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CULT COMPLEX ON THE MOUNTAIN VOTTOVAARA

Abstract

This article gives a presentation of the cult complex on the mountain Vottovaara, Karelia (Russia). The author describes the cult stones e.g. according to their location, orientation and morphological features.

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In summer 1992 the archaeological crew of the Karelian Museum of local lore managed to find a new complex of cult stones on the mountain Vottovaara. It is situated 20 km to the south-east from the village of Sukkozero (Muezirski district of Karelia) (Fig. 1).

The mountain Vottovaara is the highest peak in western Karelia (417.1 m). The cult complex (about 6 km² in area) occupies the whole mountain and several other hills next to it (Fig. 2). The slopes of the mountain are steep and rugged landscape is very typical for the whole area. The rocks alternate with small marshes and lakes. In the centre of the mountain top one can detect clear traces of neotectonic activity.

I start by studying the cult stones. I regard them as a stone boulders or pieces of rock, the artificial character of which is obvious. There are several stones with traces of human influence such as "legs" and "heads" or which were specially arranged in groups. In this paper I make an attempt to describe the structure and composition of the cult complex and to clarify its principle of formation. My study is based on the data obtained in summer 1993 which have been statistically analyzed.

Each cult stone was described according to 12 characteristics which, in my opinion, ought to give an all-around conception of the site and the morphological features of the stones. The characteristics include the following: stones in groups or separate ones; traces of treatment; presence of "legs" and "heads", and their number and orienta-

tion; size; location on rock or peat; closeness to water or a high point; closeness to the edge of a precipice. Altogether 1886 cult stones were discovered but their number is probably much higher.

The densest concentration of the cult stones is in the centre of the mountain top and on the steep south-western, southern and south-eastern slopes of the mountain. There they occupy every naked rock. The number of the cult stones sharply diminishes on the lower levels. As a rule the stones are arranged in groups. Only 138 of them are separate stones (18.7%). 1148 stones make up 166 groups. Each group includes 2–44 stones. The groups with 2–6 stones constitute 68.6% of the groups. Every group has stones with "legs" and stones without them. The groups of stones with "legs" are always larger than the groups of stones without them.

There are no traces of treatment in the stones; neither zoomorphic nor anthropomorphic features exist in the stones. The stones with "legs" amount to about a third of all the cult stones — 431 (33.5%). The quantity of the "legs" varies from 1 to 11. Almost half of the stones with "legs" have only one "leg" — 184 (42.6%). The number of the stones with two or three "legs" is nearly the same (95 and 83 — 41.2%). The "legs" were not placed according to the cardinal points of the compass. In most cases they are oriented towards the edge of the precipice or the nearest small lake. The "legs" of each cult stone are of the same mineral as the cult stone itself.

