

M. A. Castrén and his Archaeological Research in Russia and Siberia

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Abstract

The Finnish researcher Matthias Alexander Castrén (1813–1852) carried out several excavations and archaeological surveys during his expeditions through Lapland, northern Russia, and southern Siberia between 1838 and 1849. This article presents a preliminary overview of his fieldwork, methods, and scholarly background in archaeology. Castrén represented a holistic view of cultural research, but showed signs of growing independence of its different realms. Castrén had adopted a view of stratigraphy and an idea of a sequence of different successive periods. On the other hand, his documentation could not compete with the most advanced archaeologists of his time. Castrén's archaeological results soon became outdated, but he provided an important pattern for future generations during the next hundred years.

1 General background

Matthias Alexander Castrén (1813–1852) was above all a linguist, but also ethnographic – including archaeological – questions had a considerable position in his sphere of interests. He worked as the first professor of Finnish at the University of Helsinki from spring 1851 until his death in 1852.

Castrén had adopted the Hegelian idea of a *Volksgeist*, a national spirit, which was reflected in the language and culture of every people. This idea spurred him to search for the roots and original homeland of the Finns. On the other hand, his voyages, especially in various parts of Russia and Siberia, followed the tradition started by the Russian Academy of Sciences in the 18th century with the aim of acquiring more thorough information about various parts of the large Russian empire. Castrén's travels were also a part of international exploring activity in Asia. His work was thus also intertwined with nationalistic and international goals. Castrén himself was con-

scious of the international significance of his work, especially his linguistic pursuits.

What do we know about Castrén as a field archaeologist? What were his methods like? When we speak of the first half of the 19th century, we must not forget that the differentiation of scholarly disciplines as we know them had only begun. Castrén's field methodology in cultural research consisted of three main layers. Firstly, he paid attention to the linguistic situation in order to identify places where Uralic languages were spoken or where he otherwise assumed Finns or their ancestors may have lived. Secondly, he interviewed the local population in these places to collect folklore material concerning the ancient inhabitants of the region and their monuments. Thirdly, he searched for those monuments himself and carried out excavations, whenever possible, or collected other observations, for example during wintertime, when digging was impossible (see e.g. NLF Coll. 539:27 p. 418–419, 422; NLF Coll. 539:39, p. 472; NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 8–9, 46–48, 97).

2 Lapland 1838

Castrén made his first expedition in the summer of 1838 to Lapland. He was mainly interested in the past Lappish (Sámi) occupation of Lapland and northern Finland. He also made archaeological observations, especially concerning the so-called Lapp graves and Lapp cairns, but almost no documentation of this research remains. By Lapp graves, he meant pits in the ground, probably consisting of the remains of ancient dwellings or reindeer hunting pits. Lapp cairns he often considered as the ruins of ovens (NLF Coll. 539:2, p. 117, 123; Coll. 539:27, p. 120, published Castrén 1852: 1–74; in German Castrén 1853: 45; Coll. 539:27, p. 224–225, published Castrén 1852: 75–95; in German Castrén 1853: 83; Coll. 539:31, p. 93). Already on the way to the north, he had visited some Bronze Age cairns, which he originally assumed to be Swedish in origin. Later he changed his mind, referring to J. K. Bähr's studies in Livonia, and began to consider these remains as Finnish (NLF Coll. 539:4, p. 624, published Castrén 1870a; cf. Coll. 539:27, p. 225). The surviving documentation of his archaeological work from this trip is not very detailed. However, his research methods were already similar to those he used later in the east.

3 Russian Karelia 1839 and north-western Russia 1841–1844

Castrén travelled to Russian Karelia in 1839 and continued his studies there. For this trip, he had received a grant from the Finnish Literature Society, and his main aim was to collect folk poetry and traditions (esp. NLF Coll. 539:27, p. 224–225). After this trip, Castrén published his Swedish translation of the (Old) Kalevala. On the other hand, the whole trip was, in a way, a substitute, because A. J. Sjögren from the Imperial Academy of Sciences had already contacted Castrén about an expedition to northern Russia, but it had to be postponed (NLF Coll. 539:27, p. 205–206; about Sjögren and the

Academy of Sciences, see Branch 1999).

In late 1841, Castrén travelled together with Elias Lönnrot to eastern Lapland and from there to the Kola Peninsula and Arkhangelsk. Lönnrot returned home, but Castrén continued further to the east, mostly with a grant from the Finnish Senate. Castrén's trip extended to Obdorsk (present-day Salekhard) in the delta of the Ob River (NLF Coll. 539:27, p. 253–680, published Castrén 1852: 97–320; in German Castrén 1853: 93–308).

