

Introduction Mortensnes cultural heritage site

Welcome to a digital walk through the cultural history of the Mortensnes cultural heritage site in Nesseby municipality, on the north side of the Varangerfjord.

12,500 years ago, the ice had retreated from the Varanger Peninsula after the last ice age. As soon as the land was habitable, people came from the east. They lived off the rich resources on land and in the sea. At Mortensnes cultural heritage area, you can walk along a marked path and see traces of the people who have lived here. From tent sites used 10,000 years ago, through the Stone Age and up to modern times. There are 500 Sami graves, two sacrificial places, a labyrinth and a reconstructed goahti, where you can light a fire. The area is open all year round, but there may be snow from October to May. Follow the marked paths to preserve cultural relics that have not yet been excavated. The entire area is protected.

The information building contains an art installation and is open in summer as a visitor centre, where coffee and waffles are served. The building is also used for groups that have booked a guided tour.

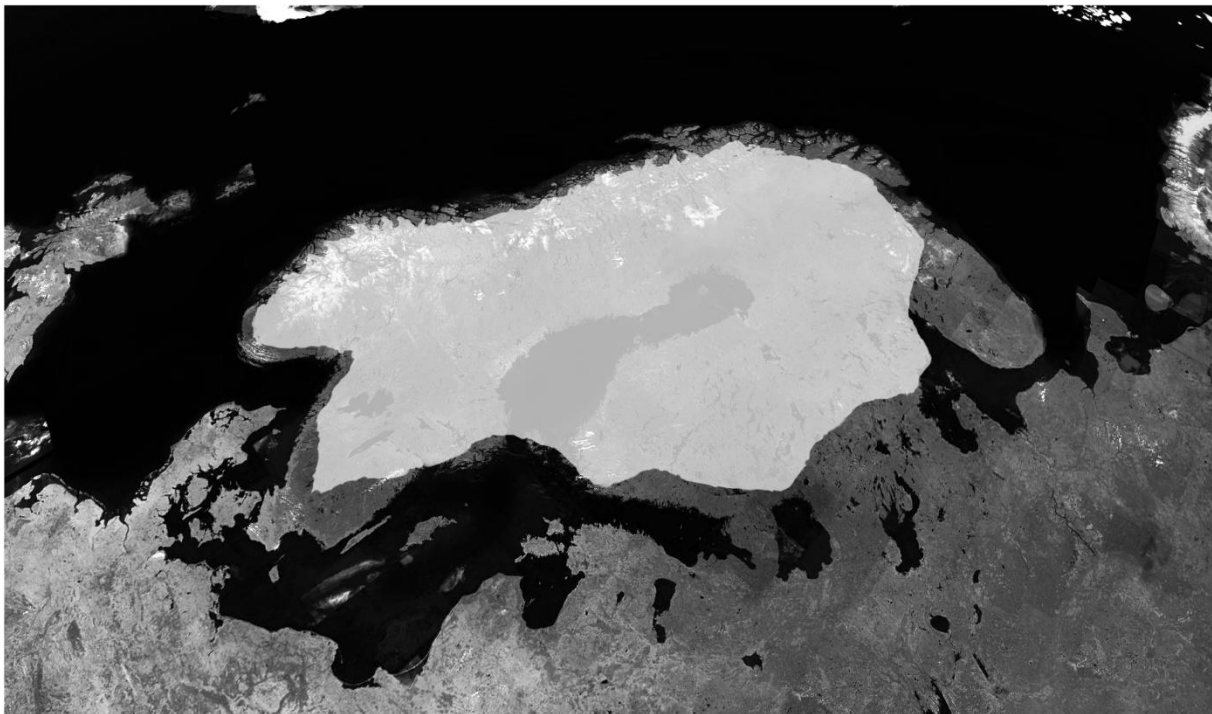


Tent settlement Old Stone Age 10,000 years old

The earliest traces of people in Varanger are over 10,000 years old. When the ice sheet retreated along the coast of Finnmark 12,500 years ago and the land rose from the sea, people arrived from the Kola Peninsula in the east, where it was ice-free. They lived in small groups that moved around and lived of fishing, hunting, trapping and gathering. Only stone tools, remains from the production of stone tools and traces of the dwellings are still present. This is because the remains were not covered by soil and all organic material from the older Stone Age has therefore disappeared or disintegrated.

In the area, 25 residential tufts have been found, up to 15 square meters in size. The only thing that can be seen today are the stones, which lie in a ring as they were used to hold the tent in place. The beach was then 45 meters higher than today. The tent sites were on average 5 meters above sea level at the time. The stones are not covered by vegetation, so the remains from the past are easily visible. All tufts are round.

