CHAPTER THREE

ECONOMIC SPECIALIZATION AND ETHNIC CONSOLIDATION:
NORTHERN HUNTING SOCIETIES IN THE IRON AGE
AND EARLY MIDDLE AGES

3.1 Background

In the last two millennia BC, important changes in social structure, settlement and economy took place among the hunting societies in northern Fennoscandia. Extensive systems of exchange brought the hunter-gatherer communities in the north increasingly into contact with products and traders from distant societies to both the east and the south. Particularly decisive was the expansion in the last millennium BC: contacts with the outside world intensified and became structured according to more fixed geographical patterns.

Apart from the northernmost hunting societies, the communities along the coasts of northern Sweden and northern Norway increasingly oriented themselves toward southern Scandinavia. At the same time, they began to supplement their foraging livelihood with farming. These changes may not necessarily have occurred for purely nutritional reasons; the introduction of farming was perhaps more culturally and ideologically motivated. For example, grain could have been grown to brew beer for use at ritual and social occasions. However, recent studies suggest that farming also may have played a significant economic role in some northern coastal societies, especially during the last millennium BC.

At the same time, the hunting societies in the inner and northeastern parts of northern Fennoscandia became increasingly involved in long-distance exchange with metal-producing societies as far away as central and eastern Russia. Changes in settlement and economy also occurred

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3 See for example, Prescott 1996; Taavitsainen et al. 1998, 240; Storli 2006, 24.
4 Arntzen and Sommerseth 2009.
among these communities, but still within the framework of a hunting livelihood. While parts of the settlement in the northern coastal areas (especially in Finnmark and on Kola) may have been almost sedentary at the end of the Late Stone Age, increasing mobility can be observed throughout the Early Metal Age (1800 BC–AD 0) with seasonal movements between coastal and inland areas. Terrestrial resources were emphasized to a greater degree, and the number of settlement and hunting sites in the interior increased. This growing interest in the interior and its resources may have been connected with the role that furs played in the exchange with the eastern, metal-producing societies. The fact that habitation sites in the interior contain many arrowheads and hide scrapers supports such a hypothesis.6

The Early Metal Age thus seems to have led to a decisive differentiation of the northern cultural landscape. While the communities along the southern parts of the coast of northern Norway and the Gulf of Bothnia stressed agriculture to an increasing degree and culturally oriented themselves southward, the people in the inner and northeastern areas continued their hunting economy in spite of certain changes and became increasingly involved in eastern exchange networks. Much suggests that during the latter part of this period, this differentiation culminated in the formation of different cultural identities and thus served as a basis for the dual ethnic and cultural context that later came to characterize the region.

Features of the archaeological record, and especially the different pottery styles, seem to support this interpretation. Around 2000 BC, a special type of pottery had come into use among the hunter-gatherers in the north, in which the clay was mixed with asbestos fiber. In the course of the second millennium BC, the northern hunting communities gave this pottery a relatively homogeneous shape by decorating the surface with textile-like impressions. Stylistic variation did occur, but seems confined to certain areas. Around 1000 BC, however, asbestos pottery differentiated into two geographically complementary styles: Risvik pottery along the northwest coast of Norway (as far north as northern Troms County) and Kjelmøy pottery in inner and northeast Fennoscandia.7 Kjelmøy pottery is bucket-shaped, thin-walled, and richly decorated in a style that seems to borrow features from eastern trading partners (see fig. 4). Risvik pottery stands out as being very different, as it is bowl-shaped, thick-walled, and normally unornamented (see fig. 5).