



Sacredness in the Laponian Area Mixed World Heritage Site

Florence Revelin

National Museum of Natural History, Department Man and Environment, 17 place du Trocadéro, 75016 Paris. +33 (0)1 73 78 28 06, +33 (0)6 83 88 81 41, revelin@mnhn.fr

■ Abstract

In the Laponian Area, a Mixed World Heritage (WH) Site in Northern Europe, sacred sites are notable as outstanding components of the landscape. These places are important in the traditional Saami culture and are called sieidi in the Saami language. They relate to rock formations and reliefs that the Saami indigenous people -who traditionally live on reindeer herding and from the land- encounter when they move or migrate within their lands for reindeer transhumance. Sacred values associated with these sites are inherited from the time when the traditional shamanist religion was practiced by the Saami. Sieidi are still of great importance in understanding the Saami's cultural perception of landscapes. Some of these spectacular places are also valued for their aesthetic and ecological values since the beginning of the 20th century, when the area started to become a tourist destination, and were included in the first national parks created in Europe (1909). Today, they are part of the mosaic of protected areas listed as the Laponian Area WH Site in 1996, and crystallise part of the cultural and natural values of Lapponia's landscapes.

KEY WORDS: Laponian Area Mixed World Heritage, Sieidi, Saami Sacred Places, Landscapes, Rock-formation.

■ 1. Introduction

1.1 Laponian Area: a mixed site in Saami Lands, Northern Europe

The Laponian Area (shortened to Lapponia¹) covers a territory of 9,400 km² in Northern Sweden [Fig. 1]. Listed as a Mixed Cultural and Natural Heritage Site on the UNESCO World Heritage List (WH) in 1996, Lapponia brings together several protected areas, comprising four national parks and two nature reserves, which offer a great variety of natural and cultural landscapes.

Two of the national parks within the WH

Site, Sarek and Stora Sjöfallet, count among the first such protected areas established in Sweden and Europe, in 1909, and its other national parks and nature reserves were established in the early second half of the 20th century². The area contains two dominant landscape types: an eastern lowland comprising marshlands, hundreds of lakes, and mixed woodlands; and a western mountainous landscape, with steep valleys and powerful rivers, which contains about 100 glaciers.

This mosaic of protected areas is situated in the vast region historically settled by the Saami indigenous people, a territory covering Northern Fennoscandia³ [Fig. 2], which they call Sápmi. The

¹"Lapponia" is the common name used in Sweden to refer to the WH site. This is a shortened version of the official name found on the WH List: "The Laponian Area." Lapponia is an area situated in the broader region of Lappland (covering Northern Fennoscandia), also called Sápmi.

²From 1942 to 1988.

³Fennoscandia stretches across four countries: Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia.

Saami consider this region their ancestral land and defend their close ties to it. Their traditional livelihoods are based on a subsistence economy, consisting of hunting, fishing, handicrafts, and transhumant herding of semi-domesticated reindeer. Although the Saami's activities are more diversified today in the context of a western livelihood, those

traditional activities, especially reindeer herding, remain essential to their culture and identity. The Saami herders living in Laponia have an intimate knowledge of their land and of its diverse resources, which they utilize in many ways. The site is still fully used for reindeer husbandry today (Dahlström Nilsson 2003) and it covers nine samebyar⁴, i.e.



Figure 1: Location of Laponia among World Heritage Sites in Europe and Asia. Source <http://whc.unesco.org/interactive-map>, July 2017.

