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Ritual Structures in the Volga and Ural Regions, Based on Findings of the Peter Simon Pallas Expedition

In the 18th century, the ancient and traditional cultures of ethnic groups inhabiting the Russian Empire came to the attention of prominent scholars. This was in accordance with the ruling empress' new attitude toward heterodox citizens of her state. This study describes findings of the Peter Simon Pallas 1768–1769 expedition to the Volga region and the Urals, published in 1773 in the second volume of his fundamental work “Travel to Different Provinces of the Russian Empire”. Special attention is paid to scarce but important evidence about ritual structures associated with various confessions, and places where various pagan rites were performed by local dwellers of the respective areas. A number of sites have since been subjected to anthropogenic factors, destroyed, or rebuilt, sometimes radically changing their function. To various degrees Pallas's descriptions supplement the available information and can be used by experts as a source of knowledge about the traditional beliefs and history of certain monuments of religious architecture.

Keywords: Volga region, Ural region, 18th century scholarly expeditions, Peter Simon Pallas, ritual structures, traditional beliefs.

Introduction

Studying the culture of the Empire's population was one of the most important objectives of the early Russian science in the 18th century. A number of comprehensive expeditions were organized, the scale of which was unlikely to have been surpassed later. The scope of research topics may be called unprecedented, which precipitated the emergence and development of a wide range of sciences in Russia. A large amount of material was collected in the field of the humanities. In addition to historical, archaeological, linguistic, demographic, and other data, this material included information on the beliefs, mythological concepts, and rituals of the peoples inhabiting the Russian Empire. The emergence of folklore studies and ethnography fostered the development of Russian religious studies, which were ultimately formed in the first half of the 19th century.

Already during the first scholarly journey to Siberia under the patronage of the Russian State, acting through the Apothecary (Medical) Chancery, D.G. Messerschmidt collected quite extensive evidence on the spiritual culture, habits, and customs of the indigenous population. G.F. Miller and his fellow expedition members described the religious rituals of the Siberian peoples that they witnessed or that they learned about from their informants. This evidence was assembled in a separate section: “Information about Shamans, or Siberian Sorcerers”. Research expeditions undertaken by the Academy of Sciences throughout the 18th century expanded knowledge about the ritual activities, sacred places, and religious worldview of the indigenous peoples of the Volga region, the Urals, Western and Eastern Siberia, the Far East, and Alaska, creating a corpus of sources for studying the traditional culture of the population of the eastern

outskirts of the Russian Empire. However, they also showed that the advance of the Russian administration into outlying regions, accompanied by the expansion of missionary activities and acculturation of the local population through the construction of schools and churches with parish educational institutions, was displacing traditional beliefs. Academic expeditions revealed and confirmed the ability of Siberian native populations to adopt components of another culture, specifically the Russian culture, when they came into contact with Russian settlers, received education, and became acquainted with the sciences (Shipilov, 2023: 220), yet simultaneously this changed their attitude towards the ancient cults.

The activities of Peter Simon Pallas constituted a certain milestone in the development of ideas concerning the spread of traditional beliefs and proselytizing religions. His journey throughout the Volga region in 1768–1769 was a subject of numerous scholarly articles, monographs, and handbooks, which described general issues concerning P.S. Pallas's participation in the study of the Lower and Middle Volga regions, as well as the route of the expedition, formation of collections (for example, Buddhist ritual portable art), and the traditional culture of the peoples inhabiting the region. The results of the expedition appeared in three parts in the work "Travel to Different Provinces of the Russian Empire in 1768–1774", published in St. Petersburg in 1771–1776 in German, in 1773–1778 in Russian, and in 1788–1793 in French. In 2007, the version in Russian was republished in a facsimile edition (Pallas, 2007). The first part of the edition of 1773–1778 in Russian (Pallas, 1773) was used for this study.

This article will focus on the information collected by P.S. Pallas about religious monuments and sacred places in the Volga and Ural regions, which has not been previously used as the main subject of research. The main goal of this study is to identify and describe the types of ritual structures mentioned by this scholar. This will emphasize the importance of his research work and its results as a source for scholars of our time in the field of ethnic history and historical development of religious beliefs in the Volga and Ural regions.

