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Rich Burials of Children at Zeleny Yar, Northwestern Siberia

This article introduces high-ranking burials of children excavated in 2015 and 2018 at a medieval cemetery Zeleny Yar on the lower Ob. A detailed description of the burial rite is provided, with special reference to the shape and construction of the burials and the position of the bodies. Burial goods include a hatchet, a scabbard, bracelets, and temple rings. The high social status of the children is discussed. The finds are compared with those relating to medieval children's burials in adjacent territories—the Surgut, Novosibirsk, and Tomsk regions of the Ob. Also, ethnographic evidence concerning the social status of 6–7-year-old boys among the indigenous northern minorities are discussed. Archaeological and ethnographic sources suggest that high-ranking burials of children (boys) appear in northwestern Siberia no later than the Middle Ages.

Keywords: Burial rite, Zeleny Yar cemetery, mummified remains, indigenous peoples, North, Siberia, Middle Ages.

Introduction

Among the archaeological sites discovered in northwestern Siberia, Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug (YaNAO), the Zeleny Yar medieval cemetery has a special status. Owing to the excellent state of preservation of its mummified human remains, as well as burial goods and clothing, it can rightfully be considered unique to the region.

The complex of archaeological monuments at Zeleny Yar is located near the village of the same name in the Priuralsky District of YaNAO (Fig. 1), on a floodplain island formed on one side of the Poluy River, and on the other by the Gorny Poluy channel. The complex includes the remains of a metalworking foundry (a furnace for melting metal), two buildings (6th to 7th centuries), and two cemeteries of the 8th–9th and 12th–13th centuries (Zeleny Yar..., 2005: 7). Over the course of ten field seasons (1999–2002 excavations by N.V. Fedorova, 2013–2018 excavations by Al.V. Gusev), 88 burials in varying degrees of preservation were investigated. Most of them are burials of men (61) and children (26). There

are only two female burials: in burial No. 15 were the remains of a girl, and in burial No. 78, woman. This article presents materials from two children's burials (No. 53 and 84) of the late Zeleny Yar cemetery, which stand out among the others for their rich accompanying inventory.

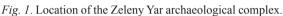
Materials and research methods

Burial No. 53

This burial, discovered in 2015, is oriented north-south, with a slight deviation to the west (head to the south). Taking into account its excellent preservation, the author of the excavations decided to extract the complex in the form of a monolith with continental soil for a preliminary study by computed tomography and a subsequent opening in laboratory conditions*.

^{*}The burial structure was opened in the laboratory of the Shemanovsky Museum and Exhibition Complex (Salekhard).





105 cm

116 cm

a

Fig. 2. Tomographic images of mummified human remains (a) and burial goods (b).

Tomographic examination* showed that the complex contains human remains, covered in the head, chest-abdomen, and thighs with metal plates (Fig. 2). Metal objects were found under the right shoulder, parietal bones, and feet.

According to the degree of epiphyseal fusion of the tubular bones, as well as the formation of the dentition, the age of the interred was determined: at the time of death he was approximately 7–8 years old. Geneticanalysis was used to determine his male sex**.

The tomographic study revealed the Harris lines on the long bones of the legs (transversely oriented bone plates in the area of the growth zone of the long bones), which are formed during periods of delay in the growth processes of the body. In paleopathology, this symptom is considered an indicator of episodic food stress (due to severe illness or prolonged fasting).

The boy was buried in a relatively shallow pit: its maximum depth in the central part was 54 cm from the ancient surface (Gusev, Svyatova, Slepchenko, 2016: 219). It contained a kind of oval-shaped cocoon 151 × 36 cm in size from a birch-bark canvas, under which there was a linen of bast, according to the assumption of the author and restorers of the Shemanovsky Museum and Exhibition Complex aspens, laid on an oblong wooden dish (?) (Fig. 3, 4). Birch-bark and bast linen, apparently,

were elements of a single design: they had longitudinal folds shaped by human teeth*, which were stiffeners.

The child was buried in a supine position, with its legs straightened and brought together in the area of the knee and ankle joints (Fig. 5, 6). One part of its remains was skeletonized, the other was mummified. The facial region of the skull, the area of the upper limbs, chestm and abdomen, as well as thighs, were mummified. The left hand was turned inward, with the back of the hand facing the central part of the pelvis. The right arm was straightened and brought under the pelvic bones. The legs and feet were skeletonized.

