

The orientation of the dead in the Finno-Ugrian cemeteries of the early Middle Ages

In the early Middle Ages the Finno-Ugrians were divided into many tribal groups each with its own distinctive funeral ceremonies. Hence, it is necessary to briefly characterize the orientation of burial in each ethnolinguistic region.

In the second half of the first millennium B.C. in the Land of the Ests¹ there existed a cremation rite of burying cremated remains in stone tombs in cemeteries surrounded by fences or in the ground. From the 11th—12th centuries along with the cremation rite inhumation was widely practised (burial in stone tombs or in the ground). The corpse was buried with the head to the north (Fig. 1). Later under the influence of Christianity, the dead were laid with their heads pointing to the west.

A similar situation can be found in the Lands of the Suomi (Finnish) and Häme tribes. The corpses which were buried in the ground were laid with the head to the north or the west with some variations. The latter came about because of the influence of Christianity.

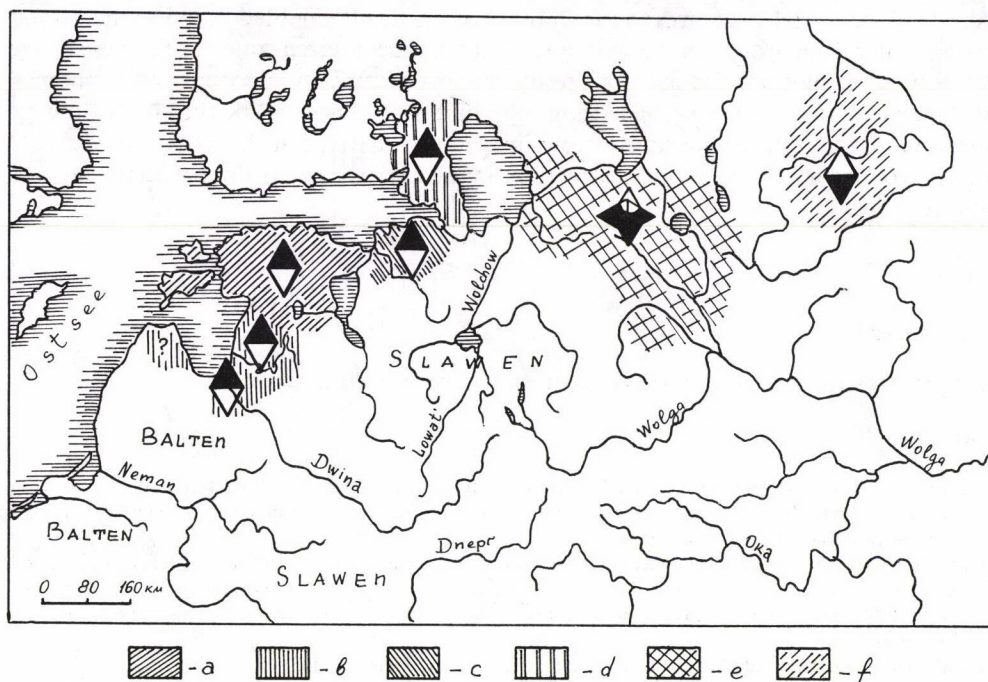


Fig. 1. The orientation of the dead in the Finno-Baltic region:

a — the Eastes area, b — the Livs area, c — the Vodians area; d — the Korelians area; e — the Vepsian area; f — the Zavolotch Tchud area.

The Daugav Livs buried their dead in the ground using chiefly the inhumation rite, with the head laid to the north, sometimes to the north-west or north-east. Relics of the cremation rite can sometimes be discovered as well.² The second group of the Livs inhabited the Lower Gauya region. The dead were buried there in barrows with the head laid to the north. Up to 20 % of the barrows show evidence of cremation.³ The burial monuments of the Kurzeme Livs have not been sufficiently investigated. In the graves the heads of the male bodies are laid to the north-east with those of females and children having no strict rules of orientation. The Kurzeme Livs lived among the Balts and partly mixed with them. The above-mentioned gives no ground for any conclusions.

