of 365 or 366. To avoid problems connected with this, the symbol for a particular date – usually at the beginning of the year – was allowed to denote two days. Special dates linked to celebrations for Christ or a saint, as well as the solstices and midsummer, were marked with distinctive symbols. The Sámi traditionally divided the year into thirteen months. Most of the surviving runic calendars dated from the sixteenth to seventeenth century, some being made as late as the early nineteenth century. It is apparent then that, despite the use of runes, the still-extant calendars date back to a time long after runes were no longer used as a daily alphabet. The oldest known runic calendar, Nyköpingsstaven, dates back to the thirteenth century and these tools are probably of a much earlier origin (Cucina 2011).

Granlund and Granlund studied 30 Sámi runic calendars which, in their view, have elements of Norwegian, Swedish, and Finnish anniversary traditions (1973) This is not surprising considering the mobility of the Sámi population (Dybdahl 2010). Connected with their mobility is another feature of these calendars: their small format was designed to make the calendar portable during travels with the reindeer. Their size probably contributed to their success as exotic commodities. Since they took up little space, it was easy for collectors to transport them to continental Europe, show them to fellow antiquarians and, through a circular process, increase their popularity and the curiosity surrounding them. Antiquarians had developed an interest in these artefacts as early as the seventeenth century, when they started being collected across Europe as precious curiosa. Ole Worm (1588–1654), who owned various Sámi curiosa, possessed at least one runic calendar (Frati 1842), as did Linnaeus as well as, according to Olearius (1674), Stobaeus, and Frederick III Duke of Holstein-Gottorp.
There must be several reasons for such interest, beyond their portability. Expert in Scandinavian perpetual calendars Professor Audun Dybdahl (2010) suggests that the use of runes, and hence their symbolic content, appealed to Europeans’ imagination. Perceived or construed as exotic, they were regarded as something precious or peculiar and worthy of study.

**Curtailed Indigenous Agency in Colonial Encounters. “Beck’s” Runic Calendar**

Historical sources bear witness to runic calendars in collections scattered across the modern Italian states but their origins and history are rarely recorded and preserved. Thus, the 1877 account by a Cambridge professor, the Iceland-
er Eirikr Magnússon (1833–1913), is extremely valuable. Magnússon wrote:

We have here exhibited, by the favour of the owner, the Rev. James Beck […] a runic calendar of Scandinavian origin engraved on six plates of reindeer horn. The only thing known of the history of this calendar is that, in 1866, the present owner secured it in Lapland from a native who was in the habit of carrying it on his person (1877:5).

The text then proceeds with a description of the calendar’s symbols. The value of this account lies in its first lines, which can be unpacked as follows.

The author shows an interest in the history of the artefact and regrets the only information he has about it is the year a fellow scholar acquired it; the item is perceived as authentic since it was acquired in Lapland from someone who was probably recognized as Sámi, as the adjective “native” suggests. Although the identification of Beck as “the present owner” implicitly recognizes the native’s former ownership of the artefact, this individual is just acknowledged as someone who “was in the habit of carrying it on his person” rather than the original owner who, having crafted, inherited, or purchased it, used it as a tool in their daily life. The very title of the account, On a Runic Calendar Found in Lapland in 1866, detaches the artefact from its Indigenous owner: the verb “found” suggests a fortuitous discovery, obscuring the presence of the original owner and his reluctance in giving it up. Other words in the text reveal the power relations at play. Here, “to secure” means “to get hold [of] or possession (of something desirable) as the result of effort or contrivance” (Bradley 1888:369). The calendar was a precious item, which Beck wanted for himself. The original owner was not willing to give it to Beck, who had to put some effort into obtaining it. Beck forced the original owner to surrender the calendar, maybe in exchange for some money. Nonetheless, this was not an even transaction. As Nordin and Ojala remind us (2017), items belonging to Sámi people were often acquired by exponents of hegemonic societies through mild violence since relationships between the two groups were usually marked by power asymmetries (see also: Lindmark 2013; Hood 2015). In light of these considerations, Beck’s account reflects nineteenth-century colonial attitudes and ideologies – but also dynamics – that were at play in the encounter between foreigners and members of Indigenous communities. It also epitomizes the history of appropriation and commodification of Indigenous artefacts and the coercion and mild violence researchers resorted to in order to obtain Indigenous artefacts for their collections in contexts of curtailed Indigenous agencies (see Kuper 2023).