The skull of the deceased rested on the occipital bone, while the chin region was pressed against the chest. The teeth of the upper and lower jaw were closed. On the parietal bones, there were fragments of hair: straight or slightly wavy, soft, dark brown.

Under the right shoulder, a bronze battle hatchet was found (Fig. 7, 1). A large ax of a similar shape, forged from iron, was found in burial No. 27 of the late Zeleny Yar cemetery. Near the blade of the hatchet were a bronze zoomorphic pipe-shaped bead (Fig. 7, 2) and a destroyed iron item, most likely a knife. Close analogs of the pendant from burial No. 53 are unknown. In the area of the head, silver temporal rings were recorded, covered with a fragment of tanned skin (it was not possible to determine which animal it belonged to). Such temporal

^{*}Computed tomography was carried out in the Salekhard District Clinical Hospital.

^{**}Description of anthropological material was carried out by E.O. Svyatova, a Leading Specialist of the Archaeology Department of the Scientific and Production Center for the Protection and Use of Historical and Cultural Monuments of the Sverdlovsk Region (Yekaterinburg).

^{*}This was one of the traditional ways of processing birchbark and leather among the population of the region. About the images created with the help of teeth by the population of a small camp on the Vyzhaya River, a tributary of the Lozva River, see the article by V.N. Chernetsov "Disappeared Art (Patterns, Squeezed by Teeth on Birch-bark by Mansi)" (1964).

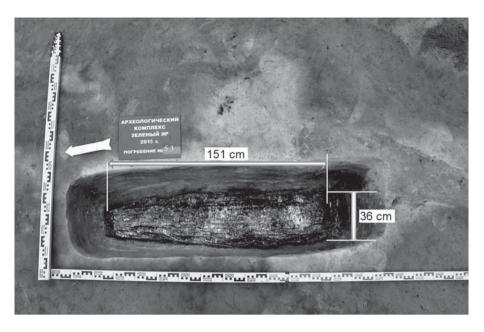


Fig. 3. Burial No. 53 (field fixation).



Fig. 4. Linen of bast (aspen?). Burial No. 53.



Fig. 5. Mummified remains of a child. Burial No. 53.

rings are characteristic of jewelry sets of the population of the northwestern Siberia at the beginning of the 2nd millennium AD. The rings were most likely made in the Perm Cis-Urals (Belavin, Krylasova, 2008: 446, fig. 181, 10, 11). Under the feet, there were small copper plates. During the examination of the remains of the deceased, no items of clothing were found. However, taking into account the coincidence of the outlines of the left foot

and the bronze plate located under it (Fig. 8), it can be assumed that the child was wearing shoes or fur stockings.

The child's body was placed in a fur cocoon made (according to the author of the article) from the skin of a fox or an arctic fox (Fig. 9). On top of the fur cocoon, large copper plates of the cauldron were placed (Fig. 10). Two plates were located in the area from the parietal bones to the lower jaw (Fig. 11, a). A rounded plate, lying on top of

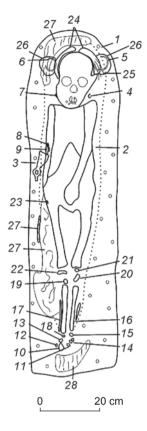


Fig. 6. Plan of burial No. 53. 1 - yellow continental sand; 2 - a furitem with a long hard pile; 3 – a bronze hatchet; 4 - a bronze ring from a plate; 5, 6 – silver temporal rings; 7 – a bronze plate; 8 - a fragment of an iron object (knife?); 9 - a pendant in the form of a tube with a bear figurine; 10, 11 – bronze plates; 12 - metapodium (?); 13 - bones of the right foot, with organic matter; 14 – bones of the left foot, with organic matter; 15 - left talus; 16 - bones of the left tibia (fibula and shinbone): 17 – bones of the right tibia (fibula and shinbone); 18 - distal epiphysis of the right shinbone; 19 – proximal epiphysis of the right shinbone; 20 - distal epiphysis of the left femur; 21 – patella; 22 – distal epiphysis of the right femur; 23 - nail plate; 24 - parietal bones; 25 - human hair; 26 - fragments of tanned leather; 27 - a fragment of a wooden structure, element 1; 28 a fragment of a wooden structure, element 2.



Fig. 8. Skeletonized feet of the deceased with a bronze plate. Burial No. 53.