Tools made of stone were made by chopping pieces to suitable sizes and function using punching techniques. They used a lot of quartz and quartzite, which are available in the area.



The ice cover 12,500 years ago. When the ice melted the land began to rise because the ice masses were no longer pressing the land down.



The stones lie in a ring where they held a tent firmly 10,000 years ago.



This is how it may have looked 10,000 years ago.

The Tapes line

7,000 years ago, it was 2 degrees warmer than today, and pine trees and birch grew on Mortensnes. The ice melted so quickly that the sea level rose as fast as the land rose. The sea washed up pebbles and formed a beach embankment, called the Tapes line, 27 m.a.s.l. A 6,500-year-old waste heap has been found here. It contained bones of fish, mammals, birds, and shells. There were fish species such as tusk and whiting, which now live further south where the water is warmer.



Reconstructed sea level and forest, as it may have looked 7,000 years ago.



The Tapes line as it is visible in the terrain today.

Housing tufts 6.500 years old

There have been registered 96 remains of houses in the area. They are between 7,000 and 5,000 years old. The houses are in rows in small groups. Catching seals and whales was important. Perhaps it required the cooperation of several families living next to each other. People lived for a long time in the same place in permanent dwellings, built of wood and turf. In the middle of the tufts there are traces of hearths. Today, the tufts are clearly visible as round or oval pits. The dwellings may have

been square, but when they sink the remains will be rounded at the corners. The walls were dug a little into the ground.

Bones of animals and fish, and other remains of meals, have been found in the waste heaps. A settlement dated 4,500 BC contained bones of migratory birds, which were probably caught in the bird rock east of the settlement. Animal bones of seals, whales, beavers, and dogs were also found. Of the fish, there were bones of the varieties cod, pollock, haddock, herring, ling, flounder, tusk, and whiting, which suggests that the sea water was warm enough for fish that are found further south today.

There have been plenty of resources, so they could hunt and fish to get food, tools, and clothing. They also made pots and bowls from clay. There have been found 6,500-year-old potsherds made of ceramics on the south side of the Varangerfjord. Grinding techniques and surface carving were developed to make arrow and spearheads, axes, and knives. The grinding technique is one of the characteristics of the transition from the Older to the New Stone Age.



Remains of a New Stone age dwelling.



In the New Stone age, it was warmer than today, so there was pine and birch forest on Mortensnes. Reconstruction of sea level, forest, and housing as it may have looked 6,000 years ago.



Some of the homes in the New Stone age had rectangular walls, as the outline in the picture shows. The floor had been dug down. They have used beams and walls to hold up the roof.

Housing tufts 4000 years old

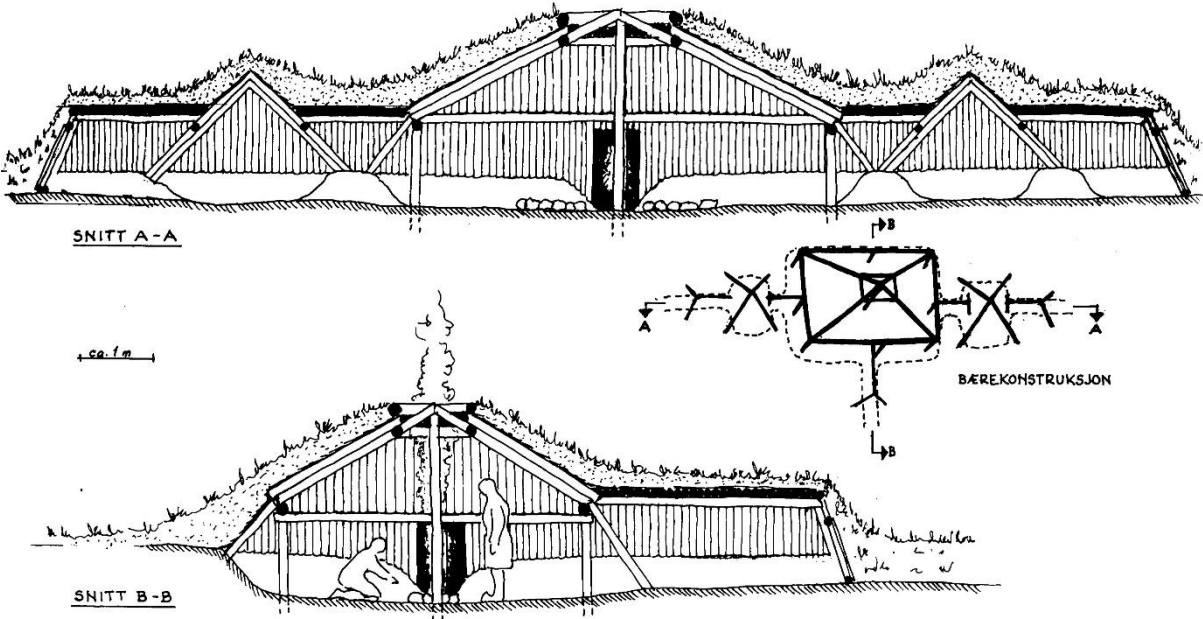
4,000 years ago, people lived in large houses with four entrances. There were several such houses in rows along the beach, which was 15 meters higher than today. Around the Varangerfjord there were several groupings of such dwellings. Large quantities of bones of mammals, fish, birds, shells, and snail shells have been found in the rubbish piles of these homes.