In the Arkhangelsk region, Castrén visited the site of Kholmogor. Because it was winter, he could not carry out excavations, but he made observations regarding the site and interviewed local people. He writes in his published account how he travelled to Kholmogor, which had been the Biarmians' famous fortress, but was now only a small and insignificant district town. He would have liked to dig at the location of the Jumala [Eng. God] temple, but because the earth was frozen, he could only make observations. Instead, he stayed in town for several days to collect oral traditions of the Biarmian people (NLF Coll. 539:27, p. 418–419; Castrén 1852: 186–188; in German Castrén 1853: 177–178).¹

Castrén's unpublished notes contain a more detailed description of the site. In a romantic tone, he describes the empty, sorrowful desolation and imagines hearing the sounds of weapons and battle cries. Instead of a town, there is only forest and a cemetery. He does not provide a more exact topographical description here either.² He mentions that the Chuds used to have their own king or prince ('Knäs') in Kholmogor. Further, he writes about the etymology of the name Kholmogor and refers to chronicle information on the history of the town (SLSA 1185, Castrén's notebook).³

4 A brief stay in Helsinki and back to Siberia 1845–1849

In the spring of 1844, Castrén returned to Helsinki, either because of his poor health or to arrange his papers before continuing to Siberia. Both explanations for staying in Helsinki were

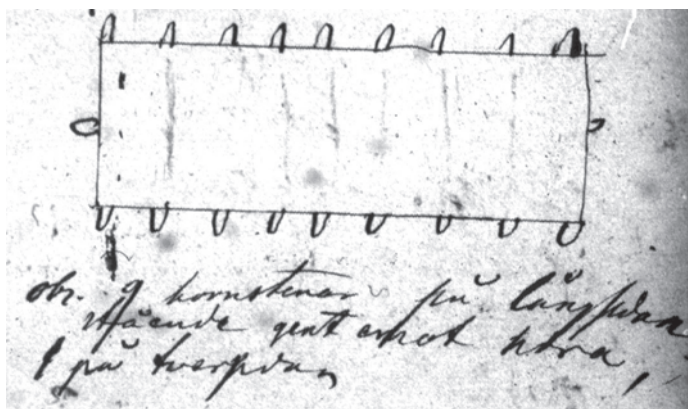


Figure 1. Overall map of a kurgan in Urak, drawn by M. A. Castrén in 1847. The text: 'Note 9 corner stones on the long side standing opposite to each other, 1 on the short side.' NLF Coll. 539:32 p. 21.

stated by Castrén himself (Giessen University Library, Manuscript Department, Collection of K. E. von Baer, *Mappe 43*: unidentified sender to Baer, 20 May 1844).⁴ In any case, he travelled to the east again in the spring of 1845, this time as an explorer sent by the Russian Academy of Sciences. Castrén's expedition was formally a part of the expedition of Alexander Theodor von Middendorff in 1842–1845. Castrén's task was to collect linguistic, ethnographic, and archaeological material, whereas Middendorff himself concentrated on geography (Sukhova & Tammiksaar 2005: 27–53; for the expedition in Russia in general, see Stagl 2009: 41–43). As far as archaeology is concerned, this trip differed from the earlier ones in the sense that the Academy (A. J. Sjögren and P. von Köppen) had instructed Castrén to carry out excavations in southern Siberia when he got there. The Academy was especially interested in the ethnic character of the graves (Castrén 1855: *Bilaga I*, esp. p. 454–455; the instructions in German Castrén 1856: 505–527). It is especially significant that particular scholarly questions had been set for Castrén to answer. For earlier travellers, archaeological research had been merely a part of obtaining general information about the country (about expeditions to Siberia, see Bucher 2009).

Castrén arrived in the Minusinsk area from the north in the spring of 1847. On the way southwards, he investigated by digging a couple of kurgans somewhere along the Ana

River, but the majority of all his excavations he carried out in the Minusinsk–Achinsk region, where he opened approximately 20 kurgans. These are his best-known excavations, because he took rather detailed field notes that were preserved and published for the first time by J. R. Aspelin in 1901. Castrén himself wrote an account of his results, which was published in 1870 (Aspelin 1901; Castrén 1870b; travel reports and letters published in Castrén 1855; in German Castrén 1856). Castrén was not very eager to excavate in Minusinsk, because he was relatively sure that the kurgans had nothing to do with ancient Finns, but because this research was part of his programme, he had to carry it out.