Fig. 7. Bronze hatchet (1) and zoomorphic pipe-shaped bead (2). Burial No. 53.

the bones of the brain region, partially overlapped a rectangular plate located in the area of the facial region. Its dimensions are 19×14 cm. The plate, which was located above the jaw, is rectangular in shape, measuring 25×15 cm. Leather belts were found on the plates: one lay parallel to the longitudinal axis, two others were located perpendicular to the one indicated and were connected with it by a knot in the central part of both plates. To the right of the



Fig. 9. Fur cocoon made from the skin of a fox or an arctic fox. Burial No. 53.

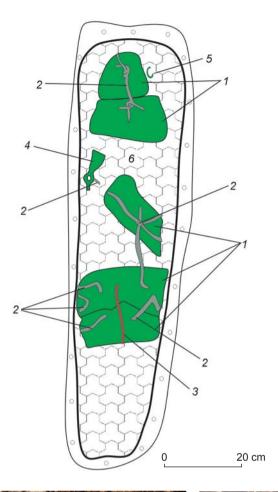


Fig. 10. Location plan of goods in burial No. 53. 1 - copper plates of the cauldron; 2 - fragments of leather belts; 3 - a twisted cord; 4 - a bronze hatchet; 5 - a bronze ring made of a plate; 6 - a fur cocoon.

skull, there was a plate of a bronze cauldron, to the left was an open ring made of a narrow bronze plate. The third rectangular plate was located diagonally in the thoracic region and the abdominal cavity (Fig. 11, b). Its dimensions are 41×15 cm. In the central part of the copper cauldron plate, there was a knot that tied five leather belts. The ends of the two belts lay parallel to the longitudinal axis of the body of the deceased. The end of the belt, which stretched towards the feet, reached the plates overlapping the area of the deceased's thighs. The ends of two more belts were parallel to the longitudinal axis of the copper plate.

The presence of leather belts in the burial should be associated, most likely, with a protective ritual. This assumption is supported by the fact that the belts were cut or untied prior to burial. This ritual is based on the ideas of the indigenous inhabitants of the northwestern Siberia about the "mirroring of the worlds": a spoiled thing in "our world" acquires integrity in the "other world". In the burial tradition of the indigenous peoples of the northwestern Siberia, the ritual has existed since the Middle Ages and is preserved in our days in the form of the deliberately breaking through the bottom of copper cauldrons during burial.



Fig. 11. A fur cocoon with copper plates of the cauldron. Burial No. 53. a – plates and leather belts in the area from the parietal bones to the lower jaw; b – a plate and a knot connecting five leather belts in the area of thoracic section-abdominal cavity; c – plates, braided strap, and fragments of leather belts in the thigh area.

The thigh area was covered by two rectangular copper plates, the longitudinal axis of which was perpendicular to that of the deceased (Fig. 11, c). The plates were overlapping and had practically the same dimensions: 15×32 and 14×30 cm. On them, parallel to the longitudinal axis of the deceased, there was a braided strap (its material has not vet been determined). Fragments of leather belts were found along the edges of both plates. Notably, the ends of the leather belts that lay on top of the described plates were not tied. Perhaps they were untied or cut before burial.

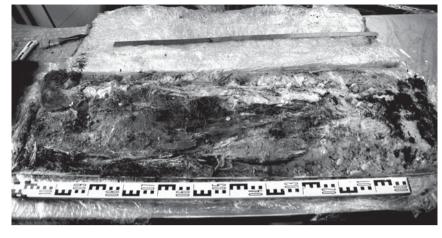


Fig. 12. Wooden dish (?), on which there was a birch-bark cocoon with the buried person.

Burial No. 53.

A birch-bark cocoon with the child's body was laid on an elongated wooden dish (?), probably with raised edges (Fig. 12). Unfortunately, owing to the poor preservation of the item, it is not possible to accurately determine its shape and size. According to the restorers of the Shemanovsky Museum and Exhibition Complex, the dish is made of coniferous wood.

The burial pit was filled up to the top. Remains of above-the-grave structures were not found.

Burial No. 84

Another burial with a rich inventory was discovered during the 2018 field season. Like burial No. 53, this one was structurally different from the rest. The remains found

in it belonged to a 6–7 year old boy. The pit is relatively shallow; its maximum depth is 39 cm. A boat-shaped funerary structure with a straight stern was placed in it. Judging by the thickness of the fragments found in the northern part of the burial, it was made of wood. Most likely, the structure was hollowed out from a solid larch trunk. Folded birch-bark canvases, folded under the walls of the burial chamber in the northern part of the complex, served as a cover.