There have been found tools and objects of use decorated with ornamentation. It shows that they had an aesthetic sense and time to decorate things of value. The ornaments are often birdshaped and geometric patterns. Several small carved human figures have also been found. Skeletons of dead people have been found in some of the tufts. Perhaps they wanted to keep relatives close even after death, and perhaps the small human figures were amulets as a reminder of the dead?

There are 70 tufts in the area along the shorelines down towards today's sea level. The climate gradually became colder, and the homes smaller in size. Perhaps several seasonal residences were used. A copper dagger, dated 2000 BC, has been found in Karlebotn. This marks the transition from the Stone Age to the Metal Age, where copper and bronze begin to be used for tools and hunting weapons.



Excavations show that there were four exits in the large houses.



Example of how the houses 4,000 years ago may have been constructed.

The Labyrinth

We do not know when it was made, but the labyrinth can be 2,000 years old. Then the sea level was directly below the labyrinth. During archaeological excavations, it has been found, among other things, sacrifice of beavers, which are now extinct in Varanger. There are many labyrinths around the White Sea, but this one stands out because it is shaped like concentric rings. It may be because trader and archaeologist Nordvi in the mid-19th century made excavations and moved the stones. The labyrinths have functioned as places to deal with negative forces, which could be dangerous when fishing. They may also have been used for rites of passage.



The labyrinth today consists of 13 untidy stone circles.

The sacrificial stone

The sacrificial stone was smeared with cod liver oil for fishing luck. Cod liver oil was valuable as it was used as a light source in oil lamps, to lubricate leather clothes so they became waterproof and to impregnate equipment. When people ate fish, they poured cod liver oil over it, both because they needed the fat and because they liked the taste. Sacrifices of animals and fish have also been buried in the soil around the stone. We do not know how old the sacrificial stone, or the labyrinth is, but the area was under water 2,000 years ago. The story of Morten's last sea voyage is one of many legends connected to this place.



The stone has been offered sacrifices for good fishing luck.

Morten's last sea voyage

Once upon a time, two brothers, Morten and Anders, traveled to Vadsø in the autumn with their own boats loaded with fish. On the journey they had excellent weather and favourable wind. The next day they sailed back. Towards evening they arrived outside Klubbvik. Then a terribly strong east wind fell upon them. Morten capsized at Mortenesnes, the keel hit the bottom, and he came under the boat. Anders sailed past, but as the weather was rough, he had to stop in Mortensnes Bay. There he left his boat and continued by foot. He had just arrived at Gurluovta, when he saw a man coming up from the shore towards him. He recognized the man, it was his brother! Anders waited, and when Morten came to him, he took hold of Anders and began to drag him down to the shore and said: "Since you didn't bother saving me, now you will go with me to the bottom of the sea."

Then Anders shouted: "Now come to help, all those who rest in the graves." Morten shouted: "Everyone who lives in the sea, come to the rescue!" Then there was a terrible hissing sound on land and roaring sound from the sea. The dead came with pieces of coffins as weapons and the dead-at-sea came with kelp stems. The dead buried on land fought on Anders' side, and the draug drowned at sea fought on Morten's side. At dawn the draug went back and left their weapons behind, because the dead buried on land held their standing and the draug lost. Anders thus escaped with his life. The place where the dead and the draug fought is still called Gurluovta, which means "split bay", because the battle between the dead and the draug has created a chasm there.

The next day Anders went to get his boat. Then there were pieces of coffin tables and kelp beds, so many that one could not even walk through the bay. Anders erected a stone to commemorate the fact that the dead had stood their ground in the fight on the side of living humans. In Norwegian, the place is called Mortensnes, because Morten died at the headland.