The burial monuments of the Vodians and Ingrians date from the period when the tribes had a common territory and culture with the Slavs. In the Slav-Vodian group of barrows and in the graves of the Vodians and Ingrians one can find burials with a meridional orientation (with the head laid to the north)⁴ suggesting that this kind of position is typical of them. The Korelian cemeteries of the first centuries of the second millennium A.D. reveal mainly the inhumation rite (earlier the cremation rite was widespread) with the meridional orientation of the dead with seasonal shifts to the north-east or north-west.⁵

In the Vepsian region during the second half of the first millennium A.D. the cremation rite prevailed. Graves and barrows revealing the inhumation rite date from the

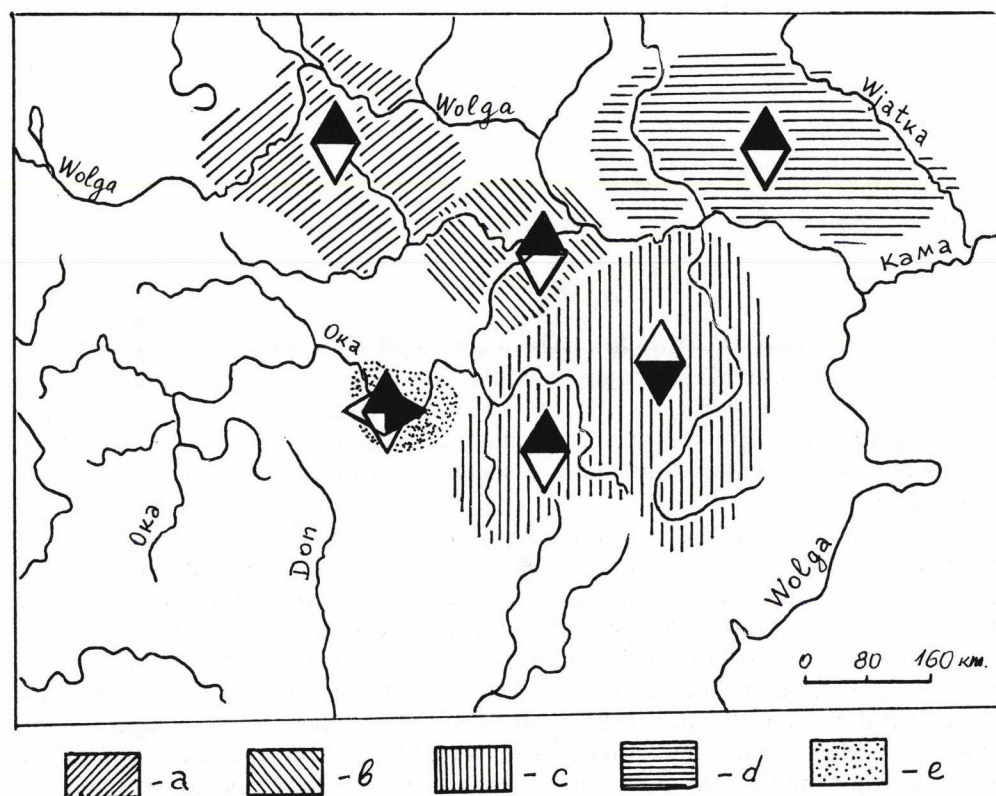


Fig. 2. The orientation of the dead in the Finno-Volga region:
a — the Merya area; b — the Muroma area; c — the Mordvins area; d — the Cheremis area; e — the Riazan-Oka cemeteries area.

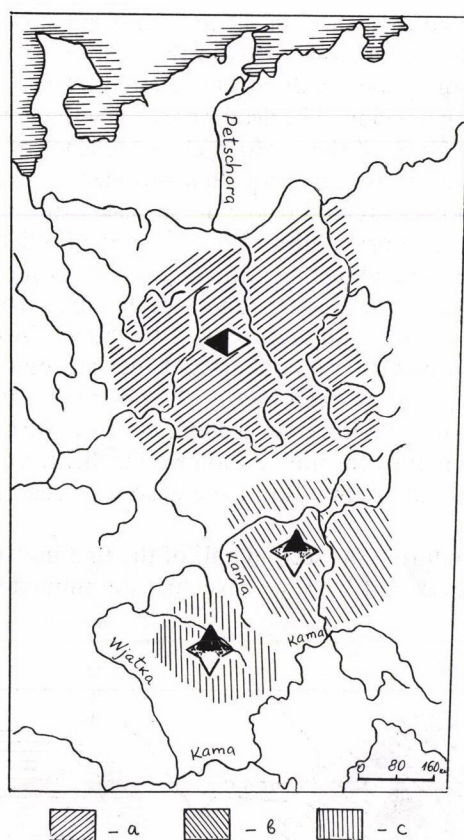


Fig. 3. The orientation of the dead of the Finno-Permian region in the 11th—14th centuries: a — the Vym culture area; b — the Rodanov culture area; c — the Chepets culture area.