Research by P.S. Pallas

When Empress Catherine the Great decided to organize an expedition for studying natural history in the Russian Empire and turned to the Leipzig professor H.G. Ludwig for a recommendation, he named

P.S. Pallas. On December 22, 1766, the Academy of Sciences elected P.S. Pallas to be a member of the Academy as a professor of natural history. After confirmation of his election in the summer of 1767, P.S. Pallas moved to St. Petersburg. He was actively involved in preparation of the expedition, discussed scholarly and organizational issues at meetings of the Academy, studied the works of predecessors, and compiled a research program (Borisenko, Hudiakov, 2005: 126). This work took almost a year; only in June 1768 did he leave for the journey.

As the head of the Orenburg Expedition, Pallas focused on the Volga region. When the new young member of the Academy set out on his journey, studying the distant past and traditions of the indigenous population on the outskirts of the Russian empire was not his main task, although the instructions he compiled prescribed "not travelling through any place uselessly so nothing important would be overlooked" and contained points on recording "all remnants of antiquity", spiritual traditions, and describing customs and habits (Fleiman, Bobyr, 2001: 5). Yet soon after the start of the expedition, "glimmers of ethnographic interest" appeared in his field journal along with descriptions of "natural phenomena" (Golovnev, Kisser, 2015: 64).

During his expedition through the Volga region, Pallas recorded Christian churches, Muslim mosques, and other ritual structures in varying degrees of preservation.

Despite the inclusion of territories with non-Orthodox populations—Crimea, the Kazan and Astrakhan Khanates, and Siberia—the overwhelming majority of subjects of the Russian Empire, including the central regions, Novorossiia, and Left-Bank Ukraine, were Christian. Not only were Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians Christians, but also representatives of the indigenous ethnic groups who converted to Orthodoxy earlier, in the 15th–16th centuries—the Karelians, Lapps, and Komi-Zyryans. In some areas, almost the entire non-Russian population was converted to Orthodoxy. Overall, according to official sources, Orthodox worshippers constituted over 84 % of the population of the Empire (Kabuzan, 2008: 16). Church statistics and general imperial censuses, although not entirely accurate, provide some idea about the confessions of the subjects of the Russian Empire as early as the 1730s (Ibid.: 9–10). However, in the southern and eastern regions of the country, the situation was not as clear-cut as in the western regions. On average, in the Volga region Orthodox made up slightly over 60 %

of the population; in the Kazan province they formed less than half of the population; in the Lower Volga region and Southern Urals, Orthodox made up 13 % and 15 %, respectively. In Siberia, the indigenous population was almost entirely pagan. Forced Christianization often led to the opposite of the desired outcome (Ibid.: 17–18, 23). For example, in the 1740–1750s, the share of the population in the Kazan province professing Islam increased in percentage points.

The first monument associated with religious beliefs and rituals was mentioned by P.S. Pallas in Kasimov. He wrote about the ruins of an old mosque. Only a high round tower, which had previously served as a minaret, remained of it. Pallas's remark that the mosque was being built again "with Supreme permission" is interesting (1773: 43). The publication of the "Spiritual Regulations" in 1721 changed the position of the Church and attitude of the highest state officials towards the Church. The policies of the Synodal Commission were distinguished by some rigidity, but already with accession of Elizabeth of Russia to the throne, interaction with "superstitions" began to be increasingly less repressive (Lavrov, 2000: 5). During the reign of Catherine the Great, changes in the attitudes towards the subjects of other religions, and Muslims in particular, became even more explicit. Her predecessors were not particularly tolerant: it was forbidden to build new mosques and active anti-Islamic propaganda caused discontent among the Muslim clergy. The Empress's trip to the Volga region in 1767 could have been a factor that changed her understanding of how to implement religious policies. Earlier, sometimes due to "self-interest", monuments of Islamic architecture were destroyed "in the most barbaric way" (Nauchnoye nasledie..., 1993: 32), but in 1768 Catherine the Great issued "the most gracious Imperial permission", according to which wealthy residents of Kasimov were given the opportunity to restore the destroyed mosque, building a new two-story building on the old foundation (Knyazeva, Akimova, Evtyukhina, 2018: 74). The white stone foundation and brick walls have survived until today. Initially, the mosque, like other buildings of the architectural ensemble, including those of non-sacred function, was made of wild stone mined in a quarry 12 km from Kasimov. In 1452, the town was granted to Prince Kasim Khan and acquired the status of an appanage Tatar khanate center (Ibid.). Archaeological research in 2014 in the area of the old mosque revealed the absence of the cultural layer of the 15th century, which suggests that the minaret and mosque were built later; judging by