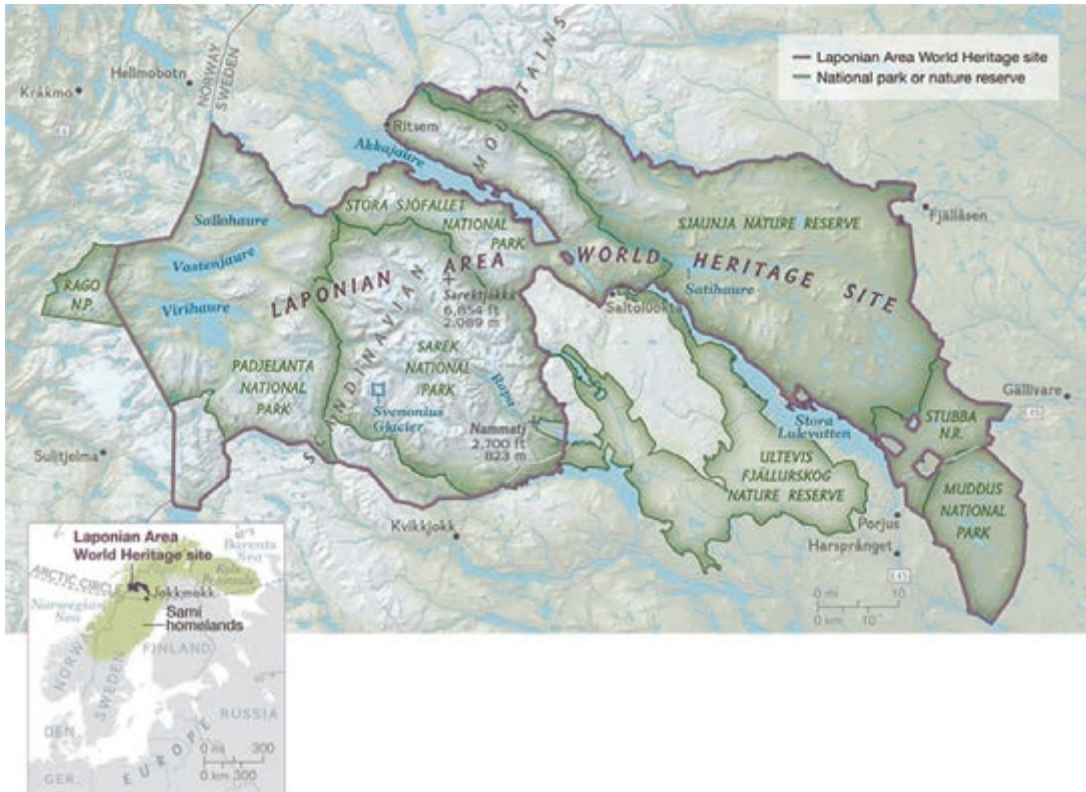


Figure 2: Location of Laponia, Northern Sweden. Source : National Geographic, 2016.

⁴A Sameby (or samebyar in plural form) is a community of reindeer herders working together on a geographic entity delimiting the grazing area.



Figure 3: Reindeer herds during a winter-spring transhumance (east of Lapponia). Source: Florence Revelin.

reindeer herding communities and their territories, which comprise different seasonal grazing areas [Fig. 3].

1.2 *Sieidi*: sacred places inherited from the ancient shamanist religion

In Lapponia, sacredness mainly refers to sacred sites, which are places noticeable for their outstanding natural formations. These places are important in the traditional Saami culture and are called *sieidi*⁵ in Saami language or *seite* in Swedish. They relate to rock formations and reliefs that herders encounter when they move or migrate within their territories for purposes of reindeer transhumance (Roué 2015). *Sieidi* are often remarkable for their shape: it can be a singular stone or an unusual land form that is noticeable in the landscape. The archaeologist Inga-Maria Mulk describes these places, which were sacrificial places, as important components of the Saami society and of their intimate relation to the land and to spirituality:

“They were part of the pre-Christian

conception of the world, with a strong belief in the presence of ancestors and other spiritual beings at certain locations. These holy places, sometimes consisting of entire mountains, were objects of different kinds of ceremonies. They are to be found everywhere in the Saami landscape – along the migratory routes, at the dwelling sites, in the hunting – grounds and by fishing-waters.” (Mulk 1994, p.123)

Sacred values associated with *sieidis* are inherited from the period when the traditional shamanist religion was still practiced by the Saami. At this time, sacred sites were used as places of worship and sacrifice, where the shamans (*noaide*) officiated. The Christianization of Northern Scandinavia, which started in the 16th century, eroded the traditional religion, which was based on an animist ontology, and practices associated with sacred sites have virtually disappeared today. However, shamanism and many sacred places are still named and known by the Saami, who still recognize that some sites and landscapes hold a sacred value. Mulk (1994) shows that this heritage has been transmitted not only

⁵We will use the saami term of “*sieidi*” in the article to refer to sacred places.

through the persistence of oral tradition, but also through other means such as historical records and scientific investigation (Op.cit., p122).