"**Borgia’s** Runic Calendars and the Vatican Collections

Unfortunately, the available sources offer scarce details on Cardinal Borgia’s seven runic calendars, the only information being passed down concerning the materials they consisted of. Borson explains that one of them was made with the bone of the Sea Dog fish (i.e.: shark\(^{18}\)), the others of wood. In later reports – based, however, on Borson’s account – details become blurred as the material becomes just fish bone\(^{19}\).

Borson mentions that a “Mr. Doctor Chrétien Ramus” (1796:38) had written about these calendars. Chrétien Ramus must be Christian Ramus (1765–1832), a Danish numismatist and scholar. Ramus had been a librarian at the Classen Library and a member of the Danish
Society of Sciences since 1816; in 1801, he was appointed inspector of the Royal Coin Collection of which he became curator in 1821. In 1793, Ramus visited Velletri to study Borgia’s collections. The work Borson mentions in 1796 must be volume no. 266 reported in the 1806 Marini-Visconti after inventory of Cardinal Borgia’s belongings as “Explanation of the Runic Calendar at no. 73 made in 1793 by Cristiano Ramus”, the no.73 corresponding to a “Runic Calendar in eight ivory tables” (Nocca 2001:62; 45). In the inventory, the material is reported to be ivory rather than shark bone, as in Borson’s description. Such incongruence shows that information regarding the materials of this artefact was at least confusing.

As part of Borgia’s Classe Boreale – acquired by Pigorini – one would assume the calendars would currently be at the Museum of Civilisation in Rome. Nevertheless, records show that at least one of Museum Borgianum’s calendars – most likely Borson’s fish bone example – is currently in the Vatican’s Anima Mundi Museum (formerly the Ethnological Missionary Museum). This calendar was studied by archaeoastronomers Ricci et al. (2010) who published a study on a runic calendar, consisting of 8 engraved tablets, held at Anima Mundi. Its object card records the artefact as Lapp, its provenance as the Museum Borgianum, and its date as 1650. On the Anima Mundi’s website, it is described as a portable calendar made of reindeer horn. Ethnologists John Granlund and Ingalill Granlund – both experts in Sámi runic calendars – date it to around 1670 and consider it to be of the Swedish–Norwegian type (1973). No record mentions a reindeer horn calendar in Museum Borgianum but scholars like Console (2001) are positive this is Borgia’s fish bone calendar. It is unlikely that collectors and first-hand observers mistook antlers for wood, while it is possible that Borson, who first mentions the shark bones, had either mistaken antlers for bones or guessed the material. Perhaps Borgia himself was not aware of the exact materials this calendar is made of.

The presence of this calendar at Anima Mundi and not at the Museum of Civilizations may have a simple explanation. Although Borgia’s Nordic collection was purchased by Pigorini, the calendar once among Borgia’s belongings probably was already, or became part of, the collections of Propaganda Fide, the institution Cardinal Borgia had managed in different capacities between 1770 and his death.

Granlund and Granlund (1973) include the Anima Mundi artefact in their comparative study of Sámi runic calendars, referring to it as “n18”. They base their analysis on Hirsjärvi’s, who studied it in 1956. According to him, it is evidently made of horn. Although Granlund and Granlund focus mostly on the calendar’s symbols, they also report Hirsjärvi’s astonishment regarding the artefact’s object card. Hirsjärvi writes: “Calendars of the pontifical museum of missionary ethnology and the Lateran Museum in Rome under inventory number AU3235A–H […], three Lappish calendars. [The horn calendar under inventory number AU3235A–H] is classified in the museum as Australian–Oceanian(!)” (in Granlund & Granlund 1973:101). This scarce information reveals that there are three Sámi calendars in the Vatican and that the one made of reindeer antler was misclassified. Cardinal Borgia would have never mistaken it for an Australian–Oceanian artefact since: 1) he had first-hand knowledge of runic calendars, owning a few of them; 2) he obtained the calendars from Danish intermediaries so he was confident of their provenance; 3) no Austro-Pacific object in Borgia’s collection was recorded as a calendar. The misclassification
must date back to after the Cardinal’s death, when information concerning some artefacts was lost or confused, and is to be traced back to Borgia’s own classification system within his museum.

Considering the North and the South as complementary, Borgia classified Arctic artefacts alongside artefacts from austral regions, mostly from New Zealand and gifted to Borgia by Cook (Nocca 2001). Upon Borgia’s death, someone must have confused the origin of the calendar, being misled by the contiguous presence of artefacts registered as from the Pacific.

Since this artefact belongs to the Anima Mundi, it is possible it was not acquired by Borgia through Münter but that it was already in the Propaganda Fide’s collection by the time Borgia became its secretary. This would explain the uncertainty regarding the material of the calendar. Münter would probably have been able to identify it as reindeer antler, but if the artefact had been collected by someone with no specific knowledge of these artefacts, the material could easily have been mistaken.