The number of cult stones with a "head" is not

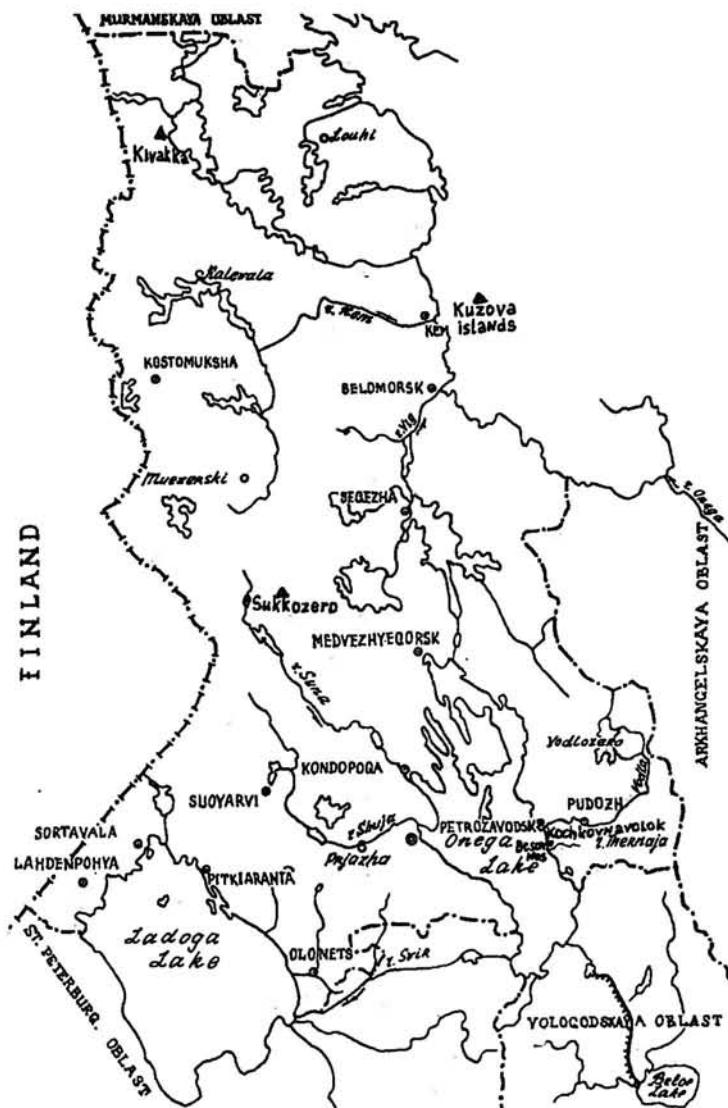


Fig. 1. Cult complexes in Karelia.

large — 24 (1.8%). A “head” consists of one or two pieces of the same mineral as the underlying stone (the base stone). In two cases the “head” piece itself has “legs”. One of the aims of our investigation was to reveal the possible regularities in choosing the suitable places for making these constructions. The cult stones stand mainly on naked rock. Only 32 of them (2.4%) stand on the sod. 1093 stones occupy the highest points in the area. 357 stones (27.7%) are situated on the shores of small lakes and marshes. Besides these some

cult stones were found which stand in a circle with hearths in the centre of it.

We can draw the following conclusions from the cult stones of the mountain Vottovaara:

- 1) The suitable place for a cult stone must have certain characteristics such as a bare rock surface without soil, a definite high level at least with a radius of 30 m, and closeness to the water (lake) or a precipice;
- 2) The cult stones are arranged in groups which have mainly 2–6 stones. The stones with “legs”

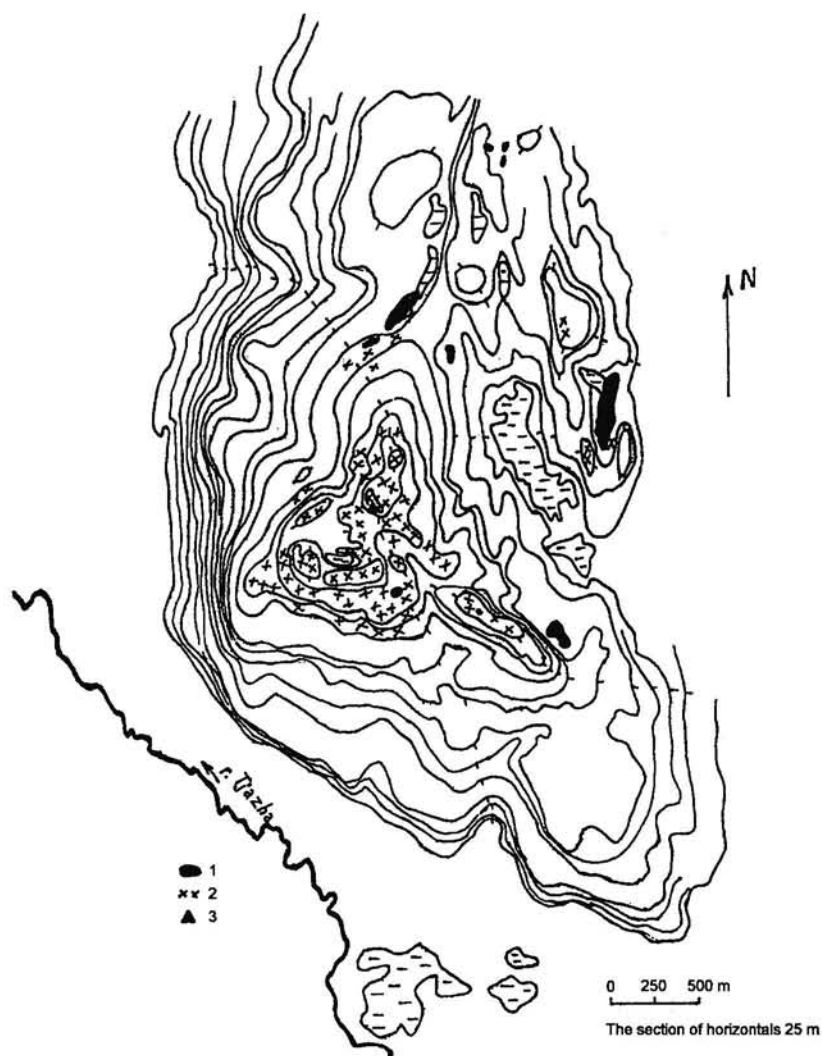


Fig. 2. Cult complex on the mountain Vottovaara. 1 — water; 2 — accumulation of cult stones; 3 — trigonometry sign.

have a higher semantic status;

3) The cult stones have no traces of treatment;

4) Undoubtedly, it must have been the mountain Vottovaara and the surrounding landscape, the traces of strong tectonic activity and the scanty vegetation that made people to create their sanctuary precisely at that place;

5) It is very difficult to describe the development and the function of the cult complex or to create a chronological frame for it.