Sieidis are still of great importance to understanding the Saami's cultural conception and perception of landscapes, as well as the Saami's language and traditional singing (juoigos), all of which are important components of the Saami's identity today despite being largely hybridized with

are often located near unusual natural formations, like a mountain, a strangely shaped rock, a cave or a cliff. Several Sámi names tell of sacred places, for example Sájvva⁶. Sacrificial sites began to be used in the 900s and may have been used into the 19th century. They are still revered within the Sámi community, and as a visitor you should show respect for these sites. Leaffásáiva in northern Laponia is an example of an area with Sámi sacrificial sites located by a lake and a mountain."(Laponia Management

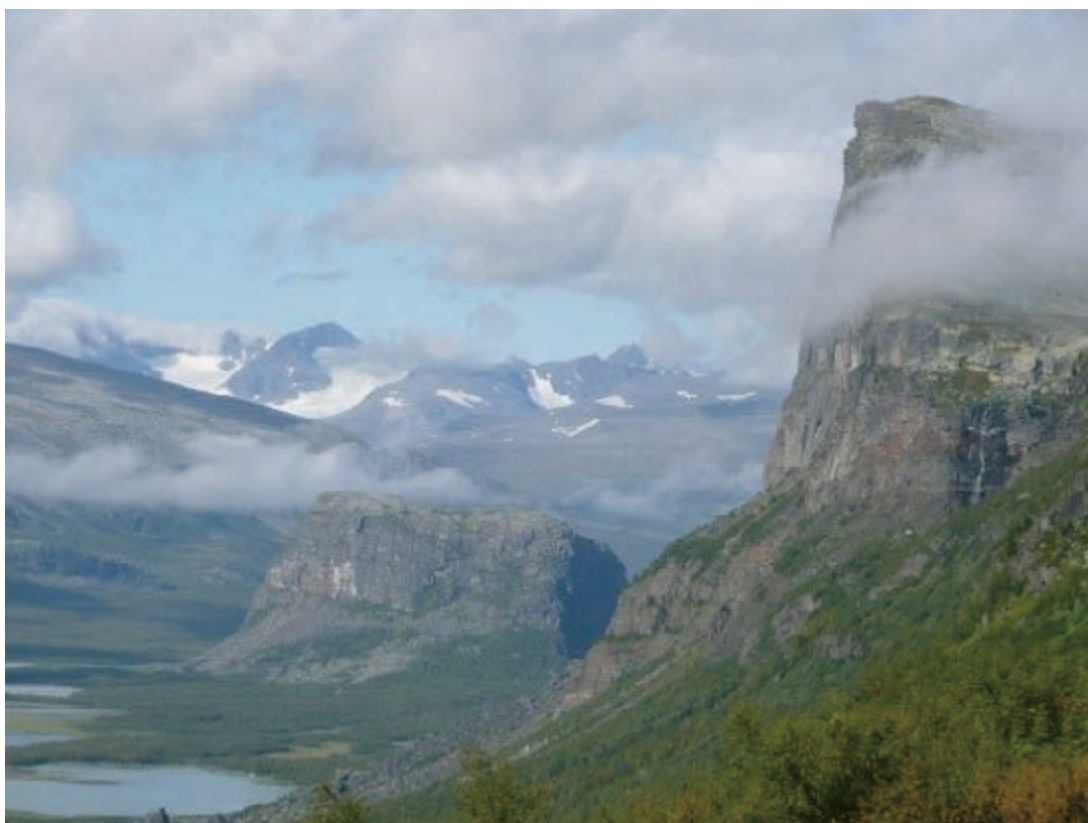


Figure 4: Nammásj (center of the picture) and Skierffe (right) in the valley of Rappadalen, Laponia. Source:www.panoramio.com, July 2017

the Swedish and Western culture. In Laponia, as in all lands inhabited and used by the Saami for reindeer husbandry, many sacred places are still known today and identified as such, although they are not formally used for religious matters. A complete inventory of such places has not been made, but their existence is described in the management plan for the WH site, putting the emphasis on the relation between sacredness and the toponymy of the landscapes:

“Sacrificial sites and other sacred grounds are found in many places in the Sámi landscape. They

Plan 2011, p.42)

