CHAPTER SIX

MISSIONARIES AND SHAMANS:
SÁMI RELIGION AND THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST IT

6.1 Introduction

Returning from his third journey to northern Norway in 1722–23, the Norwegian missionary Thomas von Westen, somewhat disheartened, reported that despite the ongoing campaign to christianize the Sámi, he had encountered “entire Sámi fjords without a single man refraining from sacrificing to the Devil; all mountains were Gods, all fields littered with pagan idols, every house and sod hut being a synagogue of Satan.” Notwithstanding von Westen’s despair, which retrospectively seems somewhat exaggerated, his remark points to crucial aspects which should be kept in mind when trying to reconstruct and synthesize pre-Christian Sámi religion. Religion or cosmology was not a secluded sphere of belief or sacredness but a repercussive field constantly enacted and embodied, and which permeated landscapes, dwellings, and everyday activities. Contrary to what constitutes the norm in our modern conception of religion, Sámi religion contained no holy texts or fixed liturgy, nor any hierarchical organization that could enforce the ‘right faith.’ Instead, religion was practiced and maintained through a bundled field of actions, myths, stories, and material manifestations. Even though Sámi shamans, the noaidis, played a leading role in the maintenance of the rites, they did not have a monopoly on cult ceremonies and sacrificial acts. These rituals could also be carried out by others, both in domestic settings and at sacrificial sites scattered around the landscape. This flexibility also made Sámi religion dynamic and open to individual interpretation.

This conception of religion had two important consequences. First, it led to significant variations in religious content and expression in the various parts of the Sámi area. Even though basic elements were common, actual expressions varied from region to region and over time. Second, the Sámi religion, on par with other ‘polytheistic’ religions, appeared as more tolerant and open vis-à-vis other religious manifestations, in the sense that it was able to incorporate foreign gods, symbols, and rites into a Sámi
Fig. 61. Cross-shaped pendants of tin-lead from the sacrificial sites Mörråsket, Lappland and Gräträsk, Norrbotten. (Photo: Statens Historiska Museum.)