Castrén noted the traditions according to which the kurgans were not built by the Kirghiz or Tatars, but instead by a people called the Chuds. He continues with folk traditions about the Chuds and their disappearance with the arrival of the white forest and white Tsar (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 8). In the same manner as around Arkhangelsk, Castrén collected information on the distribution, appearance, and structure of the kurgans in the Upper Yenisei area by interviewing local people and keeping his eyes open when travelling around. He mentioned the Tatar tradition, according to which kurgans were made like Kirghiz tents or yurts (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 82).

In his field notes, Castrén describes the following archaeological sites:

- kurgans at Urak (excavated) (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 10–13) (Fig. 1);
- kurgan at Bozhe-Ozero (excavated) (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 20–21);
- inscriptions at Uchum and Maydashi (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 32–38, 149–151);
- five kurgans excavated at Kachinsk (excavated, the biggest one only partly) (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 109–116);
- stone sculptures at Askys (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 158, 172–176);
- two kurgans on the Sagaysk steppe (excavated) (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 159–163, 293, 166–170) (Figs. 2 & 3);
- two kurgans at Sagaysk (excavated) (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 180–183);
- two kurgans on the Koybal steppe at the Beya River (excavated) (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 209–218);
- inscriptions in Oznachennaya (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 236);
- kurgan at Oznachennaya (excavated) (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 236–238); the same grave mound was visited by Aspelin in 1887 and possibly also by Tallgren in 1915 (Appelgren-Kivalo 1931: 21–22; Tallgren 1915: 94);
- the large kurgan at Tes (not excavated) (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 243, 409); this one was excavated by Aspelin and Snellman in 1889 (Appelgren-Kivalo 1931: 46; Tallgren 1921);
- two kurgans 3 verst (about 3 km) from Uybat (not excavated) (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 403–408);
- kurgan in Oya (excavated) (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 417–431)
- inscriptions in different locations.

Castrén accused excavations in cold and windy weather of giving him colds, headache, and toothache (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 221). We must not forget that his general health was quite poor (Castrén 1855 *passim*).

From Yenisei, Castrén travelled further east and carried out excavations in the Irkutsk area. The information obtained from Castrén's field notes is not very detailed, but it still reveals what he investigated and what his main results were.

Castrén also mentions brick-built kur-

gans at the Chinese border and graves on the Chinese side at the fort of Tsurukhay, as well as similar mounds in Klyuchevskiy (according to Castrén, Klichevskiy) Rudnik and Konduyevskoye near Nerchinsk. Probably some of the Mongolian/Chinese kurgans were ruins of buildings, as Castrén already assumed. Castrén probably excavated four kurgans at Aginsk; documentation of two excavations is preserved. The excavated kurgans also had a brick construction. According to Castrén, most of them had been demolished and the bricks had often been used for other buildings, like the church in Konduy (NLF Coll. 539:30, p. 380–382).

On his way back, Castrén tried to collect more information about archaeological remains, but he was mostly too sick for systematic research of any kind. He returned to Helsinki in the summer of 1849 (Castrén 1856: 461).

5 Castrén's fieldwork, dating methods, and interpretations

Castrén's letters show that he already had a conscious desire to develop his fieldwork methodology; he asked Sjögren for instructions in this area. Otherwise we know little about his archaeological models. He mentions the Swedish researcher Sven Nilsson on one occasion and the Baltic-German amateur archaeologist J. K. Bähr and his excavations of the graves of the Livs on another occasion, but this is all we get to know from his writings (Castrén 1870a: 147; about Nilsson, see Trigger 2006: 129–131; Christensson 2005).

Castrén's excavation notes in general reveal that he had a sense of stratigraphy. Usually he indicates the depths of excavated layers, as well as the type of soil. He makes observations regarding constructions of wood and stone, human bones, clay pots, and the direction and position of the burial(s) and their number. Mostly Castrén did not collect finds, especially pottery. He mentioned possible inscriptions on the stones of the graves. There are a couple of detailed drawings of the graves (Sagaysk steppe) by him (NLF Coll. 539:32, p.