11th—13th centuries. They give evidence of the Vepsian's integration with the Slavs, and in the south-western Ladoga area with the Scandinavians. The orientation of the dead in the Vepsian region varies, but the southern orientation of earlier times, which is considered to be Vepsian proper, predominated.⁶ The orientation of the dead with the head to the west or sometimes to the east can be attributed here to the rites of newly-arrived tribes.

The cemeteries of the 11th—13th centuries investigated in the area of the Zavolotch Tchuds prove that here the southern orientation of the dead was common.⁷

Thus, the eastern Baltic-Finnish group of tribes which in contrast to the western one laid their dead with the heads pointing to the south can be singled out.

The Merya, a Finno-Volga tribe, occupied mainly the eastern part of the territory between the Volga and Kliazma. Their burials in which the orientation of the dead can be defined date from the time of Slav settlement in this area. The orientation of the dead in the Merya cemeteries varies (NNW, NW, SE, E).⁸ But the orientation of the graves dating from the 5th—10th centuries and that of the barrows indicates that the Merya buried their dead with the head pointing to the north (Fig. 2).

The northern orientation was also typical of the Muroma burials of the early Middle Ages, as well as of all the investigated cemeteries of the 5th—11th centuries.⁹

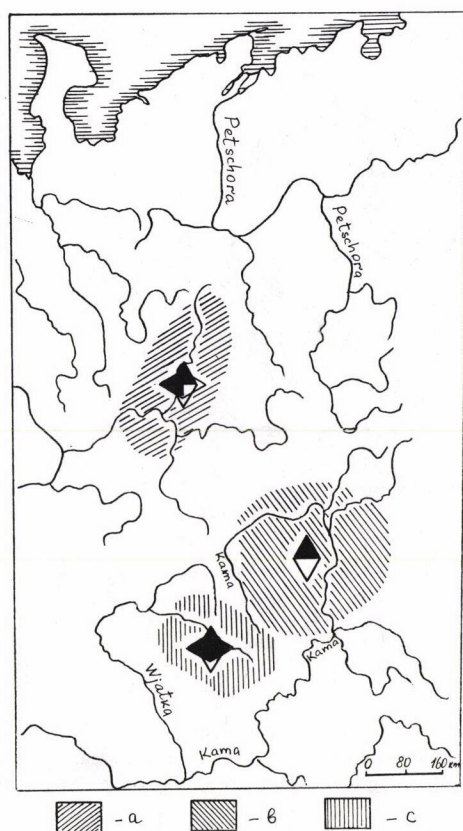


Fig. 4. The orientation of the dead of the Finno-Permian region in the second half of the 1st millennium A.D.: a — the Vanvizdin culture area; b — the Kharino-Lomatovo culture area; c — the Polom culture area.

Alongside the northern orientation the southern orientation occurs in the Podboltievo, Malishevo, and Bezvodnino cemeteries. The eastern orientation which was discovered in some of the Malishevo, Podboltievo and Kotchkino cemeteries seems to be quite alien.

The Raizan-Oka cemeteries belong to the tribes which formed as a result of the territorial and ethnic merging of the native Finno-Ugric tribes and the newly arrived Balts. Studies of the cemeteries shows that for the Finno-Ugric ethnic group burials with the head to the north are typical, and for the Balts burials to the east are typical.

According to the orientation of the dead, mainly to the north or to the south, the Mordvin cemeteries are divided into two local groups. In the basin of the Tsna and in the territory between the Tsna and Moksha the dead in the 6th—14th centuries were laid with their heads pointing to the north. But farther to the north of the Mordvin area the dead were buried with the head pointing to the south. Some scholars believe that the southern orientation is typical of the Moksha; the northern one for the Erz.

