

Evolution of the Burial Rite of the Finnic Population of the Eastern coast of Lake Peipus in the Beginning of the second Millennium AD

A successful enquiry into the evolution of the burial rite of different ethnical groups of the ancient population of the north-west of the Novgorodland can be done using the data from large burial grounds, excavated with the use of modern methods. Belonging in this connection is a large burial complex of the 10th—13th centuries, situated on the east coast of Lake Peipus near the Zalakhtovie village. Originally it contained no less than 300 mound embankments and timber and earthen structures. The Finnic ethnicity of the site is indisputable. Especially clearly the Finnic traits of the Zalakhtovians can be observed in the character of their attire and material culture. Thus, their clothes were decorated with geometrical designs of small bronze spirals, the women wore shawls on the head fastened with small pins, to the upper sarafan-like skirt they fastened breast decorations of pins and chainbearers and to the belt a massive sheath was attached. Among the personal ornaments zoomorphic pendants were widely used. The types of hand -made pottery have analogies among the ceramics of the Baltic-Finnic tribes. In

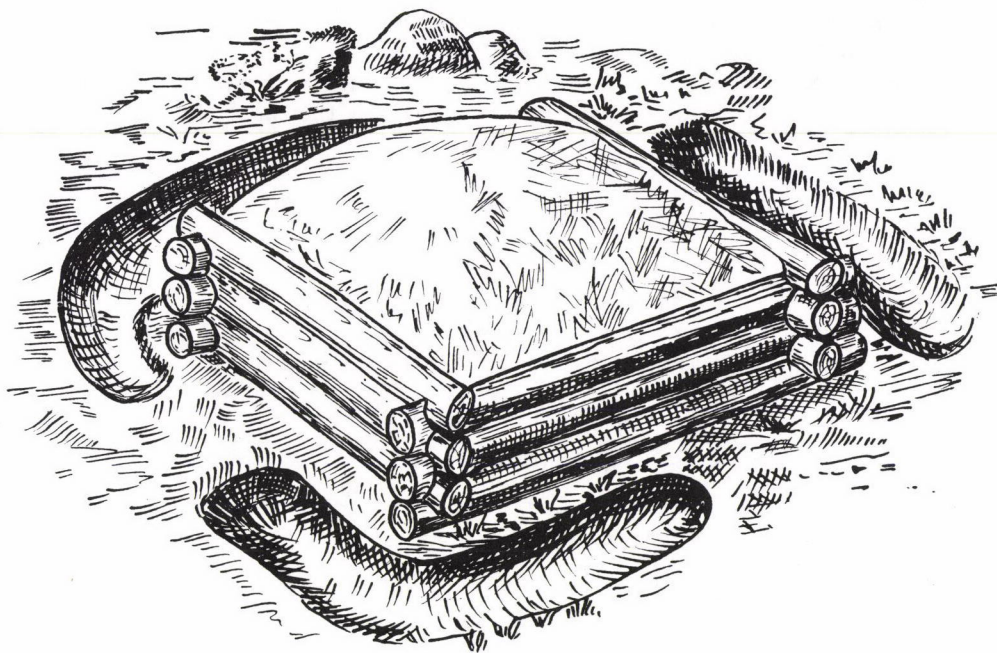


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the "home of the dead".

general, the complex of the Zalakhtovie material culture (types and sets of decorations, the style of clothes and cloth decoration motifs) is close to the antiquities of the Ests.¹

Extensive excavations of the central part of the burial ground provided new observations on the formation of the burial rites of the population concerned. It has been determined that in the 11th century during the transition from cremation to inhumation Zalakhtovians had various types of burial rites which were manifested in the construction of different types of burial constructions at same time.

The main part of the adult population were buried in timber and earth structures which could be defined as "homes of the dead". They were square wooden log-house structures approximately 2×2 m in size and possibly up to 1 m high (Fig. 1). Earth was found only inside the structures overlapping the burials cremated elsewhere. The structures are similar to the timber and earth structures of the ancient Finns which are known from the area between the Ladoga region and the Upper Volga. Together with the "homes of the dead" a series of lighter wooden constructions was found at Zalakhtovie. In these, charred slabs remained along the edges of square (1.44×1.80 m, 1.70×1.90 m) or round (0.80×1.30 m) hollows (0.06—0.10 m deep), in the center of which pits were situated (0.30—0.50 m in diameter and 0.10—0.21 m deep) with remains of cremations carried out elsewhere (Fig. 2). Furthermore, interred cremations without any evident traces of surface structures were discovered. These were ordinary round pits 0.30—0.50 m diameter and 0.10—0.26 m deep containing remains of cremation and accompanying grave-goods.

