

# A Bourgeois Milieu in the Swedish Wilderness of Sarek in the Beginning of the 20th Century

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## I. Introduction

Sarek, a well-known high-mountain massif in Sweden, was explored by natural scientist Axel Hamberg in 1895-1931. The Sarek research project became famous for its ice, glacier and evaporations studies, as the area contained remnant samples of the last inland ice. In his research, Hamberg always presented Sarek as a pristine, harsh and very isolated wilderness that only men with experience could enter—only reachable by foot or ski, or with animal transportation such as horses or reindeers.



II. Hamberg's presentation of Sarek, however, stood in contrast to his very obvious civilising efforts in Sarek at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century--with the construction of several research huts that had furniture, table cloths, gramophone, and lace curtains in the windows. At the same time, he brought with him a bourgeois cuisine with goose liver, caviar, ox tongue and whiskey on his research trips to the area.

Indeed, it is accurate to say that he took his food culture and his interests with him to Sarek. Eventually he also came to bring his wife and son on his research travels to the mountain region.

III. We see here the construction of the first hut in Sarek – the so-called “Hotel Sähkok” -- built between summer and September 1902. The already planned erection of hut was most likely strongly effected by Hamberg's bad experience with sleeping outdoors in a Sámi hut made of birch-bark in early spring. The weather was bad, and he tried to seal the hut with snow, making a kind of igloo. When the weather changed to thaw, all the snow melted and leaked into the hut. Two months later he started erecting the Sähkok-hut.



## IV. A Bourgeois Milieu in Sarek

It was common at the time, in Arctic milieus, to create comfortable settings as on Svalbard, where mining communities were established. It was an attempt to create a type of normality in the 'abnormality' of the Arctic regions.

In the case of Hamberg, it was obvious that he wanted to create in Sarek a mirror (if not a mimetic image) of his own bourgeois home environment in Uppsala, Sweden, where he also worked as a professor. The creation of a bourgeois milieu with huts and an upper-class cuisine in Sarek also meant that the transfer from his home milieu to the mountain massif area primarily involved transportation from one locale to another. The difference between his home and the circumstances of the research in Sarek became minimized -- and in the end it meant that the mountain area not only got to be partly civilised, but also domesticated.



V. Photograph of the Litnok hut, built in 1912-1914 (on the left). The whole construction project was plagued by problems, both transport- and collaboration-wise. Hamberg wrote in his field diary that the whole group was on the verge of dissolution. Three Sámi assistants from the local area carried out the transport of material, and erected the hut with Hamberg's help.

In all, six huts were erected: Sähkok in 1902, Pårtetjåkko 1911, Pårek 1912-1913, Litnok 1912-1914, Tjågnoris 1912 and Skårkas 1914-1915. They functioned as depots for food and as storage for equipment.

## VI. Home and Wilderness – A Blurred Border

The building project in Sarek meant the border between of what was home and the wilderness of Sarek got blurred. The huts-project not only made the field research in the high-mountain massif easier to carry out, it also domesticated Sarek -- since it became 'bourgeois' and filled with items that belonged to a designated civilized life and culture.

At the same time, Hamberg promoted an image that Sarek was a desolated and isolated wilderness, since that particular representation of the high-mountain massif was necessary for the natural scientific studies being made there: that is, the Sarek research still needed to be represented as being performed in a harsh wilderness. That representation of Sarek can be seen not only in Hamberg's scientific works published on Sarek, but also in his tourist material on how to survive in this mountain region. The field research he started in Sarek led to the start of wilderness tourism in the area.

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Courtesy all black-white photos: Axel Hamberg's photo archive, Ájtte – Swedish Mountain- and Sámi Museum, Jokkmokk, Sweden