

Stanislav V. Bel'skiy, Mark M. Shakhnovich & Ville Laakso 'NOVGORODIAN' STONE CROSSES FROM THE WESTERN LADOGA REGION

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INTRODUCTION

The monumental white-stone crosses of north-western Russia have often attracted the attention of staurographers (researchers of crosses; Spitsyn 1903: 203–34; Sedov 1976: 102–7; Yashkina 1998: 75–89). Many aspects of interest in these objects are related to the fact that the problem of stone crosses has become a component of the vast subject of Christianisation.

Roughly-shaped stone crosses or gravestones made of local rocks are found at quite a few medieval–17th century cemeteries both in Karelia (e.g. two crosses in Kuuppala Kalmistomäki in Kurkijoki, Fig. 1:3; see Uino 1997: 245–7, 394) and in present-day Finnish Karelia (Fig. 1:4–8; see Laakso 2014: 102). These finds are examples of aesthetic preferences during the establishment of Orthodoxy. The present publication presents one of the newly-found examples discovered in the north-western Ladoga region, in the cemetery of Kylälahti (Figs. 1–2), into scientific discussion.

RESEARCH HISTORY

The medieval cemetery Kylälahti Kalmistomäki (Fig. 1:1), situated in the vicinity of the village of Hiitola, was excavated in 2006–9 (Laakso & Belskiy 2018). The burial ground occupies the north-western slope of a rocky hill, 0.2 km west of the shore of Lake Ladoga (Laakso & Belskiy 2018: Figs. 2, 5–6). During the excavations, 92 burials were investigated, over 50 of them with

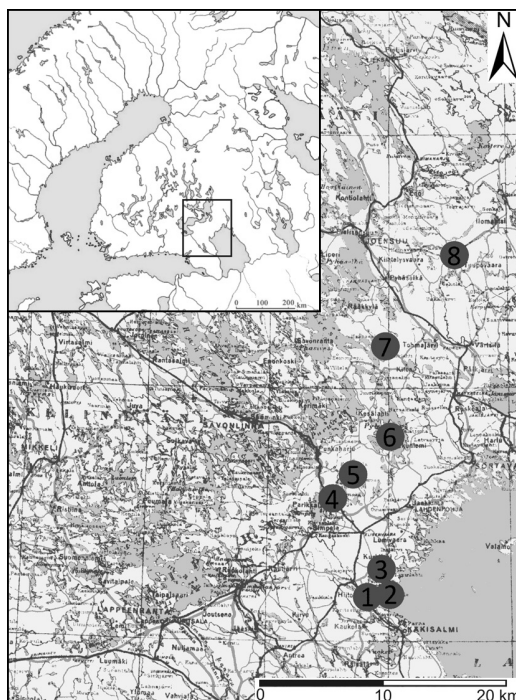


Fig. 1. Distribution of grave stones in north-western Ladoga region and eastern Finland; 1) Hiitola Kylälahti Kalmistomäki, 2) Hiitola Kilpola Kauppilanmäki, 3) Kurkijoki Kuuppala Kalmistomäki, 4) Parikkala Järvenpää Surkko, 5) Parikkala (Saari) Saarenkylä Loson kalmisto, 6) Parikkala (Uukuniemi) Uukuniemi Papinniemi, 7) Kitee Muljula Muljulan kalmisto, 8) Joensuu (Tuupovaara) Kovero Kirkkopelto. Map: V. Laakso, layout: S. Bel'skiy.



Fig. 2. Possible place where the Kylälahti limestone cross was installed (shown by arrow). Photo: S. Bel'skiy.

accompanying grave goods dating back to the 13th–15th centuries. It can be assumed that this place was the cemetery of the Kylälahti *po-gost* (parish) – the centre of the administrative district during the corresponding period. One of the most significant finds was the discovery of a fragmentary four-point stone cross carved from single limestone block and, undoubtedly, associated with the necropolis complex.

THE KYLÄLAHTI LIMESTONE CROSS: SIZE, MATERIAL AND DECORATION

In total, 14 fragments of the central part of the cross and its three arms were found within the excavation areas (Laakso & Belskiy 2018: 30, Fig. 9). Very short note about this find has already been published (Laakso & Belskiy 2018: 276, Fig. 143). However, the limited volume of that publication did not allow the presentation of all information about this artefact and its general historical context.

