

Cult Stones of the Russian North

Cults relating to sacred stones are known in many cultures, and are a universal phenomenon having a wide distribution in the forest zone of Eastern Europe. A great number of cultic boulders and stones have been found in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Byelorussia, northwestern Russia, Karelia, and Finland. The interpretation of these objects is problematic and requires further work. But even the most superficial survey will reveal a great variety of cult stones and attendant beliefs, with specific ethnocultural and chronological contexts. Therefore, a generalization of data from individual microregions and the presentation of new materials are required at present. This article deals with cult stones investigated by the author in the Kargopol district, which is still one of the insufficiently explored regions of the Russian North. An attempt is made to define their position among analogous antiquities of the East-European forest zone. The author described 11 boulders forming a compact cluster in the environs of Kargopol in the southwest part of the Arkhangelsk region (Fig. 1). Eight of them were investigated *de visu* during field work in 1988–90; three other stones which have most probably disappeared are described in local periodicals from the close of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The sacral nature of all these objects follows from oral folk tradition, which maintains that they are sacred. The relic worship of some still continues to this day.

External features point to several varieties of cult objects. The largest group consists of stones with relatively shallow natural or possibly man-made depressions usually considered to be the imprints of a human foot. These imprints are sometimes accompanied by other marks (N 1–7). A boulder with a large cavity resembling a cup belongs to the second group (N 8). Owing to lack of detailed information, two of the stones cannot be classified.

The best known specimens are two stones at Oshevsky Pogost (district centre), 48 km north of Kargopol. This material has recently been published by N. A. Makarov (Makarov, Chernetsov 1988, pp. 86–88). Presented in the following are data collected by Makarov and observations which I have compiled.

1. *Oshevsk* (monastery area). This stone is situated 0.3 km south of the monastery of Aleksandro-Oshevsky in a pine forest known locally as the Sacred Grove. The granite boulder, measuring 3 x 4 metres, is of irregular rectangular form and is 1.5 metres high. There is a badly damaged “imprint” on the flat top surface. It was originally an oval depression resembling the imprint of a giant human foot with a shoe. According to tradition, the imprint was that of St. Alexander Oshevsky, the founder of the local monastery. Near the site is a small lake known as Svatoye (Saint) with four wooden crosses on the bank. Objects of worship were the stone, the grove, the lake and the crosses. Public prayers were held there on the 9th of May (the Feast of St. Nicholas) and in June. During these feasts sick men trod with their bare feet on

