

# Uralic studies, languages, and researchers

Edited by Sándor Szeverényi



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# The life and work of the Saami theologian and linguist: Anders Porsanger

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## 1. Introduction

The unique life of Norwegian Saami priest Anders Porsanger (1735–1780) and his relation to Hungary has not yet, or only superficially, been discussed in the Hungarian linguistic literature. Porsanger’s collaboration with János Sajnovics at Copenhagen was decisive in the career of both: their suggestion of introducing Hungarian orthographic rules and their efforts to transliterate Knud Leem’s trilingual dictionary titled *Lexicon Lapponicum Bipartitum* applying Hungarian period-orthography could have brought fame and professional advancement for Porsanger and further (foreign) achievements for Sajnovics (subsequent to the publication of the *Demonstratio*). Thus, it is not surprising at all that the first and most detailed portray of Porsanger comes from Sajnovics:

“This man was a Lapp, came from Porsanger and studied in Nidrosia (i.e. Trondheim) as a young man. He received excellent education in the field of humanities there. At the University of Copenhagen, he studied philosophy and theology. He spent three years as a missionary among his fellow Lappish people, and then was appointed as a priest at the church of the Trondheim hospital. [...] This excellent scholar spoke not only his Lappish mother tongue but also Danish, German, Latin, Greek and Hebrew, to the glory of the talented Lappish people” (Szió 1994: 43).

Sajnovics was aware of how “unique” a Saami man Porsanger was, having been raised “in a way different from the ways of his homeland” and having chosen to become a scholar at a time when the majority of Saami people were undereducated or outright illiterate.

## 2. Historical background

In 18th century Denmark–Norway, ecclesiastical activity was closely intertwined with political interests. Although the Swedish expansion has already ceased by then, in the North the border issue remained unresolved (Kristiansen 2016: 1055–1056).

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The church also played a role in the definition of the borders. In addition to the church building efforts, the increasingly popular movement of pietism<sup>1</sup> introduced by Thomas von Westen<sup>2</sup> and the Saami mission (*Finnemisjonen*) established under this movement also provided new ways to reach the Saami people. A crucial point of the mission's strategy was the education of Saami-speaking missionaries. The future missionaries were trained in Trondheim Seminary (*Seminarium Scholasticum*),<sup>3</sup> which belonged to the Cathedral School (*Trondheim katedralskole*).<sup>4</sup> Von Westen's aim was to train Saami-speaking missionaries and Saamis who could help missionary work as school teachers. Some of them indeed became teachers, but nobody started theological studies (unlike in 17th century Sweden). This is why Anders Porsanger is a prominent "exception", the first Saami linguist and priest of Norway.

### 3. The early years

Anders (Biret-Ánde) Andersen<sup>5</sup> was born in September 1735 in the village of Olderfjord, Porsanger municipality, Finnmark<sup>6</sup> county. He was born to Anders Henriksen (Heandaraga-Ánde 1701–1768) and Berit Mortensdatter (Mortte-Biret, ca. 1695–1768). The local vicar, Danish Ole Hierild (1708–1788), was the first to recognize Porsanger's great talent and started to teach him. He saw such promise in him that he wanted to bring the boy with him to Denmark when he returned home, but his parents, although sensing the importance of this offer, did not agree to this. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Pietism (< Lat. *pieta* 'piety, tenderness') was a revivalist movement established within the Protestant church in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It looked upon reformation as an ongoing process instead of seeing it as a past and finished event. Its focus was on the importance of practical Christian life instead of dogmatic theology (Oftestad et al. 2005: 144–148).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas von Westen (1682–1727) was a Norwegian missionary and minister who managed to organize the Saami mission in just a few years and had several chapels and schools built (Steen 1954: 150–197).

<sup>3</sup> This institution (established in 1717) provided Saami linguistic education for future priests and missionaries before they began their studies in Copenhagen. It was also intended to impart Bible knowledge and to train teachers of Norwegian language. *Seminarium Scholasticum* was closed upon Westen's death.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the school's history, see Eriksen 1897: 168–187.

<sup>5</sup> Andersen assumed the name Porsanger as a sign of respect for his homeland.