As mentioned, the Anima Mundi object card reports the artefact’s date as 1650. Granlund and Granlund (1973), following Hirsjärvi who interpret a carving as a year, date it to 1670. If the date is 1650, the timespan corresponds with Körningh and Negri’s missions in Sápmi. Upon their return to Italy, it is likely they offered Sámi artefacts to Propaganda Fide. If the date is 1670, neither Negri nor Körningh could have collected it, but perhaps it was collected by a later unknown Catholic priest on a secret mission. Since both Körningh and Negri were affiliated with Propaganda Fide, the Catholic missionary office, other currently unknown Catholic missionaries may have been also in Sápmi at the time.

**Conclusion**

Sámi artefacts have been inserted in complex exchange networks since at least the seventeenth century, their functions and values constantly changing. As coveted commodities entangled in colonial histories, Sámi artefacts functioned as a material means to explore and experience the exoticism attributed to Sámi cultures. As collections were assembled, disassembled, and then re-assembled, artefacts changed in location and meaning, often disappearing and/or reappearing in written documents, storages, and collections. All these artefacts have different, context-specific, and yet similar histories and, as this paper demonstrates, their biographies can offer insights into power relations and international networks. Some of these items are today on display in various cultural institutions but their layered histories are seldom told, if known at all – likewise their entanglement with colonial ideologies such as confiscation, appropriation, colonial commodification, epistemological, and physical violence. This, in turn, makes these objects unavailable to their communities of origin, which may not even be aware of their existence.

Museum visitors encountering Sámi artefacts in Italy are often unaware of the complex – often silenced – history these objects embody. As argued in this contribution, the analysis of the existing historical accounts mentioning Sámi artefacts can help shed light on the wider context in which they were produced, exported and exploited, as well as the wider networks of which they became part. Through such studies it is possible to see the world through “the eyes of the artefact”, to grasp the feelings of the hands who crafted it, of those who bartered, bought or stole it, and of those who studied, displayed or handled it.
Sámi objects may today be shielded from time in controlled glass cases but they were once used under pouring rain, in the warmth of a goahti (turf hut) during a blizzard, or under the midnight sun. And in between, they have been many different things while staying the same. Sámi material culture in museums has multiple stories to tell to those who are willing to look beyond the glass. In most cases, it is impossible to know exactly who crafted them, and where and why, but it may be possible to identify regions, timespans and communities of origin, providing insights into the often asymmetric relations between such communities and foreign actors. For instance, the presence of early modern Sámi artefacts in Italian museums testifies to the interconnectedness of Sápmi in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and sheds light on early collectors’ ideologies and how current imageries of Sápmi first emerged. Recent projects of restitution of Sámi material culture (Nylander 2023) bear witness to the role Sámi communities endow ancient artefacts with. These items not only connect the past with the present but are also part of a shared heritage projected into the future. Sámi artefacts, obtained through coercion or violence as well as trade, were inserted in international networks of exchange and knowledge production (Sjoholm 2023), becoming representational items epitomising the cultures in which they were produced.

Notes

1. In this contribution, I employ the etic terms “Lapland” and Lapp/Laplander only when quoting/examining historical sources. In all other instances, I use the emic term “Sámi”. The Sámi are today the only recognized Indigenous peoples of continental Europe. Their ancestral homeland, Sápmi, stretches across Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia.

2. As of the early 2020s, Sámi artefacts are known to be housed in at least three Italian institutions (Museo di Antropologia e Etnologia, Florence; Museo delle Civiltà, Preistorico-Etnografico "Luigi Pigorini", Rome; the University of Bologna) and the Vatican collections.

3. The 1983 Utsjoki convention dictated that, to be recognized as Sámi, museums should meet the following criteria: be focused on Sámi issues, led by Sámi peoples, located in Sámi territories and managed by Sámi institutions.

4. The twofold nature of the museum, epitomized by the adjectives “preistorico-etnografico” (prehistorian-ethnographic), dates back to its founder. When Pigorini founded the museum the then-current policy of acquisition was framed by positivist lenses: prehistoric materials were displayed alongside ethnographic ones, as they were both perceived as testimonies of past and current wild/barbarian peoples (Cardelli-Antinori 2001).