In the Cheremis area of the 5th—11th centuries the rites of cremation and inhumation coexisted. For burying the cremation remains graves were made of the same form and size as for inhumation. In the 12th—13th centuries the inhumation rite dominated everywhere. According to the orientation of the graves the typical direction for the Chere-

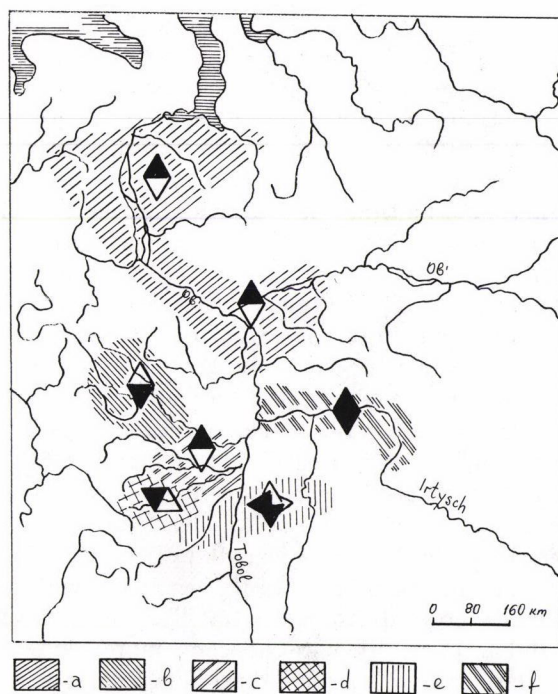


Fig. 5. The orientation of the dead in the Ugrian region:
 a — the area of Kintusovo-type antiquities; b — the Yudino culture area; c — the area of Moltchanovo-type antiquities; d — the area of Makushkino-type antiquities; e — the Bakal culture area; f — the Ust-Ishim culture area.

mis was the meridional position with the northern orientation.¹⁰ The western orientation of the dead can also be found in the cemeteries of the 11th—13th centuries, probably as a result of Slav influence. In the cemetery of the Tchiertovo Gorodishche dating from the 6th—7th centuries, the dead were found to be oriented to the south-west, in the Potchinkovo cemetery of the 12th—13th centuries to the south-east.

In summarizing the rites of the Finno-Volga tribes, it can be noted that here, as well as among the Baltic-Finnish tribes, the northern orientation of the dead dominated except in the burials of the Moksha in which they were placed in the opposite direction.

The orientation of the dead of the Finno-Permian group varies in cases. Thus, in the Vym cemeteries (Fig. 3) of the Komi-Zyryans of the 11th—14th centuries, the main orientation was meridional, but this comprises only about 45 % of the investigated burial sites. The latitudinal orientation is typical for 17.9 % of the burials under investigation. But to the burials of this type should probably be attributed the graves oriented to the south-west and north-east (24 %), because there are no bodies oriented to the south in the Vym cemeteries. Thus, the number of burials with latitudinal orientation rise to 42.5 %. In comparison, a small number of graves (9.6 %) contain bodies with intermediate orientation between the meridional and latitudinal.

The difference of orientation of the dead in some cemeteries is quite distinct. The meridional burials of the Kitchilkosky I, Vesliansky II, Vetiusky, Vadiassky, and Kokpomiagsky cemeteries amount to 71.5 %—90 %. In fact, the western orientation is not used here. But there are some cemeteries (the Idzidielsky cemetery — 84.7 %;

Zhiganovsky cemetery — 77.5 %) in which the western orientation is predominant, and the meridional burials are few (2.8 % and 23.5 % correspondingly). E.A. Savelevieva, who excavated the Vim cemeteries, believes that here the dead were laid in the direction of a source of water, but this suggestion cannot always be proved. It is quite possible that the difference in the orientation of the dead came about as a result of the cross-breeding of various ethnic groups.

The Vanvizdin culture, dating from the second half of the 1st millennium A.D. (Fig. 4), preceded the Vim culture in this area. Of 27 investigated burials of the Vesliani cemetery I belonging to the Vanvizdin culture, 26 had the western orientation and only one body was oriented to the east.¹² The latitudinal orientation of the Vim burials is likely to date back to the Vanvizdin culture. However, the other cemetery of the Vanvizdin culture, Shoynaty, has no systematic orientation.