The child was stretched out in the boat on his back, with his feet toward the river, and with his legs straightened and brought together in the area of the ankle joints (Fig. 13, 14). The arms of the deceased were straightened and placed along the body; their back surfaces were pressed to the sides. Hair is preserved on the bones of the skull; on the left side of the chest, lay a lock

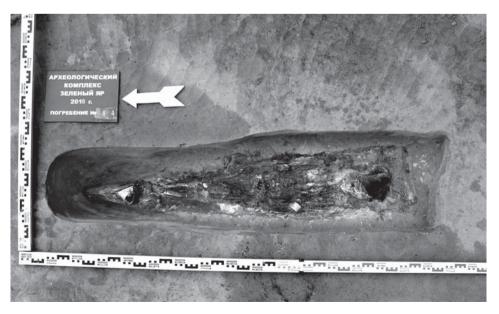


Fig. 13. Burial No. 84 (field fixation).

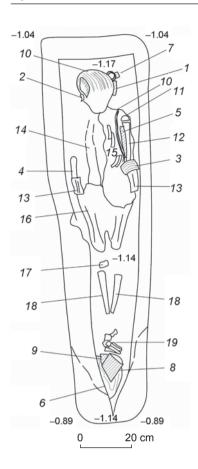
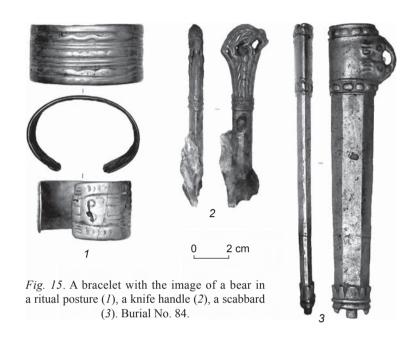


Fig. 14. Plan of burial No. 84.

I – fragment of a bracelet; 2 – fragment of a temporal ring (?); 3 – a bronze bracelet; 4 – handle of a bronze knife; 5 – a bronze scabbard; 6 – fragment of a wooden object; 7 – temporal rings; 8 – coneshaped item from the cauldron wall; 9 – cauldron wall; 10 – human hair; 11 – head of the humerus; 12 – diaphysis of the humerus; 13 – mummified forearm; 14 – spinal column; 15 – fragments of ribs; 16 – mummified part of the body (pelvis, hips); 17 – unidentifiable bone fragment; 18 – shinbone; 19 – bones of the right foot.



of long hair (up to the level of the elbow joint). The hair is slightly wavy and black. The teeth were closed, which indicates the fixation of the jaws. The child may have been dressed. The articulation of bones of the postcranial skeleton, as well as the "closed" position of the chest and pelvic girdle, indicate that the decomposition of the body took place in a limited space. Thick clothing could have acted as a limiter. The co-directionality of the metatarsal bones of the right foot indicates a limited isolated space in which its decomposition took place. Only tight shoes could have been the limiter. On the boy's left hand, in the area of the elbow joint, there was a fragment of a bronze bracelet, depicting a bear in a ritual pose (Fig. 15, 1). The other two parts of this bracelet were located near the left temple. Bracelets depicting a bear in a ritual pose belong to the status ornaments of the late 1st to early 2nd millennium AD. They were used in the northwestern Siberia from the Surgut region of the Ob to the Yamal Peninsula. Sometimes, they are even called Obtype bracelets. Such bracelets are found, for example, in the complexes of the Saygatinsky I (Surgutsky District, Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug (KhMAO-Yugra)) and Kintusovsky (Nefteyugansky District, KhMAO-Yugra) cemeteries (Ugorskoye naslediye..., 1994: 87-88), the Barsov Gorodok cemetery (Surgutsky District, KhMAO-Yugra) (Arne, 2005: 81), and they are also found among accidental finds (Baulo, 2011: 214).

Knives were laid under the arms near the child's shoulders: on the right, there was an iron knife with a bronze handle; on the left, a knife with a wooden blade in a bronze scabbard, with a wooden handle (Fig. 15, 2, 3). A bronze scabbard with a wooden blade inside was discovered at the cemetery for the first time. The fully preserved scabbard was made of white bronze by casting in a bipartite cored mold; the surface was polished. Bronze scabbards with a zoomorphic decor are rare in the northwestern Siberia. Apart from those found in burial No. 84 at Zeleny Yar, two scabbards are known from the Yamal Peninsula: one from the Pechora River, and others from the Koksharovsky Kholm complex (Verkhne-Saldinsky District, Sverdlovsk Region) (Chernetsov, 1957: 196).