the survey pits, in the mid 16th century (Bocharov, Sitdikov, 2018: 135). Thus, Pallas's information about construction of a new mosque on the site of the old one fits the general historical context. He also described the external and internal structure of the remaining parts of the building, its size, and construction material in some detail.

In the immediate vicinity of the mosque, P.S. Pallas described the buildings located in the old Tatar cemetery. According to D.V. Makarov, in the mid-16th century it might have served as an honorary necropolis where service (military) class Chingisids and Tatars from the central provinces of the Russian Empire sought to be buried (Makarov, 2012: 26; Belyakov, 2010: 238). At that time, the town of Kasimov was perceived as the resting place of Tatar princes, as a dynastic necropolis. It is no coincidence that Pallas considered the khan's tomb to be "the most noteworthy" Tatar monument, which he did not fail to write about in a report to the Academy of Sciences (Nauchnoye nasledie..., 1993: 32). The town was a traditional place for the estates of the service class Chingisids. This could have been associated with the loss of the independence of Kazan and Astrakhan, and attempts of the Kasimov ruler Shah-Ali to create their equivalent in his town (Belyakov, 2010: 237). During his reign, a mosque with a minaret, palace, and *tekye* were built. Traces of the former necropolis were discernible even in the mid-19th century. The walls of several mausoleums have survived. The most famous of them today is the *tekye* of Afghan-Mukhammed, built by Ryazan artisans. The façade is decorated with brick patterns; small platbands "in the form of columns with bands, topped with triangular cornices" are above the arched windows; the belt under the eaves consists "of three rows of brickwork"; the jamb posts of the entrance portal are topped with "short cube-shaped semi-columns of white stone" (Knyazeva, Akimova, Evtyukhina, 2018: 74). Despite its status as a historical and architectural monument, the *tekye* is currently in a dilapidated state.

P.S. Pallas described the Shah-Ali Khan mausoleum in Kasimov, noting good preservation of the building. It was a brick quadrangular structure measuring $14.0 \times 7.8 \times 4.9$ m, with thick walls and wide eaves, oriented with its long axis along the east-west line, and divided into two rooms. The smaller room was intended for prayer; it had an entrance on the western side, a small window on the northern wall, and the floor was made of crude stone. The entrance to the larger room ("the vault or cellar") was on the southern side. No traces of door hinges or other fastenings were

found. A stone tablet with an inscription in Arabic was above the entrance (about 1.5 m wide). This room contained burials with surviving gravestones. The roof of the building was covered with earth, and guelder rose grew on it (Pallas, 1773: 44–45).

The tomb measured $6.5 \times 5.8 \times 3.5$ m. There were two windows in the wall on the northern side and one on the eastern side. The windows had grates, but they had been broken by vandals. Pallas mentioned eight burials. Five of them were located by the eastern wall; one by the entrance; and two in the very center, one of which, according to Pallas, could have been a double burial. The central graves had stepped stone facing. Pallas reported that in addition to the burials, there were nine skulls in the room. Each grave had columnar tombstones, about 180 cm high, on pedestals on the eastern side. Only two of them were in an upright position; the rest were broken. The reddish tombstones had Arabic inscriptions, and their western side was decorated with carved “flowers or stars like a lattice” (Ibid.: 46). Pallas also mentioned an underground space under the tomb, which could be accessed through a narrow passage. The passage was covered with stone and filled with earth, and was marked with slabs on the outside. Bones, skulls, human hair, and remains of yellow, green, and striped taffeta-type fabric, which was well preserved and had hardly even lost its colors, lay in disarray on wooden platforms (“ambos”) inside this basement. Pallas believed that “people with curiosity of the modern times who are worthy of condemnation destroyed their peaceful resting place” (Ibid.: 46–47). There is a legend that one can reach the minaret from this underground space (Knyazeva, Akimova, Evtyukhina, 2018: 74).