<sup>6</sup> The northeasternmost and largest (48,618 km<sup>2</sup>) county of Norway with a population of 75,000, it constitutes a part of Lapland, and a quarter of the population are Saami. The most important Saami-populated municipalities are Kautokeino, Karasjok, Tana, Nesseby, and Porsanger. Finnmark was part of the Trondheim Diocese until 1803.

their son stayed in Porsanger and started to work with missionary Hans Hagerup Krogh (1723–1785).<sup>7</sup>

At the request of the College of Missions, Copenhagen<sup>8</sup> the Bishop of Trondheim, Frederik Nannestad<sup>9</sup> established an institute called *Seminarium Lapponicum Fredericianum*<sup>10</sup> in 1752 to promote the Saami linguistic education of Norwegian missionaries (in fact, continuing the tradition of the earlier Seminarium Scholasticum). This new institution was part of the efforts the public authorities made to strengthen the connection of the Saamis with the (Danish-) Norwegian nation state. The king himself provided financial support for its establishment and as Bishop Nannestad also found it important to use the Saami language on Saami territories, the activity of the institution would not be hindered by anything. Knud Leem (1697–1774),<sup>11</sup> the prominent Norwegian linguist of Saami language and culture, was appointed as head of the institution.

#### 4. Studies

Professor Knud Leem was promised funding from the College to hire young “language masters” from Finnmark. Johan Falch (1707–1758), a priest from Talvik, was appointed to choose the most suitable candidate (speaking both Saami and Norwegian), and he chose Porsanger, 17 years of age at the time. The job of the language master was to act as a native interviewee in linguistic studies and to assist in such studies (Kristiansen 2016: 1060). The most prominent argument for Porsanger

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<sup>7</sup> The mission was in charge of informing the public authorities of conditions at the borders from the beginning. In 1750, Krogh (together with Porsanger) was appointed to define the borders situated furthest from the northern coastline (Kristiansen 2016: 1059).

<sup>8</sup> In 1714, Frederick IV established the College of Missions (*Missionskollegiet*) in Copenhagen to finance and manage Protestant missions under royal patronage. The principal goal of the institution was to organise a mission to India, but from 1716 it also managed the Saami missions.

<sup>9</sup> Frederik Nannestad (1693–1774) was Bishop of the Trondheim Diocese from 1748 (for further reference, see Hansen and Olsen 2006: 305–324).

<sup>10</sup> The institution, in fact, continued the tradition started by the Seminarium Scholasticum, and operated until Leem’s death in 1774.

<sup>11</sup> He had already finished his theological studies when, in 1715, his interest turned towards the Saami language and culture. In 1723 he applied to the Missionary College to become a missionary among the Saamis of Finnmark. Around this time, he also began his Saami language studies in order to be able to preach to the Saamis in their own language. He went to Trondheim, where he studied at the Seminarium Scholasticum between 1723 and 1725. From 1725 he served as a missionary in Finnmark for 10 years and accumulated a wide range of knowledge about the Saami language, earning the title of professor for this in 1752 (about Leem, see Kelemen 2018).

was probably the fact that he spoke the same (Porsanger<sup>12</sup>) dialect as Leem, which Leem also used in his work.<sup>13</sup> In 1752, Porsanger arrived in Trondheim to work as a language master, and at the same time he enrolled in the second grade of the Trondheim Cathedral (Latin) School.

Porsanger ended up in the same class as the son of the influential headmaster Gerhard Schøning (1722–1780).<sup>14</sup> This led to a conflict between Bishop Nannestad and the headmaster, since Schøning was of the opinion that Saamis had to learn to read and write in Danish, and that the bishop exceeded his powers by this move. Nevertheless, he had to accept the bishop's decision, but he pulled his son out of the class in a demonstrative manner.<sup>15</sup> Porsanger was an excellent student and received a number of scholarships.<sup>16</sup>

From 1758, Porsanger studied theology at the University of Copenhagen and graduated successfully in 1761. His studies in Copenhagen were financed by the College of Missions. During his stay, in 1760, he and Michael Baade (1739–1799)<sup>17</sup> translated certain parts of the Bible (three epistles of John's) from Danish to Saami upon the request of the college<sup>18</sup> (Hansen and Olsen 2006: 143).

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<sup>12</sup> It belongs to the eastern subdialects of Northern Saami's Finnmark dialect in Norway (cf. Sammallahti 1998: 11).

<sup>13</sup> *En lappisk Grammatica* (1748); *En lappisk Nomenclator* (1756); *Lexicon lapponicum bipartitum* (1768–1781).

<sup>14</sup> The first historian professor in Norway, headmaster of the Cathedral School from 1751.

<sup>15</sup> It is useful to be acquainted with Schøning's idea of the Saamis to understand the nature of the conflict between the bishop and the headmaster. In his 1751 paper (*Forsøg til de nordiske landes, særdeles Norges, gamle Geografi* [Inquiry into the ancient geography of the Nordic countries, particularly that of Norway]), he suggested that the Saamis are in fact immigrants, having arrived and settled in Finnmark county of Norway at a later point of time than the Norwegians. In addition, Schøning also claimed that the Saami people, who lived close to nature, were characterised by a lower cultural level than the Norwegians, which made it necessary to bring them to a higher level, that is, to make them learn to speak and write in Danish (Kristiansen 2016: 1061–1062).