The lower and right parts of the cross are missing (Figs. 3–5). By size, the fragments can be divided into ‘large’ – 6 examples (max. 25 x 30 cm) – ‘average’ – 5 items (max. 20 x 11 cm) – and ‘small’ – 3 objects (max. 6 x 4 cm). The distribution area of the fragments was 5.5 m², but most of them were collected from an area of

4 m², in the fill of very shallow graves (0–0.15 m from the topsoil).

The reconstructed height of the cross is 0.7 m, and the diameter of the circle is also 0.7 m (Fig. 5). The smallest width of the horizontal arm is 0.19 m, the smallest width of the upper arm is 0.21 m and the largest is 0.42 m. The thickness of the object decreases from the ends to the cen-



Fig. 3. Fragment of the Kylälahti limestone cross in situ. Photo: S. Bel'skiy.

tre, from 6–7.5 cm to 4.5 cm. It may be assumed that this parameter was not fundamentally important in this case. Along the perimeter of the edge of the front side there is a convex fillet 2–2.5 cm wide. The reverse side of the cross, as in most cases, is smooth and undecorated.

Yellow slabby limestone-shellrock, easy to process, was used as a raw material. On the surface there was numerous small cavities left by lost inclusions. All rough surfaces of the cross have noticeable traces of slight grinding.

On the cross from Kylälahti, the decoration consists of a few ornamental zones in the centre and at the ends of the arms (Fig. 5). The latter are balanced symmetrically with respect to the vertical axis of the central stem. In the centre of the cross is a flat, 2 mm high relief representation of an eight-point cross with a slanting lower crossbeam. It is placed on a one-step pedestal of Golgotha of a fairly simple form. The crucifix is carved very accurately, precisely in the centre of the object, following central symmetry. The width of its middle and (right-slanting) lower crossbeams is identical with the width of Golgotha. On top of the cross is a representation of ‘bird’ (dove), facing left. His legs touch the upper part of the cross, his body, head and fan-shaped tail are well-discernible. Above the bird, at the head of the cross, slightly bulging letters ‘НИ’ under a titlo (diacritic symbol) are visible. They are the beginning of the word НИКА (VICTORY), which is traditionally divided into two syllables. The letters are 4.5 cm high. The maximum dimensions of the carved cross are 24 x 10.5 cm, together with the ‘bird’ – 28 x 10.5 cm. On the left arm, under a titlo, the letters ‘ICY’ (Jesus) are shown. ‘I’ is represented in the form of a cross with three crossbeams, characteristic for the period of 12th–15th centuries (Panchenko 2002: 187). The monogram inscriptions were usually placed on the arms of a cross. In our case, reconstruction of most of them is impossible due to the absence of one third of the surface of the cross, but there is another titlo at the base of the artefact. It may be assumed that under the centre of the cross was the end of НИКА monogram – ‘КА’. A ‘XC’ monogram was possibly carved on the right arm. A number of the distinguishable representations are perhaps semantically more important than a simple reproduction of standard canonical symbols. The dove, a symbol of



Fig. 4. Fragment of the Kylälahti limestone cross in situ. Photo: S. Bel'skiy.

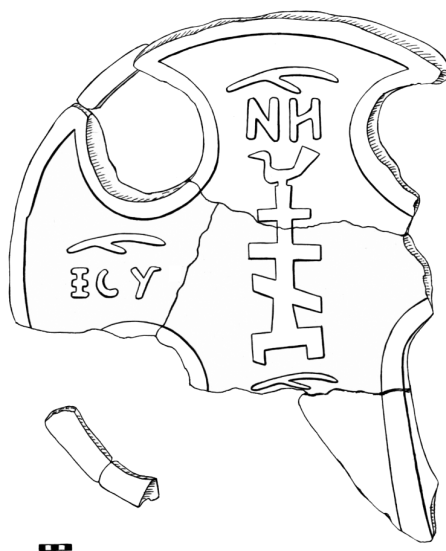


Fig. 5. The Kylälahti limestone cross. Drawing: M. Shakhnovich.

the Holy Spirit, is an infrequent element of the decoration of stone crosses.

Parts of the fillets around the artefact have traces of a reddish colour. The use of different hues of red for painting crosses on a common yellow background corresponds to Orthodox symbolism of the early Middle Ages.