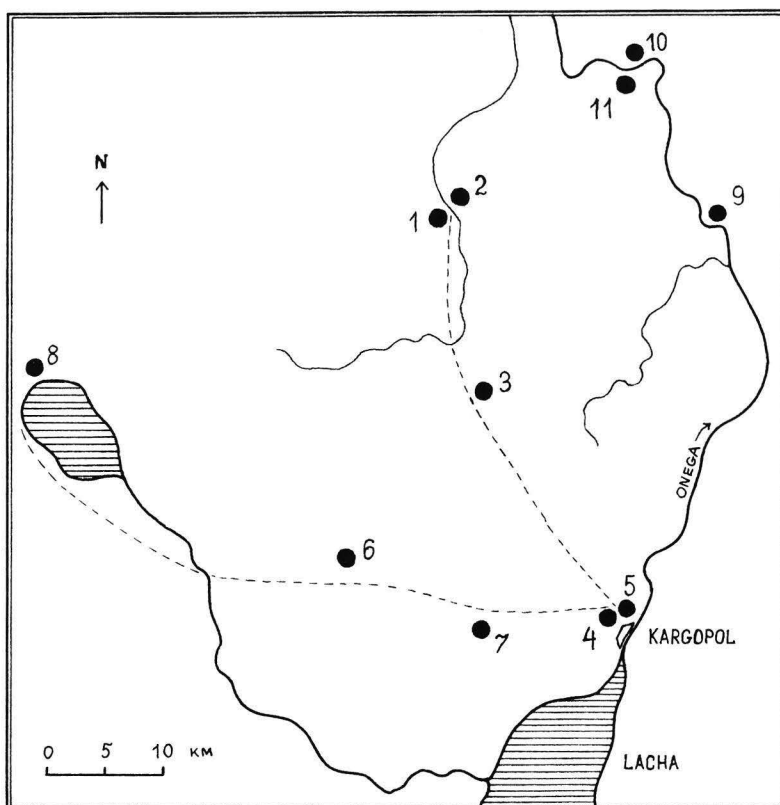


Fig. 1. Locations of cult stones: 1 Oshevensk (monastery), 2 Oshevensk (Valdovo locality), 3 Pozdyshevo, 4 Zazhigino, 5 Kurenina Liaga, 6 Krasnaya Liaga, 7 Sofonovo, 8 Martynovo, 9 Julinskaya, 10 Babkino, 11 Mukhomorikha.

the “imprint” of Saint Alexander Oshevsky, trusting that it could cure ailments of the feet. Kerchiefs were tied to the crosses to cure headaches; aprons and shovels were affixed in cases of spinal disorders; and old shoes to cure foot diseases. Severed hen’s heads were also placed there to cure animals. The lake water was considered salubrious, and sick men made ablutions in it.

2. *Oshevensk* (Valdovo locality). The cult stone is located 1.5 km northwest of the monastery on the bank of Lake Valdavinskoye. It is a limestone slab split in two, measuring 1.2 x 0.8 x 0.16 m. The stone was originally in the parvis of the Chapel of the Mourning Virgin. Carved on one side of the slab is the date 1876, when the chapel was built and the slab was trimmed. In the middle of the slab is an oval depression 1–3 cm deep and 32 x 13 cm in area, which is considered to be an “imprint” of the Virgin (or St. Alexander Oshevsky). Near the stone was a “saint tree”: two pines growing from a single root, with a wooden cross nearby. Feasts were held there on Palm Sunday and a week before Whitsunday. Medicinal functions had an important role in the rituals: sick men trod with bare feet on the “footstep” of the Virgin; articles of clothing were tied to the pine and the cross; and money was thrown in the water and into the hollow of a tree-trunk.



Fig. 2. Cult stone in the village of Pozdyshevo.

Investigations of the environs of the Oshevensky stones offer a broader picture of the nature of this original cult complex. At a distance of 1.5 km west of the monastery is the dry bed of the Khalui River. A local object of worship there is a sinkhole (diameter 3 m) with three wooden crosses near it. It is linked in tradition with the activities of St. Alexander Oshevsky. The locality between the dry river bed and the monastery is known as *Velesovo pole* (field). The microregional connections between this place-name and the cult stones also deserve attention. According to some researchers, stones with impressions resembling those of human feet are regarded as incarnations of the Ancient Russian god *Veles-Volos*, or the Baltic deity *Velns* (Aleksandrov 1983, p. 14; Shorin 1988, pp. 61–62; Urtans 1988, p. 12). The worship of the Oshevsky stones as relics of a local saint is evidently secondary, and has a more ancient heathen basis.

3. *Pozdyshevo*. A cult stone with an impression is known from Pozdyshevo, 25 km north of Kargopol. It is in the centre of the village by the Old Oshevsky road, which connected the settlement with the Aleksandro-Oshevsky monastery. The cult stone is a small granite boulder measuring 1.05 x 0.6 m (height 0.46 m). The depressions on the surface resembles the imprint of a human foot with a toe-like feature (Fig. 2). It is oval and clear-cut with vertical sides and a flat bottom. An oblong depression of two joined conical holes, resembling a big toe, joins the broad part of the oval. The length of the depression together with the “toe” is 33 cm. It is 13 cm wide and 3.5–4.0 cm deep. The oval depression is probably of natural origin; it may have been artificially supplemented with two holes to enhance the resemblance to a human footprint (Fig. 3). The imprint is attributed to St. Alexander Oshevsky and is still worshipped by the local inhabitants. Rain water collecting in the depression



Fig. 3. “Imprint” on the Pozdyshevo stone.

was gathered and used for curing various diseases. A spring at a low elevation near Lake Aleksandrovskoye, 300 metres west of the stone, is also worshipped. There is cross near the spring, to which local people bring clothes, objects and money. The water of the spring is considered to be sacred and medicinal.