The determination of the calcinated bones of the burials made by N.M. Ermolova showed that in the "homes of the dead" the adult population was buried, both men and women. The lighter wooden structures were erected exclusively over the burials of children and the calcinated bones of children and males were deposited into the ground pits without any wooden parts. Thus, the difference in the burial structures was related primarily to the sex and age of the dead.

In the 11th century the first inhumations appeared. Originally they were exclusively in hollow pits 1.56—1.75 m wide, 1.80—3.25 m long and 0.70—1.28 m deep with the walls supported with wood and overlapped with flooring. In fact, they were the same "homes of the dead", only sunk into the earth. It is noteworthy that in this group of burials men and children were buried in all but one. By the end of the 11th century

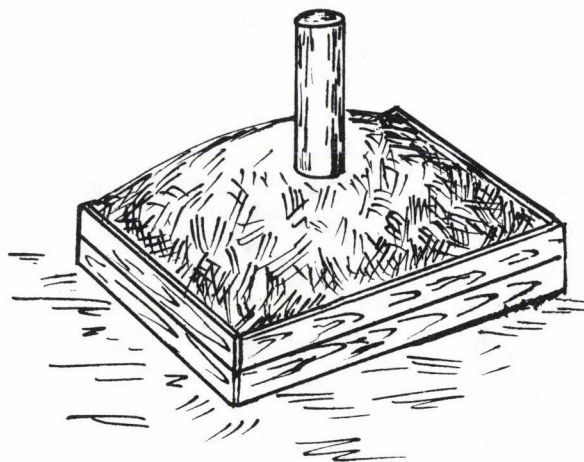


Fig. 2. Reconstruction of the light wooden construction placed over remains of cremation.

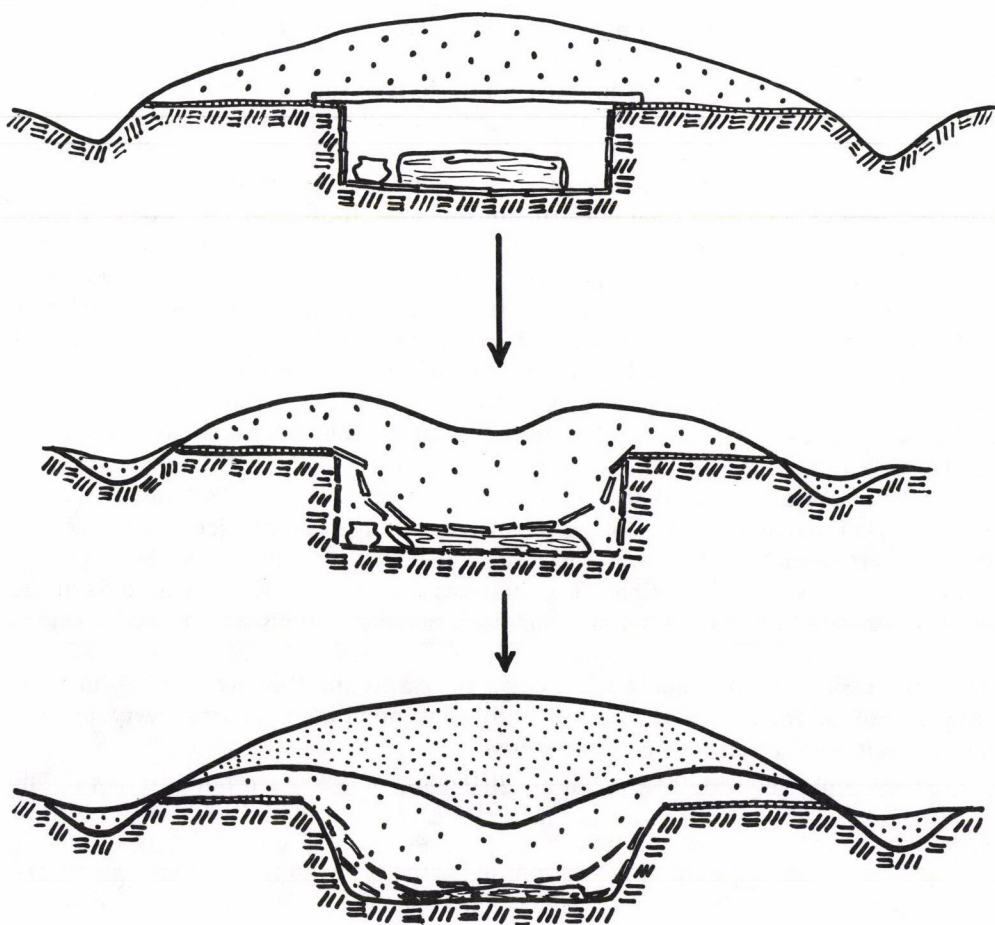


Fig. 3. Schematic presentation of a mound with the pit (three stages).

mound embankments came into custom and all population groups were buried under mounds (Fig. 3). The pits were still constructed of hollow form.

