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NEW DISCOVERIES ON THE SCULPTURES OF OLENI ISLAND, LAKE ONEGA

Tatiana Popova

One of the most remarkable Mesolithic monuments in North-Eastern Europe is the prehistoric Karelian burial ground on the southern Oleni Island in Lake Onega. The burial ground of Oleni Island was discovered while opening a limestone quarry in 1936, which ruined the cemetery considerably. During 1936–1938 an expedition led by V. Ravdonikas conducted extensive excavation works in the area (Ravdonikas 1940; Zhironov 1940).

In 1939 the excavation materials were transferred to the Peter I Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Kunstkamera), where they are preserved to the present day as an invaluable treasure of Russian archaeology.¹

Archaeological (Ravdonikas 1956; Gurina 1956) and paleontological (Debets 1948; Gurina 1956; Yakimov 1960) material on this remarkable Early Holocene necropolis has become world-famous and open to research.

During the last decades numerous interesting Mesolithic and Neolithic settlements have been found in the north and north-eastern regions of the European part of Russia (Pankrushev 1978; Oshibkina 1983; Filatova 1988). Four new Mesolithic cemeteries have been discovered: Siamozerski II, Chernaia Guba I in Karelia, Peshchanitsy and Popovo in the eastern Prionezhe region (Oshibkina 1982; 1989a; Gurina 1989: 27–31; Gokhman 1984).

Moreover, the Oleni Island burial ground that was previously dated to the 3rd-2nd millennium BC by V. Ravdonikas and N. Gurina (Ravdonikas 1956: 18; Gurina 1956: 274–259) has been re-dated, according to the new results of the radiocarbon method, to the 2nd half of the 6th millennium or the early 5th millennium BC (Mamonova & Sulerzhitski 1989; table 2). Oxford Laboratories have estimated the original date of the cemetery to an even earlier period – the middle of the 6th millennium BC (Price & Jakobs 1990).

The age of the monument is still a matter of controversy but most researchers associate it with the Mesolithic Period. Since not all authors acknowledge the new results based on C¹⁴ dating, some of them still date the cemetery to the Neolithic Period (Alekshin 1994).

The Oleni Island cemetery has been the subject of several wide-ranging studies (Laushkin 1962; Masson 1976; Stoliar 1983), including those observing the different types and idiosyncrasies of burial customs and unique prehistoric art objects made from bone and antler by the ancient tribes of the Zaonezhe region.

The cemetery is exceptional among the Mesolithic monuments of the same period for its rich and unique grave goods, which make it a rare and somewhat mysterious monument in the whole North-Eastern Russia and the Scandinavian Peninsula. This also explains why scholarly interest towards the prehistoric archaeological monument on the Oleni Island has not faded but has become increasingly attractive due to progress in research methods and new approaches (Oshibkina & Krainov & Zimina 1992; Stoliar 1994; 1995; Popova 1995: 22–26).



Hunting and fishing tools, weapons and jewellery (plates and pendants) of organic substance, such as elk, deer, wolf, bear, and beaver bone and antler appear next to large slate, quartz and flint grave goods.

The most interesting items are exquisite prehistoric art objects of bone and antler, symbolising the spiritual world of the ancient fishers and reindeer-hunters of Lake Onega. Quite recently two new, previously undiscovered motifs were found on one snake sculpture of bone (Figure 1) at the burial site No. 23. One was discovered by V. Poikalainen, who, while taking a photograph of the figure, noticed an anthropomorphic face on the snake's head. Under the right angle and with favourable light it was clearly distinguishable (Figure 2). Small round hollows – the eyes of the snake (Gurina 1956, drawing 120.5; collection MAE, No. 5716–103^B) – in its head with a slightly rounded top and flat lower side appear like eyes in a hu-



Figure 1. Representation of snake (burial No. 23).

Figure 2. Anthropomorphic representation (face) on snake.

man face and an almost indistinctive groove transforms into a mouth, which in its turn emphasises the contour of a nose.

After this sensational finding scholars turned their attention back to the object. Close inspection revealed a third, so far unnoticed representation in the head area, which lies in the opposite profile side of the snake (Figure 3). An elk head with characteristic features is depicted on this representation: an oblong animal head with a thickened



Figure 3. Representation of elk on snake.

end and the emphasised unusual lower part (the dewlap), small ears are pressed against the animal's neck, its mouth is marked by a round, almost indistinct indentation. The eye is most expressive – it is not depicted as a depression but as a rounded convexity (eye and eyelid). The elk representation also shares the particular features characteristic to all elk heads found in the Oleni Island burial ground. Even though representations differ from each other, the animal, whatever its size and the style of finish, is always depicted in profile.



Close analogies of this new elk representation can be found among other objects discovered at the cemetery, too – e.g. a carved bone head from burial No. 82 (Gurina 1956, drawings 118–119, 3, 5; collection MAE, No. 5716–347), but also a bone hunter's dagger, which handle is decorated with an elk head from burial No. 61 (Gurina 1956, drawings 118–119; collection MAE, No. 5716–220).