4. *Zazhigino*. The main feature in this group of cult stones is a boulder by the Oshevsky road in the village of Zazhigino near Kargopol. The boulder measures 2 x 2.5 x 1.5 metres, with eight depressions of different contours on its flat top (Fig. 4). The largest is an irregular diamond-shaped depression (30 x 17.5 cm); near this feature are three irregular oval-shaped holes (4.5 x 6.5 cm; 4.5 x 5 cm; 2.5 x 3 cm). Four depressions beneath them resemble the imprints of two feet in shoes pointing in different directions (lengths 19 and 22 cm). All the depressions are 1.5–4 cm deep. This “composition” is rather primitive and is probably of natural origin, although some details could have been added artificially. According to legend, St. Alexander Oshevsky sat on this stone, and the depressions are imprints of his feet and fingers. The boulder was popular among pilgrims to the monastery and it is still worshipped. During the investigation of the stone, modern coins were found in one of the depressions, having been left there as a donation.



Fig. 4. Depressions on the Zazhigino cult stone.

5. *Kurenina Liaga*. This stone is in a northern suburb of Kargopol in a marsh near Kurenina Liaga (liaga means a small pond with stagnant water). Near the site are the abandoned villages of Kurenikha and Komolovo. This granite boulder is the largest of the cult stones, measuring 4.5 x 5.0 x 1.5 metres. On the top is a natural crescent shape fissure in which rainwater accumulates. Near the foundation on the northwest side is a depression resembling a human foot with a shoe and a forked toe (30 x 14 x 1–2 cm). According to local legend, these marks appeared after St. Alexander Oshevsky trod upon the stone. The boulder is considered to be “sacred”, but there is no data on cult worship. The tradition probably died out when the nearby villages were abandoned. A fragment of a red flint arrowhead was found near the stone at Kurenina Liaga. Further investigations indicated the absence of any cultural layer. The Neolithic arrowhead was probably brought there as a “thunder arrow” or “bolt”. The use of prehistoric stone artifacts as heathen amulets is well known in the ethnological and archaeological record (Sedova 1957), and such objects are common in the north, e.g. in the Belozero region (Golubeva 1973, fig. 50:6).

6. *Krasnaya Liaga*. This stone is situated 20 km west of Kargopol between the abandoned villages of Sheina and Zenkovo. It lies at the slope of a sinkole at the former site of a small lake (Krasnaya Liaga). It is a granite boulder measuring 2.5 x 1.7 x 0.7 m. On the gently sloping east side of the boulder is an depression of natural origin (20 x 8 x 4.5 cm). The depression has a smooth deep-grey surface, and its contours are distinct on the coarse-grained light-grey boulder. The “footprint” is ascribed to St. Alexander Oshevsky, who is said to have walked there. People are known to have trod with bare feet upon the depression. The longevity of this practice is indicated by the burnished condition of the “heel” of the imprint.



Fig. 5. Cult stone in the village of Martynovo.

7. *Sofonovo*. A stone similar to the above-mentioned was located at the village of Sofonovo, 10 km southwest of Kargopol. It was probably destroyed during extensive land-reclamation works, but is mentioned in a scholarly article on the region published in the early twentieth century (Rudometoc 1913, pp. 7–8), and is still remembered by the local residents. It was a small granite boulder with a depression on top resembling the imprint of a bare human foot. A chapel dedicated to St. Makary Zheltovodsky was built above the stone and the “footprint” was attributed to this saint. A hole in the floor of the chapel permitted access to the stone.

