The bear stones of Olkhovka

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Abstract

The complex of sacral stones of Olkhovka is usually dated to the Iron Age and to the Middle Ages. However, there are some facts indicating that the stones could be used by the Neolithic people yet. Finnish/Karelian name of Olkhovka was Lapinlahti (literally: “Sami bay”). The practice of cup stones is unknown in Sami culture, but there is the cult of noticeable stones (the cult of sieidis). The word sieidi/sejjd has no Uralic etymology, but can be explained through Hattic šail – “lord”, “master”. Ancient Sami had contacts with the Neolithic population of the Russian Northwest, which spoke a language that was a juncture between Yeniseian, Hattic, and Caucasian languages. Also a noteworthy fact is that almost all stones with artificially created cups resemble lying/sitting bears, and so ritual practices around these stones could be formed by the Neolithic people yet, who definitely had certain bear rites and bear myths.

Keywords: sacral stones; Sami; pre-Sami substratum; Paja UI Deŋ

1. Introduction to the problem

In the northeastern part of Karelian Isthmus, near the village of Olkhovka, on a hill not far from the bank of Lake Sukhodolskoye, there is a group of sacral stones (fig. 1). These stones are glacially deposited rocks with cups of anthropogenic origin (see for example fig. 2). The area of the site is about 1500 * 500 m, and there are a few dozens of sacred stones on it.

The complex of sacred stones of Olkhovka is usually dated to the Iron Age and to the Middle Ages.

The grounds for this dating are the following: first, the practice of making cups upon stones is considered to be closely connected to the people speaking Finnic languages, which appeared on this territory only in the Iron Age¹, and second, near the complex of sacred stones were found settlements and burials of the 12th – 15th centuries (Lapshin 1995, Saksa 1984). However, the dating of the site through nearby settlements and burials evidently is indirect dating. And direct dating of the site is impossible since current archeology doesn’t know ways to date directly the cups themselves made upon the stones.

Thus, it is possible to state that now there is no reliable estimation of the time when the site start used by the ancient people. And also there are some indirect facts indicating that the stones could have begun to be used by ancient people as a sacral place not in the Iron Age, but much earlier.

¹ Iron Age timeframes for the territory of northwest Russia are the following: middle of 1st millennium BC – the middle of the 1st millennium AD.
In the current paper I would like to consider facts indicating that the stones could be used in the Neolithic period yet.

Fig. 1. The location of Olkhovka (drawn by the author)
Fig. 2. A stone with artificially made cups (photo by the author)

2. The trace of Sami

It is a noteworthy fact that the name that was given by people speaking Finnic languages to Olkhovka was Lapinlahti (see fig. 3) that literally means “Sami bay” (lapin means “of Sami” and lahti means “bay” in Finnish and in Karelian).

Fig. 3. Lapinlahti village on a Finnish map of 1923 (image source – Ольховка)
Before 1818 lake Sukhodolskoye had no direct effluent to Lake Ladoga and had effluent only to Vuoksi (fig. 1). The river Burnaya (fig. 1) emerged in the spring of 1818 when due to the rapid melting of snow and heavy rains the waters of the lake rose strongly and broke through into the Lake Ladoga forming the river Burnaya (see Burnaya).

Before 1818 the lake Sukhodolskoye was actually a long and narrow bay and probably the southern end of the lake could bear the name of Lapinlahti. Thus, there was a compact Sami population near the complex of sacral stones.

It should be noted that the practice of cup stones is unknown in Sami culture, but there is the cult of noticeable stones (the cult of *sieidis*).

3. The trace of Paja Ul Deŋ

The Sami word *sieidi/sejdd* is used to denote sacral stones; originally this word means “spirit”, “tutelary”. This word has no Uralic etymology, but can be connected with the Hattic word *šail* – “lord”, “master” (see: Akulov 2020b: 3). It is more accurate to translate the word *sejdd* as “master”, “lord”, “tutelary” rather than just “deity” since translations “master”, “lord”, “tutelary” better express the concept that existed in the Stone Age (see: Akulov 2020c: 10). The word *sieidi/sejdd* was borrowed not from Hattic language, but from the language of the Neolithic inhabitants of the Russian Northwest.

Sami were the first people speaking a Uralic language who spread the East European plain and they had direct and pretty durable contacts with the Neolithic population. These Neolithic inhabitants of the territories of the Russian Northwest are conventionally named The People of Big Water, in their hypothetical reconstructed language this name has the following view: Paja Ul Deŋ [paðʒaul’dεŋ] (Akulov 2020a). It is possible to say that Paja Ul Deŋ spoke a language that was a juncture between Yeniseian family on the one hand and Hattic and Caucasian family on the other, but actually seems to be closer to Caucasian languages and to Hattic rather than to Yeniseian family (Akulov 2020b, 2021).

It is logical to suppose that ancient Sami borrowed not just a single word/concept, but borrowed the whole complex of ideas and certain ritual practices that existed around the stones.

4. Interpretations

A noteworthy fact is that almost all stones on which there are artificially created cups resemble lying and sitting bears (see fig. 4 and fig. 5) that suggests that ritual practices around these stones were formed by The People of Big Water yet, who evidently had certain bear rites and bear myths as well as any other ethnic groups whose main activities were hunting and fishing. It looks possible that Paja Ul Deŋ intentionally chipped off some parts of a stone in order to increase its resemblance with a bear (see fig. 4).

It is highly likely that the stones were somehow included in the system of hunting and/or fishing rituals.

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2 *Sieidi* is the form exiting in Northern Sami, and *sejdd* is the form existing in Kildin Sami.
3 *Šail* is a transliteration while actual transcription of the word is */šail/.
4 The Neolithic inhabitants of the territories of Saint Petersburg and Leningrad region are conventionally named The People of Big Water since whole their life was closely connected with Littorina Sea and Lake Ladoga.
Fig. 4. A stone that looks like a sitting bear (photo by the author)

Fig. 5. A stone that looks like a lying bear (photo by the author)
Also, it should be kept in mind that ancient Sami definitely had their own hunting/fishing rites and evidently had certain bear myths and bear rites elaborated independently. And ancient Sami bear myths and bear rites could be influenced by those of Paja Ul Deˀŋ and/or mixed with those of Paja Ul Deˀŋ.

5. Conclusion

Thus, we can say that the sacred stones of Olkhovka are a multi-layered site, that these stones were used by the Neolithic people, and that the most ancient ritual practices associated with these stones were formed in the society of Paja Ul Deˀŋ yet. Then, certain ritual practices associated with stones were borrowed by the Sami, and then by the peoples speaking Finnic languages. The practice of cup stones is the latest practice and is associated with people speaking Finnic languages, however, it did not arise out of nowhere, but on the basis of more ancient rituals that existed around the stones; in other words: cups were made not on any stones, but on those that were already included in certain rituals by the previous populations.

References


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