The snake figure is carved from a long animal bone and has slight traces of polish on its surface. It represents a reptile, with the head and the body, 17.6 cm (6.9 inches) long. Its curving body makes about 2/3 of its total length. The last third is distinguishable as the neck and upper body of the vertical anthropomorphous idol, but in the horizontal position it resembles an elk. The figure's prehistoric

carver has skilfully designed a snake's protruding jaw-line and throat, simultaneously emphasising an elk's head and neck.

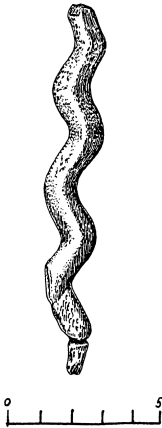


Figure 4.

Another snake figure has also been discovered from the female burial site No. 57 near the left humerus (this burial belongs to a triple funeral – burials Nos. 55–57 – containing lavish grave goods). The snake figure is also carved from a long animal bone and displays traces of intense polishing.² The figure's head is missing. This item differs from the previously mentioned snake figure not by its shorter length (12 cm or 4.7 inches) and the more winding body, but because it has been elaborated as a bas-relief and not as a spatial art object, i.e. it has a flat side (Figure 4). The figure had a different function, of course, – most likely it was used as an application, as suggested by a deep incision in the figure's tail, was possibly attached to another object (Gurina 1956, drawing 120, 4; collection MAE, No. 5716–189^a).

The finding from the Oleni Island cemetery, where human and elk representations appear together with a snake allow us to speculate that it is not just a vivid example of syncretism in prehistoric art. This particular item is definitely an unusual ritual object with three different iconographic representations encoded into it. No analogies to this ophidio-anthropo-theriomorphic representation from burial No. 23 are known.

So, the sacred elk that was the pet of prehistoric man of the Oleni Island cemetery. It ruled the forest, was “the master” who guaranteed success in hunting. It was related to the anthropomorphic idol that, according to ethnographic parallels, may tentatively be associated with the original ancestor, the guardian of family. People turn to such idols in times of troubles, praying for protection and help. Idols of wood, antler or other organic material are very common among Siberian peoples. A. Anisimov's observations about the Evenki of the North-Yenisei region appear particularly interesting in this light. These people distinguished between guardian spirits of family and of tribe, whereas the guardians of family were depicted as anthropomorphic spirits, the guardians of tribe were zoomorphic (elk, bear, etc.) (Anisimov 1950).

The function of the snake is not so explicit, however. With no intention to deny the existence of snake cult and the reverence that the tribes of the prehistoric lake region felt towards it, we cannot univocally identify it as a fertility symbol (Gurina 1956: 243–244). It is possible, however, that in this case the snake symbolises chthonic forces and as it is connected to the underworld (the other world) it represents the realm of underworld and water-world.

In the light of this new information I should also mention a male figure found in burial No. 130 (Gurina 1956: drawings 120, 3; collection MAE, No. 5716–619) that I prefer to categorise as anthropo-zoomorphic. The feet of the figure attract immediate interest: instead of normal human feet it has animal hooves, most likely those of an elk (Figure 5). The style of carving resembles the hooves of a horned anthropomorphic (anthropo-zoomorphic, to be more exact) figurine found in Kubenino (burial No. 2) (Oshibkina & Krainov & Zimina 1992: ill. 69). V. Ravdonikas has considered it a phallic rather than anthropomorphic representation (Ravdonikas 1956: 17).



Figure 5.

I will take a closer look at the interesting findings from burial No. 23, which considering the above are of no lesser importance. Reports of archaeological excavation have revealed that the burial had been ruined during the construction of the limestone quarry. The skeleton's feet were found intact in the original position, but its upper body and hands had been jumbled. Its skull had gone missing and its sex is unidentified. The body is buried 0.5 m (Gurina 1956: 278) underground. It is the most common type of burial in this cemetery – a single burial where the body, facing up, is horizontally stretched out not too deep underground and, like most burials in the cemetery, is oriented towards the East, towards the rising sun.

At the same time burial No. 23 differs from others in its unusually small number of grave goods (Gurina 1956: Prilozhenie I, ill. 12). The burial contained no animal bones, which means that the deceased was not given any grave food. As for jewellery, three plates

made of beaver incisors placed on the body's chest and seven elk incisors in the left hip area in the close vicinity of the ophidio-anthropo-theriomorphic figure have been mentioned. Interestingly enough, one of the two human figures at this cemetery (this is not a lapse of memory, as the third figure is considered anthropo-zoomorphic) was discovered in this burial – namely, the bifacial janiform figurine (Gurina 1956: ill. 120, 2; collection MAE, No. 5716–78). Comparative analysis has revealed that the same technical methods have been used at the mouths of the figure's both faces and at the mouth of the anthropomorphic face. Similar style has been used also for carving the mouth of a female figurine found in burial No. 18. Thus, the cemetery's anthropomorphic figurines may stylistically, although with some variations, belong to the same schematic human representation type.