8. *Martynovo*. This cult stone is situated near the northern bank of Lake Lekshmozero, 60 km northwest of Kargopol. It is on the course of a dried brook near the road from Martynovo village to the former monastery of St. Nicholas. The object is a granite boulder (4.90 x 3.60 x 1.45 m) with a concave top inclined towards the north. In the centre is a natural (?) triangular depression in which rainwater accumulates (Fig. 5). On the southeastern side of the boulder are three natural ledges permitting access to the top. It has been suggested that these ledges were cut artificially. The boulder is still worshipped by local people. The depression with water is considered to be the “sacral gift of St. Nikola”, and is also worshipped. Visitors to the rock can climb the steps, wash with the “holy” water, and leave donations of money.

9. *Julinskaya*. This cult stone is near the village of Julinskaya, 44 km north of Kargopol, at a ploughed field 200 metres from the Onega River. It is an oval-shaped granite boulder (2.5 x 1.5 x 0.7 m; Fig. 6). There are no signs on the stone except for natural fissures. Oral tradition ascribed the stone to St. Nicholas (Nikola), who was said to have walked there in search of a place for a temple and sat down to rest on the stone. At a distance of 500 metres is a “holy” spring, where a wooden chapel once stood. The water of the spring was considered to be medicinal. The place-name *Nikolskiye gory* (St. Nicholas Hills) also points to the sacral nature of this locality. The place-name *Volosovo* (a common name for local villages) suggests the original connection of this complex with the cult of the Old Russian god *Veles-Volos*. The



Fig. 6. Cult stone in the village of Julinskaya.

correlation of Volos and Nikola is mentioned by B. A. Uspensky, who has pointed out that Nikola was one of the Christian substitutes of the pagan Volos (Uspensky 1982).

Fifteen kilometres downstream from Julinskaya on the Onega River were two stones which were no doubt of cultic significance. They were located in chapels as Christian relics. They could not be located, as the related chapels and villages no longer exist. A description has remained, permitting an examination of them together with the above-mentioned monuments (Moiseev 1899).

10. Babkino. This cruciform stone was an object of worship in the Chapel of St. Nicholas in the village of Babkino, where it was believed that the icon of Nikola the Miracle-Worker drifted on it. Before feasts, sick men would come to the chapel to gnaw on the stone to obtain cures.

11. Mukhomorikha. A “white limestone slab” was said to have existed in the Chapel of St. Elijah (Ilya) in the village of Mukhomorikha. According to legend, the

icon of the Prophet Elijah drifted on it. Eye-witness accounts mention that “pilgrims suffering from toothache gnaw on the stone, which is kept in the chapel”.

The miraculous “appearance” of saints’ icons is a widely known feature in the Greek Orthodox Church. As a rule, they were connected with places that already had cultic significance, and there were widespread beliefs concerning their healing properties (Nosova 1975, pp. 100–104). Stones for healing toothaches are particularly prominent in this material (Afanasjev 1983, p. 230; Zabylin 1880, p. 80; OGV 1905). A similar interpretation can be given to the “sacred” stones at Babkino and Mukhomorikha.