The data show that during the transition from the rite of cremation to inhumation both types coexisted during a certain period of time. During the period when men and partly children were already buried in pits according to the inhumation rite, women in general were cremated. Thus, the sex and age of the dead played a significant role during the change of rites among the Zalakhtovie population.

In the 12th century — still in the stage of mounds with interments into sunken graves — the burial rite in Zalakhtovie was stabilized and became characterized by uniformity for all sex and age groups. By the end of the 12th—13th centuries during the replacement of embankments with ground pits by mounds with surface burials, changes in the character of burial of different sex and age population groups occurred simultaneously.

The transition from burials in pits under mounds to burials on the surface did not take place suddenly, but was gradually prepared in the course of the simplification of the pit burials. Thus, in the mounds of the 11th — the beginning of the 12th centuries the pits were comparatively deep (over 0.80 m), overlapped with flooring, with the walls

planked with wood. At the same time in the mounds of the end of the 12th century the depth lessened (less than 0.50 m) and often traces of the wall planking and wooden overlappings begin to be absent in them. Thus, in later mounds with sunken pits the idea of a burial cell as a home for the dead is lost and the burial "moves up" to the surface.

A compulsory detail of the burial rite was to deposit a certain set of accompanying utensils. During the period when the Zalakhtovie population buried their dead according to the cremation rite the grave-goods were placed in the pyre along with the corpse. Burnt and partly melted objects together with the calcinated bones were placed into a small pit in the ground. Only the features which played an independent role in the burial rite bear no traces of fire. Thus in particular, vessels were broken at the moment of burial and their sherds were scattered around the burial pit or among separate burial structures. In one case a vessel was used as the original lid of the pit containing the remains of the cremation. Another burial was analogously covered with a wooden shield, an iron shield-boss of which has remained. The shield, in its turn, was pierced with a spear and an axe. In the 11th century among the Zalakhtovie population a rite of spoiling of arms and tools was widespread as well as a rite of sticking big objects into the earth near the burials.

In the burials of the inhumation rite decorations and elements of clothing were situated where they were worn in life. Occasionally separate decorations were placed beside in a birch-bark box as gifts. Consequently the dead was clothed in festive dress with a set of decorations corresponding to his sex and age status and then wrapped up in bark. In such configuration the burial was put on the bottom of the pit. Arms, everyday tools and utensils were placed beside the corpse.

Each sex and age group of the burials differed having its own burial tool set. The complex of objects characteristic of male burials is extraordinarily laconic, i.e. arms (axes and spearheads), everyday utensils (knives, firesteels, whetstones, adzes, barking irons) as well as modest finds of personal ornaments and elements of clothing (brooches, finger-rings, bracelets, buckles and sometimes belt fittings). In the group of burials performed according to the cremation rite trading artefacts are found (scales and weights).

The basis of the female complexes consists of various personal ornaments and elements of clothing. Neck-rings, bead necklaces often in combination with various pendants, hair pins, breast decorations consisting of pins, chainbearers and chains belong to the especially female categories of ornaments. In the female burials, in comparison with the male ones, other implements and agricultural tools are represented, corresponding to the production activities of the female part of society. These are few: scissors, sickles, hoes and in rare cases spindle-whorls.

The complex of artefacts of a child burial in general consists of the same objects as an adult burial, viz. neck-rings, brooches, bracelets and finger-rings and in girls burials beads. Amulet-pendants are a characteristic feature of a child's set of artefacts.

Having considered the features of the burial rite of the Finnic population of the XI—XII centuries in Zalakhtovie, it can be noted that in the beginning, i.e., in the 11th century the sex and age of the dead determined in many aspects the differences in the burial rituals of different population groups. At that time the timber and earthen structures (the "homes of the dead") were often erected there. Their presence indicates that such structures were spread much wider among the Finnic population of the Novgorod land than previously assumed. The discovery of structures of similar type in the excavations led by V.A. Nazarenko and A.N. Bashenkin in the north-eastern parts of the Novgorod land substantiates this observation as well.² Further investigations of large burial

grounds will enable us to present a more complete picture of the evolution of the burial rituals of the ancient Russian and Finnic populations of the north-west of the Novgorod land.

N.V. Khvoschinskaya

EVOLUTION OF THE BURIAL RITE OF THE FINNIC POPULATION OF THE EASTERN COAST OF LAKE PEIPUS IN THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND MILLENNIUM AD

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