Regardless of the scarcity of grave goods, burial No. 23, as well as burials Nos. 18 and 130 are remarkable for their unique examples of prehistoric art created by the ancient inhabitants buried at the Oleni Island cemetery. Burials No. 23 and 130 are unique also because the bottom of the grave and bones have been covered with a thick layer (0.04 m/1.6 inches) of ochre, which according to N. Gurina is not characteristic of burials with few grave goods. Speaking about the characteristics of burial No. 23 we should remember that archaeologists distinguish between two complex burial grounds on the Oleni Island cemetery, the northern and southern area, and this particular burial belongs to the southern area (Gurina 1956: ill. 120, 1; collection MAE, No. 5716–103^a). C¹⁴ dating method enabled to determine that the centre of the cemetery was originally located in the northern area and the cemetery extended southwards only later (Gurina 1956: 28, ill. 9). If, considering this, we look at the categorisation of all the island's antler and bone sculpture types, we realise that elk representations have been discovered in the burials of the northern area. Findings with anthropomorphic representations are characteristic of burials in the southern area of the cemetery (Nos. 18 and 23) and snake representations have been found in the burials of the southern (No. 23) and central (No. 57) area of the Oleni Island cemetery.

Consequently, the earlier and more dominant symbol was zoomorphic – the elk representation from the earlier period of the cemetery is related to the elk cult. There occurred also another

type of anthropo-zoomorphic figures, namely human-elk representations (burial No. 130) from the initial period of the necropolis. The elite burials of tribe leaders originate from the same period (Nos. 152–153).

Later on when burials spread to the central area, zoomorphic representations were still used. As suggested by the ophidiomorphic representation (burial No. 57) it was probably around this time that a new cult emerged – worshipping a new creature, the snake. With the emergence of burials in the southern area anthropomorphic figures with novel design of facial features suggestive of ancestral cult appear. Snake representations still exist, though not independently. This period is characterised by a new type of representation – a composite representation of snake, human and elk. This representation, as well as those of human, are typical only to the burials of the southern area, where the number of grave goods is relatively small.

Information stating that the northern area of the cemetery represents the Caucasian anthropological type, whereas the southern area represents the Mongoloid type, is by no means insignificant. The anthropologists' theory claiming a complicated heterogeneous anthropological population on the southern Oleni Island still stands (Stoliar 1994; 1995; Oshibkina 1994). Based on his new research results, I. Gokhman has determined that the main anthropological type of the necropolis was the one containing North-European and Uralic components (according to the classification of G. Debets – eastern Cro-Magnon) with South-European and Siberian Mongoloid features (Gokhman 1994).

Relying on this information it is possible to state that the new type of anthropomorphic representations discovered at the burials of the southern area attest to a change in ritual thinking, connected to a new ethnos, most likely of eastern origin. Even more so because Lapponoid burials are most common in the southern area of the cemetery.

Changes in world concept, which brought along the transformation of the semantic field of all representations, is apparent. The former tradition of worshipping elk and snake underwent changes. It is assumed that the elk motif in the composite representation that

was found in burial No. 23 symbolises genetic memory. All in all we may talk about five types of sculptures in the Oleni Island cemetery – zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, anthropo-zoomorphic, ophidiomorphic and ophidio-anthropomorphic. Sculptures were carved only from the antlers and bones of wild animals, differing thus from the earlier prehistoric objects (those originating in the 7th millennium BCE) of the area: in Verete culture wood was also used and in the peat moss settlement of Vis I no bone objects have been discovered next to wooden, birch-bark and bark objects and wickerwork. As regards artefacts of the Oleni Island cemetery, burial complexes of Peshchanitsy (mid-8th millennium BC) and especially Popovo (7th millennium BC) are of great significance. S. Oshibkina has attributed both to the Verete culture. She argues that the funeral tradition and single findings of the Verete culture bear great resemblance to the Oleni Island cemetery, which continued the tradition of these burial complexes (Oshibkina 1989b). It has also been noted that materials used by the Verete and Oleni Island cultures have analogies in the Bronze Age – namely, the grave goods found from the cemetery associated with the ancestors of Laplanders on the Oleni Island in Kola Bay (Shmidt 1930; collection MAE, 4082).

Thus, new meaningful elements of prehistoric objects found on the Oleni Island expand our understanding of the spiritual culture and sacral sphere, the rituals and customs of prehistoric man inhabiting the coasts of Lake Onega, which in a sense served a regulative role ensuring stability in the community of mainland population.

In combination with other data these new findings will hopefully open the semantics of some phenomena from another aspect, help to analyse the social structure of the hunter-fisher community in greater detail, and specify their ethnic origin. In this sense it seems most practical to investigate the North, particularly the motifs of Lake Onega petroglyphs, but also to study the more recent cultures of the Eurasian taiga zone.

Comments

¹ Collections of the MAE (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography) No. 5716; number of items – 720; number of objects – 1073.

² Analysis under microscope showed that the surface is scratched in a manner suggestive of fine polishing, possibly with ochre. The surface of the bone snake figurine found in the burial No. 23 bears evidence of unfinished treatment.

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