The Islamic architecture of Kasimov is an example of the medieval sacred architecture of the Golden Horde, which had Russian influences as evidenced by the lost “Gothic” gates of the palace of Prince Sayed-Borhan, and Russian motifs in the decoration of the Afghan-Muhammad *tekya*. In his reports to the Academy of Sciences, Pallas wrote that the remaining buildings in Kasimov, including those of religious purposes, should be given to the Tatar community, so it could take care of them and “at least preserve these ruins” (Nauchnoye nasledie..., 1993: 32). Since the buildings mostly did not survive the test of time, their descriptions in the travel diaries of P.S. Pallas are of interest as a source for studying these monuments.

Pallas also described a complex of Islamic sacred structures in the village of Bolgar, built on the “ruins

of an ancient city” (1773: 185), which had been known of long before his journey. The census books, written sources on the abatis lines, and other documents of the 17th century contain some references to the Bulgar fortified settlement (Rudenko, 2014: 32). In the early 18th century, a dependent monastery was organized in its place; some buildings were adapted to the needs of the monks; some were dismantled for stone, etc. This might have prevented plundering of the monument by local residents for some time, which was observed later after the monastery ceased to exist (Ibid.: 34–35). In the early 18th century, Bolgar was visited by D.G. Messerschmidt and by Peter the Great during the Azov campaign. The tsar noted the less than satisfactory condition of the foundations of the ancient buildings, pointing out the need to fix them, and ordered to make copies of the inscriptions in Arabic (Pallas, 1773: 192). At the time of Pallas’s stay, a minaret which was about 25 m high, with a repaired staircase of 72 steps, each more than 30 cm high, and a wooden roof with an Arabic inscription, was present at the site. The tower had small through holes, which served as skylights. The monument has survived to this day in its reconstructed form. Next to the minaret, there was a ruined quadrangular building made of tightly laid bricks and crude stones, which, according to Pallas, could have been a mosque (Ibid.: 188). Further research has confirmed his assumption. This structure was the Bolgar Cathedral Mosque, which could have been previously wooden (Khlebnikova, 1987: 60). Wooden constructions were typical of the town in the pre-Mongol period, but the buildings mentioned by Pallas should be dated to the time after 1236, when the Mongol troops of Khan Batu burned Bolgar.

Pallas also described a “vaulted mosque”, built of stones of different sizes, with a quadrangular foundation and octagonal top, which, “after being repaired, was dedicated as a church in the name of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker” (1773: 187). Multifaceted and particularly octagonal mausoleums were widespread in the Islamic world. E.D. Zilivinskaya identified them as a separate type and found a number of parallels among mausoleums in regions of the Golden Horde (2009: 128–129). Another lower “tower” with thicker walls and two quadrangular buildings (“mosques”) surrounding it have survived in the southwestern part of the dependent monastery. These buildings were located at one of the two cemeteries in Bolgar. One cemetery was used for burying ordinary residents, while the other was intended for the noble deceased, for whom richly decorated tombstones

and mausoleums, as well as the minaret, were built. Several buildings were described by Pallas as civil structures: the “monastic cellar”, “judge’s house”, bathhouse, and dwellings (1773: 187, 189). However, some of them were assigned this purpose at the time of their description, which was significantly later than the time of their creation.

P.S. Pallas mentioned ancient tombstones of various sizes “with Arabic, and several with Armenian inscriptions” (Ibid.: 192). Upon the order of Peter the Great, some of them had been copied and 49 had been translated. According to the translations, 22 inscriptions dated back to 1223, which led Pallas to the assumption that there had been an epidemic in the town that year. According to D.G. Mukhametshin and F.S. Khakimzyanov, the earliest epigraphic monuments of Bolgar can be dated to 1271 (1987: 13).