When did the worship of these objects begin, and in what ethnic tradition did the tradition take shape? Visual investigation of the cult stones offer no basis for dating or ethnical attribution. The analysis of related features of landscape and topography, a search for possible connections with archaeological sites and survey of parallels may prove more effective. As a rule, archaeological sites in the Kargopol region (from the Mesolithic to the Early Middle Ages) are situated near the great rivers and lakes. The banks of Lake Lacha and the upper reaches of the Onega River were the most densely populated parts of the region in prehistoric times. Maps show that the cult stones are situated far from these sites and form a compact group. It can be concluded that they have no connection with local antiquities. The cult of sacred stones has deep roots in the old Lapp culture and a number of other cultures of the Eurasian tundra regions (Gurvich 1968). But comparisons of specific monuments and cult forms with the above-described materials show that they have nothing in common. Cult stones similar to those in the Kargopol region have a wide distribution in the Pskov and Novgorod regions and also along the Upper Volga. They can be dated from the second half of the first millennium to the beginning of the second millennium AD, and are connected with the Slavic ethnoses. It can be suggested that the diffusion of the stone cult in the Kargopol region was linked to Slav colonization, a major event in Russian history from the tenth to the fifteenth century. The Charter (Ustav) of Prince Svyatoslav Olgovich of 1136/37 testifies to the development of the region by the Novgorod administration and names settlements indisputably belonging to the basin of the Onega River and situated in the immediate vicinity of the above-mentioned region (Spiridonov 1989, pp. 16–21). The taxation of this territory was preceded by the penetration of Slavic population. This process is reflected by the sharp rise in the number of sites of the tenth–thirteenth centuries (Makarov 1986, pp. 61–69). Makarov has concluded that settlers from Novgorod prevailed among the migrants (Makarov 1989, pp. 86–101). There are unfortified settlements and cemeteries of this period along the banks of Lake Lacha, often at the locations of older settlements. This was determined by the prevailing economic structure and the specialization of the population in the fur trade (Makarov 1988, pp. 120–133). The majority of the cult stones are situated in quite different types of landscape and terrain far away from large lakes and rivers, on watersheds which remained unpopulated in the tenth–thirteenth centuries. The development of this territory with its fertile carbonate soil is connected with peasant colonization and changes in the economic structure with the growth of ploughing agriculture. According to Makarov, this process did not begin until the fourteenth century (Makarov 1988, pp. 127–129). The system of settlements formed, and a number of cult stones were located near them. The locations of these stones indicate the directions of the oldest arterial routes promoting the development of the region. One of them was the waterway provided by the Onega River (N 9–11), while two others were the land routes from Kargopol to Oshevensk (N 1–5) and from

Kargopol to Lekshmozero (N 6–8). Therefore, the available data permits the conclusion that the diffusion of cult stones was connected with the development of the region by peasant settlers. The arrival of the Novgorod population was followed by a reappearance of the stone cult. These stones can be dated to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

At present, cult stones are considered to be an important source for the reconstruction of pagan beliefs. Researchers have attempted to reveal the connections of the stones with the Pre-Christian cults of the Slavic and Finno-Ugrian populations, but despite the deeply archaic nature of stone worship, it is not always connected with heathen tradition. Some were worshipped in purely Christian contexts, which came about in the Late Middle Ages. A well-known example is the “stone of Antony Sijsky”, an architectural detail of the monastery of Antonievo-Sijsky, which cannot be older than the close of the sixteenth century (Makarov, Chernetsov 1988, p. 85). The cult stones of the Kargopol region are connected with Christian saints, the most popular of them being Alexander Oshevsky, the founder of the largest monastery in the region. The stone cult rituals are connected with peasant feasts and scheduled to definite dates of the Orthodox calendar. In addition to stones, springs, lakes, trees, crosses and chapels are worshipped, all forming distinctive cult complexes. The widespread conceptions of their healing properties were based on the belief of connections with the worshipped saint. Therefore, the stone cult is part of a syncretic system of folk Orthodox religion and may be connected with the formation of a cult of local saints, particularly St. Alexander Oshevsky. However, the Pre-Christian origin of some stone cults is not out of the question (e.g. Oshevsk, Julinskaya). Studies by B. A. Rybakov indicate the great significance of paganism in the life of the Old Russian peasant and urban population (Rybakov 1987). Therefore, the conservation of heathen religious relics in the outlying northern regions is quite probable. At present, this problem cannot be resolved because of the lack of available information

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