<sup>16</sup> Further proof of his exceptional talent is the fact that the majority of scholarship holders were the sons of well-known priests.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Baade was a Danish missionary, Knud Leem's student. He also translated the first six chapters of the Gospel of Matthew into Saami (Kjølås 1995: 49)

<sup>18</sup> Porsanger also translated the First Book of Moses and the Acts of the Apostles, but these translations were destroyed. Porsanger himself burned them in anger after not receiving the position of parson of Trondheim Cathedral (cf. Apelseth 2004: 183).

## 5. Missionary in Varanger

After finishing his studies, Porsanger was commissioned as a missionary to Varanger<sup>19</sup> by the new bishop, Johan Ernst Gunnerus (1758–1773).<sup>20</sup> On his way to East-Finnmark, he arrived in Trondheim at Christmas, 1761, where he got stuck because of foul weather. He was ordained as a priest in the Trondheim Cathedral in April 1762 and continued his way to Varanger later in the same year (Martinussen 1992: 18). Bishop Gunnerus intended to make him stay in Trondheim to help the elderly Leem finish his trilingual dictionary. The Seminary also planned to employ him as a senior lecturer, but no salary would have been paid for this position at the time. Therefore, Gunnerus had to let him continue his journey to the north. In 1762, Porsanger arrived in Varanger and settled down in Nesseby. There is little information about his activity as a missionary there. It can be assumed that Saami language teaching and preaching were important to him. This is supported by a 1764 letter of his to the missionary board about the immediate need for a Saami alphabet book and catechism (Martinussen 1992: 19).

## 6. Hospital priest and senior lecturer in Trondheim

During Porsanger's stay in Varanger, Bishop Gunnerus (together with Knud Leem) was trying to solve the problem of his employment (which was first and foremost of financial nature). Finally, Porsanger was appointed as a hospital priest<sup>21</sup> in the Trondheim Hospital and as a senior lecturer in the Seminarium Lapponicum (1896: 6). This meant that he worked full time as a hospital priest and also received a salary from the College of Missions as a lecturer. In the same year, he married Anna Catharina Hagerup (?–1780), and they lived together in humble circumstances despite the two salaries. Porsanger had numerous duties in addition to dictionary writing, since he was obliged to undertake further jobs to earn a living. This hindered work on the dictionary, which heightened the tensions between Leem and him, present from the beginning.

Leem taught only a few classes in the Seminary and did little work on the dictionary (as his hands trembled so much by then that even a signature required serious effort on his part; cf. Martinussen 1992: 20–21). The majority of the work was Porsanger's responsibility, still he did not dare complain. The conflict between them reached its peak in 1769–70 when he was summoned to Copenhagen by the College

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<sup>19</sup> The easternmost municipal unit of Finnmark.

<sup>20</sup> About Biskop Gunnerus, see Hansen and Olsen (2006: 324–358).

<sup>21</sup> Hospital priests were among the lowest ranking members of the church hierarchy, because they worked with poor and sick people and received a small salary if they received any salary at all.

to take a stand in the issue raised by János Sajnovics (and Miksa Hell): whether the Hungarian way of spelling should be adopted in Leem's dictionary (already in press) or not.

## 7. Collaboration with János Sajnovics

János Sajnovics and Miksa Hell participated in an astronomy expedition to the island of Vardø [1768–1769], where they also started studying the Saami language. Sajnovics had Leem's grammar book and the vocabulary list of the *Nomenclator* as help, but he had great difficulty in using these because of the "strangeness" of their spelling and his lack of Danish knowledge. However, when he listened to how spoken Saami sounded, he concluded that the Hungarian way of spelling would be more suitable for the transcription of the language, because of the linguistic relatedness of the two languages, among other things. Sajnovics and Hell shared this theory with Otto Thott,<sup>22</sup> their patron and current president of the The Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters (*Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab*), who was enthusiastic about the idea. At Thott's request, Bishop Gunnerus appointed Porsanger as Sajnovics's assistant, and Sajnovics had a good opinion of Porsanger (Solbakk 1998: 13–14).

Porsanger was quick to get acquainted with Hungarian spelling, and in 1770 he and Sajnovics undertook to transcribe the Leem dictionary<sup>23</sup> according to Hungarian orthography, which they finished as early as May 1770.<sup>24</sup> In June, Porsanger submitted his 17-page report<sup>25</sup> to the College of Missions, in which he mostly agreed with Sajnovics's suggestions, but he also complemented them with his own views. Thus, his recommendation on Saami orthography was a different, third version. With this, the conflict between Leem and Porsanger reached its climax, as the professor was against the new way of spelling from the beginning.