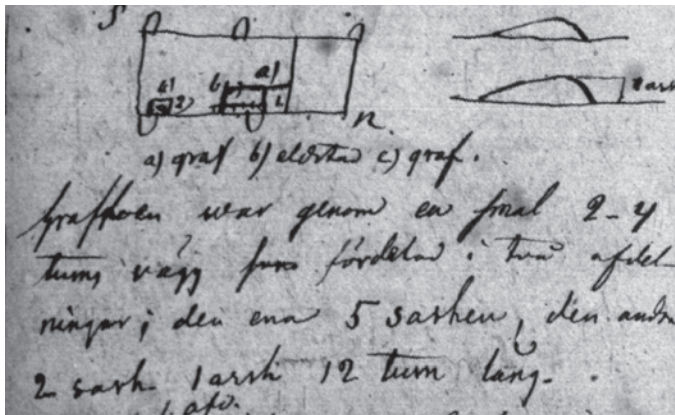


Figure 2. Graves in a large kurgan on the Sagaysk steppe, excavated and drawn by Castrén. a – grave; b – hearth; c – grave. NLF Coll. 539:32 p. 160.

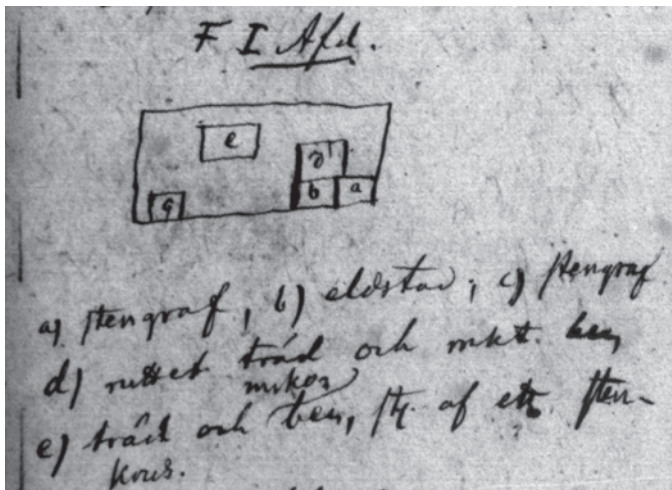


Figure 3. Graves in the same kurgan as Figure 2. a – stone grave; b – hearth; c – stone grave; d – rotten wood and plenty of bones; e – wood and human bones, pieces of a ceramic vessel. NLF Coll. 539:32 p. 162.

162, 163, 167) (Figs. 2 & 3).

Castrén compared bigger and smaller kurgans and stated that the smaller ones were usually oriented from east to west, while the larger ones were oriented from north-west to south-east (NLF Coll. 539:32, esp. p. 99, 109).

Castrén interpreted most kurgans as family graves. He stated that the number of stones on the kurgan never exceeded the number of people buried in it. The mounds had originally been low, but they had grown in height when new burials had been made into them (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 185, 429). The inscriptions on the stones Castrén considered to be personal marks of the buried people (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 431).

Castrén did not have any reliable method for dating the graves he had excavated. He did

know about the Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages and their chronological relationship to each other. He attempted to date the mounds by observing the thickness of the soil layers, the vegetation, and the extent to which the decomposition of human bones and other organic material had proceeded. According to Castrén, the older kurgans were usually larger and more quadrangular than the younger ones, they more often had stone stelae erected on top, and they were mostly at ground level with no elevation, because their inner construction had collapsed and allowed the mound to sink (NLF Coll. 539:32, p. 210). Both in his comparisons and field methodology, Castrén still represents the antiquarian tradition rather than the comparative archaeology that developed in the early 19th century, al-

though the more modern ideas had influenced him to some extent. As noted, his documentation was not very detailed, even in his own time (cf. Trigger 2006: 110–114, 121–129; Eberhardt 2012).

The only surviving list of Castrén's finds is not very detailed. In his calendar of 1847, he has, however, listed the finds he sent to St Petersburg. They consisted mainly of skulls and bones, both human and animal, some knives and other pieces of iron, and some copper or bronze horse harness ornaments. (SLSA 1185, Castrén's notes in *Karmannyi męsyačoslov' na 1847* [Карманный мęсяцослов' на 1847]). As far as we know, the finds he sent were lost on the way from Siberia to the west.