The Kharino-Lomatovo culture of the 4th—9th centuries is characterized by a variety of burial rites.¹³ Here one can find the cremation rite alongside cremations graves, the inhumation rite and sometimes the cremation rite in barrows. This culture was formed as a result of the mixing of the local Gliadenovo population with the newly-arrived tribes, including those from across the Urals. It is no wonder that the burials of the Kharino—Lomatovo culture greatly differ in their orientation of the dead. Scholars suggest that it can be explained by the specific position of the cemeteries with respect to rivers and the orientation of the dead towards water sources. There is, however, some conformity: the burials with the northern orientation become more widespread as early as the middle stage of the development of the culture in question and later this practice predominates.

The later Kharino-Lomatovo culture (9th—12th centuries) is definitely associated with the Early Medieval Komi-Permians (Fig. 3). The main rite here was inhumation in shallow pits; the dead were buried with their heads oriented to the north with corresponding deviations.¹⁴

The ancestors of the Votyaks are regarded as belonging to the Polom culture of the 5th—9th centuries (Fig. 4). Its most thoroughly investigated cemetery is at Varnino.¹⁵ Here one can single out two territorial zones — the eastern part of the cemetery where the dead were mainly oriented to the north, and the western part with its predominant western orientation. The scholars concerned suggest that the differences in the orientation of the dead are connected with tribal differences. According to data from certain cemeteries the latitudinal orientation of the dead, which is followed by the northern one later, seems to be more typical of the Polom culture.

The burials of the Ichepets culture (the 9th—15th centuries) which can beyond all doubt be attributed to the northern Permians (Fig. 3) have different orientations, but typical in each separate case.¹⁶ Thus, in the Midlanshai and Kipkino cemeteries the orientation of the dead to the north was most common, while at Tchemshai and Vasiakar Bigershai the dead were predominantly oriented to the east and north-east. In the Adamov Bigershai cemeteries the western orientation dominated. The differences in this case are accounted for by the fact that heads of the corpses in these cemeteries were very often oriented away from a river.

For the Early Medieval ancestors of the Voguls, who lived in the forested area beyond the Urals, were typical Molchanovo and Makushkino patterns of finds were typical as well as those of the Yudino culture (Fig. 5). According to data from the Pereyma barrow cemetery, the Vogul group of tribes with burial remains of the Molchanovo type (the 7th—9th centuries) buried their dead according to the inhumation rite with the head pointing to the north. The cemeteries of the Yudino culture (the 10th—13th centuries) contain evidence of both the cremation (earlier) and inhumation rites with the head point-

ing to the south or SWW.¹⁷ In the barrows of the Makushkino type (the 11th—14th centuries) the dead are usually oriented to the west or to the north-west.¹⁸

The northern group of the Ostyaks (The Yugren of the Russian chronicles) is represented by the Kintusovy type of remains (end of the 1st millennium and the beginning of the 2nd millennium A.D.). In the graves the dead are mainly oriented with the head pointing to the north or north-west, but sometimes one can find opposite orientations.¹⁹ The southern Ostyaks (the Bakalskoye culture of the 7th—14th centuries and Ust-Ishim culture of the 10th—13th centuries) had no fixed orientation of the dead.²⁰ The main orientation of the dead in the barrows of the Ust-Ishim culture, where both the cremation and inhumation rites were used, was northern (48 %) and southern (46 %). Both eastern (4 %) and western (2 %) orientations were also found.²¹ In the graves of the Bakalskoye culture, south-west and west orientations are predominant, and in some cases the dead are oriented to the north-east.

The analysis of some burials of the Ob-Ugrians reveals that the most typical way of burial was with the head pointing to the north. Some deviations in the orientation of the dead, especially in the cemeteries of the southern regions, can be explained by the

