
Tracking symbols of death and afterlife: overview of burial customs of the Late Stone Age Russian Plain hunters-gatherers-fishers.

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Résumé

People represent essential information that needs to be either preserved or transferred – through symbols. The possibility to code the immense amount of information and to embody ideas in such a concise way let people use symbols efficiently as a foundation for ritual performance. Since mortuary practices as all ritual activities always consist of many steps and signs, we also may track symbols and try to explain them on the material of burial sites' excavations, even though symbols' interpretation might have a large number of possible meanings (e.g., Genep 1909).

The current report is dedicated to first study results of Late Stone Age hunter-gatherer burial sites located in the central part of Russian Plain, where the so-called Volosovo archaeological culture existed during 3500-2700 cal BC. Large and arguably long temporal Volosovo pit-houses, as well as numerous necropolises with complicated structure, are archaeologically well-known nowadays. Within this communication, burial sites Sakhtysh II, VIII, Chyornaya Gora, and Panfilovo were studied. The collection in focus comes from the Volodary site (Nizhniy Novgorod district, excavated in 1946-1947, 1970-1973 and kept in the State Historical Museum, Moscow). The material is mostly unknown to western specialists and may represent essential parallels to hunter-gatherer burial sites from Baltic and Eastern Europe (e.g. Zvejnieki, Tamula, Sope).

During previous studies of Volosovo burial sites, scholars characterized burial assemblages and tracked the sites' evolution using the typological approach. However, nowadays it became necessary to pose qualitatively new questions related to ritual's nature.

In my opinion, the following elements might be considered as symbols due to archaeological context, the recurrence of these features and the existence of reasonably close ethnographical parallels:

1. Body's orientation with a head to the water source.
2. Manipulations with the body (intentional disarticulation, ritual murder, ritual physical abuses).
3. Remains of specific animals in graves – a guide to the afterlife or a social group's totem

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(Propp 2000).

4. Dog burials nearby graves as a possible symbol of an afterlife guard.
 5. The burial sites' location at the spots of abandoned Volosovo settlements as a symbol of afterlife household.
 6. The fire and the use of ochre as a symbol of transformation and purification.
 7. Ritual 'hoards' as symbols of memory, care for deceased people, and worship.
- Having observed these symbols, we will get a little closer to the understanding of both ritual's nature and the underlying ideas of burial performances.

Mots-Clés: mortuary archaeology, archaeology of ritual, ritual life of huntergatherers, Late Stone Age, burial sites, interpretation of burial objects, archaeology of Russian Plain