5. It is challenging to find a culturally sensitive terminology that can be used for Indigenous Sámi worldviews and practices coeval and intermingled with Christianity. Kaikkonen (2021) proposes using “non-Christian worldviews” along with Sámi terminology, rooted in Sámi indigenous worldviews. While acknowledging the importance of Indigenous terminologies in conveying culturally specific notions, I employ here the expression “Indigenous pre-/non-Christian Sámi worldviews” to refer to Sámi worldviews coeval/intermingled with Christianity.
6. Negri had epistolary communications with Johannes Schefferus (1621-1679), the author of the influential 1673 "Lapponia" (Klein 2021).

7. Both Negri and Körningh were connected with Propaganda Fide, the dicastery responsible for missionary activities, established in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV as Congregatio pro gentium evangelizatione. Körningh’s exploratory journey may have served as a preliminary investigation charting the potential for a Catholic mission among the Sámi. Negri may have been sent to the area to further assess the possibility of preaching to the Sámi and to restore them to Catholicism (Raunio 2019).

8. The image of a Sámi god in Norwegian (Pentikäinen 1987).

9. Aubin-Louis Millin de Grandmaison (1759-1818), a French botanist and antiquarian, was the director of the French literature periodical Magasin Encyclopédique.

10. Colini’s 1886 annotated inventory is extremely relevant since Colini had consulted the collection held at the New Museum Borgianum of Propaganda Fide, founded in 1883 by Monsignor Domenico Jacobini. This new museum merged Cardinal Borgia’s collection preserved in Propaganda Fide’s Collegio Urbano with all the artefacts Propaganda Fide had received as gifts from the missionaries since its foundation in 1622 (Console 2001).

11. Greenlandic artefacts were popular in the 17th-century Danish court (Nordin & Ojala 2017). Borgia most likely received his Greenlandic drum from Münter.

12. Such an approach, along with Lucretius’ stadial understanding of societal evolution, later inspired the Danish antiquarian Christian Thomsen (1788-1865) to develop the three-age system (Kuper 2023).

13. In 1879 Mantegazza had travelled to Sápmi to carry out research on Sámi peoples (Mantegazza 1881). He and his pupil, the botanist and ethnologist Stephen Sommier (1848-1922), took anthropometric measurements and photographs of Sami men, women, and children. They also collected and sent to Italy Sami artefacts as well as human remains currently held at Florence Museum. Sommier visited Sápmi also in 1886 for a second fieldwork.

14. Manker (1893-1972) was a specialist in Sámi history and ethnography and author of Die lappische Zaubertrommel (1938 and 1950, 2 volumes) an influential study on Sami drums. In 1939 he became the director of the newly established Sámi section at Stockholm’s Nordic Museum (Sjoholm 2023).

15. Von Westen was a key figure in the process of assimilation – through religious conversion – of Sámi peoples into Norwegian society.

16. A single calendar made of beech is reported in the literature. It is held at NTNU Vitenskapsmuseet in Trondheim. Dybdahl (2010) suggests this artefact was purposely made as a copy of another Sámi “runic” calendar, bearing a striking resemblance (but not complete correspondence) to the calendar at Anima Mundi.

17. For instance, the “runic” calendar at Bologna University (Frati 1842; Cucina 2011).

18. It is worth mentioning that sharks have a cartilaginous skeleton rather than bones.


20. Cardinal Borgia welcomed to his museum Ramus, who carried a letter of recommendation from his teacher Christian Heyne, whose father-in-law was Arnold Heeren, an important correspondent of both Borgia and Münter (Stuiber 2014).

21. Compiled in 1806, during the negotiations for the division of Cardinal Borgia’s estate, the inventory was compiled by the expert for Propaganda Fide and Vatican Library’s prefect Gaetano Marini, and the archaeologist Filippo Aurelio Visconti, expert for the Borgias (Mantegna e Santoni 2022).

22. www.museivaticani.va

23. Many objects once housed in Borgia’s private mu-
seum were handed over to Propaganda Fide after his death in 1804, then becoming part of the Anima Mundi museum, an institution established in 1926 to host thousands of “exotic” artefacts donated over the centuries by missionaries either directly to the Popes or to Propaganda Fide itself (Console 2001).

24. This is demonstrated, for instance, by the fact that the cardinal’s heirs believed the goavddis to be Greenlandic.

25. Drawing on earlier surveys, researcher Eeva-Kristiina Nylander, working with Sámi heritage and repatriation processes (2023:116), reports the existence of the following Sámi artefacts in Anima Mundi: “five paperknives with antler handles made for tourists, one knife with an antler handle made for tourists, and a rune calendar with 8 sections from the 17th century”. It appears that the knives were all souvenirs and only the calendar was an actual tool once in use, perhaps suggesting they were collected on different occasions.

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