On the road between Kasimov and Bolgar, Pallas briefly described the language, appearance, clothing, and ritual activities of the Moksha people who lived along the banks of the Volga, Cheremshan, and other places. Although they were baptized, “few remember their ancient rituals and customs”, and did not have “any idols”; however, in secluded forest places, the Moksha people had special sanctuaries where they sacrificed horses, bulls, and smaller livestock to the invisible Almighty (1773: 178). Such rituals were also performed at the graves of deceased relatives. This situation was quite common. Christianity was perceived as extraneous, which was reflected even in folklore; and attempts to Christianize people of different faiths could end at the very least with the expulsion of preachers, and in the worst case with their murder. Notably, if in the 17th century we may speak of some religious tolerance, which implied voluntary expression of the desire to be baptized and receiving an altered social and tax status, in the early 18th century mass Christianization was initiated, aiming among other things at social mobilization and religious consolidation without changing the tax status, (Konev, 2006: 22–23).

Similar remote places that were called “keremets”, for performing ritual actions, were described by Pallas among the Chuvash people. This sacral object was a quadrangular area surrounded by a fairly high fence, which had three entrances: from the eastern, northern, and western sides. The northern entrance had to face a source of water. A sacrificial animal was brought into the *keremet* from the eastern side, tied to poles during prayer, while people entered the interior from the western side. A canopy was made near the western entrance, under which the meat was prepared and

a table with sacrificial bread was placed. The animal was slaughtered and skinned on the northern side; stakes were set up in the northern corner, and the animal’s skin was hung on them. In September, the Chuvashes celebrated the end of the harvest. In honor of this event, they gathered at large *keremets* for joint ceremonial sacrifice. There were also small family *keremets*, which were used throughout the year on the occasion of illness, births, commemoration of the dead, etc.

Pallas described one such ritual monument in the village of Teidakovka. Unbaptized Chuvashes continued to live there at the time when the scholar visited the village. The *keremet* was located “in a pleasant place overgrown with birches” on the bank of a river far from the village (Pallas, 1773: 275). The cult of Keremet played an important role among the ritual activities of the pagan Chuvashes and was based on the veneration of ancestors (Matveev, 2005: 112). Other peoples of the Volga and Ural regions regarded him as a stern but fair spirit whom it was better not to anger. The symbol of Keremet among the Chuvashes was the tree and especially the birch tree. A source of clean water was also required for performing the rituals. A special person was responsible for maintaining order at the site, guarding it, and keeping it in proper condition—changing the fence three days before the ceremony, sweeping the site, burning garbage (and everything “unclean” along with it) (Pallas, 1773: 275). The information of Pallas was confirmed by later scholarly research.

The description of the sacred mountain of the “Kirghiz” in the vicinity of the Iletsk fortress is relatively detailed. This place consisted of a white hill located in an open space, without vegetation, which was swampy at the top. It was convenient to keep watch from it, and thus the hill was called “the guard mountain” by the local residents. Even in the late 1760s, pagans, passing by it, threw “all sorts of furs and other trinkets into this swamp” as a sacrifice (Ibid.: 357). The hill was also a place for festivities, during which people walked around it and prayed on their knees after washing their faces in the swamp.

There are indeed chalk cliffs near the former Iletsk fortress, which look unusual in the landscape. Considering that beliefs associated with stones, mountains, and stone structures were quite common in the Southern Urals (Tuzbekov, 2015: 151), Pallas’s information is quite plausible. Similar rituals have been observed, for example, among the Bashkirs in relation to Mount Bolyn-gus. It was given special

reverence—before ascending it, ablutions and prayers were performed, and the ascent was made on the knees. Prayers were offered at the top, while at the end of the ritual, a meal was prepared at the foot of the mountain. Christians and Muslims who were believers also took part in the meal (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art. F. 1571, Inv. 1, D. 2913, fols. 1–55).

Experts distinguish various categories of stone objects and complexes used by the Turkic-speaking population of the region to carry out ritual actions: menhirs, burial mounds, placements of stones, cliffs, individual rocks, and mountains. As one may see, these include both natural and man-made objects. The worship of mountains can be associated with reverence for the mountain spirit-masters, which probably has roots in Tengrianism. A mountain with anthropomorphic outlines or with another unusual appearance could have been considered sacred. The white color of the hill that was described by Pallas could have become the reason for sacralization of this object by the local population.