The head of the deceased was probably decorated with two pairs of bronze temple rings. One pair was sewn to a fur garment (a headdress or a fur blanket), in the place that corresponds to the right side of the parietal region (Fig. 16). Another pair of rings and a fragment of a bronze bracelet were found in the lower left part of the skull (Fig. 17). All rings are completely preserved, covered with a green patina. The rings are open, made of forged bronze wire round in cross section.

The boy's body was wrapped in a blanket, which in the burial is evinced by the remains of decayed flesh. When studying the find, it was possible to establish that the fur layer consisted of two canvases. The upper fabric was a skin



Fig. 16. A pair of temporal rings located in the parietal region of the deceased.

Burial No. 84.



Fig. 17. A pair of temporal rings and a fragment of a bronze bracelet, located in the lower left part of the skull of the deceased. Burial No. 84.

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Fig. 18. Copper plates fixed with leather straps on a fur blanket. Burial No. 84.

Fig. 19. A copper cone. Burial No. 84 (field fixation).

turned with the pile down. The fur was long, with brown axial hair and light underfilling. The lower fabric was a skin turned with the pile up. The fur was light. To which animal the fur belonged is difficult to determine.

On the fur cover, copper plates were fixed with leather straps. They were laid across the abdomen, pelvis, and crosswise on the thighs (Fig. 18). At the northern edge, at the bottom of the burial structure, an object in the form of a cone (Fig. 19) rolled from a copper sheet was uncovered. Cones or similar figures, made from the walls of copper cauldrons. are characteristic of burials of the Zeleny Yar cemetery of the 12th-13th centuries. They were usually placed at the feet of the interred (Gusev, 2019: 227). At other burial sites discovered in the northwestern Siberia, no cones from the walls of cauldrons were found. They are extremely rare in the cemeteries of the Kama region. K.A. Rudenko calls them symbolic vessels, and dates them to the 11th-12th centuries (2000: 41, 103).

The burial pit, after the burial boat was placed in it, was filled up to the top. The remains of the above-the-grave structures were not found.

Thus, the above-described children's burials at Zeleny Yar are characterized by unusual burial structures (in burial No. 53, a birch-bark cocoon made with teeth; in burial No. 84, a boat), as well as a wealth of grave goods. At this cemetery, in the burials of children under the age of 5–6 years, at best, small fragments of a copper cauldron were found; in the burials of adult men (apart from burial No. 27), there were fragments of a copper cauldron and of knife handles.

Discussion

The cemetery of Zeleny Yar of the 12th–13th centuries includes 18 children's burials. The age of death of the children ranges from six months to eight years old. According to the rite, children's burials at the late cemetery generally do not differ from those of adults. The bodies were placed in wooden log-sarcophagi in the form of boats, which were tied with plant fibers. One exception to this is seen in the children's burial No. 53: a birch-bark cocoon with the body of a child was laid on an oblong wooden dish (?).

Children were buried wrapped in fur blankets or dressed in fur clothes. Both children and adults were buried in bonnet-type hats and shoes made of reindeer hide, which resemble modern *kisy* (fur boots of the indigenous peoples of the North). Some remains show traces of fur stockings. Children's clothing and blankets are made of beaver, sable, marten, wolverine, or polar fox fur. At the bottom and side walls of three burials, the remains of a deerskin litter were found (Gusev, 2015: 292).

Mummified remains of varying degrees of preservation were found in seven children's burials of the late cemetery. Mummification was provided by a large amount of copper (these were plates of a copper cauldron, which presence can be considered a feature of the late Zeleny Yar cemetery), which has antiseptic properties, as well as by high soil acidity and permafrost.

The children's burials under study stand out in terms of the richness of the inventory, which includes artifacts that are rarely found in this territory: a bronze hatchet and a scabbard.