6 Future plans and continuing Castrén's tradition

Later, in 1850, Castrén wrote a research proposal to the Russian Geographic Society for investigating the prehistoric graves of Finland, but it did not lead to any practical measures. His aim was to search for ethnic definition by comparing different types of graves. Thus, he continued along the same lines he had established for himself during his expeditions in Lapland, Karelia, Russia, and Siberia (Castrén 1870a). At the time, there were no systematic studies of ancient remains in Finland, and because of emerging Russian and Finnish nationalism, Finland was largely out of the scope of the Russian Academy of Sciences. As for Finland itself, there were no people or organisations capable of the task before the 1870s. (Branch 1999: 135; Nordman 1968: 17–19).

Castrén lived at a time when different scholarly disciplines strove for independence and also archaeology developed rapidly. The immediate, concrete significance of Castrén's work therefore remained quite limited and his results soon became outdated. However, questions of ethnicity remained in the focus of archaeological research for the next 50 to 70 years, and southern and western Siberia was considered as the original home of the Finns

for almost as long. This ideology brought the later archaeologists J. R. Aspelin, Hjalmar Appelgren, and A. O. Heikel to Siberia in the 1880s (Salminen 2003). Thus, we can summarise Castrén's archaeological significance in two senses. Firstly, he was the first researcher to answer certain archaeological questions in Siberia. Secondly, by starting the eastern research tradition in Finnish archaeology, he served as a model for the later generations of Finnish archaeologists. His work can be considered to have been more important for the international research of Siberian rock inscriptions, which was carried on by several scholars in different countries. However, as far as Castrén's archaeological field methodology and analysis are considered, the next generation of archaeologists already had more refined tools at their disposal than Castrén.

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Notes

- 1 Wägen ledde mig först 70 verst till *Cholmogor*, som fordom war Bjarmernas frejdade fäste men nu är en ringa och obetydlig kretsstad. Jag hade under nästförflutna sommar gerna welat anställa gräfningar på det ställe, der Jumala-templet och en gammal Bjarmisk begravningsplats förmodas hafva varit belägna, men då saknade jag medel till ett så kostsam företag, och nu war marken så frusen och snöbetäckt, att jag icke ens wille göra ett försök med dess upprödande. Jag dröjde dock några dagar i staden och erhöil derunder talrika traditioner om det hädangångna Bjarmafolket, dess fäste och tempel, dess skatter och glans.
- 2 *Cholmogor* Ehuru jag redan på förhand blifwit noggrannt underättad derom, att Cholmogor numera eger intet qvar af sina fordna minnen, täcktes jag ej fara förbi denna werldsberömda ort utan att åtminstone taga dess läge och yttre beskaffenhet i ögnasigte. Ligger vid östra stranden på en mils lång ö, som omärmas af Dvina. När man känner dess fordna öden, erbjuder den flacka omgifningen anblicken af en förödd nejd. Man <s--> wid en så namnkunnig ord fästen och höjder, naturliga och konstgjorda fästen, men när man ser den sorgsna kalhet, så långt ögat når, intages man nödigt af tanken, att <härjning> jemnat d[en]na bygd. Så idylliskt det är att nödgas bana sig <väg> genom skaror af feta kor, som <-----> maka sig fram på gatorna, och höra deras enformiga melodie, känner sig likväl af denna anblick ängslig till sinnet, emedan man vid Holmogor är van att tänka sig sköldars striderop och wapenklang. Blott en dunkel furuskog på en närbelägen holme erinrar om det förflutna. Der staden förut stått, finnes nu blott en begravningsplats.
- 3 Enl[igt] Müller hette Kolmogor först Holmgrad (Голмградъ), utbreddes d[er]ifr[ån] ända till Novgorod, som fordom k[al]l[a]des m[e]d s[am]ma namn. *Холмогоры*, emedan nejden består af холмы (kullar) och горы. Холмогардъ af г[ородъ] холмовъ (островъ) гардія правителство, правительственный городъ! *Холмогор* nämnes första g[ån]gen 1401 under sista Novgorodska sammansvärjningen under Марѳа посадица <--> Двинской Лѣтописецъ: «Одолыта öfvervunnen полки Великаго князя и убита множество Двинянь и Заволочанъ, а инный истопота (dränt), а князь ихъ ранень, кинулся въ лотку и убъжалъ на *Холмогоры*, многихъ руками изымата, потомъ и грады ихъ взята, и приведота, землю ту всю подь Великаго Князя (d. ä. Moskowska Knäsen Vasilej Dimitrievitsch).
- 4 For a copy of this letter I express my gratitude to Ph.D. Erki Tammiksaar, Tartu.

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