In addition to fragments of the cross, an elongated piece of sandstone, measuring 1.1 x 0.28 x 0.17 m and with a neat hole in the centre, was found c 3.6 m to the north-east of the find spot of the cross (Laakso & Belskiy 2018: 163, Fig. 94). It can be assumed that this was a special pedestal for the cross. The hole (0.2 x 0.09 m) has a nearly rectangular shape with rounded corners. Hence, the stone cross from Kylälahti was dismantlable and perhaps due to the 'inconvenient' shape of its pedestal, it was necessary to additionally dig it into the ground. It is also possible, that it was fixed in the fissure of a large rock, slightly dominating the area of the cemetery (Fig. 2).

PROBLEMS OF DATING

In northern Europe, the tradition of raising stone crosses is known from the late 8th century onwards (Yashkina 1998: 75). In the 14th–16th centuries lime-stone crosses became widespread in the rural kurgan-zhalnik cemeteries of Novgorod Land (Yashkina 1998: 77, 80).

The object under consideration belongs to the type of 'Novgorodian' zhalnik-grave (burials lined with stones) crosses made of stone slab and mounted on a stone pedestal with a 'specially-made socket for this purpose' (Sedov 1962: 342). The majority of researchers follow in their studies the simple classification proposed for 'Russian' stone crosses in north-western Russia by staurographer A.A. Spitsyn in the beginning of the 20th century: gravestone monuments 'without a circle' and 'in a circle' (Spitsyn 1903: 206, 220). The Kylälahti cross is the so-called 'cross in a circle', i.e. a sign combining two Christian symbols in one figure – a circle-nimbus and a cross. The form of the cross is the 'Greek' one, traced from the 6th century: it has approximately equally long arms with convex, strongly widening ends. The pointed ends of the arms are connected by arch-shaped 'bridges'. The widening lower part of the cross would have come out of the circle and, possibly, may have ended with a protruding tenon serving as a junction with the base.

According to indirect evidence, the find in question can be dated to the period of functioning of the cemetery. The representation of an eight-point cross without additional attributes, i.e. the instruments of the Passion of Christ, is an early feature that allows us to date the find to the period

up to the 15th century (Sedov 1976: 106). In addition, the cross on the pedestal/throne is a formal indicator of the system of bishopric rule, which is clearly demonstrated in the sphragistic materials of the 14th–15th centuries (Yanin 1970: 53).

THE CROSS FROM KILPOLA

Another find worthy of attention within the framework of this article is a rather small 'Novgorodian' stone cross from the Island of Kilpola (Fig. 1:2), c 4 km south-east of the Kylälahti cemetery (KM 2590:17; see Uino 1997: 219; Hiekkänen 2003: 499). This cross was first published by T. Schwindt in 1893 (Schwindt 1893: 56).

According to M. Hiekkänen, the cross is made of limestone-mixed sandstone. It is 0.57 m high and was mounted on a special stone-slab pedestal. The cross was found in 1886 on a hill near the lake shore (Schwindt 1893: 105). An equal-armed four-pointed cross without a pedestal is carved in the centre of the object. Despite the identical morphology, it differs from the Kylälahti cross in laconism, that is, there are no carved inscriptions and symbols traditional for Orthodox artefacts. A.A. Spitsyn (1903: 226) believed that the 'simplicity' of the cross from Kilpola was due to the fact that it was manufactured on the spot. However, this cross is identical to other numerous examples of 'Novgorodian' smooth white-stone crosses of unpretentious decorative design (Shlyapkin 1906: Tables XXI, XXII; Kochkareva 1974: Fig. 2). Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that it was not manufactured in the western Ladoga region, but in stone-carving shops of the Novgorod neighbourhoods. As an addition to Orthodox antiquities from this area of the Ladoga shores, we can mention the 1922 find from the village of Kilpola (KM 3641:1–4; see Uino 1997: 187, Fig. 6:10, 12). A small hoard was discovered here, including a silver pendant clasp with a representation of a 'flowering cross'.

CONCLUSIONS

At present, according to our information, Kylälahti is the westernmost find point of 'Novgorodian' stone crosses 'in a circle'. It is a gravestone monument, which is confirmed by its belonging

to the context of this medieval cemetery. Perhaps it was not part of a separate burial, but had a general attributive meaning for the entire rural cemetery.

In general, the uniformity of the inscriptions and the standardisation of the general morphology of the stone crosses 'in a circle' indicates that they were manufactured in a one workshop or that there was a very widespread tradition of making them. Stone crosses can also have been used as landmark stones.

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