Two sacred places are especially known for their spectacular landscapes: Skierffe and Nammásj [Fig.4]. These rock formations have specific shapes that form steep and scenic landscapes which contrast with a large valley (Rappadalen). They include several sites where people and the gods met, according to local history. Holding a sacred value from the Saami's perspective, those places are also representative images of the local spectacular landscapes from outsiders' perspectives. They are symbolic images

⁶Sájvva is a suffix meaning "sacred lake" or "sacred mountain" in Lule Saami, one of the two Saami dialects (with North Saami) spoken in this part of Sápmi.

of the area, staged in a century's worth of tourist brochures and iconography, to represent its "wild" nature and the scenic landscapes of the local national parks. We will see that these aesthetic and natural values have played a significant role in the conservation of the area, both as a symbol of an "untouched" nature and as a testimony to the site's integrity.

■ 2. Significance of natural and cultural heritage and conservation status

2.1 World Heritage values of the site

Aesthetic and natural values of Lapponia compose the forefront of the heritage conservation system, made of multiple layers on the national and international scales. Several attributes of the area have indeed contributed to defining the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of Lapponia through the criteria vii (aesthetic), and partly led to its nomination to the WH List⁷ Two other natural criteria describe Lapponia's values: viii (geology) and ix (ecological processes). They refer to the great variety of natural phenomena that relates to the variety of the sites' landscapes, including their rich flora, mountains, lake areas with active deltas, wetlands, and primeval boreal forest (IUCN/WCMC, 1996).

The mixed WH nomination includes the recognition of cultural values. These relate to centuries of occupation of the area by the Saami people, which represents an outstanding living example of a traditional human interaction with the environment (criteria iii and v). Ancient monuments and cult sites connected with the Saami are protected under the provisions of the 1988 Ancient Monuments Act.

Archaeological remains attest to the arrival of early inhabitants to Lapponia 6,000-7,000 years ago:

The settlers were nomadic hunter-gatherers, subsisting principally on wild reindeer, and traces of their occupation are found in the form of hearths and house-foundations. The domestication of reindeer began about two thousand years ago. It evolved gradually, and in the 16th and 17th century the Saami

migration with reindeer herds in an annual cycle was fully established. (UNESCO WHC, Decision: CONF 201 VIII.B, 1996)

The justification of OUV also refers to contemporary Saami culture and the persistence of a semi-nomadic livelihood based on reindeer transhumance:

[...] these ancestral ways of life, based on the seasonal movement of livestock, have been rendered obsolete or been abandoned in many parts of the world, making the property one of the last and among the largest and best preserved of those few that survive. (Ibid.)

Although these cultural features are recognised today and included in the management and conservation system of the area, it is important to underline that the WH application process was primarily only based on the natural values of the smaller territory of the Sjaunja nature reserve. The initiative emerged from a century-long history of conservation efforts for the diverse ecosystems and outstanding natural heritage in the region (especially wetlands and avifauna). These first stages of the process, in the late 1980's-early 1990's, were seen by Saami representatives involved in the defence of indigenous rights as a denial of their close ties to the region (Dahlström 2003, Green 2009; Roué 2013, Revelin 2013). It is only since 1996 that the cultural values of the area have been officially recognized through the international status of the WH and thanks to the intervention of Saami representatives, who demonstrated the cultural values of the site (Mulk I-M. 1997; Teilus M., Lindahl K. 2000).

2.2 Sacredness and Conservation as shown by Lapponia

Analysis of the official documentation (IUCN 1996 and ICOMOS 1996) and research focusing on the WH application process (Dahlström 2003, Green 2009, Roué 2013) show that sacredness was not a core dimension in the demonstration of the OUV during the application process. However, it is an implicit and inherent dimension when talking about the Saami's cultural landscapes: it relates to the Saami's toponymy and intimate knowledge and experience

⁷See the description of the criteria for the assessment of Outstanding Universal Value in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (WHC, 2017, pp. 25-26).

of landscapes, both of which are essential to the migrations of herders during transhumance.

The management plan of the area makes a small reference to this dimension, in line with the Convention on Biological Diversity, as an “international instrument which implies commitments for Sweden for the management of Lapponia” (Lapponia Management Plan, Appendix 4 2011). This refers to the Akwé: Kon Guidelines (2004): “Voluntary guidelines for the conduct of cultural, environmental and social impact assessments regarding developments proposed to take place on, or which are likely to impact on, sacred sites and on lands and waters traditionally occupied or used by indigenous and local communities.”