During his travels in the Volga and Ural regions, Pallas noted the presence of several ancient burial mounds, but their descriptions were often fragmentary. Sometimes, the scholar limited himself to only reporting the fact of their existence, and sometimes to the violation of their integrity. For example, in the vicinity of the villages of Sevryukovo and Ermachikha (probably modern Sevryukaev and Ermakovo in the Samara Region), he mentioned three burial mounds on the river bank, one of which had traces of plundering in the center.

However, there were also more detailed descriptions. Near the Buzuluk and Sorochinsk fortresses, Pallas recorded burial mounds with different structural features—with embankments and which were “low, lined with large terracotta tiles on the inside” (1773: 333–334). According to information from the tomb raiders, he wrote down information about the presence of human bones, copper arrowheads, weapons, and other copper, as well as gold objects, in the burials. The number of burial mounds increased as they approached Novosergievsk. In its vicinity, Pallas described a plundered burial mound around which he found human and marmot bones, as well as the polished fragment of a shell. A ceiling slab was discovered at the bottom of the robbers’ pit about 2 m deep. A split anthropomorphic sculpture made of dark soft sandstone lay on the surface, a poorly made “facial” sculpture about 60 cm high, facing east, was to the east of it. The burial

mounds varied in size. The height of a mound could reach 2 m or more; the circumference of the mound was “more than 50 steps” (> 30 m). Remains of burnt wood could be found in earthen mounds, which Pallas believed to be a sign of the funeral feast (Ibid.: 334). Human bones with the accompanying goods (iron objects, arrowheads, flint, tongs, and in some cases horse heads) were at the bottom of the burial pits in wooden coffins. According to Pallas, more interesting items could be found in smaller graves, because these would contain buried women, who were usually provided with ornaments as burial goods. He suggested that burials with iron items belonged to the Nogai Tatars or “Kirghiz”, while those with stone slabs belonged to “another ancient people who lived in this land” (Ibid.: 335). On the whole, Pallas correctly identified the nomadic nature of the population that left the burial mounds he described. In fact, these were the first archaeological excavations for scholarly purposes in the Southern Urals (Salnikov, 2009: 161).

It is not possible to establish the exact cultural affiliation of the burial mounds described by Pallas. However, on the territory of the present-day Orenburg Region, shell ornaments have been found among the evidence from the sites of the Khvalynsk-Berezhnovka type, dating back to the second half of the 5th to the early 4th millennium BC (Bogdanov, (s.a.)). Judging by the presence of anthropomorphic stone sculptures, burial mounds in the Novosergievsk area must have belonged to Turkic-speaking nomads, who were known there in the 9th–12th centuries. Some scholars attribute them to the Golden Horde period (Garustovich, Ivanov, 2014: 17).

Conclusions

In terms of the emergence and development of historical sciences in the Russian Empire, the 18th century can be compared to a volcanic eruption. The lands with their indigenous inhabitants and their traditions and customs were studied for several centuries. After creation of the Academy of Sciences and organization of scholarly expeditions under its auspices, it became possible to collect an incredible amount of evidence, which is a rich source on the history and culture of the peoples of Russia. Even until today not all of this evidence has been studied and published. The name of Peter Simon Pallas is associated with the emergence of a clearly expressed ethnographic perspective on research

of the indigenous population of Russia (Borisenko, 2023: 21). P.S. Pallas's studies gave the impetus to compilation of an ethnographic description of the peoples of the Russian Empire (Golovnev, Kisser, 2015: 65), and he occupies a worthy place among other "ethnologists" of his time, who studied the peoples whom they wrote about in the field (Golovnev, 2018: 8).

During his travels through the Volga and Ural regions, Pallas noted a number of religious and ritual sites, such as Muslim stone complexes in the towns of Kasimov and Bolgar, which included mosques, minarets, and khans' tombs; *keremets*—sanctuaries of the Volga Chuvashes, where commemorative and festive rituals were performed; sacred mountains; and burial mounds. Much of the information he provided has been confirmed by modern scholarship, which indicates its reliability and relevance even today. The descriptions of ritual sites made by P.S. Pallas during his travels through the Volga and Ural regions can be used by specialists in the field of ancient and traditional cultures of these regions as an additional source.

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