Analogs of the examined children's burials with rich burial goods are known in the Surgut region of the Ob, at the Barsov III cemetery dating to the 1st to early 3rd centuries. Two burials were made in the ditch of the Beloyarsk period settlements of Barsov Gorodok I/20 (Early Iron Age) and Barsov Gorodok I/3 (Surgutsky District, KhMAO–Yugra). The people were buried in the supine extended position, apparently in wooden coffins. In both burials, a vessel was installed at the feet of the deceased. In burial No. 1 at Barsov Gorodok I/20, which had a rich inventory, a boy with Mongoloid features of about six years of age was buried. The inventory includes numerous glass and other types of beads, zoomorphic pendants, plaques, onlaid pipe-shaped beads, bronze and silver plates, a bracelet, a whole mirror, and fragments, including those with engravings; cult castings, weapons (bronze arrowheads of the Kulai type, iron daggers, and celts). Next to the buried was a vessel of the Late Sarov type (Chemyakin, 2008: 82).

The preservation of items made of organic materials (leather, fur, and wood) in other burial sites of the Middle Ob region, including those synchronous to those under

study, were much lower than in the Zeleny Yar burial grounds. This makes it difficult to find archaeological parallels. In addition, most of the materials from the Barsov and Saygatinsky cemeteries, which are geographically closest to the Surgut region of the Ob, have not yet been described (except for the materials of the above-mentioned Barsov Gorodok III, of the Early Iron Age).

At the cemeteries of the 10th–14th centuries in the Novosibirsk region of the Ob, in particular at the Berezovy Ostrov I burial mound, children were buried in pits of various depths. In one child's burial, there may have been a coffin (Ocherki..., 1994: 225). At the burial mound of Yurt-Akbalyk-3 (the basin of the Ueni River, the left tributary of the Ob, in the north of the Novosibirsk region of the Ob), there is a mound dating to the 7th to early 8th centuries, containing two rich burials of children under 3 years of age. The associated burial inventory included various ornaments, belt sets of the Early Turkic time, Chinese coins of the 50s and 580s, and bronze plaques with the heads of three bears (Ibid: 217).

Most of the cemeteries of the 11th–14th centuries in the Tomsk region of the Ob, unfortunately, were plundered. Judging by individual details, it can be concluded that the burial goods consisted of things that a person would use during his lifetime. Each age category has a specific composition of inventory. The least plundered, but also the poorest, is the Astrakhantsevo cemetery. Four of 11 children's burials there did not contain any goods. In the rest of the burials, there were beads and earrings (a small amount), an iron arrowhead, a knife, and an accumulation of ceramics (Ibid: 256–257).

Unfortunately, in the search for parallels, ethnographic materials are of no help. K.F. Karjalainen when describing the burial rite, or rather, the rites of preparation "for the last journey" and rituals after burial (1994: 76–133), focuses on actions and ceremonies. He gives only general information about what is put in the burial, without indicating the differences in the inventory, determined by the sex and age of the deceased. He does not even mention children's burials.

O.A. Murashko and N.A. Krenke, who described materials from cemeteries of the 19th century in the lower reaches of the Ob (Priuralsky District, YaNAO), which were studied by D.T. Yanovich, report that all cemeteries contain the deceased in a supine extended position (2001: 30), and "children's burials are distinguished by the presence of toys" (Ibid.: 34).

The data of modern ethnography of the Ob-Ugric and Samoyed peoples are significant for our research. They say that boys by the age of 6–7 not only have an idea of purely male occupations, but also have certain work skills. They are not considered children, and actively help their parents, and they are especially trained and educated as future breadwinners of the family (Krasilnikov, 2009: 57).

Conclusions

When describing the burial rites of the Ob-Ugric peoples, researchers usually focus on certain aspects of the rituals and do not touch upon the burial ceremony of children who died at 6–7 years of age. Information is provided mainly on the burials of infants and adults. Therefore, it is not possible to trace the preservation or transformation of the burial rite of children of the age of interest. Nevertheless, we can confidently assert that for a boy, a representative of the indigenous peoples of the Far North, the age of 6–7 years was the transitional period from childhood, when he imitated his parents, to an independent adult life. It was from these years that the boy took an active ("adult") part in the life of the family, and became the main assistant to his father in the trades and reindeer herding.

This period of transition from childhood to adulthood was reflected in the burial rite at the medieval cemetery Zeleny Yar. That is why the boy, who died at the age of 6–7, when he became an independent family member, was sent to another world with a lot of expensive jewelry and furs.

The tradition of a rich funeral accompaniment of boys was developed at least in the Middle Ages, and has survived to our days.

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