Sacredness does not play a major role in Lapponia’s official management system for the conservation of landscapes: sacred places are not referred to as a core aspect of management, although mentioned as places for which “visitors should show respect” as they are “still revered within the Saami community” (Lapponia Management Plan 2011). However, the places are significant as intangible cultural heritage related to the local landscapes and are thus respected in the ordinary use that the reindeer herders make of this area.

■ 3. Which management system and what are the stakes for sacredness in Lapponia?

3.1 Lapponia Tjuottjudus: a Participatory Management System including the Saami’s perspective on conservation

Since 2012, the WH site has had its own management board, in charge of implementing the management plan (adopted in 2011). This participatory management system, officially called Lapponia Tjuottjudus (in saami), is composed in majority of Saami representatives and integrates representatives from all levels of society:

- 5 seats for Saami representatives,
- 2 seats for the representatives of both municipalities encompassed within the site’s borders,
- 1 seat for the Swedish Environmental

Protection Agency (SEPA),

- 1 seat for the County Administrative Board.

This committee functions by consensus decision-making, drawing on a traditional system used in herding communities. Its establishment represents an important step forward for the Saami: it symbolizes a significant change in the governance of their traditional lands. The management of the national parks and nature reserves, previously piloted by the SEPA, has been transferred to this organ and is regulated by a common management plan. The UNESCO World Heritage Centre now presents this overall management system as an example of good practice based on its collaborative dimension and the significance of local people’s participation (World Heritage Review 2012).

3.2 Current state of conservation and challenges for a better integration of sacredness

According to the recent IUCN Outlook Assessment of the WH natural and mixed sites, “the overall state of conservation of the site is good and stable.” The four national parks and two nature reserves within the property demonstrate “highly effective management”⁸ (World Heritage Outlook, consulted in August 2017).

A key challenge for maintaining the sacred value of landscapes would be to achieve better knowledge and integration of this implicit dimension. This challenge is reinforced by the fact that the spiritual and sacred values of a given natural landscape do not easily fit within the official management categories of national and international systems.

Collecting detailed knowledge of sieidi from a Saami’s perspective would allow for better understanding and the integration of this dimension into the conservation of the area. This issue is, today, partly addressed through the “Naturum” project, a visitor centre dedicated to presenting the “Reindeer Landscapes” through a Saami lens (Revelin 2015). This project also encompasses a website dedicated to presenting Lapponia’s heritage, in all its diversity: lapponia.nu. It puts the emphasis on the description of

⁸Conclusions made in the IUCN Outlook only concern natural criteria.

the Saami's cultural landscapes. Some research is still currently being undertaken on the Saami's intangible cultural heritage in order to enrich this project.

■ 4. Conclusion: linkages of nature and culture in sieidi

Laponia is an interesting example where close linkages between nature and culture are observable through the sacred value of landscapes. Specific natural formations in the landscape were considered as sacred places (sieidi) by the Saami. They were used as worship places and held an important role in the shamanist religion. There is no evidence of the persistence of such shamanist practices. However, sieidi still imply particular knowledge, relationships, and perceptions of local natural landscapes which are important today to Saami culture, identity, and empowerment.

If this cultural dimension constitutes a significant heritage from a Saami perspective, it is not a core dimension of the multi-scale conservation system, partly because the sacred values of the landscapes are not easily graspable. This stems both from the erosion of practices linked to this spiritual dimension and from the places themselves, whose identification is not complete due to this erosion of practices. Sacred places are moreover part of a greater landscape and comprise a variety of identifiers of diverse scales, which are still used as visual landmarks by Saami herders. That makes the sacred value of this Saami landscape difficult to encapsulate in the current national and international conservation systems, which are mainly based on natural and aesthetic values.

Indeed, the conservation of the region, operated under the guidelines of national parks since the early 20th century, is still largely associated with the image of wilderness prevailing in outsider's perspectives. This dominant perception partly results from the history of the colonization of Northern Fennoscandia but also from the fact that the Saami's traditional livelihood and transhumant herding leave very few traces in the landscapes (sacred places included) – or traces that are not easily perceptible from a non-Saami's gaze.