Turf hut remnants

The goahti is a Sami housing type with walls and roof made of wood, which is covered on the outside with birch bark and then peat is piled in layers for insulation. The goahti is easy to heat up with a fire in an open fireplace or with a wood stove. It retains heat well and is protected from rain, snow and wind since the walls are sealed with bark and turf. There are 47 tufts in the area used from the year 0 to the 20th century. The goahtis have varied in size and were used in seasons of sea fishing and hunting for marine mammals and birds. They appear today as pits in the terrain.

From the 14th century onwards, livestock such as sheep and cows became part of the household, in addition to reindeer for transport and fishing, trapping, and gathering. There became fewer wild reindeer due to intensive hunting in large trapping pit facilities. From the 17th century onwards, some families specialized in taming reindeer and moving with small reindeer herds, which developed into modern-day domestic reindeer husbandry. Most people continued with a combined economy based on fishing in the sea, lakes and rivers, livestock, hunting, trapping, and gathering. They used several places of residence between the coast and inland, as they moved according to the activities in the various seasons.



The remains of the goahtis appear today as small pits in the landscape.



A goahti has wood on the inside, then a layer of birch bark and on the outside a thick layer of peat. This insulates well.

The joint goahti

In the 19th century, large goahtis were built, with space both for housing people in one room and barns for livestock in another room. The joint goahti is a reconstruction built in the 1990s. It is possible to light a fire in the fireplace. In the 20th century, wooden floors, panels on the walls and wood-burning stoves became common. The peat on the outer walls and roof was effective insulation, and the need for firewood was less compared to in log houses. The small buildings of timber, áiti, were used to store food, clothing and equipment. Goahtis were used as housing for people and animals until the 1960s. The boat is a reconstructed bask. It is a type of boat that was previously used for sea fishing in Varanger.



A joint goahti, drawn by J.A. Friis at Mortensnes in 1871.



Reconstruction of a joint goahti and an old type of boat called bask.

Trading post

A trading post was established at Mortensnes in 1784, after the Danish king abolished the monopoly for trade in Finnmark, which merchants from Bergen and Copenhagen until then had exclusive rights to. From 1840, Andreas Nordvi was a merchant. He had studied archeology in Copenhagen, and carried out excavations of the labyrinth and the graves. He established a local museum with the finds. In the 1870s, Nordvi sold Sami cultural objects, archaeological finds, skeletons and skulls from the burial ground to collectors and racial researchers at anatomical institutions spread across Europe. The trading post went bankrupt in 1877 and the buildings were dismantled and transported to new locations. The main house was rebuilt in Vadsø town and is today known as Esbensengården.



The trading post as it was in the 1870s.



Today, only the foundation walls remain after the timber in the buildings was taken apart and reused elsewhere.

The burial ground

The largest Sámi burial ground in the Nordic region is gathered at Mortensnes. There have been registered 500 graves dating from 1000 BC. to 1600 AD. The dead were wrapped in birch bark. Skis, bows and arrows, horn spoons, jewellery, ceramics and tools have been found. It seems that people were buried with their private possessions. The graves are in natural cavities, under boulders or in dry-walled chambers. The stones were usually removed, the dead placed, and then the stones were stacked back, so the rocks appear natural and untouched. The burial in rock cavities may have been intended as an easier transition to the realm of the dead, where, according to Sami tradition, one would be resurrected. Therefore, those who died needed the equipment they had used when they were alive.

During a period in the 19th and 20th centuries, skulls and skeletons were sold to race researchers in Europe, as it was certain that there were Sami people who had been buried and the researchers wanted to study whether there were differences from the remains of Norwegian people. The area is now protected.



A terrace has been built, where you can stand and get an overview of the burial field.



Some of the graves have been opened and the contents removed.

Sacrificial site

Ring-shaped stone enclosure, which may have been used for sacrificing. Written sources in the 18th century tell of regular sacrifices of animals to ensure good health and happiness in hunting and trapping. When sacrificing, a selected animal was slaughtered and eaten, and then the bones were buried. Rituals were performed by a noaidi, who is a person with the ability to have contact with the invisible forces, such as the dead and other figures. The sacrificial site's location in the burial field might indicate that it has been used for funeral rituals and for making sacrifices to the dead.



Stones are stacked in the form of a round enclosure, and inside sacrificial rituals may have been conducted.

Várjjat Sámi Musea
Varanger Samiske Museum



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