## 8. Fall from grace

Although Porsanger saw the opportunity of professional advancement and fame in the Copenhagen assignment, it turned out quite differently. Leem fiercely opposed the

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<sup>22</sup> Danish count and statesman. He held several positions at the time, e.g. he was a member of the Privy Council, Highest Chancellor of the Danish Chancery and President of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters.

<sup>23</sup> For more on the dictionary, see Kelemen (2018: 99–108).

<sup>24</sup> Sajnovics wrote the following in his Diary on May 15, 1770: "I have presented the Lappish dictionary written with Hungarian spelling to Count Thott" (Szió 1995: 145).

<sup>25</sup> *Betænkning om den lappiske Orthographies Forandring efter den Ungarske* [Report on the modification of Lappish orthography on the basis of Hungarian spelling].

new spelling throughout their cooperation and probably considered the suggestion as a personal attack. It might be legitimate to consider why Porsanger and not Leem was asked to examine the applicability of Hungarian spelling in the dictionary. The answer probably lies in the fact that a native speaker of Saami was regarded as more authentic as far as linguistic competence was considered than a linguist professor who had learnt Saami “only” as a foreign language. Also, Porsanger might have been appointed for this task as a potential successor of Leem.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever the case may be, Porsanger was a very ambitious person, and he became well-known within church circles outside Trondheim as well. It was reasonable for him to hope for advancement in his career, as during his Trondheim stay he was promised a higher position, the parson of Trondheim Cathedral.

The position became vacant in 1771, and Porsanger officially applied for it, but his application caused great “discontent” in Trondheim, as he clearly had bad reputation by this time. He was considered a selfish, defiant man characterized by rude comments and disrespectful behavior. He was rumored to be drinking and playing cards with ordinary people regularly. The higher circles of the church presumably became aware of Porsanger’s ambitions, and the elite could not agree with such a high ranking position being filled by a common man who was a Saami as well. Gunnerus had been staying in Copenhagen, and only after returning home had he confronted the atmosphere around Porsanger. As a consequence, in a letter written on October 25, 1771, Gunnerus also turned against his protégée, asking the king not to approve of Porsanger’s appointment on the grounds that he lacked a work ethic and the critical observations described above. Thus, the position was offered to Marcus Frederic Bang<sup>27</sup> (1711–1789) instead of Porsanger. Bang also served as Bishop of the Trondheim Diocese from 1773 to 1787.

## 9. On a mission again – The last attempt

It became clear that the government of the church did not want Porsanger to serve as a priest in Trondheim. He became the parson of Vadsø in 1772 and served as a priest in East-Finnmark from 1777. In fact, he had been removed from the center of religious authority and lost the chance to restart his career (Wåle 1975: 2).

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<sup>26</sup> In his 1769 letter to the College of Missions, Bishop Gunnerus requested 200 rigsdaler (the currency in the personal union of Denmark–Norway) for Porsanger until “Mr. Leem’s departure” (Dahl 1906: 45). This phrasing supports the theory that Porsanger could have been Leem’s successor.

<sup>27</sup> Bang despised the Saami people. He was against the Saami mission and the use of the Saami language.

The successor of Gunnerus, Bishop Bang also played a part in the ending of Porsanger's academic career with his "anti-Saami" ideology. After Leem's death, he made sure that the Seminarium Lapponicum ceased to exist in the same year, 1774. He was strictly against Saami language teaching and insisted that everyone had to learn Danish.

Hoping for a better position and salary, Porsanger and his family set out to Copenhagen in 1780, but their ship ran aground at Risør and the whole family died. Porsanger was only 45 years old (Hanssen 1986: 126).

## 10. Summary

Kristiansen (2016: 1071) raised an important issue in his paper about Porsanger as to what extent (if at all) Porsanger's Saami origin played a part in his tragedy. It is more likely, however, that the collective impact of several factors caused his work to be fruitless. He had ground-breaking potential, but still could not achieve a leading position, even though he had everything needed for a career: talent, ambition, and, initially, support from the higher circles of the church. He lived in a class-conscious time when it was unacceptable for a common, ordinary man to be appointed as a high ranking member of the church. Although he was a revolutionary of his time, he has not been recognized as a great Saami linguist. This lack of recognition is also due to the fact that all of his work had been consumed by fire: some of his work perished in the great fire of Copenhagen, while his translations were burnt by himself.

After his 1762 ordination, almost 160 years passed before another priest of Saami origin was ordained in the Norwegian church.

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