In addition, two similar cult complexes are

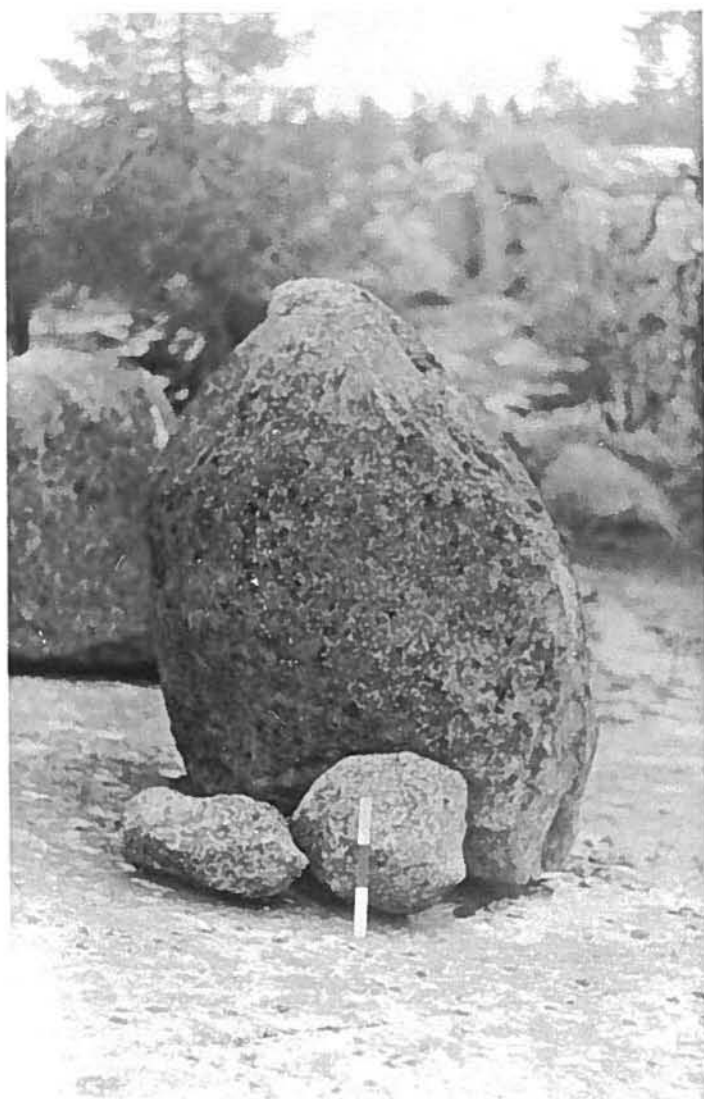
known from the Russian Karelia. One of them is located on the Russkij and Nemetskij islands in the White Sea, 20 km from Kem (Mullo 1984, 52), the other on the mountain Kivakka in the area of the Paanajärvi nature reserve in northern Karelia (Manjuhin & Shahnovič 1993, 82). The subject of our study is the most southern and largest cult complex in North Russia. If we compare it with similar cult complexes in Karelia we can detect both resemblance (the bare mountains with steep slopes and traces of tectonic activity) and some



Cult stone with "leg".



Cult stone with "head".



Phallic construction.

difference between them. The cult complex in the White Sea has more diversity. The cult stones with "heads" and stone masonries are predominant and besides, some real zoomorphic and anthropomorphic forms can be detected in the stones. The number of phallic stones is much higher on the islands of the White Sea than on the mountain Vottovaara.

Even in the 18th century the population in inner Finland and in the north of Russian Karelia firmly connected these unusual stone constructions with the Saami people. At present we can not know for certain whether the Saami people were the creators of the stone cult or whether they adopted it from somewhere else. It is impossible to date the

cult complex at the moment because we have not got any archaeological finds. We can only distinguish a set of necessary features for the sacred stones and mountains. Our main attention will be directed to the dating of the cult complex on the mountain Vottovaara in the future investigations.

References

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