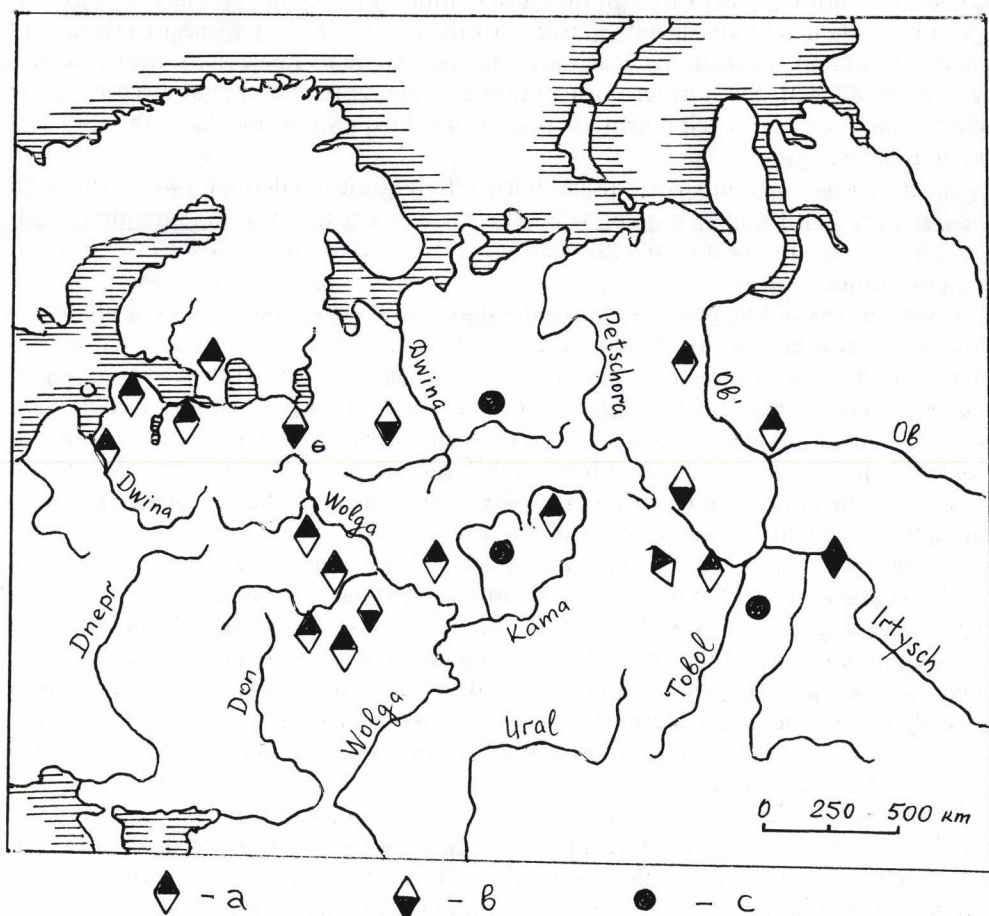


Fig. 6. The main orientation of the dead in various regions of the Finno-Ugrian world during the early Middle Ages:

a — northern orientation; b — southern orientation; c — orientation with shifts.

fact that the Ugric ethnic groups may have lived alternatively with the Samoyed population.

The investigation of the burial rites of the Finno-Ugrian tribes of the early Middle Ages shows that the orientation of the dead with the head pointing to the north (Fig. 6) was characteristic throughout the Finno-Ugrian World and was connected with Finno-Ugrian mythology — pagan concepts which go deep into ancient times and the period of the Finno-Ugrian ethnic community.

A review of all preserved legends of various Finno-Ugrian peoples gives the following picture of ancient Finno-Ugrian mythology. According to ancient concepts, the world was divided into three zones. The middle zone represented the earth surrounded by the waters of an ocean. The lower zone was the land of cold and darkness, where evil spirits dwelt. The upper zone (the sky with the polar star in the center) was the habitat of the heavenly gods.

According to Finnish and Karelian myths say the rotating firmament has a motionless center — the North Star. The firmament was supported by a world mountain (world pillar or world oak-tree) the top of which touches the North Star. The world mountain is in the north where the firmament touches the Earth, and beyond the River Manala (Tuonela — present meaning: purgatory) there is the kingdom of the dead. The idea of the inaccessibility of the North Mountain reaching into Heaven was also widespread among the Ugric tribes. In the legends of the Ostyaks and Voguls there is information according to which in the far north behind the mouth of the river Ob in the waters of a cold ocean there is an inaccessible "upper world" for ancient people — the heavenly dwelling of the souls of the dead. According to the legends of the Ob-Ugrians, the souls of the dead were taken there on the back of a bird, most often a big fantastic bird of gigantic size with a human head, a big beak and long sharp claws. The North Star was the entrance to the "upper world".