Recent developments in the management

of the area (2010s) - including both the setting up of a participatory management board where Saami representatives are involved and the adoption of a management plan where the Saami's perspective is considered - strengthen the linkages between nature and culture in the stewardship of the area. This more integrated approach is based on a greater recognition of the local perspective on heritage conservation and contributes to overcoming the historical opposition between nature conservation and local development. Transhumant reindeer herding is thus addressed as an evolving and living practice, including modernization dynamics, and which is inherently linked to the local landscape and its conservation.

The sacred value of Laponia is also part of this nexus between nature and culture, as it relates to livelihoods, knowledge, transhumance, and the heritage of ancient worship practices that constitute this cultural landscape, both historically and today. Thus, even if sacredness has not been addressed as a major stake in local conservation history, the physical substrate of this spirituality has been preserved for its natural values. Though difficult to implement, recent revalorization of the Saami's role and perspective on heritage identification and management appears as a major asset to better address and consider sacredness as a component of the complex heritage in Laponia.

■ Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the organisers and participants of the Capacity Building Workshop on Nature-Culture Linkages on Sacred Landscapes of the University of Tsukuba, especially Dr. Maya Ishizawa, Prof. Yoshida Masahito and Prof. Inaba Nobuko, for the valuable experience and insights that contributed to this publication. Financial support was partly provided by the programme "Exploration Japon" of the French Government for participating to the workshop. I am also grateful to Alix Levain and Marie Roué for their helpful comments on earlier version of the text, and to Xavier Forde for reviewing the written English.

■ Literature cited

- Dahlström Nilsson Å. 2003. Negotiating Wilderness in a Cultural Landscape. Predators and Saami Reindeer Herding in the Laponian World Heritage Area. Uppsala, Acta Universitatis Upsalensis, 534 p.
- Green C. 2009. Managing Laponia. A World Heritage as an arena for Sami ethno-politics in Sweden. Uppsala, Acta Universitatis Upsalensis, 230 p.
- ICOMOS. 1996. Advisory body Evaluation, n°774.
- IUCN/WCMC. 1996. World Heritage Nomination – IUCN Summary, The Laponian Area (Sweden).
- Laponia Management Plan. 2011.
- Mulk I-M. 1997. Sami Cultural Heritage in the Laponia World Heritage Area. Jokkmokk, Ajjte, 60 p
- Mulk I.-M. 1994. Sacrificial Places and their meaning in Saami Society. In Carmichael D.-L., Hubert J., Reeves B., and Schanche A. (dirs.), Sacred Sites, Sacred Places. One World Archaeology Vol. 23. London, Routledge, pp. 121-131
- Revelin F. 2015. Le naturum de Laponia : cultiver un nouveau regard sur la nature et sa conservation. Revue Nordiques 30, pp. 59-76
- Revelin F. 2013. Montagnes à vivre, à voir et à préserver. Dynamiques du tourisme et sites européens du patrimoine mondial (Laponia et Pyrénées-Mont Perdu). Paris, MNHN, 458p.
- Roué M. 2015. Le paysage culturel sami. De la phénoménologie à la poésie. Revue Nordiques 30, pp. 31-44
- Roué M. 2011. A Saami Reindeer Herder's Cultural Landscape : Memory, the Sense and Ethics. In Raasakka N., Sivonen S. (dirs.), Northern Landscapes "Implementation of the European Landscape Convention in the North Calotte Area Municipalities"- Conference in Inari, Finland 7-9.9.2011
- Roué M. 2013. Paysages culturels et gouvernance : nouveau contrat social ou retour du refoulé. In Luginbühl Y. & Terrasson D. (dirs.), Paysage et développement durable, Versailles, Quae, pp. 261-274
- Teilus M. Lindahl K., 2000. Mija Ednam- Samebyarnas Laponiaprogram. Jokkmokk, Samebyarnas kansli, 87 p.
- UNESCO WHC, Decision : CONF 201 VIII.B, 1996. <http://whc.unesco.org>.
- WHC 17/01, 2017. Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention. 172 p.
- World Heritage Outlook, <http://www.worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org/explore-sites/wdpaid/124388> , consulted in August 2017
- World Heritage Review. 2012. World Heritage and Indigenous People 62.