In the Finnish legends, the land of the dead, called the "Northern House" (Pohjola), is situated in the mythical waters of the far north. In the Karel myths it is in the Arctic Ocean.

Hence, it is quite clear why the Finno-Ugrians buried their dead with the head pointing to the north. According to the beliefs of the ancient Finno-Ugrians a man's soul was in his head, and the soul of the dead moved to the next world and continued to live there. The orientation of the dead with the head pointing to the north, to the "North Country" and to its entrance — the North Star — may have furthered the quickest transference of the soul to the realm of the dead.

As mentioned above, the meridional inhumation with the head pointing to the south which was popular with some Finno-Ugrian tribes may also have been connected with these mythological concepts. In this case the dead were placed with the face directed to the North Star. But there are also other explanations for the rite.

The latitudinal orientation of the dead was not of finno-Ugrian origin and was to some extent spread among some Finno-Ugrian tribes of the early Middle Ages as a result of contacts or cross-breeding with other ethnic groups such as the Samodians, the Iranians, the Balts, the Slavs, the Turks, and also as a result of interaction with Christianity. The latitudinal orientation of the dead among certain Finno-Ugrian tribes can be traced back not only to the Early Medieval ethnic traditions but to those of deep antiquity. Each case needs a special study.

THE ORIENTATION OF THE DEAD IN THE FINNO-UGRIAN CEMETERIES
OF THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

References

1. Selirand J. Eestlaste matmiskombed varafeodaalsete suhete tärkamise perioodil. Tallinn, 1974. Lk. 64—85.
2. Latvijas PSR arheoloģija. Riga, 1974. 211—213 lpp.
3. Tõnisson E. Die Gauja-Liven und ihre materielle Kultur (11. Jh. — Anfang 13 Jhs.). Tallinn, 1974. S. 38—96.
4. Финно-угры и балты в эпоху средневековья. Археология СССР. М., 1987. С. 34—43.
5. Финно-угры и балты... С. 46.
6. Голубева Л.А. Вещь и славяне на Белом озере X—XIII вв. М., 1973. С. 27—29.
7. Ovsyannikov O.V. First-discovered burialfield of "Zavolochye tshud" — In: Fenno-Ugri et Slavi. 1978. Helsinki, 1980. P. 228—236; Назаренко В.А., Овсянников О.В., Рябинин Е.А. Средневековые памятники чуди заволочской. — Советская археология. 1984. № 4. С. 197—216.
8. Финно-угры и балты... С. 75.
9. Финно-угры и балты... С. 85.
10. Архипов Г.А. Марийцы IX—XI вв. К вопросу о происхождении народа. Йошкар-Ола, 1973. С. 12—17.
11. Савельева Э.А. Вымские могильники XI—XIV вв. Л., 1987. С. 9—14.
12. Савельева Э.А. Средневековые могильники на р. Вым. — В кн.: Археология и этнография Башкирии. Уфа, 1964. Т. II. С. 237—246.
13. Голдина Р.Д. Ломоватовская культура в Верхнем Прикамье. Иркутск, 1985. С. 21—30.
14. Оборин В.А. Этнические особенности средневековых памятников Верхнего Прикамья. — В кн.: Вопросы археологии Урала. Свердловск, 1970. Вып. 9. С. 8.
15. Семенов В.А. Варнинский могильник. Новый памятник поломской культуры. Ижевск, 1980.
16. Финно-угры и балты... С. 139.
17. Викторова В.Д. Ликийский могильник X—XIII вв. — В кн.: Вопросы археологии Урала. Свердловск, 1973. Вып. 12. С. 133—168.
18. Викторова В.Д. Курганы у с. Макушино на р. Нице. — В кн.: Археология и этнография Башкирии. Уфа, 1964. Т. 2. С. 247—250.
19. Чернецов В.Н. Нижнее Приобье в I тысячелетии н.э. МИА, 57. М. 1957.
20. Генинг В.Ф., Овчинникова Б.Б. Пахомовский могильник. — В кн.: Вопросы археологии Урала. Свердловск, 1969. Вып. 9. С. 128—137.
21. Финно-угры и балты... С. 196.
22. Paulson I. Die primitiven Seelenvorstellungen der nordeurasischen Völker. Stockholm, 1958. Ancient cultures of the Uralian peoples. Budapest, 1976. P. 215—242.